

RESPECT FOR OTHER RELIGIONS: A CHRISTIAN ANTIDOTE TO COLONIALIST DISCOURSE

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This essay is an exercise in displacement and substitution. I hope to displace the idea that generalizations about what all religions share are a precondition for inter-religious dialogue. Displaced, too, are the topics and devices that usually follow the purported need for such generalizations in theorizing about inter-religious dialogue: a soteriological focus when specifying what the religions of the world have in common, and the abandonment of particular religious standpoints in favor of a global perspective for the purpose of identifying points of agreement among them. In sum, I hope to displace the preoccupations of pluralist theorists of religions as these preoccupations develop in a more sophisticated form the common sense expectation that commonalities are a prerequisite for dialogue.¹

I argue for such a displacement by showing how pluralist theories of religions are implicated, despite their best intentions, in colonialist forms of discourse. The idea that dialogue demands shared beliefs and norms, or a common referent for beliefs and norms not shared,² brings pluralist theories of religions into line with the general structures of colonialist discourse that have been so well analyzed by, among others, Edward Said in *Orientalism* and Tzvetan Todorov in *The Conquest of America*.³ In imitation of the general way colonialist discourse constructs its "Others", the pluralist insistence on identity in beliefs, norms, or reference as a presupposition for inter-religious dialogue undermines, I argue, respect for other religions *as other*.

In order to provide an alternative to colonialist discourse I develop a Christian account of creation whereby differences among religions become themselves a focus for respect. Ironically, given the history of Christian involvement in colonialism, I substitute a Christian account of creation for global generalizations of a soteriological nature in an effort to overcome the

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disrespect for difference that is bound up with structures of colonialist discourse about others.

In the first section of the essay I justify the strategy of criticizing pluralist theories of religions for complicity in colonialist structures of discourse. In the second section I sketch these structures of colonialist discourse and show how they set conditions for respect that revolve around a requirement of identity or sameness. In the third section I demonstrate the manner in which pluralist theories of religions qualify such conditions without fundamentally challenging them. In the fourth section I outline how Christian beliefs about creation can produce a discourse of mutual respect that does not demand commonalities of beliefs, norms, or reference, a discourse of respect for others that allows them to remain valuable as others, in all their differences from oneself. I therefore conclude that Christian beliefs about creation offer a radical alternative to colonialist discourse, a radical alternative to the way colonialist discourse constructs others worthy of respect.

1. Justifying the Enterprise

The lynchpin of my efforts of displacement and substitution—the criticism of the discourse of pluralist theories of religions as colonialist—makes sense for two reasons. First, this line of criticism brings together a number of discrete criticisms of the pluralist search for commonalities made in recent secondary literature about theories of inter-religious dialogue. One such criticism is that pluralist generalizations about what all religions have in common conflict with genuine dialogue in that they prejudge its results. Commonalities, which should be established in and through a process of dialogue, are constructed ahead of time by pluralists to serve as presuppositions for dialogue; pluralists thereby close themselves to what people of other religions might have to say about their account of these commonalities.⁴ Critics of pluralist theories of religions argue, moreover, that a pluralist focus on commonalities slights differences among the religions of the world. The pluralists' insistence on commonalities as a condition of dialogue shows an unwillingness to recognize the depth and degree of diversity among religions,⁵ or the positive importance of them.⁶ Finally, pluralists are criticized for hiding the particularity of their own perspectives by claiming to form generalizations about the religions of the world from a global outlook. Besides being untrue,⁷ denying the particularity of their perspective brings pluralist theorists of religions close to the kind of absolutism that it is part of their own project to avoid. Beliefs from a particular point of view are elevated to the truth pure and simple by way of a claim that the standpoint from which such beliefs are formulated is not one standpoint among others. Kenneth Surin shores up this last criticism by identifying the particular historical circumstances of the pluralists' penchant for global generalizations with neo-colonialism; he also extends the criticism of globalism by suggesting that the pluralists' failure to recognize the historical

situatedness of their own discourse blinds them to the harsh facts of power inequality that continue to mar real inter-relations between members of different religions in neo-colonialist contexts.⁸ Apart from some intriguing hints in support of the idea that pluralist theories of religions are merely a "liberal corrective" to colonialist forms of discourse and so "hardly different" from them,⁹ Surin does not systematically explore the connections between pluralist theories of inter-religious dialogue and colonialist discourse. My own attempts to draw out these connections wrap the previous complaints about pluralist theories of inter-religious dialogue, along with some new charges, into one coherent package.

An investigation of pluralist complicity in colonialist discourse makes sense in the second place if one thinks through the meaning of inter-religious dialogue as an ethical issue. In order for inter-religious dialogue not to lapse into monologue, several sorts of reciprocal ethical demands must hold for all participants. First, participants must make honest efforts to communicate their points of view. Second, participants must be open to the opinions of others, allowing them to speak freely, attending to what they have to say, and making efforts to understand them in their own terms. Third, participants must enter into dialogue with the presumption that the opinions of others will be intelligible and intelligent, and therefore with the expectation that, when different from one's own, the opinions of others pose a challenge to the rectitude or adequacy of one's opinions as they stand. In sum, inter-religious dialogue, like any form of dialogue, is constituted by mutually respectful consideration of one's interlocutors' opinions; it is an ethical matter of the treatment due oneself and one's partners in dialogue as people with something potentially valuable to say.

