



Research article



**AN INVESTIGATION OF CHRISTIAN MISSION APPROACHES IN THE
CONTEXT OF RELIGIOUS PLURALISM IN INDIA IN THE 20TH CENTURY**

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ABSTRACT



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This paper investigates the historical development of Christian mission approaches in response to religious pluralism in India during the 20th century. It highlights the theological challenges posed by the coexistence of diverse religious beliefs and practices, where no single religion is viewed as having a monopoly on absolute truth. The analysis traces the failure of major missionary engagements—Syrian Orthodoxy in the 3rd century, Roman Catholicism in the 17th century, and Protestant missions in the 19th century—to engage India's religious pluralism effectively. Through an exploration of the limitations of traditional Christian missions and an evaluation of ancient Hindu texts with their unhistorical mythical figures, this paper proposes a new mission strategy: the Pneumato-Logos-Christo-centric approach. This approach emphasizes a fresh theological framework for Christian missions to proclaim Christ within the pluralistic context, navigating the tension between respecting religious plurality and upholding the uniqueness of the Christian faith.

Keywords:

*Christian Mission,
Religious Pluralism,
Ancient Hindu Texts,
Pneumato-Logos-Christo-
Centric Approach*



Introduction

Christian mission approaches have failed to engage with religious pluralism in India. There have been at least three major missionary efforts: the Syrian Orthodox Church in the 3rd century, Roman Catholicism in the 17th century, and Protestant missions in the 19th century. According to Geomon George, “each failed to engage India’s religious pluralism theologically.”¹ It is challenging for Christian missions to proclaim Christ in the context of religious pluralism where numerous theological beliefs and practices co-exist in a nation. In religious pluralism, no single religion can make a supreme claim about absolute truth. Every religion is considered to be equally important and worthy of respect and belief.

There is no authentic argument against the historical reliability of Christ but most religious figures of ancient religions are unhistorical and unknowable. For instance, the most ancient “Purana” of Hindu Text contains numerous mythical figures.² In addition to this, John Dowson affirms that, “The true meaning of Vedic myths is entirely lost, their origin is forgotten, and the signification and composition of many of the mythic names are unknown.”³ This affirmation rightly points out that the religion of Hinduism is incredibly rich in its demonstration of mythical figures. Many of the mythical figures in Hindu scriptures first appeared in ancient Hindu texts, such as the Vedas. This paper will investigate and analyze several Christian approaches to religious pluralism in the context of India. This paper proposes a novel Christian approach to religious pluralism that provides a framework for advancing Christian missions and evangelism, especially through the Pneumato-Logos-Christo-centric paradigm.

Research Question:

- What are the Christian mission approaches in the context of religious pluralism in India in the 20th century?
- What new approach could be brought in place for effective mission engagement in the context of religious pluralism in India?

¹ Geomon K. George, “Twentieth century South Asian Christian Theological Engagement with Religious Pluralism: Its Challenges for Pentecostalism in India,” Ph.D. Thesis, (Edinburgh: The University of Edinburgh), p.237.

² “Purana” is a Hindu Text, composed primarily in Sanskrit with a wide range of topics, but also in regional languages, particularly filled with myths, legends, and other traditional lore. It was likely to be written between the 4th CE to 10th CE.

³ John Dowson, *A Classical Dictionary of Hindu Mythology and Religion* (New Delhi: Rupa and Cooperatives, 2000), 13.



Religious Pluralism

John Harwood Hick (1922 – 2012): According to John Hick, "Christianity is not the only way of salvation, but one among several."⁴ Pluralism is the popular view that says all religions lead to the same God and all ways lead to heaven. This concept is close to the popular Hindu Scripture, *Bhagavadgita*, where Krishna says that "By whatsoever way men worship me, even so, do I accept them; for, in all ways, O Partha, men walk in my path."⁵ The concept of religious pluralism means various ways to various people. John Hick has argued that "all the world religions constitute differently configured human responses to the same Ultimate Reality lying beyond all representation in human terms."⁶

