

RETHINKING CHRISTIANITY'S CLAIM TO ABSOLUTENESS*

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Ever since the time of the primitive Church (St. Paul, Justin the Martyr) Christians have been concerned with the relationship of their religion to other religions. Hegel, Schleiermacher and Troeltsch treat this question under the rubric, '*die Absolutheit des Christentums*'. This term simply means the unconditional, unlimited and exclusive significance of the Christian message, that is, God's self-manifestation for all times in Jesus Christ.

In one sense today's religious pluralism does not distinguish itself from past attempts. In another sense it does. During the past century one notices a growing awareness of religious pluralism. Some scholars speak of a 'global culture' or of a 'planetary culture', that is to say that, as a result of improved communications, people are no longer always able to limit themselves to their own tradition or culture apart from other traditions and cultures.⁽¹⁾

The key question in regard to Christianity's claim to absoluteness is this: how can the Church be bound to Jesus Christ and, at the same time, be an open community? Most studies on the absoluteness of Christianity are done from one particular perspective asking how the primacy or lordship of Christ squares with an openness to other religions. In this essay I prefer to touch upon this question only tangentially. Instead of appealing to Church dogma to settle the issue, I ask what if Christianity is not the absolute religion, but one among many all of which lead to salvation.

It seems strange to me to observe a negative attitude on the part of many contemporary Protestant and Catholic theologians in regard to the possibility of salvation on the part of the non-Christian religions.⁽²⁾ They are thought to be works of sin and vain attempts at self-redemption (Rosenkranz, Emil Brunner) or it is implied that one cannot find salvation in the non-Christian religions since they either do not understand the

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1. Glyn Richards, "Towards A Theology Of Religions", *Journal of Theological Studies* 31 (1980), p. 44.

2. Christof Gestrich, "Der "Absolutheitsanspruch" des Christentums im Zeitalter des Dialogs", *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* 77 (1980): 106 – 128; See Gerhard Ebeling, "Religionslose Welt? Religionsloses Christentum?" in *Unterwegs Zur Einheit. Festschrift für Heinrich Stirnimann* ed. Johannes Brantschen and Pietro Selvatico (Freiburg/Wien: Universitätsverlag Freiburg Schweiz, 1980) 399 – 408. For a Roman Catholic view see Hans urs von Balthasar, "Catholicism and the religions", *Concilium* 5 (1978): 6 – 14.

doctrine of *sola fide* or cannot find satisfying answers, (Trillhaas, Pannenberg).³⁾

Such a negative attitude seems curious to me in light of the fact that in over 95% of the cases one's religious vision has been largely selected by the accidents of birth. This is not to deny the fact that some individuals do change faiths as a result of a conversion experience. However, this is a rather rare occurrence. Normally, the faith that one accepts is the only faith one knows, as John Hick shrewdly observes.⁴⁾

Methodologically, this essay is written from the standpoint of a philosopher of religion. This essay commences by examining Ernst Troeltsch's *The Absoluteness of Christianity*. There follows an exposition and critique of Wilfred Cantwell Smith's book, *Towards a World Theology*. It seems to me that Smith builds on the work of Troeltsch. The final section contains some reflections on this issue of religious pluralism.

I. E. Troeltsch and The Absoluteness Of Christianity

There are, at least, two ways of writing a book. The first way consists in a straightforward account of the subject in linear fashion. The second way utilizes the spiral method, that is, one begins *in medias res* and then in subsequent chapters fills in what went before. Troeltsch used the second method in writing his classic treatise, *The Absoluteness Of Christianity*.⁵⁾

The way Troeltsch begins one might think that he is about to reject Christianity's claim to absoluteness *in toto*. This turns out not to be the case at all. For Troeltsch the term, 'absoluteness', has various meanings. First, it may mean 'supernatural revelation'. This term has a long history to it going back to the Christian-Gnostic debate, where the doctrines of supernatural divine revelation and that of the Incarnation were forged. Christianity was thought, says Troeltsch, to be the complete, final and perfect knowledge of God. The other notion formed at this time was that Christianity contains in perfect form the truth found imperfectly in other religions and cults.⁶⁾

It was Albrecht Ritschl and his school, particularly Ferdinand Kattenbusch, who pushed the idea of supernatural revelation in order to maintain the absoluteness of Christianity. They did this by way of an appeal

