

IS THERE COMMON GROUND AMONG RELIGIONS?

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Paul Nitze, one of the original “mighty men of Washington, D.C.,” recently made a comment regarding a political opponent in Washington: “He was a wonderful friend. We disagreed but after all our disagreements were only over matters of substance.”¹

A curious statement. It could have many meanings, I suppose. Perhaps Nitze was being facetious. Or perhaps he was defining the word “substance” in a way that would lessen the paradoxical nature of his statement. I think, however, that what he meant was that even though he and his colleague disagreed on matters of political philosophy and political strategy they remained friends over the years, and despite frequent public clashes they were able to maintain that friendship on a deep, very personal level. They had enough common ground so that despite their disagreements they could still relate.

I would like to explore the same kind of issue in terms of religious pluralism. The religions of the world differ on matters of substance. Each of them proclaims a different “truth” about where human beings come from, the reason for which they live on earth, and their ultimate destiny when life ends. Contrary to what some say, these differences are real and substantive.² In terms of interreligious interaction, the question raised by Nitze’s quote—“Can we disagree on matters of substance and still get along?”—is a real one.

Can we disagree on matters of religious substance—important matters, ultimate matters—and still get along?

There are three possible answers to such a question. The first is to say that we cannot get along when we disagree on matters of substance. The

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¹ *New York Times Book Review* (January 2, 1994) 5.

² Pluralists like J. Hick (*An Interpretation of Religion* [New Haven: Yale University, 1989]) and P. Knitter (*No Other Name?* [Maryknoll: Orbis, 1985]) often make a distinction between ultimate reality and conditioned, historical reality. One deals with Truth and the other with truth. I do not make such a distinction, at least in the way they do. But if you agree with their distinction, then my argument in the following applies to conditioned, historical truth. In answer to the primary question of common ground between religions the pluralist answer lessens the importance of the question, reducing it to second-rank importance because ultimately we are all pointing toward the same thing, whereas for those of us who do not make the same distinction the question is still of first-rank importance, because ultimate Truth cannot be known perfectly. It can only be known well enough to identify its essence and to disqualify obviously incorrect representations of that Truth. I would add, however, that I recognize that many things about Truth cannot be known, and we should be more up front about that fact.

religious world must inevitably be seen as one of conflict, competition, and violence, whether metaphorical or literal.³

The second answer (the longest of the three) is to say that we can get along but only if we reduce the ultimacy of our "substantive" positions. This position has many forms and has managed to become the dominant one almost across the board in the academy these days. Yet it has not gone unchallenged. In the philosophy department the debate is between the foundationalists and the antifoundationalists. Among cultural anthropologists the debate is between the universalists and the relativists. Among literary theorists the debate is between those who advocate some kind of hermeneutical understanding and the deconstructionists. The antifoundationalists, relativists and deconstructionists argue that there is no common ground upon which any of us can stand. There is no common ground upon which to base a relationship in spite of disagreements over matters of substance, no place to drive that fundamental stake in the ground from which other discussions can take place. As Paul Knitter has said, "[According to the relativists] there really is no common foundation or ground on which to construct and carry out cross-cultural interpretations. . . . At best one can appeal to intercultural standards or norms; at worst one is simply at sea trying to plot a temporary direction, yet aware that the winds will shift and another course will have to be selected."⁴

Knitter and others have fashioned a response to antifoundationalism that refuses to go back to the old forms of foundationalism or universalism. They call their position pluralism. Pluralists have attempted to move beyond the exclusivist paradigm that insists that one and only one religion could be at all true. They have attempted to develop a pluralistic theology of religions. The most systematic proponent of this position is John Hick⁵ who, together with other pluralist theologians/philosophers, suggests that there is a common God or one ultimate reality or a shared spirit or goal or a mystical core within all the religions, and it is that common belief or human condition that provides the common ground from which we can talk to one another. For pluralists no one religion can claim to be the final description of this common essence, but all can contribute something in the way of understanding it.⁶

Pluralists, however, irritate the antifoundationalists every bit as much as exclusivists do. The antifoundationalists, relativists and deconstructionists argue that there is no common ground, not even in the mystical world of the transcendent, as the pluralists seem to represent. Everything we know and are is historically and culturally conditioned. In suggesting that there is a common ground, the antifoundationalists argue, the pluralists are really ar-

³ See H. Vroom, *Religions and the Truth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), and W. Crockett and J. Sigountos, *Through No Fault of Their Own?* (Grand Rapids: Michigan: Baker, 1991), for thorough discussions of this position.