Pluralism believes in the equal authenticity of each religion, with no one religion being superior to the other. We can summarize it in the affirmation that "all religions are true."⁷ S. Mark Heim identifies the pluralism of Hick, as "a metatheory of religious reality and experience, an idea of what is behind all the conditional forms of particular traditions and individuals."⁸ Furthermore, Hick defines pluralism as "The great world faith are different and independently authentic contexts of salvation/liberation."⁹ According to Margaret Chatterjee, religious pluralism is defined in terms of 'religious relativism.' He states, "Relativism is a position which has been held especially with reference either to what is "right" or to what is "true."¹⁰

Historical Understanding of the Indian Religion and Religious Pluralism

Eknath Easwaran's work, *The Upanishads and the Bhagavad Gita*¹¹ helps us to understand India's majority religion of Hinduism. The Bhagavadgita is a section from the Mahabharata,

⁴ See John Harwood Hick, *Problems of Religious Pluralism* (London and New York, 1985); *An Interpretation of Religion* (London and Yale, 1989); and John Hick, *Christianity and Other Religions* (Oxford: One World, 2001). These sources are taken from John Hick and Brian Hebblethwaite, *Christianity, and Other Religions: Selected Readings*, p. 156.

⁵ *Bhagavadgita*, IV: II.

⁶ John Harwood Hick, *The Theological Challenge of Religious Pluralism*, in John Hick and Brian Hebblethwaite, *Christianity and Other Religions: Selected Readings*, p. 156.

⁷ Rudolf von Sinner, "Inter-Religious dialogue: From "Anonymous Christians" to the Theologies of Religions," [Inter religious Dialogue From Anonymous.pdf](#), p.4.

⁸ Perry T. S., "The Christian Message in a Postmodern World: a critical re-appropriation of Hendrik Kraemer's theology of religions," Ph.D. Thesis, Durham E-Thesis, (Durham: Durham University,1996), p. 35.

⁹ John Hick, "Review of Glyn Richards, Towards a Theology of Religions," in Religious Studies, (1990) in Perry T. S., "The Christian Message in a Postmodern World: a critical re-appropriation of Hendrik Kraemer's theology of religions," Ph.D. Thesis, Durham E-Thesis, (Durham: Durham University,1996), p.10.

¹⁰Margaret Chatterjee, "Reflections on Religious Pluralism in the Indian Context," *Journal of Hindu-Christian Studies*, Volume 7, Article 5, (Butler University Libraries, January 1994), p.1.

¹¹Eknath Easwaran, *The Upanishads*, (California: Blue Mountain Center of Meditation in Berkeley, 2007), <https://eds-p-ebscobost->



a renowned Sanskrit epic of the Hindus. It spans chapters 23 to 40 of Book VI and is presented as a dialogue between Prince Arjuna and Krishna, the incarnation of the god Vishnu. The Bhagavadgita encapsulates key Hindu teachings, including the concepts of rebirth (samsara), the eternal Self within each individual, the universal Self in all beings, various forms of yoga, the divinity present within, the nature of self-knowledge, and other related ideas. Lesslie Newbigin in John Hick and Brian Hebblethwaite's *Christianity and Other Religion*,¹² explores religious pluralism in the Indian context. Newbigin argues that the religious pluralism encountered in India, while diverse and rich, poses a challenge to Christian witness. He does not dismiss the value of other religions but critiques certain strands of pluralism that relativize all religious truth claims. Newbigin insists that the particularity of Jesus Christ as the revelation of God is central to Christian faith and cannot be reduced to one option among many equally valid religious paths. India is the cradle of all major religions in the world namely, Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikhism, and Jainism. "India is the second-largest population in the world with 1.4 billion (1,453,122,145) people."¹³ India has 1894 unreached people groups. Hindus make up 80% while 14% adhere to Islam and 3.3% adhere to Christianity. Indian pluralistic concept of religion begins with the history of Vedic religion, which is also known as the Vedic period that was closely related to the Indus Valley Civilization from 3300 to 1300 BC. The Upanishads is the oldest Hindu Scripture which is also known as "Vedanta." Eknath Easwaran argues that the Upanishads is one of the oldest Sacred writings of Hinduism, for example, he says "The Upanishads, the Bhagavad Gita, and the Dhammapada – are among the earliest and most universal of messages."¹⁴

