

Keith Ward's Exceptionalist Theology of Revelations

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Drawing extensively upon anthropological and historical studies of primal and "canonical" religions (*RR*, 2, 232, 278, 318, 343), the philosophical theologian Keith Ward attempts in his recent book *Religion and Revelation*,¹ to develop a comparative doctrine of revelations in order to situate Christian revelation within the plethora of revelations that are an undeniable aspect of human religiousness in its virtually infinite forms (*RR*, 57, 37, 23, 215–16). Yet because Ward believes that in Jesus Christ God has disclosed the true form of human redemption (*RR*, 280), he evaluates other revelations in light of this belief. Consequently, his theology of religions, despite its drawing upon the data of historical and comparative study of religions, is incapable of accommodating other revelations on their own terms. For example, Ward tries to read Śaṅkara as a theist, and, thus, as an ally. In this essay, I will argue that this appeal to Śaṅkara is misdirected since Śaṅkara's position involves an ontological nondualism that ultimately annuls theism. I will also argue that such a misreading is an inevitable consequence of Ward's exceptionalist theology of revelations,² but is unconvincing to philosophical theologians of religions who cannot agree with Ward that the central claims of orthodox Christianity are "simply true" (*RR*, 279). Ward's fideism forecloses arbitrarily upon the limits of revelation and encourages an exceptionalist parochialism. This is harmless perhaps within the walls of liberal seats of theological learning, but it can foster fundamentalisms in other settings. Finally, I will argue that Ward's fideism belies the apparently comparative character of his undertaking. For rather than enter into a dialogue in which his most basic beliefs are subject to challenge and modification, Ward engages other revelations in order to determine to what degree, if any, they are consistent with—and thus true to—an orthodox conception of Christian revelation.

Ward, a defender of "open orthodoxy" (*RR*, 2), takes a confessionally Christian course in developing a comparative doctrine of revelations. Responding to John Hick's recent attempt to work out a religious but not confessional interpretation of religions, Ward argues that it is impossible to interpret religions *religiously* (as opposed to interpreting them naturalistically) without "holding a confessional view of some sort,

however attenuated that may be" (RR, 108). (In other words, Hick, by Ward's reckoning, is also a confessional interpreter of religions.) A confessional interpretation differs from what Hick calls a naturalistic interpretation in that at some point it ceases subjecting certain basic theological convictions to questioning and accepts them on faith as divinely revealed. On this point, Ward explicitly follows Thomas Aquinas, for whom Christian theology is the highest science since it takes its first principles from God who reveals Godself for the *salus hominis*. Since this *salus* cannot be attained through human reasoning (though it does not contradict, but rather perfects properly ordered reasoning), its principles must be revealed by God. Eternal joy for the theologian—what might be thought of as the prayer of the theologian—consists in directing reason "towards its proper supernatural end": the contemplation of "the mystery of God as revealed in Jesus Christ" (RR, 3–6). Revelation is thus ordained as a communication by God to human beings that can establish us "in a way of life which will lead to contemplation of that which is supremely real and to eternal bliss" (RR, 23).

But because Ward recognizes that Christians no longer live in a situation in which they can affirm Christian revelation while categorically denying its presence elsewhere (RR, 17, 21, 39–40, 278–80), he finds himself "forced to enquire into the criteria for accepting something as a Divine revelation" (RR, 7). So Ward generalizes Thomas's doctrine of revelation in order to evaluate the divine authority of other revelations. The issue for Ward, then, is not the possibility of revelation in general or the truth of Christian revelation in particular, but rather what criteria should be used for evaluating revelations other than the one held sacred by Christians.

In order to address this question, Ward approaches the topic of revelation comparatively in order to assess the nature and authority of the various alleged sources of revelation communicated from a supersensory realm through specially endowed persons (RR, 57–58) and, in the canonical traditions, preserved in such authoritative writings as the Qur'ān, the Bhagavadgītā, the New Testament, the Śiva Sūtras, and The Book of Mormon, to name just a few of the books invested with an alleged divine origin that daily confront us imperatively (RR, 112).