⁴ P. F. Knitter, "Common Ground or Common Response?", *Studies in Interreligious Dialogue* 2 (1992) 111.

⁵ Hick, *Interpretation*.

⁶ See also Knitter, *No Other Name?*; S. Samartha, *Courage For Dialogue* (Geneva: WCC, 1981); W. C. Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion* (New York: Mentor, 1962).

going for just one more exclusivistic religion: Call it the religion of religious pluralism. Close inspection of religious pluralism reveals that it is founded largely on the western Enlightenment values of tolerance, respect, rationality and equality. Francis Schüssler Fiorenza sums it up best: "Unconsciously they (the pluralists) make Christian or Western conceptions of theology and religion covertly normative for what constitutes religious studies."⁷

The reason pluralism is such an enticing prospect, of course, is that there are many who see antifoundationalism, relativism and deconstructionism as nihilistic or existentialist dead ends and yet are loath to go back to the old versions of foundationalism. Pluralism offers a "religion" that captures all of the politically correct ethical absolutes of the day: liberalism in attitude, feminism/masculinism in gender relationships, rationalism in matters epistemological. Yet it has become increasingly evident that adherents of the religion of pluralism hold to their teachings with a tenacity and exclusivity every bit as intense as do foundationalists. So a group of theologians who might be called postliberal have suggested that the answer might lie in the rough equivalency of a number of cultural/historical traditions each having its own rules of discourse and linguistic conventions. These traditions are each systems unto themselves, and even though they cannot relate to those in other traditions because their linguistic and cultural rules systems are so different they practice what Knitter has called a kind of "good neighbor policy" toward those other systems.⁸ They realize fully that their own being and identity has to be formed completely within their own system. On the other hand, there is no reason to be antagonistic toward other systems, just as there is no particularly pressing need to interact with them. One simply ends up being a "good neighbor," trying not to harm one another in the process of being who they are.⁹

Postliberal theologian William Placher has called this approach to theology an "unapologetic" approach. As Christians we simply do our own thing, according to Placher, not avoiding our responsibility as Christians and yet not apologizing for what we are doing or trying to bring it into harmony with anyone else.¹⁰

For many of us, however, this is as unsatisfying as antifoundationalism. It does not appear that the Christian gospel will allow one to simply ignore the injustices that may be occurring in another cultural-linguistic system. Christian theology seems to be a universal theology concerned with universal, eternal standards of right and wrong, and when one sees injustices around the world it seems that the Christian is called upon to act even if it means acting normatively. To not do so, it seems, leaves one open to an even more insid-

⁷ F. Schüssler Fiorenza, "Theological and Religious Studies: The Contest of the Faculties," *Shifting Boundaries* (ed. B. Wheeler and E. Farley; Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1992).

⁸ Knitter, "Common Ground" 113.

⁹ There are several varieties of postliberal positions, ranging from G. Lindbeck (who most closely matches my description here) to D. Tracy. For some very useful distinctions see R. Lints, "The Postpositivist Choice: Tracy or Lindbeck?," *JAAR* (Winter 1993) 655-679.

¹⁰ W. Placher, *Unapologetic Theology: A Christian Voice in a Pluralistic Conversation* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1989).

ious form of imperialism than was present in some of the early Christian colonialization/imperialism schemes. If there are no cross-cultural, universal values, then the values that pertain will be those that are able to be enforced by the most powerful military, political, or economic entity on the field. Sadly, the history of the world has shown that dominant political and military forces rarely are backed up by a high level of ethical integrity. Thus by denying that any kind of cross-cultural values are possible we open the world to even more drastic abuse than we have experienced under current conditions.¹¹ So world conditions seem to force us to at least attempt to find some kind of common ground.

And now the third option: We can get along with those with whom we have substantive differences, but we need to ground such friendship on the basis of a mutually agreeable common ground. I would like to argue for a common ground consistent with both Christian theology and the cultural needs of the modern world. This is really just the first step in such a search. Christian theologians need to identify a common ground consistent with Christian theology before it can be compared with other religious traditions.