The Upanishads speak about the Aryans who brought their gods and goddesses to India with "a form of hymns and lyrics associated with an ancient form of Sanskrit dating from 1500 B.C."¹⁵ Aryans worshiped natural forces of power as their gods. Easwaran affirms that "They worship natural forces and the elemental powers of life: sun and wind, storm and rain, dawn and night, earth and heaven, fire and offering."¹⁶ Aryans' gods are called the *Devas*, gods, and goddesses. For example, fire, wind, water, rain, earth, and thunder.

com.aaron.swbts.edu/eds/ebookviewer/ebook/bmxlYmtfXzQ4OTY3Ml9fQU41?nobk=y&sid=869314f7-3038-48d6-b6b1-b912f484e8be@redis&vid=4&format=EB (Accessed 11/13/2022).

¹² Lesslie Newbigin, "The Christian Faith and the World Religions," in John Hick and Brian Hebblethwaite, *Christianity and Other Religions: Selected Readings*, (Oxford: One World, 2001), pp. 88-117. <https://eds-s-ebshost-com.aaron.swbts.edu/eds/ebookviewer/ebook/bmxlYmtfXzI0Njc4MF9fQU41?sid=692bae07-6a4d-4130-ab04-72d1a2f9ae26@redis&vid=2&hid=/&format=EB> (Accessed 11/13/2022).

¹³ People Groups, "Country: India," https://www.peoplegroups.org/Explore/Country_Details.aspx?genc0=IND#topmenu. India is home to a total of 236 languages and 270 mother tongues. The top languages spoken in terms of the number of speakers are Hindi-Urdu, Bengalis, Punjabi, Marathi, and Gujarati. The Dravidian languages spoken by people living in southern and central India are: Telugu, Tamil, Kannada, and Malayalam.

¹⁴ Eknath Easwaran, *The Upanishads* (Nilgiri: Blue Mountain Center of Meditation, 2007), 8.

¹⁵ Easwaran, *The Upanishads*, p. 17.

¹⁶ Easwaran, *The Upanishads*, p. 17.



Hinduism is a prehistoric religion which means Hinduism was already in existence before the written records were invented. Hinduism began between 2300 B.C and 1500 B.C. Hinduism does not have a single religious founder. It is a combination of a variety of religious beliefs and practices. Hinduism has over 520 million followers now. Some believe Hinduism began in 3000 B.C. and is the oldest religion on earth. Like the Christians, Hinduism has Trimurthi (Trinity): Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva. The following chart shows the statistic of Indian religion by the number of followers.

Religion	Population
Hindus	1.2 billion
Buddhists	520 million
Muslims	172 million
Sikhs	30 million
Christians	28 million
Jains	6 million

Historical Development of Selected Christian Approaches to Religious Pluralism in India

Several approaches have already been made to proclaim Christ in the context of religious pluralism. Some of those approaches are the exclusive approach (Karl Barth), inclusive approach (Klerk Pinnock, M.M. Thomas, Karl Rahner, P.D. Devanandan), pluralistic approach (John Hick), anonymous Christian approach (Karl Rahner), Biblical realism approach (Hendrik Kraemer), Christ-centered syncretism approach (M.M Thomas, P.D. Devanandan), and fulfillment theory approach (Farquhar, K.M Bannerjee, Joseph Padinjarekara).¹⁷ All of these approaches have their strengths and weaknesses. However, in this study, there are a few selected approaches to religious pluralism categorized under

¹⁷ For further insight into all these positions, see, Geomon K. George, *Religious Pluralism: Challenges for Pentecostalism in India* (Bangalore: Center for Contemporary Christianity, 2006). Also see, Ken Gnanakan, *Proclaiming Christ in a Pluralistic Context* (Bangalore: Theological Book Trust, 2002). And in Bruce J. Nicholls, *The Unique Christ in Our Pluralist World* (Michigan: Baker Book House, 1994). Besides this, there are other approaches also made by Christians to meet the challenges of religious pluralism which are not included in this research study. This classification is seen in Chris Wright, "The Unique Christ in the Plurality of Religions" in Bruce J. Nicholls (Michigan: Baker Book House, 1994), observes that these three terms were based on the analysis given by Alan Race in *Christians and Religious Pluralism* (Orbis, 1982). And also, a related set of models is given by Paul Knitter in *No Other Name*. (SCM, 1985). A very thorough and well-reasoned defense of exclusivism and critique of pluralism is provided by Harold Netland: *Dissonant Voices: Religious Pluralism and the Question of Truth* (Eerdmans: Apollos, 1991). A more recent exposition on exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism could be found in, Ken Gnanakan, *Proclaiming Christ in a Pluralistic Context*.