Although seemingly open to the challenge of these revelations (RR, 191, 271), Ward judges their validity not by criteria emerging from those various revelation-traditions themselves but rather in light of the revelation of God in the life of Jesus Christ. Ward writes:

God is manifesting the Divine Being decisively in this one historical life [Jesus]; so that this life becomes for ever the image of God, as a historically purposing and redemptive power and value (RR, 195).

This claim belies Ward's apparent openness to other revelations. By confessing prior to the investigation of other revelations that the revelation of the divine in Christ is decisive, Ward has foreclosed on the search for criteria for revelation. This is certainly his prerogative as a confessing Christian theologian, but hardly venturesome for serious comparative theological investigation, since Ward does not allow the teachings of Christian revelation to be placed in question by other revelations. In this unequal discussion between revelation-traditions, the outcome is assured (though the road there may be novel): revelations are true only to the degree that they agree with the revelation of God in Christ.

Ward acknowledges that this foreclosed view of revelation in Christ "can sound unacceptably exclusive," arrogant, and even "obstinate" (*RR*, 195, 198). Taken as an exceptionalist assertion reflecting no familiarity with contemporary developments in theology of religions it could be rejected as uninformed. However, Ward's writings on this topic are fully conversant with the current status of the discussion. The trend of the theological topic of salvation in other religions has rapidly advanced in the last decade to the point where even some conservative evangelical theologians are struggling to accommodate salvation in other religions to Christian soteriology,³ while some revisionist Christian theologians have called for the surrender of any privileging of Jesus and Christian revelation.⁴ Ward's belief in the "absolute supremacy" of revelation in Jesus Christ (*RR*, 195), must be seen in light of these developments as well as his multicultural view of revelation, which refuses to grant any particular revelation unique status as the only communication of God with human beings (*RR*, 215–16, 341, 275). No culture, including one's own, writes Ward can "produce a finally perfect expression of Divine truth," for all religious traditions are "continually changing, fallible, culturally influenced forms of life" (*RR*, 191).

It would be a mistake, however, to infer from this view of revelation that Ward rejects the idea of a final revelation. Although Ward does not view Christian revelation as "the provision of inerrant information on irrefutable evidence" (*RR*, 281), he nevertheless accords "absolute supremacy" (*RR*, 195) to the revelation of God in Jesus Christ. In Ward's view, "Christianity can intelligibly claim to be the 'final revelation,'" (*RR*, 280) because it has fallibly and provisionally been guided by God through "prayerful thought" to realize historically the most adequate idea of the "Supreme Value" available in the various religious traditions of the world (*RR*, 279–80).

Ward's book, then, can be seen as an attempt to articulate a theology of revelations that remains dogmatically orthodox without enclosing itself within the limitations of a propositionalist, inerrantist view of the

Christian scriptures as the only revelation of God (*RR*, 97, 124, 129, 189, 214, 281, 341, 343).⁵ Rather, Ward views revelation as “primarily a Divine existential challenge,” which “exists in many diverse cultural forms” (*RR*, 341).

In support of this open yet orthodox doctrine of revelation, Ward makes the anthropological assertion: “finite being exists in order to unfold a set of creative values of a quite particular and distinctive kind, which are new, unrepeatable expressions of free creativity” (*RR*, 199). He sees human history as an arena where those who have become alienated from God play out the drama of searching for renewal through seeking “an active personal God” (*RR*, 197–98). He views the emergence of temporality and individuality as a phase in God’s own development as self-giving love.⁶

Ward grounds this anthropological claim in the theological assertion that there is a single, supreme God of perfect goodness who expresses Godself by creating free, unsublatable persons; these finite persons, in turn, temporally image the infinite inner life of the deity by creating new values in a universe that has a moral dénouement (*RR*, 200–202, 208).

Developing the Christological implication of this anthropology and theology, Ward claims that the free creativity that is partially realized by finite beings in their religious communities is fully realized in Christianity and Jesus, who is “an icon of Divine self-disclosure for the whole world” (*RR*, 196; see also 279, 278, 191).