Preconditions for dialogue are also of an ethical sort in the sense that they should motivate or dispose one to relate to others in the way dialogue demands. Fallibilist and pluralist outlooks are two such preconditions.¹⁰ (The term "pluralist" is not used here to identify pluralist theories of religion. One of the questions asked in this paper is whether pluralist theories of religions are compatible with the pluralist presupposition for dialogue to be described.) A fallibilist admission that one's opinions might be wrong or tell only part of the truth is necessary if the opinions of others are to make a claim on one, if the opinions of others are to be considered possible sources of enrichment and correction. A pluralist willingness to recognize difference when it appears and look for some value in it is necessary if one is to listen and learn from people who do not share one's own viewpoints.

The insistence on theorizing commonalities as a presupposition for inter-religious dialogue, and the way pluralist theorists of religions usually proceed to make such generalizations — by focusing on soteriology and attempting to occupy a global perspective — seems odd if preconditions for dialogue are ethical ones. First of all, beliefs about salvation do not obviously dispose people towards the sort of relations with others that dialogue requires. As the history of Christian relations with non-Christians amply demonstrates

(and as pluralist theorists of religions are tireless in pointing out), beliefs about salvation that Christians hold have often been aligned with colonialist and imperialist practices. Conquest and colonialization have been justified, for example, by the need to Christianize: salvation requires a knowledge of Christ and entrance into Christ's church which only conquest and colonization can guarantee. Beliefs about salvation with this history are not propitious starting points for fostering inter-religious dialogue even if one hopes to rectify their past associations with colonialist practices by generalizing a meaning for them from a global perspective.

Second, proposing that all participants in dialogue occupy a global perspective seems to dilute Christian responsibility for inter-religious interactions that have fallen far short of dialogue in the past; it deflects acknowledgement of Christian fault in a morally suspect way. The need for a global perspective blocks from the start any suggestion that failures of inter-religious dialogue are primarily a Christian problem. When one takes a global perspective, problems specific to Christianity are subordinated at once to a problem of parochialism shared by all religions of the world. While such an *a priori* deflection of specifically Christian fault would be ethically problematic whatever the history of Christian involvement in non-dialogical relations with people of other religions, it is especially problematic given a history of Christian complicity in imperialist and colonialist practices the world over. Christians are arguably one of, if not *the*, prime culprits in inter-religious interactions that have fallen far short of dialogue in the past. Christians therefore require special prompting toward dialogical relations with others. Setting the terms for inter-religious dialogue from a global perspective seems a less than urgent task if other religions lack Christianity's degree of fault.

As a way of both accepting responsibility for an ignominious Christian past and taking responsibility for remedying it, I occupy an explicitly Christian standpoint in the final section of this paper. I try to show how some beliefs that Christians hold have the potential to dispose them towards mutually respectful relations with others in inter-religious dialogue.¹¹ Without slighting the importance for inter-religious dialogue of rethinking Christian beliefs about salvation—something clearly needs to be done to prevent Christian beliefs about salvation from interfering with prospects for inter-religious dialogue—I focus on Christian beliefs about creation in this last section. Given the unfortunate practices with which Christian beliefs about salvation have been aligned, beliefs about creation seem more likely grounds for actively promoting the respect for other religions of which Christians are especially in need.

Finally, when dialogue is considered as an ethical issue a theory of commonalities among religions becomes an odd proposal. To begin with, such a proposal seems to concern logical presuppositions for dialogue rather than ethical ones. Dialogue cannot proceed when participants have nothing in common; commonalities among the participants are in that sense

a logical presupposition for dialogue. But a focus on those commonalities is not obviously what disposes people to engage in the mutually respectful relations characteristic of dialogue; in other words, such a focus is not on the face of it an ethical precondition for dialogue.

Establishing commonalities prior to dialogue might seem a disposing factor towards dialogue if what discourages people from dialogue is the fear that differences among religions are too great to permit communication. This is a rather rarified philosophical fear, however. Much more likely to get in the way of dialogue (as pluralist theorists of inter-religious dialogue well know) are denigrating, dismissive, or disdainful attitudes towards people holding opinions different from one's own.

Moreover, even if fear of communication-barring diversity of beliefs and norms among the religions of the world is an important element blocking dialogue, theorizing about commonalities is not needed to dispel it. Extending arguments made by Donald Davidson in "The Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme", one can render the pluralist worry about whether such commonalities exist a moot point.¹² The existence of commonalities can simply be presumed from the fact that adherents of other religions seem appropriate parties with which to converse. If adherents of other religions are speaking words susceptible of interpretation, then we must hold some beliefs in common with them. The only parties with whom it would not be possible to communicate because of a failure of commonalities in beliefs or norms would be ones with whom it would never occur to one to enter into discussion (e.g., ants, stones, and vegetable life forms). One need not specify therefore the nature of such commonalities in order to be convinced that they exist; the existence of commonalities in beliefs and norms can remain an uninteresting retrospective conclusion in any situation where one recognizes that adherents of other religions are language users.

