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No other gospel: Christianity among the world's religions

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No Other Gospel! Christianity Among the World's Religions

Carl E. Braaten

Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1992

146 pages

Reading Carl Braaten's *No Other Gospel!* gave me writer's cramp! Of its 134 pages of text only 36 are free of any trace of my yellow highlighter. Intellectually, this is a very stimulating book, and I also found it inspiring.

As its sub-title suggests, the book addresses the place of Christianity among the world's religions. My own need to reflect on this issue arises not only from my context as a parish pastor, but also as a father whose eldest son's girlfriend is a member of the Baha'i faith. I am encouraging our son to read *No Other Gospel!*—and I recommend it to any person seriously concerned about the claims Christianity might legitimately continue to make in this multi-cultural land within the global village.

Written, at least partially, in response to Paul F. Knitter's *No Other Name?*—which I have not read—Braaten affirms biblical passages such as Acts 4:12 and Galatians 1:6–9 as foundational for the Christian claim that “Jesus Christ is unique, normative, decisive, and final as the self-revelation of God and the salvation of the world” (1).

Braaten includes Knitter, along with John Hick, James Gustafson and others, in the category of theologians he calls “theocentric pluralists” who argue that “Christ must decrease so that God might increase!” (21). This statement captures the essential thesis common to those who champion the “Copernican Revolution” (38–40) in theology. Braaten identifies this school with ancient Arianism, thereby elaborating on the claim made in his introduction: “We are facing a conflict in Christology as great as the ancient controversies over the three persons of the Godhead (Nicaea) and the two natures of Christ (Chalcedon)” (8). Clearly, Braaten's perspective is orthodox, and he establishes a four-fold context from which his argument proceeds:

1) Jesus Christ is the personal event in whom God's final revelation has already occurred....

2) ... faith in Jesus Christ means personal participation in God's eschatological salvation.

3) ... the church... must proclaim Jesus of Nazareth as the sole Saviour of humankind until God's kingdom arrives in its final glory.

4) God's will is that all shall be saved and that the whole creation... will... reach its fulfilling future in the reign of God through Jesus Christ our Lord.(3)

In addition to the Introduction, *No Other Gospel!* contains seven chapters, only one of which—chapter 3, “Christ Alone is the Heart of the Church's Message”—is original to this volume. Throughout, Braaten employs biblical references effectively, in conjunction with the Lutheran Confessions, to defend traditional doctrines like the Trinity (ch. 6) and the

Two Kingdoms (ch. 7); to decry our cultural values of relativism, pluralism and openness (ch. 1); and to deny that Christianity's absoluteness—its "scandal of particularity" (52)—has made "the sins of... sexism, racism,... anti-Semitism... intolerance [and] imperialism" inevitable (52).

Braaten insightfully engages in dialogue with prominent theologians, including Karl Rahner, Wolfhart Pannenberg and, particularly, Karl Barth.

The major disappointment I have about this book is its fifth chapter, "Christianity Needs a Theology of Religions". Of its twenty pages, only the last five specifically address points of either divergence or congruence between the Christian and other religions. While the book is helpful in acknowledging other religions as arenas in which God is revealed (ch. 4), this chapter left me wanting a more in-depth discussion of how sharply a theology of the cross distinguishes Christianity from the four other religions discussed—Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism. Earlier in the same chapter Braaten claims, "The essential task of preaching today is to answer the question: Who is this Jesus of Nazareth" (85–86)? It would have been helpful to have a more thorough development of a cross-centred theology, including the doctrines of incarnation and resurrection, within the parameters of this chapter.

Typical of the book's fine writing and provocative style is the challenge presented in its final chapter:

The church and its members have a special and exclusive calling to be witnesses of God's promise of eternal salvation through faith in Jesus Christ.... Such Christian exclusiveness is under heavy attack these days... from within the church itself, its various councils, bureaucracies and theologies. It is a... Quisling conspiracy against the gospel itself, a subversion of Christianity within broad segments of church leadership (133).

For those who are concerned that Braaten's analysis is correct, and share his conviction that Christian identity needs to be reformed and the church's mission renewed, this book will prove to be most valuable.

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