3. Paul Knitter, *Towards A Protestant Theology Of Religions* (Marburg: N.G. Ewert Verlag, 1974), p. 209.

4. John Hick, "On Grading Religions", *Religious Studies* 17 (1981), p. 456.

5. Ernst Troeltsch, *The Absoluteness Of Christianity And The History Of Religions* (Richmond, Va: John Knox Press, 1971), (hereafter cited as "The Absoluteness Of Christianity"). Other works of Troeltsch on this question are: *Die Bedeutung der Geschichtlichkeit Jesu*, pp. 47–51, the various articles in the *RGG* which discuss the problem of absoluteness, (such as 'Weiterentwicklung', 'Theodizee', 'Offenbarung', and 'Kirche') and the essay, "The Place of Christianity Among the World Religions" in *Christianity and Other Religions*, ed. John Hick and Brian Hebblethwaite (London: Collins, 1981). None of these are available to me in the library to which I have access.

6. *The Absoluteness Of Christianity*, p. 58.

to the dogmatic method in theology, in contradistinction to Troeltsch who underscored the use of the historical method and an undogmatic Christianity. Troeltsch argues that Christianity lives by its involvement in a historical context and thus always in completely individual historical forms.⁽⁷⁾

Second, 'absoluteness' may refer to Christianity's character as the final and perfect religion. This understanding of absoluteness is found in Hegel who defines Christianity as the absolute religion. Why so? Hegel saw in Christianity the highest and final stage of religion. Troeltsch objects to Hegel's understanding of absoluteness on the grounds that one cannot prove with absolute certitude that Christianity will not be superseded by some other religion. History would have had to reach its endpoint in order for one to prove Hegel right. Troeltsch felt that the wish to possess the absolute in an absolute way at a particular point in history is a delusion.⁽⁸⁾

Third, 'absoluteness' may mean Christianity's claim to be *the* truth, a claim which belongs to the very nature of the Christian faith. Such an understanding of Christianity takes no account of the truth-claims of other religions.⁽⁹⁾

What does Troeltsch himself mean when speaking about the absoluteness of Christianity? This is not an easy question to answer. He begins by making a distinction between naive absoluteness and an artificial apologetic absoluteness. This distinction applies, however, only to the higher religions.⁽¹⁰⁾ 'Naive absoluteness' has reference to the fact that all religions are born absolute because they are a response to a divine command and preach a reality that demands acknowledgment and belief.

A scientific approach indicates that the naively understood absolute is, in fact, God himself. Troeltsch holds that the absolute is the goal of the human spirit, marked by a boundlessness and an otherworldliness that transcends history itself. Naive absoluteness is something to be expected particularly at the inception of a religion. However, from this naive absoluteness an artificial, apologetic absoluteness arises under the pressure of circumstances.⁽¹¹⁾

One must be careful to separate naive or natural absoluteness from its historical expression, that is, from an artificial, apologetic absoluteness. In the case of Christianity, Jesus pointed to the kingdom as an absolute. However, the *Urkirche* transferred this absoluteness to Jesus. As Troeltsch puts it, natural absoluteness gradually grew beyond its naive, self-contained outlook into a doctrine of unique and miraculous expression of the divine.⁽¹²⁾ In making this distinction between naive and artificial absoluteness

7. Ibid., p. 71.

8. Ibid., p. 122.

9. Ibid., p. 56.

10. Ibid., p. 160.

11. Ibid., p. 149.

12. Ibid., p. 154.

Troeltsch seems to be making a value judgment. He appears to look kindly upon natural absoluteness while looking less kindly upon an artificial, apologetic absoluteness. He tends to view the latter as an aberration.

In *The Absoluteness Of Christianity* Troeltsch makes use of the historical method. By judicious use of the historical method the Christian religion will be investigated impartially and without prejudgments. Christianity and the non-Christian religions are not *totaliter aliter*. By using the historical method one sees the close ties that exist between them. Troeltsch believes that in the history of religions we are confronted with the rivalry between the prophetic, Christian, Platonic and Stoic world of ideas, on the one hand, and the Buddhist or Eastern on the other.⁽¹³⁾

From his study of history Troeltsch came to the conclusion that the personalistic redemption-religion of Christianity is the highest and most significantly developed world of religious life that we know. On this point one notices a tension in Troeltsch's thought. On the one hand, he makes the point that *homo religiosus* possesses the absolute only in God and not in a particular historical phenomenon such as Christianity. On the other hand, Troeltsch argues that nowhere is a greater revelation to be found other than in Christianity. Christianity surpasses other religions because they have not as yet achieved this breakthrough to personalism the way Christianity has.⁽¹⁴⁾

I offer the following comments in regard to Troeltsch's *The Absoluteness Of Christianity*:

1) One can only admire Troeltsch's speculative powers as seen in the fact that he anticipated many of the same questions we have today vis-à-vis the absoluteness of Christianity, although he gave his lectures on the subject over eighty years ago.