This exceptionalist view of revelations leads Ward—even while stressing the constitutive force of cultures, histories, and individuals in the various global responses to revelation—to arrange the data of revelation emerging from ethnographic and historical studies of these diverse cultures in accordance with an evolutionary schema, which progresses from the primal religions to the canonical religions, with the Gospels claiming preeminence as the final revelation thus far. This view conveniently lends itself to the subordination of “primal” to “canonical” revelations by seeing revelation as a progressive, if halting, movement from the “realm of ambiguous polymorphous gods and spirits” of the primal religions (*RR*, 83) to the personalist theism of the preeminent canonical tradition in which “the central revelatory act of God” is the revelation of God in Christ (*RR*, 258; see also 1, 89–91, 93, 194, 279). Ward’s exceptionalist theology of religions thus presupposes not only that revelation in Jesus Christ as mediated by orthodox Christianity is true, but also that it provides the substantive criteria for evaluating the content of other revelations (*RR*, 279–80). Revelation in Jesus Christ is not merely one revelation lying alongside other revelations, but is the paradigmatic revelation of God’s redemptive love for human beings.

At this point, Ward is confronted with a ticklish dilemma: Either he must judge as false any revelation that contradicts or is inconsistent with the “irreformable” and “irrevocably true” Christian claims that God is redemptive love calling human beings to union with Godself.⁷ Or he can accept these revelations as true to the degree that they coincide with God’s revelation in Christ—even if this requires a tendential recasting of these doctrines in favour of orthodox Christianity.⁸

Ward takes the latter approach, resulting in the failure of his theology of revelations to take *at face value* the conflicting views of the Divine revealed in different revelation-traditions. Thus, Ward subjects the notion of *sūnyatā* to theistic reinterpretation and looks for analogies to the Incarnation in the Torah and the Qur’ān. I will focus here on his *tendential interpretation of Advaita Vedānta*, in which he attempts to discern theistic—and thus, from his perspective, true—elements in Śaṅkara’s view of Brahman.

Ward seeks to make an ally of Śaṅkara by pointing out that Śaṅkara’s speaking of Brahman as an omniscient, omnipotent, eternally pure, intelligent, and free Self, which is the origin, continuance, and end of the world, is to describe Brahman “in very similar ways to the God of the Semitic tradition” (RR, 144–5).⁹

This attempt to recruit Śaṅkara fails. For, as Ward immediately acknowledges, this language applies to *saguṇa* Brahman, or Brahman conceived as possessing qualities, which is sublatably by *nirguṇa* Brahman, or Brahman conceived as beyond all qualities (RR, 145). Given this distinction, Śaṅkara, much like the Christian theologian who resorts to the distinction between apophatic and cataphatic predication with respect to Christian belief and practices, is able to support the ritual and devotional practices and theistic doctrines of traditional Hinduism as well as asserting their ultimate lack of foundation in *nirguṇa* Brahman.

Śaṅkara’s shotgun marriage between an elite philosophical nondualism and *déclassé* theological dualisms arose in a social context that demanded the synthesis of philosophical speculation and theological imagination. Since the distinction between nondualist and dualistic modes of religious thinking passes beyond the concern and comprehension of most of the faithful, religious philosophers can, without disturbing piety overmuch, apophatically strip away the peculiarities of the narratives of the divinities and their arbitrary deeds, wants, doctrines, and cultic regimes and move toward a conception of reality in which such anomalies are sublated (*bādha*), though indulged at the level of illusion, where religious and other modes of human existence operate.¹⁰

This maneuver presupposes the penultimacy of theism. For theism attempts by way of analogy to domesticate transcendence through

anthropomorphism, while nonduality breaks the bonds of analogy and threatens theism with an overwhelming and explosive encounter with reality. Apophatic alignment of theism with nonduality, which eludes the reach of even such language as “one,” “qualityless,” “nondual,” and “impersonal,” relativizes theism, thereby showing it to be penultimate. Conversely, cataphatic inscriptions of theism on nonduality must be rejected as meaningless, since they push theism beyond its semantic range. One may say of theism what Bataille says of poetry: it “describes nothing that does not slip toward the unknowable.”¹¹