I. WHAT IS WRONG WITH THE OLD COMMON GROUND?

Before we proceed to state the position for a common ground, we need to deal with a legitimate question: What is wrong with the old common ground? Why can we not go back to older formulations of Christian exclusivism and universality? Let us rearticulate the argument that Christianity and the Christian worldview are the common ground on which the whole world should interact.

As James Borland put it in his 1989 Evangelical Theological Society presidential address: "If taking the gospel to every creature was a concern of Christ's two thousand years ago, why should his *modus operandi* be abandoned now, especially without a word from him to that effect?"¹²

Understood one way, that argument is a good one. There is ultimate truth to it. The gospel is not a changing, relativized truth. It is the unchanging, eternal gospel of Jesus Christ. But certain circumstances seem to call for a different strategic response today for two primary reasons.

First, the older view was argued before the widely-held recognition that all forms of Christianity are expressed in culturally conditioned terms.¹³ In-

¹¹ Perhaps the best record of these abuses can be found in P. Johnson, *Modern Times* (New York: Harper, 1985). It is easy to say that one country, for example America, cannot be the "moral policeman of the world." It sounds chic and reasonable and self-restrained. Unfortunately such thinking contributed to our initial apathy at least to the holocausts in 1940s Germany and 1970s Cambodia and the current genocide in Bosnia, where the powers of the world sat/sit back and watch(ed) millions of people die. I am not sure that the Biblical ideal of working for peace can be used as justification for such apathy in the face of the world's suffering.

¹² J. Borland, "A Theologian Looks at the Gospel and World Religions," *JETS* 33/1 (March 1990) 11.

¹³ C. Kraft, *Christianity in Culture: A Study in Dynamic Biblical Theologizing in Cross-Cultural Perspective* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1979); L. Luzbetak, *The Church and Cultures* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1988).

variably what used to be considered the essence of Christianity was often the essence of eastern European culture or Greek philosophy or the Hebrew worldview or, most recently, North American individualism. It is now more commonly recognized (although not universally accepted) that there is no form of Christianity that does not have cultural accouterments. All Christianity is contextualized to some degree, and thus to try to base a common ground of discussion on Christian theology ends up giving the nod to a relative form of theology (Roman Catholic, Lutheran, Reformed, Orthodox, anabaptist, etc.) or worldview (idealism, realism, monism, etc.) or political system (democracy, monarchy, socialism, communism, etc.).¹⁴ We stumble into the old pluralist danger of making the relative universal.

Second, up until very recently, in historical terms, Christianity has never really been divorced from political power. The separation of Church and state, that ideal of western democracy, is an ideal that has never been realized in the world to any great extent before the great American experiment. Even today in America, although most would say that some form of Church/state separation is a good thing and has worked, it must be admitted that it has worked only provisionally. The proof of its provisional success is that whenever the western version of Church and state separation is exported to (for example) the Middle East it runs into a great deal of difficulty because, like it or not, a great deal of western culture is imported along with the concept.¹⁵

But that is not to say that the separation of the Church or religion in general from the engines of political power is a bad thing. Indeed it seems to be a very good thing, and it seems to be the promise of the future. Right now it is an unrealized promise, but the fact that it is a promise that appears to be working and appears to be a good thing for the future is what demands that the exclusivist paradigm be added to so that it incorporates the unchanging nature of the gospel and its evangelism corollaries as well as the need to live peacefully with non-Christians in the midst of our religiously free democracies. To do that we need a common ground that allows exclusivism and political religious freedom.

II. WHAT IS THE COMMON GROUND?

Christian theologies from the apostles to the early fathers of the Church to modern theologians have recognized the importance of the question of common ground. Most often the question has been stated in terms of knowing God when the special revelations of the Scriptures and Jesus Christ are not present.

Sometimes the question has been asked in almost purely philosophical terms. Can someone who has never heard of Yahweh of the Israelites or Jesus of the first-century Christians know of God? If so, how? The answer to

¹⁴ R. J. Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1985).

¹⁵ See L. Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks: The Gospel and Western Culture* (Geneva: WCC, 1986).

the first question in Christian theology has always been affirmative. God is known by everyone. Psalm 19:1–4 states it in beautifully poetic terms:

The heavens declare the glory of God;
 the skies proclaim the work of his hands.
 Day after day they pour forth speech;
 night after night they display knowledge.
 There is no speech or language
 where their voice is not heard.
 Their voice goes out into all the earth,
 their words to the ends of the world.