If pluralist theorists of religions decline to leave the existence of commonalities an undeveloped retrospective conclusion, and focus instead on generalizing about commonalities as a precondition for dialogue, this may be because they have an overly-narrow understanding of dialogue's goal. Dialogue, for them, must end in agreement about substantive religious or ethical issues. The essential goal of dialogue is an arguably broader one, however—mutual understanding rather than agreement¹³—and there is no reason to suppose that the exploration of commonalities fosters that goal's attainment. Conversation oriented to mutual understanding need not be about commonalities. A thematic focus on what parties in dialogue have in common will not necessarily serve to advance such conversation either, when it falters or seems difficult to begin. Should a failure to comprehend block dialogue, the usual recourse is to determine the internal logic of one's interlocutor's position; the usual recourse is to determine the presuppositions and interests of the other party according to which what they say might begin to make sense in their own terms. One's sharing of those presuppositions and interests is of no obvious relevance for such an enterprise.

The establishment of shared beliefs or norms, or a common referent for them, might be important as an ethical presupposition for dialogue if the mutual respect that dialogue requires were respect for the *truth* of others' opinions. But dialogue does not make so stringent a demand. The religious opinions of others are taken with a seriousness sufficient for the sort of respect dialogue requires if one simply believes that these opinions are possibly true. One need not presume from the start that they actually are.¹⁴

Suppose, however, that pluralist theorists of inter-religious dialogue do not make this last mistake; they propose commonalities in beliefs or norms or ultimate reference as prerequisites for only those forms of mutual respect that are essential to dialogue. Pluralist theorists of religions in that case are suggesting that a recognition of commonalities is necessary before one can be genuinely open to others, willing to hear them out, or ready to recognize the possible truth of their opinions and on that basis to reflect on the inadequacy of one's own beliefs. If an awareness of commonalities is proposed by pluralists as a condition for these forms of respect for others, then pluralist theorists succumb, I argue, to the primary features of colonialist discourse despite their best intentions to criticize colonialist practices.¹⁵ Mutually respectful relationships of the sort necessary for dialogue are predicated upon a demand for sameness, a demand that prompts a peculiar colonialist dialectic of identity and difference in the evaluation of others.

II. *The Structures of Colonialist Discourse*¹⁶

Colonialist discourse is characterized, first of all, by the proposal of universal standards for respect. A single set of beliefs, values, or forms of action constitutes the standard to be met by all people worthy of respect. Before being accorded any sort of respectful treatment like that found in dialogue, people must conform to a certain form of social and cultural life. Conforming to a standard of this sort means meeting a condition of sameness or identity. The community of people worthy of respect is the community made up of those who affirm or in some way demonstrate the same body of beliefs or social values. The people formulating these standards meet them, moreover. Therefore all other people worthy of respectful forms of approach and treatment are like the people formulating the standards.

Difference from the standards and, therefore, from the practices and opinions of the people who have formulated them, is grounds for disrespect. Difference in beliefs and norms is immediately translated in this way into terms of superior and inferior value. Difference is devalued—at best overlooked or trivialized in favor of conformity to the same standards for social and cultural life, at worst disparaged and disdained when it seems to stand in the way of conformity to the standards proposed.

Thus, colonialist discourse circles around a peculiar dialectic of identity and difference in the evaluation of others. To the extent others are like

oneself, they are worthy of respectful treatment; to the extent they are unlike one, they simply are not worthy of such respect.

This dialectic of identity and difference in the evaluation of others prompts efforts at typification. In general, taken as a whole, are other people like oneself or are they not? Differences *within* the group with which one aligns oneself and within groups other than one's own — differences of a situational and historically specific nature — tend to be occluded as a result. The dialectic of identity and difference propels ahistorical and presumptive forms of over-generalization: The members of one's own group are all alike; the members of other groups are all alike. There is only one line of difference with the potential to make a difference within colonialist discourse, in other words — a line of difference that distinguishes one's own group from others. In order to draw that line clearly, the parties on either side of it are treated as uniform entities, monolithic and homogeneous.

Differences that have a significance for a colonialist dialectic of identity and difference, differences between one's own group and others, tend to be absolute ones, therefore. Differences within the various groups at issue are not available to relativize or undercut the generalizations that distinguish one group from another. If another group is to be included in the community of persons due respect, they are *just* like one's own; if they are on the other side of the line separating one's own group from others, they are *nothing* like one's own group.

Indeed, on the basis of this colonialist dialectic of identity and difference the opinions and behaviors of others can never be *too* much like those of the group with which one aligns oneself. In even the best case, therefore, others tend to be viewed as imposters, like what one knows but still strangely and disquietingly unlike it. Mohammed, for example, when viewed through "Orientalist" spectacles, is familiar and therefore a potential candidate for respect in that he seems to be like the Jesus Christians know; finally, however, he is alien and therefore a fraud, because although similar to Jesus in some respects he is after all not like him in others.¹⁷ In even the best case, others are defective versions of something that is one's own — still on the way to becoming it or falling away from it through some unhappy process of devolution.

Therefore a mere likeness is ultimately not sufficient. A strict identity to oneself is required in order for others to be worthy of respect. Any perceived dissimilarity becomes the excuse for promulgating an absolute difference in value between oneself and others. Others' opinions are simply wrong: one's own are simply right. One's own compatriots are rational, just and generous; the other side is merciless, fanatical, barbaric. Whatever infects the decision-making processes of others so as to corrupt their conclusions is simply absent from one's own.

This sort of dialectic of identity and difference in the construction of conditions for respecting others makes two possible forms of treatment appropriate, depending on whether or not others are or are not like oneself.