Śaṅkara does not reject theism outright, but interprets it in light of a hierarchical ordering of scriptural texts. According to this hermeneutic, texts that teach that ultimate reality is utterly distinctionless are higher than those that teach that ultimate reality contains ineliminable distinctions.¹² On this approach, the end of theology, then, for both Hindus and Christians would no longer be the ultimate verification of the differentia of theism, but rather the recognition as ultimate of a transpersonal, transtheistic, simple, and formless reality—a recognition in which the cognizing self and its correlatively constituted deities are annulled (*bādhā*). If Ward were to continue along the path pointed out by Śaṅkara, rather than continue trying to find irreducible elements of theism in Śaṅkara, he would be forced in the end to agree with Śaṅkara that theism is a penultimate expression of a reality not figurable or conceivable by analogy with any aspect of human experience.

Another obstacle to Ward’s attempt to read Śaṅkara as a theist is Śaṅkara’s uncompromising claim that Brahman is *nirguṇa*—without qualities. Ward, a Christian theologian committed to the doctrine of creation, with its ineliminable dualistic realism, would seem to be obliged to reject Śaṅkara’s doctrine of *avidyā*, which asserts that qualities are ultimately unreal, despite their verisimilitude within dualistic experience (*RR*, 197–98). But because Ward wants to turn Śaṅkara into an ally, he gives a Christian theological slant to the concept of *avidyā*. Implicitly utilizing the Advaitic theory of double truth, Ward reshapes his doctrine of creation:

the world of appearances is real on its own level; it is the world in which we live and move and have our being. It is only when we take this play of relational, conceptually interpreted reality to be real in itself that we are under illusion. For then we do not see the only true Real (*RR*, 147)

This passage reads less like a Christian rethinking of *avidyā* as creationist than as an Advaitic rethinking of the doctrine of dualistic creation in terms of *avidyā*. Ward’s appeal to Aquinas’s notion of God as

simple, by which Ward hopes to indicate that his reinterpretation of avidyā sidesteps nondualism, actually underscores the nondual character of Aquinas's notion of God as simple and throws into question the consistency of Thomism respecting the simplicity of God and the reality of creation (RR, 147).

In order to smooth over this irreconcilable difference between nondualistic and dualistic views of the origin of the world, Ward proposes the contradictory position that the qualityless Brahman supports qualities. He writes:

appearances are not *substantially distinct* from reality, since they cannot exist without it. Yet appearances are *qualitatively distinct* from reality, since they have properties that it, as Real, does not. (RR, 152)

Yet if properties are unreal, then nothing can be specified by reference to them. If the oasis is not contained in the mirage, then it is pointless to talk about the continued existence of the oasis once the mirage is apprehended. The analogy here is less than perfect, since the existence of oases and mirages are not dependent upon each other. But the properties relevant to theism, should they exist, are *ipso facto* dependent upon the Real. Yet if those properties are not predicable of the Real but only of appearances, then any doctrine based on them is illusory. To continue to assert the reality of theism after the reduction of qualities to nonsubstantial appearances is an instance of what Rāmānuja, the eleventh-twelfth century theistic Vedāntic theologian and foe of Śaṅkara, calls the "persistence of sublated cognition."¹³ In other words, one cannot pull the rabbit of an ultimate personal God out of the hat of nonduality.

Advaitic theism cannot without distorting its meaning be seen as tending toward dualistic, realistic Semitic theism. Also, Ward's attempt to recruit Śaṅkara as an ally raises insuperable difficulties not only for theism but for soteriology. If Brahman as conceived by Śaṅkara is ultimate, then Jesus saves in the same way that Kṛṣṇa or Sri Ramana Maharshi save: as penultimate illusions leading the deluded one to the overcoming of *avidyā*.¹⁴ If salvation in Jesus Christ is ultimate, then *nirguṇa* Brahman doesn't save unless one holds that it ultimately gives way to or is merely a negative way of talking about a nonsublatable personal God (as Vedāntic dissenters from Śaṅkara do, such as Rāmānuja and Caitanya).¹⁵ To remain true to orthodox Christianity, Ward must reject Śaṅkara's doctrine as false. No attempt to fit Advaita Vedānta into an exceptionalist Christian standpoint can take Śaṅkara's doctrine at face value.