The answer to the second question—how God is known—has been answered variously. Sometimes it is asked in much more practical terms: How can I talk about things spiritual with people who have never heard? The apostle Paul models a possible answer to this question in his well-known speech to the Athenians in Acts 17. He recognizes the common ground of God-knowledge by referring to the Athenians' intuitive sense of a great God out there somewhere whom all of their identifiable gods may have overlooked: the Unknown God. But again, although Scripture and theologians universally, consistently and explicitly have recognized this common ground, its details have been variously postulated: Where is it located? How do we know it? What good does such knowledge do?

I would like to suggest that when these various postulations are seen as complementary rather than as mutually exclusive alternatives, Christian theology already has a well-articulated doctrine of common ground that will serve us well today. It is made up of three well-known theological concepts.

1. *Logos spermatikos*. The idea of *logos spermatikos* ("seed of reason") was suggested by Justin Martyr, who was arguing in defense of the Christian faith.¹⁶

Justin was looking for a way to argue for Christian faith from a point of reference that would be common to all. His answer was the *logos spermatikos*, which was both similar to and different from the common ground many search for today—similar in that it would be something readily accessible to everyone, different in that although Justin was looking for an apologetic edge, many today are looking for a more neutral starting point.¹⁷ In either case, however, the *logos spermatikos* had some fascinating features.

¹⁶ The primary arguments are found in the "First Apology of Justin" and the "Second Apology of Justin" (ANF 1.159–194). The scholarly literature on Justin's *logos spermatikos* tends to focus on the stoic and Platonic origins of this concept and the philosophically inconsistent nature of Justin's argument due to the fact that it is apologetic and not systematic in form. See for example M. J. Edwards, "On the Platonic Schooling of Justin Martyr," *JTS* 42 (April 1991) 17–34; R. Holte, "Logos Spermatikos, Christianity, and Ancient Philosophy According to St. Justin's Apologies," *ST* 12 (1958) 111–168. Justin Martyr (AD 110–165) was a Gentile born in Samaria. He was well educated and tried all the Greek philosophers. But he settled on the teachings of Jesus Christ. He wrote the Church's first theological arguments in defense of the faith.

¹⁷ Most common-grounders today eschew the label of apologetics, a fact that makes the search for a common ground suspect, in their eyes at least; see Knitter, "Common Ground."

Justin realized that the concept separated him from the polytheists (roughly equivalent to today's pantheists) as well as the relativists who disavowed any enduring truth. He sought not only to ally himself with the Jews and philosophers against these two groups but also to carry on a winning argument even with his allies.¹⁸

Justin's argument was interesting. He began with the idea that reasonable living is always persecuted,¹⁹ a kind of second-century version of Leo Durocher's dictum: "Nice guys finish last." All human beings have a seed of rationality planted within, but the devils work to discourage its cultivation. Good humans who have only a part of the seed are persecuted some, but those who have much more of the seed (those who know the whole seed, the *Logos* himself, Jesus Christ)²⁰ are persecuted unrelentingly. This analysis corresponded very well to the world in which Justin lived, where pagans thrived and ruled, Jews and philosophers lived a tenuous existence, and Christians were out-and-out persecuted.

Justin's appeal in his writings was for the pagan emperor Antoninus Pius to look around and see what was happening. Christians obviously did not deserve the treatment they were getting, so something must be wrong. Even the Greek philosophers were getting short shrift, although they were people a Roman emperor at least paid lip service to. Thus it was obvious, argued Justin, that the thing Christians and philosophers held in common—a rational, reasonable approach to life—was the cause of the attacks.²¹ Instead of attacking this *logos spermatikos*, an emperor interested in orderly, reasonable subjects should be defending and promoting this feature of existence that all humans should and could therefore see as something to build community around (to use modern terminology).

Justin's argument is ingenious. It is based on the rational as well as the ethical. It pulls together the religious and the philosophical, which are actually not properly divided in Justin's mind: The religious is the culmination of the philosophical. We hear its echoes in modern arguments for a human common ground. Human rationality is often held up as that which should unite us. In many ways the Enlightenment call for recognition of the rational character of all human beings has roots in Justin's argument. Certainly the renewal of efforts at finding the universal ethical base of all human communities has important similarities with Justin's *logos spermatikos*.