2) Troeltsch appears to be on the right track programmatically, that is, by wishing to study the world religions using the historical as opposed to the dogmatic method. However, in practice he does not always stick to his intended goal. For example, to call Christianity the 'normative religion' for all of history up to the present seems to be a value judgment that goes well beyond the canons of the historical method. Troeltsch seems to be a prisoner of his own presuppositions, however inadvertently. Troeltsch appears to be caught up in this dilemma: how does one as a systematic theologian embrace historical thinking without, at the same time, nullifying its many universal values?

3) I wonder how knowledgeable Troeltsch really was in regard to the world religions. Troeltsch states that in the history of religions we are confronted with the rivalry between the prophetic, Christian, Platonic and Stoic world of ideas and the Buddhist or Eastern. Is this not casting up false alternatives? What about Confucianism, Islam, Hinduism and the other major religions? Are they non-existent or non-important?

13. *Ibid.*, p. 93.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 129.

II. Towards a World Theology

One noteworthy attempt at rethinking Christianity's claim to absoluteness finds expression in the work of Wilfred Cantwell Smith, particularly his latest book, *Towards a World Theology*.⁽¹⁵⁾ Smith argues that the line that led from Schleiermacher to Troeltsch (in dealing with the new pluralism) as well as the opposing line, that led to Barth and Kraemer, can be transcended today as we begin to use new categories.⁽¹⁶⁾

W.C. Smith continues, in some respects, some of the same lines of thought opened up by E. Troeltsch. Smith too makes great use of the historical as opposed to the dogmatic method. He writes primarily from the standpoint of an historian of religion. Smith reminds us, reminiscent of Troeltsch, that history is the domain of the specific, of the recalcitrant fact.⁽¹⁷⁾ Smith observes that Hinduism, Christianity, Islam etc. are historical terms as are all human concepts. Smith manages to go beyond Troeltsch. He sees four items that interact in the formation of a religious tradition: 1) the accumulating religious tradition that each person inherits; 2) the particular personality each brings to it; 3) the particular environment, including the community, in which each lives; and 4) the transcendent reality to which the tradition points.⁽¹⁸⁾

Smith points out that the various religions are not static but in process. A Christian, for instance, participates creatively in a community in flux. It is, writes Smith, like people dancing. One does not have a dance but actively takes part in one. The pattern may be learned from others yet each dancer adds a little to the dance in the act of dancing. Smith puts so much stress on the process character of a religion that he proposes we drop such terms as 'religion', 'Christianity', 'Hinduism' etc. since they are emaciating abstracts. Here he seems to carry Troeltsch's ideas to their logical conclusion. For Smith the only thing that Christians have in common is the fact that they have shared a common history.⁽¹⁹⁾

Smith calls it the 'fallacy of misplaced concreteness' to think of 'religions' in the plural or of 'religion' in the singular just as it is to suppose that religions are either true or false. This way of approaching the issue must be superseded. Smith argues that religions look differently to insiders or to believers than they do to outsiders. One must be careful not to reify or objectify other religions.⁽²⁰⁾

In order to clarify this last point I would like to recall Gabriel Marcel's distinction between a 'problem' and a 'mystery'. Smith himself does not use Marcel's distinction, however, it may help to clarify the point Smith makes. The natural sciences deal with problems where objectivity is an ideal. On the

15. Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *Towards A World Theology* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1981).

16. *Ibid.*, p. 121.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 5.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 26.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 5.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 93.

other hand, the humanities, for example, religion, philosophy and theology, (among others) deal with mystery. In objective knowledge, as in the natural sciences, what is known is dominated. However, in speaking about religion, our discourse is about persons and their beliefs, in relation to which the idea of domination is entirely inappropriate. Unfortunately, many contemporary, Western epistemologies are geared more to science rather than to history, more to things than to persons. Smith sees the truth of religion more as a humane concept rather than as an objective one.⁽²¹⁾

It is neither possible nor desirable to approach the study of religion the way a physicist studies the structure of an atom. One's subjectivity enters into the study of another religion. One may consequently become a new person in the process. In the past Christians have tended to objectify Asian religions, for example, thus reducing the religious orientation from the form of consciousness to an object of consciousness, thus failing to understand these religions properly.⁽²²⁾