Thus Ward's reading of Śaṅkara is persuasive only from within a

particularist Christian perspective. Whether this particularism be exclusivist or inclusivist,¹⁶ it is animated by an invincible theological exceptionalism centering upon the universal lordship of Jesus Christ and the ultimacy of the Gospel. Ward is by no means unique in his exceptionalism, for doctrinal exceptionalism is invariably an aspect of particularistic religious communities.¹⁷ In these communities, paradigmatic acts of a religious founder, sacrosanct spoken or written revelations, or bodies of supposedly indubitable doctrines are thought to be of transhistorical and transhuman origin. They are thus exempted from the sorts of relativizing criticism applied to such “natural” products of human genius as art, philosophy, mathematics, and science.

Consequently, many religious people possess a simple, almost unconscious, certitude that their religious beliefs are absolutely true and final. Not many Muslims would assert that there is *probably* no God but Allah, and Muḥammad is *probably* his prophet. Not many Buddhists would say that *bodhi* is *probably* the goal of human life, which is probably characterized by endemic *dukkha*. Not many orthodox Christians would say that they are *probably* saved by the blood of Jesus, who *probably* was the Incarnate Son of God and the *probable* messiah. Not many traditional Lakotas would say that the *canunpa* was *probably* given to them by White Buffalo Cow Woman. Expressions of this sort are not part of the ordinary linguistic repertory of religions. Exceptionalism is ordinary in the realm of religious belief. For most religious people such central vital elements of religions as rituals, chants, and stories, and beliefs oriented around sacred objects, places, times, and persons are not seen as human constructions, but rather as paradigmatic revelations of divine powers.

Ward’s exceptionalism is thus not anomalous—he is united with most adherents of most religions in giving precedence to the revelation that commands his loyalty. While it is understandable that one will revere one’s revelation above all others, it is arrogant at worst and foolish at best to insist that there can only be one ultimate object of loyalty—that is, unless a godlike omniscience about the object of loyalty has been granted by that object of loyalty itself to the community of loyalty. But to think this in even as mild a fashion as Ward does is to evince an exceptionalist outlook.

At bottom, religious exceptionalism is arbitrary and fideistic. It asserts either without justification or with a solipsistic justification that its teachings are paradigmatic for others. But just as I can think of no compelling reason to reject the possibility of divine revelation, neither can I discover any principle that would allow me to say that *this* revelation is true but *that* revelation is not. Traditional defenders of revelation would agree with the first statement, but some would argue that the second

statement is false, since they can find resources within their revelation-tradition to show why other revelations are either false or subordinatable to their own revelation.

When looked at from the standpoint of religious studies, however, it appears that revelation spreads itself around promiscuously, whether in the Tanak, the Qur'ān, the Christian Scriptures, the Vedas, The Book of Mormon, A Course in Miracles, The Book of Urantia, etc. If I accept even one of these as revelation, thereby rejecting rationalistic denials of the possibility of revelation, I can discover no principle *outside of that revelation itself* that would allow me to reject the others as revelations. Yet such a rejection would be exceptionalistic, since the judgment is made in light of criteria internal to that revelation. But such criteria do not stand alone, like a syllogism, whose validity can be checked by those who have learned the logic of syllogisms. Of itself the recognition that the knowledge engendered by revelation lacks this objectivity ought not to undermine one's faith, though it ought to produce in one an epistemological modesty when judging other revelations. For the recognition that one's criteria are internal to one's tradition and not universally cognizable ought to make one realize that those not gripped by one's revelation owe no obligation to it. Unless it becomes a personal reality for others, as it has for you, it has no claim upon them. The purest act of faith that one can make with respect to the revelation that commands one's loyalty, beyond the absolute confidence that one places in it, is to allow it to stand in the midst of other competing revelations without making coercive claims for it while teaching it, preaching it, and allowing it to persuade or not through its own merits. In this way one can be orthodox in a truly modest way and avoid fanaticism.

A comparative theology of religions that does not hold all revelations in suspense, ever subject to challenge from all sides, is actually a dogmatics, or systematic theology, that is merely informed by the data of the historical and comparative studies of religions. Ward's global theology of revelations is really a dogmatic and apologetic treatise on Christian revelation, addressing itself to other revelations with the claim that Christian revelation is their norm and crown.