But there is more than that. It is an objective reality that God has implanted this seed of knowledge in every race of men,²² a claim that echoes

¹⁸ See E. Osborn, "Justin Martyr and the Logos Spermatikos," *Studia Missionalia* (1993) 147.

¹⁹ "Since of old these evil demons . . . shared such fearful rights to men that those who did not use their reason in judging of the actions that were done were struck with terror" (ANF 1.164).

²⁰ For Justin, even those who know only the partial *logos* are Christian: "We have been taught that Christ is the first-born of God, and we have declared above that he is the Word of whom every race of men were partakers; and those who lived reasonably (*meta logon*) are Christians, even though they have been thought atheists" (ANF 1.178). Justin mentions in this category Socrates, Heraclitus, Abraham, Ananius, Azarius, Misael and Elias.

²¹ "The devils have always effected, that all those who live a reasonable and earnest life, and shun vice, be hated" (ANF 1.191).

²² *Ibid.* On whether or to what extent Justin meant this hypostasis of the *logos* to take place and on its relationship to Middle Platonic thought see Holte, "Logos" 122–123.

that of the apostle Paul in Rom 1:18–20. It is interesting that Justin himself does not make this connection. He uses little of Romans in his findings, focusing much more heavily on OT texts and Matthew’s gospel. But the parallels are obvious. Both Justin and Paul speak clearly about God making the personal divine nature known to all men through the created world, and in Justin’s case especially the impulse to live reasonably.

One modern evangelical missionary, Don Richardson, has written about experiences he and his wife Carol had in their mission to the Sawi in Irian Jaya. It sounds remarkably similar to Justin Martyr’s idea of the *logos spermatikos*. Richardson notes that the Sawi were cannibals for whom treachery was a way of life.²³ For example, they would intentionally go through the motions of friendship and hospitality for visitors solely for the purpose of lulling them into complacency and fattening them for table consumption later.²⁴

Yet in the midst of this treachery-filled culture Richardson discovered a practice he called a redemptive analogy,²⁵ an act so similar to the self-sacrificial love of the Christian gospel that it had to come from a similar source. When conflict arose between the Sawi and a neighboring tribe, the only thing that could stop the violence was an exchange of infants, a Peace Child, to be cherished and raised by the other tribe. The pain to the child’s parents was enormous, but genuine peace was the result.²⁶ Richardson used this redemptive analogy to relate the gospel story of God’s sacrifice of his Son for peace.²⁷

Richardson goes on to claim that all cultures he has studied have similar stories embedded in them.²⁸ Many have been the stuff of legend and story for years. Others, like the Peace Child, have only recently been told. Many are yet to be discovered. Although Richardson himself does not make the connection, all of them may be seen as concrete examples of Justin’s *logos spermatikos*: the seed of wisdom planted in all cultures waiting to be discovered, watered and grown.

The metaphor of a “seed of wisdom” available to everyone has appeal for these modern thinkers searching for a common ground. For those of us with a materialist bent, the concept of seed has a substantiality to it that is attractive. A seed is a tangible thing, a solid piece of common ground that we can all point to as a place to start. Seed also has inherent in it the idea of growth, a very popular metaphor in today’s experientialist approach to life and knowledge. Finally, there is an objectivity to a seed implanted in us that somehow helps us rise above the historically and culturally conditioned subjectivities of modern philosophies and theologies.

²³ D. Richardson, *Peace Child* (Ventura: Regal, 1974) 8.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.* 288.

²⁶ *Ibid.* 193–206.

²⁷ *Ibid.* 206.

²⁸ *Ibid.* 288. He notes a few redemptive analogies from other cultures: Olenos the Sin-bearer, Balder the Innocent, Socrates’ Righteous Man, the Unknown God of the Athenians, the *Logos* of the apostle John.

Of course, it is that very feature—its supposed objectivity—that makes the *logos spermatikos*, by itself at least, an inadequate common ground for almost everyone today. Conservatives object to it on the basis of its threat to the special nature of revelation. The *logos* must be partial, suggestive and condemnatory only, waiting to be completed, defined and salvifically effective by the work of Jesus Christ. Put another way, whereas Justin saw the *logos* as different in quantity but not in quality from Jesus himself, those of us who are conservative see it as different in kind. The *logos spermatikos* (if we would even use the term) can only convict. The *Logos* saves.