It is illegitimate to construct a theology of religions from within one tradition looking out, as it were, on the others the way Christian theologians have attempted to do in the past and continue to do. One must attempt to take into consideration the whole field of religion, as opposed to a sector of it, as the field of one's study. Step one in this process involves a recognition of the faith of others, while step two means the realization that there really are no 'others'.⁽²³⁾

A real difficulty exists in trying to elaborate a theology of religions or, in Smith's language, a theology of comparative religion for those among us who are Christians. One may ask if such a theology remains merely one option among several, all equally cogent, or else does one say *a priori* that it is true dogmatically, that is, accepted because it is Christian? In this matter Smith seems to face the same problem Troeltsch did, namely, combining absolutism and relativism, or using the dogmatic method *and* the historical one. In Troeltsch's language we do not have any means to construe Christianity's elevation above sensuality as supernatural while interpreting Plato as natural.⁽²⁴⁾

The difficulty may be seen from another angle. It seems that faith cannot be theologised about by an outsider or a non-believer. Since the Christian faith (and every form of faith Smith would say) is an awareness of a truth that transcends the empirical, an outsider cannot comprehend that faith. An outsider simply does not see the same thing that a believer does. What does one do in such a situation? Smith answers that the data for theology must be the data of the history of religion. The Christian faith must be seen as part of the history of religion.

In such an enterprise one must posit a view of history which includes,

21. Ibid., p. 190.

22. Ibid., p. 93.

23. Ibid., p. 103.

24. *The Absoluteness Of Christianity*, p. 48.

rather than excludes, the transcendent reference. In constructing a theology of religion one must interpret intellectually the cosmic significance of human life generically and not just for one's group or religious community specifically. Such a theology will be a collaborative effort, a 'colloquy' among Buddhists, Muslims, Hindus, Jews, Western humanists and representatives of all the religions.⁽²⁵⁾

The going will not be easy. The first difficulty will be problems of language. Christians feel comfortable with the term, theology. However, Western humanists and Buddhists do not. Another *crux theologorum* is the word, religion. Buddhists might quip that they do not have a 'religion' at all. They would also look skeptically on an enterprise involving an ideational scheme that is theological in nature, pointing out that abstractions such as a theology of religions do not save us from misery and suffering.⁽²⁶⁾

Another difficulty in elaborating a theology of religion has to do with pluralism and ways of dealing with it. Christians and Muslims have traditionally claimed to possess the truth. Ever since the time of Paul, Christians assert that faith in Jesus Christ saves. However, Paul never heard of faith in God through Islamic patterns or of faith in the Buddha, observes Smith. The term, salvation history, may be rightfully applied to the history of every religious community. In the Qur'an, for example, Allah has spoken to Muslims down through the centuries. Christians must recognize and accept the fact that to say Christianity is true does not mean that other religions are untrue.⁽²⁷⁾

Smith distinguishes between truth as propositional and truth as personal. If my reading of Smith is correct, he does not assert that all religions are equally true. He does, however, argue that a religion becomes more or less true in the case of particular persons as it informs their lives and nurtures their faith. Smith opts for the primacy of personal truth as opposed to truth as propositional in regard to the field of religion. He prefers to see truth as a humane rather than as an objective concept.⁽²⁸⁾

Finally, Smith proposes a criterion which may be useful in constructing a theology of comparative religion. In order for a statement involving persons to be valid, its validity must be verified both by the persons involved and by critical observers not involved. This means that no statement about Christian faith is true that Christians cannot accept and that non-Christians cannot accept. In other words, the validity of a Christian theology of religion, that is, one constructed in conjunction with the other religions and one which does not aim to dominate the other religions, may be tested by trying to express it in say Islamic concepts.⁽²⁹⁾

So far I have attempted to summarize the main points of Smith's book.

25. W.C. Smith, *Towards A World Theology*, p. 188.

26. *Ibid.*, p. 137.

27. *Ibid.*, p. 140.

28. *Ibid.*, p. 190.

29. *Ibid.*, p. 135.