Theology of religions—whether concerned with the topic of revelations, soteriologies, or other theological topics—must dispense as far as possible with irreformable *a priori* assumptions about other religions. It ought to concern itself with bringing religions into challenging encounters with each other. Unless theology of religions works in this way, it becomes nothing more than a reassertion as true of what one has already determined to be true.

While no answer can be given, except perhaps eschatologically, to the

question of which if any revelation is true, it is not inconsistent with religious—even Christian—faith, to hold that there are numerous sources of redemptive revelation whose unity—if indeed they are unified—escapes the powers of reason to detect. This situation does not require the *sacrificium intellectus* of fideism, nor does it require a rationalistic *sacrificium fidei*. Another way opens, a way of temperate faith and reason that recognizes that revelations excite within their recipients an ardour that understandably but not necessarily allows of no rivals.

What is at stake here is not the truth of the exceptionalism of orthodox Christianity. The real issue is the *future* of orthodox Christianity, insofar as it is exceptionalist; for a rejection as un-Christian of all forms of religious exceptionalism would require a major reorientation within Christianity as a whole (and other religions as well). While many would see such a change as equivalent to the death of Christianity or as a crisis requiring a distinction between true and false Christians,¹⁸ others—including this writer—see it as an opportunity for Christianity to practice its own deepest kenotic, apophatic truth. Just as Jesus is said to have renounced the prerogatives of divinity (Phil. 2.6–8), so Christianity ought also to divest itself of its claims to religious sovereignty. Could Christianity survive the rejection of exceptionalism? To my mind it could do so and thrive, for the paradox of spiritual life is that the surrender of the props of self-assertion leads to a more solid grounding in the divine itself. The familiar Christian metaphor for self-abnegation is the secret of spiritual growth not only for Christianity but for all religions:

Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. He who loves his life loses it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life. (Jn 12:24–25, RSV)

Those of us who, like John Hick, can no longer accept the “unique superiority” of any religious tradition,¹⁹ are in search of a view of religious truth that will allow us to be religious but not exceptionalist, since the retention of the exceptionalism of our respective traditions is no longer acceptable, no matter how genial that exceptionalism may be.²⁰ Probing and wide-ranging as Ward’s theology of religions is, it remains bound within the limits of an amiable but irreformable Christian exceptionalism. And so it fails to venture into the kenotic mystery of Christianity from which the nonexceptionalist yet genuinely Christian Christianity of the future may yet emerge.

1 Keith Ward, *Religion and Revelation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 57 (hereafter cited as *RR*).

2 I prefer *exceptionalist* to more polemical terms, such as *hegemonic*, *monologic*,

solipsistic, imperialistic, and so forth. By exceptionalism, I have in mind its use by Americanists for the messianic idea that America as a new, democratic nation founded in a "New World" under God's special providence will prove an exception to the apparently fixed laws of history that governed the birth and death of Old World civilizations (See Jace Weaver, "Original Simplicities and Present Complexities: Reinhold Niebuhr, Ethnocentrism, and the Myth of American Exceptionalism," Journal of the American Academy of Religion 63 [Summer 1995]: 231–47). Adapting this idea to religious studies, I would use the term exceptionalism to stand for the belief that a particular religion is excepted in some significant way from human limitations. Examples of exceptionalism include the belief that elements of one's religion have been instituted directly and without admixture of human error by the Divine itself. The view that the patterns that mark the birth, growth, and death of all other religions do not apply to one's own is another instance of exceptionalism. In Ward's case, exceptionalism shows itself in the belief that, unlike other religions, Christianity proleptically reveals in Christ "the true form of human redemption" (RR, 280), while other religions approximate this form to lesser degrees.