In either case, however, the result is colonialist. In either case, others are assimilated to one's own projects; in either case, others lack the density of resistance to block the expansion of one's projects, to resist incorporation within them. Expansion, according to this dialectic, is consequently boundless; it is all-consuming.

Should others be perceived as different from oneself, should they fail, therefore, to conform to standards for respect, they properly become mere fodder for the development of one's own concerns. They lack the standing to require consideration in the course of one's self-interested pursuits. One has the right to bend others to the instrumentality of one's will without attention to their own wishes or interests; one has the right to kill them, enslave them, expropriate what they own or produce. The indigenous peoples of the Americas were treated this way by the conquering Spanish, their resources in body and land exploited by those who believed them to be so different from themselves. If the beliefs and attitudes of others are considered like those of one's own group, then one's enterprises should serve the ends of these other people as a matter of course. If others are really like members of one's own group, there is no need to ask whether their desires conform to one's own. One may not kill these other people, enslave them, or take away their property as one's self-interest directs; one would not, after all, treat members of one's own group in that fashion. But one can still rework their forms of life in one's own image, by force if necessary, changing their customs, forms of exchange etc., to match one's own, on the presumption that such steps are for their own good. Thus, even the most well intentioned among the Spanish, for example, Bartholomé de Las Casas, were complicitous in practices that ran roughshod over Indian rights to self-determination.¹⁸

The dialectic of identity and difference becomes in this way a multi-purpose device for justifying a variety of imperialist postures. Where the intent of colonizers is the expropriation or enslavement of indigenous peoples, difference is the device of choice. Where the intent is the destruction of native cultures (the reproduction of a Christian and European culture in a new land), or a highly profitable and exploitative trade in native goods, identity is the device of choice.¹⁹ Operations of either sort can proceed, as a result, without fear of the others' judgment or rightful opposition; one simply does not give these others any room to stand *as* genuine others. Others remain caught in the colonizers' insistence on a kind of "narcissistic self-recognition" in their dealings with them.²⁰

Responsibility for colonialist practices is shifted away by these means from questions of self-interested gain on the part of colonizers. Questions about the proper treatment of indigenous peoples are naturalized. Colonialist practices are the product, it seems, of facts of difference which colonizers simply find and do not themselves produce. Questions about the proper treatment of native populations are thereby taken out of the colonizers' hands, taken out of their control. Given the natives' socio-cultural state, the

colonizers had no choice but to initiate the invasive procedures that will fundamentally rework or ultimately destroy native cultural and social practices.

The entire dialectic of identity and difference exhibits the unequal relations of power in colonialist situations that make it possible. This dialectic serves as a whole, of course, to disguise the results of military supremacy as ones of moral superiority. "While the covert purpose is to exploit the colony's natural resources thoroughly and ruthlessly through the various imperialist material practices, the overt aim, as articulated by colonialist discourse, is to 'civilize' the savage, to introduce him (*sic*) to all the benefits of Western cultures."²¹ But more than this, the very terms of the dialectic reflect and help to sustain a difference in power between the people formulating standards for respect and those who are to be the primary objects of evaluation. The dialectic hides the particularity of the standards used and thereby disguises the fact that a superiority in power is what enables these particular standards to be universalized—that is, made standards for all. The dialectic holds out the possibility of what appear to be relations of mutual respect among peoples different from one another—it holds out the possibility of a mutual respect based on genuine commonalities—but disguised thereby is the fact that only certain parties—those not formulating the standards—are the object of any real assessment or evaluation. Only non-European or non-Christian parties must have their worthiness to be respected proved. Also disguised is the fact that such evaluations proceed on the European and Christian colonizers' terms. Peoples whose lives do not run along European or Christian lines are the passive objects of a process of assessment that European Christians initiate and set the ground rules for. Thus, it is not simply that the denigrated non-Western other is constituted by the absence of what the West possesses. Whether disdained or valued, others are absent from the process of evaluation. Even where others are valued, they are the absent object of colonialist representations. Finally, the typification that allows the colonialist dialectic of identity and difference to proceed repeats the real "commodification" of native populations that colonialist practices enforce—the reduction of colonized peoples, the reduction of their own agency, to nothing more than a resource or a simple means of access to resources for the West's benefit and profit. Other peoples are comprehended by generalities; they become a fixed list of traits and abstract qualities,²² a kind of stereotyped object,²³ without the capacity to surprise or frustrate the colonizers' intentions to control them for the West's own gain.

III. Colonialist Discourse and Pluralist Theories of Religions

Pluralist theorists of religions try to make the best of the possibilities supplied by colonialist forms of discourse. In conformity with the basic moves of that discourse they presume that adherents of other religions must meet a certain standard of beliefs and norms to be worthy of respectful treatment in

dialogue. The same set of beliefs and norms or an identical referent for beliefs and norms not shared must be characteristic of all religions worthy of participation in inter-religious dialogue. People of religions different from one's own can be accorded a place of respect in inter-religious dialogue to the extent they affirm, like oneself, the importance of upright behavior, say, or some locus of ultimate concern, some reality with a capital "r" to which they hope to conform their hearts and minds.