Christian theologies at the other end of the theological spectrum find the concept of *logos spermatikos* (if they were to even use the term) inadequate for another reason. It is too objective. As described by Justin it is the key to everything, the wisdom that if realized and practiced (in whole or in part) can lead to salvation. For many modern exegetes this approach ignores the new discoveries about human nature so determinative for modern theologies.

2. *Sensus divinitatis*. John Calvin fixed this phrase in the theological lexicon. According to Calvin the *sensus divinitatis* is an immediate, intuitive sense we all have of God: “There is within the human mind, and indeed by natural instinct, an awareness of divinity” (*divinitatis sensum*).²⁹ This means that there is “no nation so barbarous, no people so savage, that they have not a deep seated conviction that there is a God.”³⁰ The proof? All human cultures have had a religion, and even idolatry is proof of the point. This means that for Calvin the world’s religions are not the evil inventions of the devil but the natural result of the *sensus divinitatis*.³¹

This by no means leads one to the judgment that all religions are the same, however. Even though God has sown the seed of religion in all human beings, “scarcely one man in a hundred is met who fosters it . . . and none in whom it ripens.”³² The *sensus divinitatis* does not lead to salvation. Our superstitions and our malaise—in short, our sin—prevent us from taking full advantage of this intuitive knowledge.

That does not mean it is worthless, however. It is the starting place of our knowledge of God. If our faith and trust and belief in God were traced back in infinite regress we would discover at the beginning not a propositional presupposition nor a creed but an overpowering awareness that God is.³³ And there is more. From the *sensus divinitatis* we also gain admiration

²⁹ J. Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960) 1.43.

³⁰ *Ibid.* 1.44.

³¹ *Ibid.* 1.45.

³² *Ibid.* 1.47.

³³ To this extent C. S. Peirce was right on target in his “Neglected Argument for the Reality of God” when he identified the beginning of our knowledge of God with “musement,” a kind of meditative opening of oneself to the world and self. As Peirce describes it: “Enter your skiff of Musement, push off into the lake of thought, and leave the breath of heaven to swell your sail. With your eyes open, awake to what is about or within you, and open conversation with yourself” (*Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce* [Cambridge: Belknap, 1960] 6.315).

for God's good creation,³⁴ the necessity of creaturely obedience to such a majestic Creator,³⁵ and an overpowering drive toward piety in the face of such glory.³⁶

What does this intuitive knowledge do? It leads us to worship God, and it gives us hope: "Knowledge of this sort, then, ought not only to arouse us to the worship of God, but also to awaken and encourage us to the hope of future life."³⁷

But this knowledge leads us only to an awareness of our sin. We instinctively know God, but we also instinctively know that our knowledge is incomplete and skewed by our inability to see clearly. Calvin spends a considerable amount of time showing the limits of the effectiveness of this knowledge of God.³⁸ But he spends more time emphasizing the reality of this intuitive knowledge. It is clear that Calvin wants to emphasize that all human beings everywhere intuitively know God.

This universal intuition is of a different character than Justin's *logos spermatikos*. Whereas Justin's *logos* has an objectivity about it, Calvin's *sensus divinitatis* moves us toward the subjective end of things. The *logos* is, the *sensus* knows. Put in sentence form, "the *sensus* knows the *logos*." God made us to know the seed of religion planted in all creation. We have both the truth of God available to us and the ability to know the truth, at least to the extent of convincing us that something is wrong with life and that a corrective is needed.

It is something like this *sensus divinitatis* that the apostle Paul discussed in Rom 2:15 where he notes that even Gentiles who have never heard the law know the law (right and wrong) intuitively because it is "written on their hearts."

One writer who has recognized the two elements we have discussed so far is C. S. Lewis. Underlying all existence, he says, is a universal unchangeable moral code called the *tao*: "This thing which I have called for convenience the *tao* and which others may call Natural Law or traditional morality or the First Principles of Practical Reason or the First Platitudes is not one among a series of possible systems of value. It is the sole source of all value judgments. If it is rejected, all value is rejected."³⁹

How does one know the *tao*? Lewis says that we know because of the way we are made. In perhaps his most famous work, *Mere Christianity*, Lewis begins and bases his entire argument for Christianity on the fact that we know the *tao*, we know when our deeds are in sync with it and when they are not: "If anyone will take the trouble to compare the moral teaching of, say, the ancient Egyptians, Babylonians, Hindus, Chinese, Greeks, and Ro-

³⁴ Calvin, *Institutes* 1.53–55.