This section concludes by offering a brief critique of Smith's *Towards a World Theology*:

1. Some scholars may object to Smith's book on epistemological grounds, for example, his distinction between propositional truth and personal truth. These are large questions, ones which cannot be treated adequately in this essay. I might ask in passing if this is really an either-or situation? Are not some truths both propositional, that is, (veridical statements about the world and the perception of persons about the world), and personal? One may quibble about some points in Smith, however, I see his work as seminal. His is the best analysis of the question that has been ever done, an indispensable point of departure for further reflection on this question of rethinking Christianity's claim to absoluteness.

2. I would ask on what basis does one posit a view of history that includes the transcendent reference. I would personally agree with Smith on this point while, at the same time, pointing out the fact that such a statement goes well beyond the uses of the historical method. Smith, much like Ernst Troeltsch, assumes rather than proves this to be the case.

3. Smith argues that faith cannot be theologised about by an outsider. How, then, is it possible for one to construct a theology of religions? Smith is certainly correct in saying that a faith looks differently to a believer than to an outsider. Perhaps there must be a willing suspension of disbelief on the part of the scholar who tries to elaborate a theology of religions. It might also be helpful for scholars to 'empathize' with adherents of another religious persuasion, that is, one must put oneself in the believer's frame of reference as much as possible, analogous to the way a therapist of the Rogerian school accepts the client unconditionally without necessarily agreeing with the client.

4. I question Smith's proposal to drop such terms as 'religion', 'Hinduism', 'Christianity' and the like since they are emaciating abstracts. Would Smith also want us to drop such words as 'politics', 'American', 'New Yorker' since they are likewise useless abstracts? Smith finds the idea of a 'Christian theology of Comparative Religion' repugnant if such a theology is constructed apart from other religions. How is it possible to have a world theology if there are no world religions but only individual religious persons?

5. Smith desires that the following criterion be used in constructing a theology of religions: in order for a statement involving persons to be valid, its validity must be verified both by the persons involved and by critical persons not involved.⁽³⁰⁾ How does this criterion square with Smith's statement that faith cannot be theologised about by an outsider? I offer an alternative criterion. In order for a statement involving persons to be valid, its validity must be verified by the person(s) involved. This would mean that one may say nothing about a person's religious commitment unless that person or community can say, "Yes, I believe that", or "We believe that".

30. *Ibid.*, p. 60.

III. Some Reflections

There are various problems involved in constructing a Christian theology of religions. Glyn Richards puts his finger on some of these when he asks when is a religious claim true or not, and whether there are any independent criteria of truth which will show when a religious claim is true or false.⁽³¹⁾ In my judgment this does not seem to be a very helpful way of posing the question. I feel uneasy with the whole notion of 'truth claims'. Analytic philosophers use this kind of language to discredit religious statements generally, as Wilfred C. Smith observes.⁽³²⁾ Moreover, religious statements are not primarily 'claims', but attempts at bearing witness to the truth. The early Church, for example, did not 'claim' a truth about Jesus Christ, but proclaimed the good news of salvation.⁽³³⁾

Along similar lines one may ask whether it is possible to grade religions, that is, place them in an order of merit? The other possibility would be to say that all religions are on the same level of value or validity. It should be noted that some of the greatest religious pioneers have been highly critical of some of the religious ideas and practices around them. Thus Mohammed criticized the polytheism of his contemporary Arabian society, the great Hebrew prophets denounced mere external sacrifices and observances, and Gautama rejected the idea of the eternal *atman*.⁽³⁴⁾ Although the idea of grading religions may seem repugnant to some, the notion that all religions are on the same level of validity is also problematical. Who among us would want to put the worship of saints and the worship of warlocks on the same level?

John Hick argues that a tool does exist with which we can attempt to grade religions, or at least aspects of them.⁽³⁵⁾ The test consists of reason applied to their beliefs. The problem arises when we consider the fact that the distinct experiences of the Hindu saints, Gautama, Jesus, Mohammed etc. were encounters with reality rather than rational constructs. The test of these encounters or experiences must be, says Hick, the test of the larger religious totality which has been built around it. Such a test can only be empirical/pragmatic, viz., does a particular religion make possible the transformation of human existence from self-centeredness to Reality-centeredness?⁽³⁶⁾

31. G. Richards, "Towards A Theology Of Religions", p. 59.

32. Wilfred Cantwell Smith, "Conflicting Truth-Claims: A Rejoinder", in *Truth And Dialogue In World Religions: Conflicting Truth Claims* ed. John Hick (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1974) p. 158.

33. *Ibid.*, p. 159.