While going along with this most fundamental presupposition of colonialist discourse—a universal standard requiring some measure of sameness or identity among those worthy of respect—pluralist theorists of religions alter colonialist discourse in two ways. First, they attempt to rule out one of its potentials, the potential that standards for respect might exclude some religions and so open their members to dismissive, denigrating, or disdainful treatment; pluralists try to block the possibility that some religions fail to conform to the standards proposed. To ensure that all candidates for inter-religious dialogue meet the standards, pluralists focus on what religions have in common when formulating them. Ideally, such standards are to be formulated after a study of all forms of beliefs and behaviors with a claim to be religious, a study whose aim is the discovery of shared beliefs and norms. If the results of such study are disappointing, irreducible seeming differences in beliefs and norms can always be brought back to the same thing by postulating a common reference for them.²⁴ In these ways universal standards for respect in pluralist theories of inter-religious dialogue lose the prescriptiveness they have in colonialist discourse: conformity to them no longer amounts to a potentially counter-factual "ought".

This attempt by pluralists to focus on the fact of commonalities can do double duty; it can also serve pluralists in the second sort of alteration they typically make to colonialist discourse. If the standards that pluralists propose for respectful treatment in dialogue are constituted by what the religions of the world have in common, they are not standards specific to any particular religious group. They are not, for example, standards that illegitimately elevate Christian notions of proper belief and behavior to the status of universal standards for respect. Beliefs and norms shared by the religions of the world are no more Christian than they are Buddhist, Hindu, etc.; a shared referent like "the Real" cannot be identified with *any* body of beliefs or norms specific to a particular religion (or religions), according to John Hick. Gone by these means—by identifying standards for respect with common beliefs and norms or with a shared referent—is (pluralists would like us to think) the jump in colonialist discourse from universal standards for respect to likeness to oneself as a standard for respect. Gone is ethnocentrism.

One can argue, however, that these two sorts of alterations are insufficient to block effectively attitudes towards others that are typical of colonialism. First of all, ethnocentrism is not avoided by making commonalities among

religions the precondition for respectful relations of dialogue. Even if standards for respect reflect commonalities among religions of the world, these standards are the result of the pluralists' own judgments about proper religious belief and comportment, judgments that are therefore as particular, as historically and culturally circumscribed, as their authors, unless pluralists can actually get us to believe that they occupy some neutral, globe-straddling standpoint. Pluralists fail to break, then, the move in colonialist discourse from universal standards to likeness to oneself as a standard for respect.

Pluralists like Paul Knitter who see the force of this charge of continued ethnocentrism have three responses. First, they seem to be arguing that pluralists cannot be imposing their own standards because the commonalities they point out are simply there to be discovered — a strategy of response rendered implausible by a striking lack of self-consciousness about the active nature of category construction concerning such commonalities.²⁵ Or, they suggest their standards are not imposed but proposed: they are mere suggestions to be revised in the course of dialogue.²⁶ This admission works against, however, the pluralists' insistence on commonalities, and an awareness of them, as the condition of possibility for respectful dialogue. Dropping the need for such conditions would be the logical conclusion to draw from the idea that real commonalities are only finally discovered and affirmed in and through dialogue with others. Knitter also suggests that shared practice as a basis for inter-religious dialogue might avoid a charge of ethnocentrism, but, as developed by Knitter, this suggestion turns out to be little more than the same strategy of proposing a shared body of beliefs and norms as a precondition for dialogue whose ethnocentrism is at issue. Conditions for the possibility of dialogue that take the form of practical worries about the predicament of our planet and prospects for human fulfillment presume, according to Knitter, a consensus on both the diagnosis and remedy for evil as matters of this-worldly domination and liberation,²⁷ beliefs and norms whose apparent specificity to particular religious points of view render them ripe once again for the question, whose diagnosis and remedy are these really?

Second, the pluralists' agreement with one half of the colonialist dialectic of identity and difference in the evaluation of others — sameness or identity as a condition for respect — inevitably brings with it the other half — the devaluation of difference. Despite the pluralists' generosity of spirit in formulating standards for respect they believe all religions meet, it is logically impossible for pluralists to rule out absolutely a colonialist devaluation of difference so long as commonalities are posed as a condition for respect. If shared beliefs, norms, or reference are a requirement for respect, difference is not valuable as such — that is, difference is not valuable without a reference to something that is the same. The unrepentantly different, difference that cannot be reduced to what is inessential or inescapably tied to commonly held beliefs or a common referent, is consequently — for the pluralist and the

colonializer—suspect. Others, it is true, are not rejected by pluralists for being different. They are accepted, but only in so far as difference is not the last word.

Difference certainly has to be devalued by pluralists when it threatens the pluralists' own assertion of commonalities. If the religions of the world do not obviously appear to have in common what pluralists say they have in common—and presumably this is not at all obvious since whole books are needed in defence of the idea—what stands in the way of that appearance becomes at worst some sort of mistake or pathology. Thus, if a self-transcending compassion for others is not exhibited by all religions, its absence may be the result of distortion by individual, class, or national self-interests.²⁸ At best, appearances that run contrary to a presumption of commonalities in beliefs, norms, or reference are taken to be the result of historically specific influences that cannot be taken with full seriousness as essential, defining moments of the beliefs or norms at issue. Thus, apparently opposed historical fact claims that cannot be reconciled as depictions of the same referent from different points of view become, for Hick, inessential features of religious belief systems.²⁹ Thus, Paul Knitter suggests that, appearances to the contrary aside, all religions at some fundamental level maintain the importance of this-worldly efforts at human betterment; otherworldly hopes are never essential to beliefs about salvation but are always only provisional coping mechanisms in situations that seem beyond human improvement.³⁰