³⁵ *Ibid.* 1.55–60.

³⁶ *Ibid.* 1.61–62.

³⁷ *Ibid.* 1.62–63.

³⁸ *Ibid.* 1.63–69.

³⁹ C. S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man* (New York: Macmillan, 1947) 28.

mans, what will really strike him will be how very like they are to each other and to our own. . . . Human beings, all over the earth, have this curious idea that they ought to behave in a certain way, and cannot really get rid of it."⁴⁰

In a more recent attempt to identify the universal *tao*, several Christian theologians have attempted to isolate the common features of all religious traditions as far as ethical values are concerned. Hans Küng and Karl-Josef Kuschel have isolated what they see to be the ethical features common to all the major world religions.⁴¹ This does not mean that all these religions are the same. They all claim different authorities, gods and scriptures for their ethical beliefs. But the similarities do support Calvin's claim of a universal sense of God and God's righteousness in the world.

3. *Imago Dei*. If Justin's *logos spermatikos* emphasizes the objective nature of a common ground for all religions and Calvin's *sensus divinitatis* emphasizes the subjective intuition of a common ability to know God, then one way of understanding the *imago Dei*, the Biblical teaching that human beings "by creation uniquely bear the image of God,"⁴² is to see it as somewhere in between the two poles. That is, one way to understand it is to see it as an inherent drive we all have to be in a relationship to God. At least that's one way Karl Barth described the *imago Dei*.⁴³

Barth's is not the only understanding, of course. The Protestant Reformers, in discussing the *imago Dei*, emphasized it in reference to humanity's original state of purity before Adam's sin.⁴⁴ We were objectively pure because we were made in God's image. Recent modern theologians have emphasized the more current objective reality of the *imago Dei*, stressing that it is this image that captures our essential goodness and our ability to model ourselves after God and Jesus Christ.⁴⁵

Barth, however, seemed to articulate something less objective than the Reformers because such a view inevitably degenerated into a discussion of how badly the *imago Dei* was damaged by sin. He also, however, wanted to avoid the more optimistic view of modern theology because that view inevitably leads to some kind of natural theology.

Barth considered Gen 1:27 the Scriptural *locus classicus* for understanding the *imago Dei*: God created human beings for fellowship, so he naturally created them as fellowshiping beings—not just fellowshiping beings with other humans, but capable of relationship with God. In the end, this is the distinctive of being human: "It is not good for man to be alone, and God

⁴⁰ C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Macmillan, 1960) 5–7.

⁴¹ H. Küng and K.-J. Kuschel, *A Global Ethic: The Declaration of the Parliament of the World's Religions* (New York: Continuum, 1993).

⁴² C. F. H. Henry, "Image of God," *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984) 545.

⁴³ K. Barth, *Church Dogmatics* III.2 (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1960).

⁴⁴ See for example J. Calvin, *Institutes* 1.35–38.

⁴⁵ See D. Cairns, *The Image of God in Man* (London: William Collins, 1973); W. Barr, "Life: Created in the Image of God," *Mid-Stream: An Ecumenical Journal* (October 1982) 473–484.

created him in his own image, as male and female. This is what is emphatically said by Genesis 1:27 and all other explanations of the *imago Dei* suffer from the fact that they do not do justice to this decisive statement."⁴⁶

The implications of this for Barth seem to be twofold: (1) The natural state of being human is to be in relationship to God. This never changes: "Since his constitution derives from this God, from Him who is faithful and does not repent of His goodness, it is therefore unshakable. It can, of course, be disturbed and perverted by human sin, but it cannot be destroyed or rendered nugatory."⁴⁷ (2) It is only in relationship with God that we can be fully human. There is no objectively existing datum that can be called religion, even true religion.⁴⁸ Neither are we able to subjectively discover truth within ourselves. We only become real in that middle land between objectivity and subjectivity called relationship: "For man cannot be what he is, soul and body in ordered unity, without representing in himself—long before he understands it, and even when he will not understand it—the good intention of God towards him, without himself being guarantor for this good intention of God."⁴⁹