- 3 See Clark H. Pinnock, *A Wideness in God's Mercy: The Finality of Jesus Christ in a World of Religions* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1992), 79; John Sanders, *No Other Name: An Investigation into the Destiny of the Unserved* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1992), 230.
- 4 Hick is in the advance on this position, along with Paul Knitter. Besides the carefully articulated philosophy of religion that Hick has most fully developed in *An Interpretation of Religion*, he has continued to write as a Christian theologian about the relation of Christianity to other religions—a relationship that he believes must be reconceived in light of the rejection of the literal truth of the belief that Jesus is God incarnate. See his *The Metaphor of God Incarnate: Christology in a Pluralistic Age* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), 109. See also his latest book in this area, *A Christian Theology of Religions: The Rainbow of Faiths* (Louisville KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995).
- 5 Ward's attempt to find a way through the bewildering diversity of religions and theories of religion without surrendering what for him are the irreformable (RR, 279) claims of orthodox Christianity, but also without remaining confined within biblicism (RR, 281) marks a step forward for an *orthodox* Christian theology of religions. He thereby avoids the pluralistic revisionism of Hick as well as the exclusivistic biblicism of Harold Netland (Harold A. Netland, *Dissonant Voices: Religious Pluralism and the Question of Truth* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1991), 34. For Hick, see works cited above and below.
- 6 RR, 199, 206–8. See also Keith Ward, *Rational Theology and the Creativity of God* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1982), 233–34.
- 7 RR, 279. Here Ward makes the decidedly confessional claim that this view of God is "simply true."
- 8 This approach, genial as it appears from within the circle of moderate but orthodox Christian faith, is unlikely to be welcomed by those whose revelations are so treated. Nor is the philosophical theologian of religions whose concern is not with the truth of this or that revelation but rather with the cognitivity of religious claims in general likely to feel the force of Ward's judgments.
- 9 Ward notes, however, that Hindu theisms, though often fostering devotion to a supreme God, lack central aspects of Abrahamic faiths such as notions of a single, transcendent Creator, who is not essentially identical with his creation, a Judge who is "experienced as absolute moral demand," and as a Redeemer who acts in history and makes his will known through prophets who condemn oppressive social contexts (RR, 134–35; see also 134–41).
- 10 Ward, following Julius Lipner, recognizes that the undue intellectualizing of Advaita Vedānta by some Western and Neo-Vedāntic interpreters is a distortion of the

tradition and sees Vedānta as part of the ethnic social and ritual fabric of Hinduism (RR, 142–43, 155–56). This view is in line with the notion of the apophatic religious philosopher as a traditional and pious interpreter rather than a detractor of scripture, which Francis X. Clooney develops—an approach I would call the piety of reading scripture apophatically. On this view, the interpreter, is not so much a philosopher in search of universal truths as a skilled practitioner of the art of devoutly reading the scriptures that project the religious milieu within which the accomplished reader—the scriptural theologian and the scriptural philosopher—read. Skilled readers are able to sustain the priority of a simple transcendent reality to the divinities central to their scriptural traditions without rejecting their authoritative scriptures by giving priority to apophatic over cataphatic texts. They are able to “grade and qualify” the latter in light of the former without any sense of dissonance. Consequently, scriptural philosophers are able “to preserve the unity of God and the multiplicity of namings of God found in the scripture” (*Theology after Vedānta: An Experiment in Comparative Theology* [Albany: State University Press of New York, 1993], 14–17, 164, 86). Gavin D’Costa cogently discusses the differences between Clooney’s contextual and textual view of Vedānta and the deracinated intellectualistic Vedānta of Paul Deussen and Eliot Deutsch in his review of *Theology after Vedānta: An Experiment in Comparative Theology* in *Modern Theology* 10 (October 94): 431–32.