A priori refusals like this to accept the significance and importance of difference suggest that pluralists are caught in the ironic position of ensuring the respectability of other religions by forcing their compliance with the conditions of respectability pluralists hold. Because pluralists go along with the basic move of a colonialist discourse—the demand for conformity to universal standards for respect—other religions tend to become the captive, passive objects of the pluralists' own desire to respect them. Other religions are captured best by the pluralists' typifications of them, and therefore pluralist discourse is pushed to overlook the diffuse, internally differentiated, historically specific and power fractured features of other religions that would undermine the accuracy of pluralist generalizations about them. Like what happens in colonialist discourse, other religions appear eternal and uniform from a pluralist perspective, and appear incapable of properly representing themselves when they stray from what pluralists need to suppose about them. Undercutting the mutuality of dialogue that pluralists hope to promote, other religions are viewed from above as if they had to wait for another (the pluralist) to render their complexities intelligible, and reveal their true nature to themselves.

IV. A Christian Alternative

One can conclude from the preceding account of pluralist complicity in colonialist discourse that genuine alternatives to colonialist discourse must

encourage respect for other religions apart from any preconditions of sameness or identity. Others must be due the respectful forms of treatment characteristic of dialogue apart from any appeal to a standard of agreement in beliefs, norms, or reference. It is my contention that Christian beliefs about God as the creator of the world are one such form of discourse. In this Christian discourse about creation differences among religions can become a focus for respect in themselves.

The line of inferences that joins beliefs about God the creator to attitudes of respect for others begins with the following basic claim:³¹ All human beings are worthy of respect in so far as they are the creatures of God. Creatures have a value transferred to them as what a good God brings to be; the creation of a good God is itself valuable. This value warrants respect. Such respect remains appropriate, whatever the intellectual and moral failings for which one might rightly be criticized or condemned, in so far as through them all one remains God's creature.

Because creaturehood is the grounds of its attribution, this worthiness to be respected is presumptive and unconditional. It makes no sense to ask *whether* anyone is worthy of the respect due God's creatures since there are no particular conditions for it. It is not the sort of thing that needs to be proved with reference to any particular characteristics that one might display. All persons are worthy of it simply in so far as they exist as creatures and that status—the status of creaturehood—can be assumed from the mere fact that one exists. The respect due God's creatures is extended to everyone, therefore, but not because of any set of features or capacities that such people hold in common.

If respect is due human beings simply as God's creatures, that respect is not conditioned by any particular qualities distinguishing some human beings from others or establishing similarities among them. *What* is owed respect because of the fact of creaturehood, however, is all those aspects of human existence that God brings to be. Human beings have value as God's creatures and should be respected as such whatever their particular qualities, but it is the particular qualities God gives them that are valuable and therefore due such respect. Creaturehood, and not the particular natures or capacities or achievements of human beings, is the reason why human beings are due respect, but that does not mean those particularities are not part of what is to be so respected. All those aspects of human life that Christians think of as a part of God's creative gifts are due such respect.

It is common in Christian theology to mark a certain division among these aspects of the world that God as creator is said to be behind, a division signaled (for instance) by Christian talk about God as *both* the creator and providential guide of the world. The existence and given characteristics of creatures are the objects of God's working when God is talked about as a creator in this more restricted sense. The capacities, acts, and achievements of creatures are the object of God's working when God is talked about as a providential guide. This classification of what God brings to be or creates in

the broader sense of the term specifies, then, at least two aspects of human existence worthy of the respect due creatures.

A third is specified by the fact that God creates each individual directly and not by way of any of the relations that he or she might have with others. God's creative concern for a person finds that person as the particular person he or she is and not simply as a member of some universal society of creatures. The respect due human beings as creatures of God is owed directly to each person, therefore, as the particular person he or she is.

This particularistic focus extends also to those aspects of created life discussed under the rubric of God's providential and redemptive plans. The value creatures have by being included in God's providential and redemptive plans is a value that concerns the particular acts and attainments that distinguish such creatures. God does not simply call one to be, but sets one on a path of self-affirmation through which one becomes the specific sort of person God intends one to be, by taking up the tasks one feels called to perform in the particular situations one finds oneself. Respect for human beings as creatures of God is expressed, therefore, in respect for the special tasks that God asks of particular persons in making them a part of God's providential and redemptive plans for the world. The respect owed human beings as workers of the world God wills is not a respect that covers them simply in general and in their anonymity. If one respects them as workers of God's will, one must respect the fact that each is to live his or her own life, i.e., to live it in the way it is specifically allotted and loaned by God.

It should be clear that this account of respect for God's creatures runs directly contrary to a general colonialist strategy of forcing or compelling conformity to one's own judgements about proper belief and action. A strategy of that sort would violate the respect owed creatures of God by standing in the way of what others might be called to believe and do as the particular individuals they are in the particular circumstances in which they find themselves. Behind the proper respect for the individual integrity of human beings that colonialist practices violate stands the particularity of God's working. As has just been said, God's working covers everyone but it covers each person as the particular person he or she is, in the particular place, class, cultural tradition, etc. where he or she is situated. God's working calls forth a particular response of action and belief, therefore, consonant with such person-specific features of an individual's existence. Impelling others to comply with the standards for belief and action one has determined for oneself or risk persecution, one disregards the fact that the calling of others is to be their own. One attempts to make such decisions for them. Or, one attempts at least to replace the conclusion such persons might arrive at for themselves with ones fitting for oneself. One insists in this way that the human face of creatures in relation to God always be one's own. Colonialist practice should be condemned, then, as a form of disrespect directed against both God and God's creatures.