34. J. Hick, "On Grading Religions", p. 451.

35. *Ibid.*, p. 461. Hick suggests that conscience or moral judgment applied to the working out of these beliefs may be seen as another tool with which we can try to grade a religion or aspects of one. Again the tool of conscience has its limitations too because none of the religions are impeccable, but are a composite of virtues and vices.

36. *Ibid.*, p. 461.

One may ask how appropriate it is to speak of rationality or the lack of it in regard to the visions of reality associated with these basic experiences. These visions of reality are linguistic maps of the universe, which aim to help one find salvation or *moksha*. These linguistic maps have, then, a soteriological function whose ultimate verification can only be eschatological. For most of us the complete fulfilment of the eschaton will be in the future where it may be the case that the root visions were maps of different possible universes (only one of which is actualized) or it may turn out that they were analogous to maps of the same world drawn in radically different projections, yet enabling sojourners to find their way, although each method of projection distorted reality somewhat.⁽³⁷⁾

Hick concludes that the tool of reason cannot test the different basic religious experiences and their associated visions of reality. It is true that around each basic vision or religious experience of the Hindu saints, Gautama, Jesus etc. interpretative systems of thought have been built. One may assess such interpretative systems in terms of their internal consistency. However, any grading of them involves grading the fundamental visions which they try to articulate and this cannot be done using an intellectual test.⁽³⁸⁾

I agree with Hick when he maintains that one cannot grade or assess the world religions as totalities. As Hick observes, each of these traditions is so internally diverse that one cannot compare their merits as systems of salvation.⁽³⁹⁾ Then too, individual religions vary so much from century to century and from one geographical area to another. Moreover, these religious traditions seem to be equally productive of that transition from self to Reality which one sees in the saints of all traditions.

I disagree with Hick when he argues that we can grade religious phenomena such as theologies, patterns of behavior, experiences, myths, cultic acts, liturgies, scriptures etc., by asking to what extent they promote/hinder the religious aim of salvation, viz., the realization of that better quality of human existence which occurs in the transition from self-centeredness to Reality-centeredness.⁽⁴⁰⁾ One may possibly grade theologies inasmuch as they are rational constructs. I am less sure we can grade religious phenomena such as liturgies, experiences, scriptures etc. using the criterion Hick proposes. How does one know whether a given individual attains salvation or liberation as a result of experiences, beliefs, or the use of scripture? I would find it difficult to gauge the results.

In order for a Christian theology of religions to emerge, there needs to be a sustained dialogue between the adherents of the various religions, analogous to the kind of dialogue that has been going on between Christians and Jews during the past decade. Just as the various Christian denomina-

37. *Ibid.*, p. 462.

38. *Ibid.*

39. *Ibid.*, p. 467.

40. *Ibid.*, p. 466.

tions have engaged in ecumenical dialogue during the last two decades (discovering much common ground in the process) so must there now be the same type of fruitful exchange and dialogue among the various religions in the world.

Christians will then be forced to modify their claim to absoluteness. Christian theology will be forced to see that the love of God in Christ and the love of God in other forms in other religions are compatible. A Christian theology of religions cannot be articulated if the other religions must remain subordinate to Christianity. Religions are neither superior nor inferior to each other. They are linked together by their otherness and illuminate each other.⁽⁴¹⁾

I see two things happening if Christianity modifies or rethinks its claim to absoluteness. First, Christianity may be strengthened not weakened in the process. Because some Christians, viz., official Catholicism, persists in its claim to absoluteness, a growing number of anonymous Christians find it difficult to subscribe to Christianity since they cannot accept its absolute claim. This problem might disappear if Christianity modified its claim to absoluteness.⁽⁴²⁾

Second, if one agrees with Wilfred C. Smith that a theology of religions must take into its purview the whole field of religion, then its articulation should involve a dialogue between theology and religious studies. Presently, the relationship between historians of religion and theologians is often one of suspicion and mistrust.⁽⁴³⁾ However, if the data for theology becomes the data of the history of religion, then there should be a fruitful exchange between the two disciplines. Of course, this hinges on the question whether or not Christianity is willing to rethink its 'claim' to absoluteness.

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41. Henri Maurier, "The Christian Theology Of Non-Christian Religions", *Lumen Vitae* 21 (1976), p. 72.

42. Paul Knitter, "Christianity as Religion: True and Absolute? A Roman Catholic Perspective", *Concilium* 136 (1980), p. 15.

43. Charles W. Kegley, "Theology And Religious Studies: Friends Or Enemies?" *Theology Today* 35 (October, 1978), p. 274.