- 11 Georges Bataille, *Theory of Religion*, trans. Robert Hurley. (New York: Zone Books, 1992), 21.
- 12 Clooney, *ibid.*, 17.
- 13 The context in which Rāmānuja deploys this phrase is his commentary on the *Bhagavadgītā* (*Gītābhāṣya*), where he argues against the nondualistic theism of Śaṅkara that Ward attempts to press into service in defense of his own theism. If the sublating cognition of nondifference annuls difference (i.e., qualities), as nondualists argue, then, Rāmānuja counters, to account for the persistence of the cognition of difference as the persistence of a sublating cognition is as absurd as asserting that both the guru who teaches the doctrine of nondualism and the student are illusory. This leads directly into one of the issues not answerable by Advaita Vedānta: putting to one side for a moment the question of the reality of difference, how can the illusion of difference arise within the nondual reality? Rāmānuja’s argues forcefully against Śaṅkara’s nondual conception of theism and reality in his commentary on *Bhagavadgītā* 2:12 (*Rāmānuja on the Bhagavadgītā: A Condensed Rendering of the Gītābhāṣya with Copious Notes and an Introduction*, 2d ed., trans. J. A. B. van Buitenen [Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1968], 52).
- 14 A position cogently stated by Rāmānuja, even as he lampoons it (*Gītābhāṣya*, commentary on *Bhagavadgītā*, 2:12.).
- 15 Ward would have found greater support for theism in the Viśiṣṭādvaita Vedānta of Rāmānuja, which mounts an effective theistic polemic against Śaṅkara’s Advaita Vedānta. A more subtle inclusivist Christian reading of Śaṅkara than Ward’s is offered by Clooney in *Theology after Vedānta*. Without attempting to turn Śaṅkara into a theist, Clooney draws out the similarities (and dissimilarities) between the scriptural apophaticism of both Śaṅkara and Thomas Aquinas. Clooney describes his inclusivism as involving the “perplexing double claim” that salvation is both universal and occurs in Christ alone. Despite being a learned and traditionalistic reader of Vedāntic texts and commentaries, Clooney would not agree that Brahman is soteriologically prior to or equal to the Passion of Christ. Yet he finds himself unable, after so long and patient an engagement with Advaita Vedānta, to assert that the knowledge of Brahman does not save” (*Theology after Vedānta*, 192, 195).
- 16 Inclusivists propose soteriologies that allow of degrees of implicit or anonymous faith in Christ as saving *in via*. In this regard they differ from the exclusivists; they remain in agreement with exclusivists, however, in their exceptionalism. Objectively all roads ultimately merge into the Way of Christ, regardless of the subjective experience of the

- faithful who do not live by the name of Jesus. *In patria*, every knee will bow at the name of Jesus (Phil. 2:10). To begin doubting the validity of Christian exceptionalism is to set out across the theological Rubicon toward pluralism. For a recent recanting of inclusivism and a rejection of Alan Race's triadic typology by a heretofore committed defender of inclusivism and the triadic typology, see D'Costa, "The Impossibility of a Pluralist View of Religions," 223–32.
- 17 Although I disagree with and even find objectionable the characterization of the Dalai Lama as a "false friend," I would agree with Jane Compson that the Dalai Lama's tolerance of other religions lies not in his being a religious pluralist but in seeing other religions in light of the Buddhist notions of emptiness and skillful means ("The Dalai Lama and the World Religions: A False Friend?" *Religious Studies* 32 [June 1996]: 278). D'Costa makes a similar, if less pointed, criticism of the Dalai Lama (D'Costa, *ibid.*, 232). There he also claims that underlying the pluralism of the Indian philosopher Sarvapelli Radhakrishnan is the nondual stance of Advaita Vedānta. Jacob Neusner is unabashedly exceptionalistic in his representation of Judaism in *A Rabbi Talks with Jesus: An Intermillennial, Interfaith Exchange* (New York: Doubleday, 1994), xii–xiii, xiv, 7. Thus the Dalai Lama, as well as Ward, Neusner, and Radhakrishnan, are exceptionalists with respect to their home traditions.
 - 18 D'Costa suggests that eventually pluralist theologians such as John Hick and Paul Knitter may no longer "properly be regarded as Christians (*ibid.*, 226).
 - 19 Hick, *A Christian Theology of Religions*, 30.
 - 20 Hick writes respecting this choice: "we have either to seek a more comprehensive view, or else each return to the absolutism of our own tradition . . ." (*ibid.*, 48).

Saints? Where are they these days?

What to do with the institutional church?

Encourage its disintegration.
Subvert celibate bureaucracies,
disrespect clerical authorities.
(Deadweight pharisaisms.)

Demand the experience of God.
Insist on the gifts of the Spirit.
Try to behold the world of light
in an air filled with light.
Heart light.

By their What you will know them?
This side of too many centuries
let us pray directly to God
with violence.

Michael Kelly