What makes the beliefs and actions of others worthy of respect is not the fact that they believe and act as we do. The beliefs and actions of others may be due respect simply as the manifestations of their own particularity, simply as the results of their own efforts to be themselves. The presumption that differences in beliefs and actions have this source means that the opinions of others about what is true and right deserve at least a respectful hearing and the effort of understanding. One may ultimately come to disagree with the beliefs and norms that others express but respect for others as God's creatures remains despite such charges of intellectual or mortal failing; disagreements always presume a prior context of respectful attention.

Respect for creatures runs contrary not only to colonialist practices marked by forced conformity and a failure of mutuality. It runs contrary as well to the dialectic of identity and difference that, I have argued, informs them. Identity in fundamental beliefs or ultimate reference is no precondition for respecting the different belief systems of various peoples. Sameness is not in general the ground upon which respect is claimed. The human beings owed respect as God's creatures might very well be very different from one another. Indeed, they might have nothing in common; they might exhibit no similarities in beliefs or form of life. That would do nothing to alter the respect due all of them as God's creatures. On our account of respect, then, differences among creatures can be recognized as real differences, even irreducible differences, while each one of them is nevertheless celebrated as a gift of God.

The positive value granted to differences among creatures in Christian discourse of this sort—the positive value granted to their specific particularities—means, moreover, that such differences can easily be attended to—differences among those who form either one's own or another group. There is no reason, in an account like this in which the value of differences is highlighted, to essentialize either one's own group or others, to view either as a homogeneous type. And if neither party is essentialized, differences *between* the two become, accordingly, a relative matter: difference everywhere confounds the binary oppositions typical of colonialist discourse.

Finally, respect for others based on creaturehood supplies no motive for constructing a general image of others to serve even the noble end of a mutually respectful inter-religious dialogue. Respect based on creaturehood undercuts all such general motives for typifying others. It undercuts a motive for even those typifications that paint a picture of other religions in colors and shapes of consummate respectability to Western Christians or the globally-minded among them. Religions need not be denigrated as wholes or whitewashed, and in this way a space might be cleared for the surprises and shocks that come from an attentive hearing of others who are allowed to remain genuine others by the conditions set on conversation. Indeed, once the baggage of presumptive generalities and searches for essential qualities is cleared away, a space might be opened for attention to the particular

histories and fracturing contests of power that have marked relations both within and between Christian and non-Christian religious groups.

V. Conclusion

Many more points of relevance to the issue of inter-religious dialogue could be developed from this account of respect based upon creaturehood, and even the points I have made could be greatly amplified, but I hope what I have said has been suggestive in pointing a way towards a fundamental displacement of the usual topics and devices in theorizing about other religions. My objective has not been to show that pluralist theorists of religions are crypto-imperialists. Pluralist complicity in strategies of colonialist discourse demonstrates, rather, the need for a radical alternative to colonialist discourse in theorizing about inter-religious dialogue. Agreement with the fundamental demand of colonialist discourse—a universal standard for respect requiring identity or sameness from those parties worthy of it—may appear innocuous, but it is not. Even the best intentions of pluralist theorists of religions are not sufficient to stay the colonialist attitudes that are the implications of such a demand. A search for commonalities that presumes this fundamental demand of colonialist discourse may appear a commonsensical foundation for inter-religious dialogue, but such a search is really specific to a particular tradition of discourse for which there are alternatives. Christian discourse about creation provides one such alternative. My intention has not been to dispute that the religions of the world share beliefs and norms or a reference to the Real; nor has my intention been to dispute commonalities in beliefs and norms as good grounds for dialogue in cases where inter-religious interchange is oriented towards a joint enterprise (like human liberation) or towards substantive agreement on ethical or religious issues. A focus on commonalities is not necessary, however, in fruitful interactions with adherents of other religious traditions, and should not be elevated, in any case, to a condition for the respectful forms of relation with others that constitute dialogue. Theorizing about such commonalities is, in sum, a misplaced preoccupation of advocates of inter-religious dialogue.

NOTES

1. The pluralist theorists of religions that I refer to in this paper are John Hick and Paul Knitter. I rely especially on John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent* (New Haven, CT: Yale Univ. Press, 1989); and Paul Knitter's 1987 Vosburgh Lectures, "Dialogue and Liberation: Foundations for a Pluralist Theology of Religions", *Drew Gateway* 58 (Spring 1988).
2. On the score of common beliefs and norms, Hick proposes, for example, a universal religious concern for comportment that abides by the Golden Rule (*An Interpretation*, pp. 309–14). Knitter in "Dialogue and Liberation" (p. 22) suggests "a shared concern for the promotion of human welfare and the removal of human suffering." Hick, of course, identifies the "Real" as a common reference point for different religious beliefs and norms.
3. See Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 1979); and Tzvetan Todorov, *The Conquest of America* (New York: Harper and Row, 1984).