Hendrick Kraemer took one implication of Barth's teaching on the *imago Dei* and made it the cornerstone of a theology of missions, a theology he called Biblical realism.⁵⁰ If, as Barth taught, human beings are made for relationship, and if because of the radical nature of God's revelation all human religious systems are suspect, then the key element in any theology of missions is not the teachings of the other religions and the point-by-point refutation of such. It is rather the encounter between the missionary as representative of Christianity and the missionee as representative of his or her system of belief. Just as the encounter of each of us with God cannot focus on the content of God (because who of us can know the Wholly Other), or on us because of our weaknesses, it must focus on what we are made for—relationship—so the encounter with other religions must focus on the relational aspects of the encounter. Kraemer emphasizes this by concluding after a lengthy discussion of possible points of contact (common ground) between religions that only one real point of contact exists:

There is only one point of contact . . . the disposition and the attitude of the missionary. . . . The way to live up to this rule is to have an untiring and genuine interest in the religion, the ideas, the sentiments, and the institutions—in short in the whole range of life of the people among whom one works, for Christ's sake and for the sake of those people. Whosoever disobeys this rule

⁴⁶ Barth, *Dogmatics* 324.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.* 347.

⁴⁸ See K. Barth, "The Revelation of God as the Abolition of Religion," *Church Dogmatics* I.2 (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1956).

⁴⁹ Barth, *Dogmatics* 347. See A. Plantinga-Pauw, "Personhood, Divine and Human," *Perspectives: A Journal of Reformed Thought* (February 1993) 12–14.

⁵⁰ H. Kraemer, *The Christian Message in a Non-Christian World* (New York: Harper, 1947). See also R. T. Habermas, "Practical Dimensions of *Imago Dei*," *Christian Education Journal* 13/2, pp. 83–92.

does not find any real point of contact. Whosoever obeys it becomes one with his environment, and has and finds contacts.⁵¹

By focusing on Barth's emphasis on the relational character of being human, Kraemer attempts to carve out a common ground between Christians and those of other religions that then opens up all sorts of common ground. He rightly observes that it is not just Christians who are made for relationship with God and by extension with all human beings. Non-Christians too are made for relationship, and we can do the most for them by creating the opportunity for them to exercise and develop this relational nature.

III. CONCLUSIONS

What have we discovered about the common ground between religions by looking at the concepts of *logos spermatikos*, *sensus divinitatis* and *imago Dei*?

First, all three concepts are necessary in order to adequately describe the common ground. If any one is set up as the only common ground, then distortion is inevitable.

If the *logos spermatikos* (or an equivalent) is set up as the common ground, then the madcap search is on for the correct humanistic teaching, the seed by itself against which all others are measured. In the history of the Church and the religions we have seen this has resulted in holy wars of religion, attempts to forcibly impose the correct seed on all others, or the search for the perennial philosophy, the correct humanistic teaching against which all others are measured. Paul speaks most forcefully against this in 1 Cor 1:10–25. Both lead to conflict and “common ground” only in the sense that whatever ground I happen to be standing on is the correct one.

If the *sensus divinitatis* (or an equivalent) is set up as the common ground, then the inevitable result is individualized religion, each of us determining what is right for us but letting everyone else determine what is right for them. The result is an inability to have any kind of meaningful relationship between human beings and between cultures.

If the *imago Dei* (or an equivalent) is set up as the common ground, we are left with the “love is the answer” solution to the problems of humankind.

Second, if these three concepts are taken together as mutually supportive, then together they construct a powerful, almost unassailable common ground from which to relate to people of other religions and those with no religion.

The *logos spermatikos* affirms that Truth does exist, independent of our theorizing, enculturation and historicizing.

The *sensus divinitatis* affirms that we can know that Truth, and when paired with the doctrine of sin it recognizes that our knowledge of the Truth will always be flawed and thus the occasion for great humility. It explains

⁵¹ Kraemer, *Message* 140.

the many different forms that our visions of the Truth can take (culturally and historically influenced forms) and invites us to dialogue with others who have similarly flawed yet truth-related visions of God.

The *imago Dei* reminds us, in a world where Truth exists but where perfect knowledge of such Truth must rely on God's good revelation and our own Spirit-aided attempts to grasp that Truth, that all God's children are similarly engaged and that the proper response to any human being, Christian or non-Christian, is to consider how God is working in their life and aid them in growing in relationship to the one true God and the gospel of Jesus Christ. That, after all, is both the essence of being human and the task of living life.