4. See John Cobb, "The Meaning of Pluralism for Christian Self-Understanding", in *Religious Pluralism*, ed. L. Rouner (Notre Dame, Indiana: Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 1984), pp. 171–72: "Instead of beginning with the assumption that we can identify what is common to all, it would be better to listen as speakers from each strand of human historical life tell us what they have found most important and how they describe it. . . . The problem is the quest for what is common. Truly to accept pluralism is to abandon that quest. If our liberal theists really wish to be open, they should simply be open. The openness is inhibited by the need to state in advance what we have in common."
5. See David Tracy, *Dialogue with the Other: The Inter-Religious Dialogue* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1990), p. 100: "[T]he differences at every step in these different turns—of the understandings of self, salvation-enlightenment, and Ultimate Reality—seem so striking, so different and other, that all I really know is that I do not know. . . . With such differences as these how can a plausible generalization—on either commonality or complementarity or dialectical relationships or sheer difference—be made?"
6. See David Lockhead, *The Dialogical Imperative* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1988), p. 3.
7. The particular perspective of pluralist theories of religions is often identified as liberalism. See, for example, John Apaczynski, "John Hick's Theocentricism: Revolution or Implicitly Exclusivist?", *Modern Theology* 8:1 (Jan. 1992) pp. 39–52.
8. Kenneth Surin, "Towards a 'Materialist' Critique of 'Religious Pluralism'", *The Thomist* 53 (1989) pp. 655–73; *idem*, "A Certain 'Politics of Speech': 'Religious Pluralism' in the Age of the MacDonald's Hamburger", *Modern Theology* 7:1 (Oct. 1990) pp. 67–100.
9. Surin, "Towards a 'Materialist' Critique", pp. 663–64.
10. See Michael J. Perry, *Love and Power* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1991), p. 100, for mention of these two preconditions.
11. Note the word "potential" in this sentence. I do not claim that the beliefs to be mentioned are by nature innocent; I do not rule out their use for colonialist or imperialist practices. I am simply claiming that such beliefs are a better starting point for encouraging dialogue than some others, e.g., the soteriological and Christological ones that usually preoccupy theorists of inter-religious dialogue.
12. Donald Davidson, "On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme", in *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984). The further purposes of my paper prohibit me from going into Davidson's arguments in support of the conclusions upon which I draw. For the details of Davidson's line of argument, see Bjorn Ramberg, *Donald Davidson's Philosophy of Language* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989), especially chapter 9. For an extension of Davidson's conclusions to religion that is similar to my own, see Terry Godlove, *Religion, Interpretation, and Diversity of Belief* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1989), chapter 4.
13. See Lockhead, *Dialogical Imperative*, p. 64.
14. See Schubert Ogden, "Problems in the Case for a Pluralistic Theology of Religions", *Journal of Religion* 68 (1988) pp. 501–2, for a criticism of Rosemary Reuther on these grounds.
15. This does not mean that their efforts to criticize colonialist practices are necessarily unsuccessful or insincere, but presumably colonialist *discourse* has something to do with colonialist *practices*, and therefore the retention of fundamental moves of that discourse runs counter to the pluralists' wish to avoid them. In the second section of this paper connections between colonialist discourse and practice will be adumbrated.
16. By "colonialist discourse" I mean something quite general. The discursive strategies I describe are not aligned with practices of colonization in contradistinction to efforts at enslaving indigenous non-European peoples. Todorov's analysis in *The Conquest of America* makes that clear. I do not think these discursive practices are limited, either, to any one stage in a colonization process. They do not have a limited reference, for example, to colonialism proper, but extend to forms of global relations that are commonly termed neo-colonialist, in which independent nation states are combined with gross economic and political disparities favoring rich Northern nations and rich property-owning minorities. Said's *Orientalism* makes this second point clear.
17. Said, *Orientalism*, p. 72.
18. As Todorov points out, Las Casas was not opposed to colonization—at least to cultural colonization—he simply wanted it to proceed by gentler means than the Spanish usually

employed — to proceed by the moral “force” of priests rather than the very literal force of guns.

19. See George Fredrickson, *White Supremacy* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1981), for an account like this of the way economic relations affect conceptions of native peoples.
20. The phrase “narcissistic self-recognition” is Abdul JanMohamed’s in “The Economy of Manichean Allegory: The Function of Racial Difference in Colonialist Literature”, *Critical Inquiry* 12 (Autumn 1985) p. 66.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 62.
22. See Deborah Root, “The Imperial Signifier: Todorov and the Conquest of Mexico”, *Cultural Critique* 9 (Spring 1988) pp. 205.
23. JanMohamed, “The Economy of Manichean Allegory”, p. 64.
24. I have John Hick in mind here.
25. See Knitter, “Dialogue and Liberation”, p. 10, citing Hick to this effect.
26. Knitter, “Dialogue and Liberation”, pp. 17, 22.
27. *Ibid.*, pp. 27–28.
28. See Hick, *An Interpretation*, p. 309.
29. *Ibid.*, p. 365.
30. Knitter, “Dialogue and Liberation”, p. 27.
31. Limitations of space force me to leave these inferences sketchy. For a more detailed treatment, see Kathryn Tanner, *The Politics of God: Christian Theologies and Social Justice* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), chaps. 5 and 6.