internal and external approaches to religious pluralism in the Indian context. For example, Gnanakan states, “Accepting Barthian exclusivism demands an utter rejection of all other religions.”¹⁸ Furthermore, exclusivism does not fully promote the biblical Christ-like attitude.

Internal Approaches

Internal approaches speak about how Indian Christian theologians and missiologists had made their attempt to adequately witness Christ in the context of religious pluralism. Several approaches got the attention of Christian messages within the Indian Christian community. However, not all of them, but some of them are described in this section on internal approaches to religious pluralism. Approaches like the Christ-centered syncretism approach by M.M. Thomas and P.D Devanandan; the Fulfillment theory approach by K.M. Bannerjee and Joseph Padinjarekara. An indigenous theologian, Geomon K. George in his Ph.D. dissertation argues for the “Pneumato-centric, Liberative and Theo-centric”¹⁹ approaches to religious pluralism.

1920 – 2019, Liberation Approach (S. J. Samuel Rayan)

Rayan’s Liberation approach model has also emphasized the “Spirit of liberation and Asian spirituality of liberation.”²⁰ Kimm identifies that Rayan “Prefers stories of liberation, believing they most closely express the heart of the historical Jesus. His is primarily a theological reading - or rereading - not an exercise in biblical criticism.”²¹ Rayan sees liberation as a model of a theological framework for engaging with religious pluralism in the Indian context. Roman Catholic theology was introduced by the Second Vatican Council between 1962-1965, Rayan was a “Spokesperson for Indian Christian theologians and the leading voice that bridged the Second Vatican Council to the Indian context.”²² Rayan believes, in every religion, “There are elements of liberative motifs.”²³ Rayan uses these liberative elements for social, economic, and political justice. After a careful study of Rayan’s theological framework, K. Kunnumpuram observes, “Rayan has sought to understand and interpret the Christian faith in light of the religious and secular realities of India.”²⁴ For Rayan, the Holy Spirit is active in other religious traditions in the struggle with liberating people from religious and political slavery.

¹⁸ Gnanakan, *Proclaiming Christ in a Pluralistic Context*, 27.

¹⁹ George, “Twentieth century South Asian Christian Theological Engagement with Religious Pluralism,” p.18.

²⁰ Kirsteen Kim, “Bread and Breath in India: The Mission Pneumatology of Samuel Rayan,” **Samuel Rayan Kim-Dr-Kirsteen-2-Feb-2000.pdf*. (Accessed 11/18/2022), pp. 3-4.

²¹ Kim, “Bread and Breath in India: The Mission Pneumatology of Samuel Rayan,” p. 3-4.

²² George, “Twentieth century South Asian Christian Theological Engagement with Religious Pluralism,” p.106.

²³ George, “Twentieth century South Asian Christian Theological Engagement with Religious Pluralism,” p. 107.

²⁴ K. Kunnumpuram, “Samuel Rayan: A Great Indian Theologian,” *Bread and Breath: Essays in Honour of Samuel Rayan*, T. K. John (ed.), (Gujarat Sahitya Prakash: Gujarat, 1991), 139.

**1921 – 2001, Pneumato-Centric Approach (Stanley Jedidiah Samartha)**

Samartha was one of the well-known Indian Christian theologians who made a tireless attempt with his pneumato-centric approach to engaging religious pluralism in the Indian context. Samartha emphasizes the Holy Spirit's active presence outside the confine of the traditional church. George states that, "In this model, the Holy Spirit is seen as the saving action of God's Spirit with people of other faiths. The pneumato-centric approach stresses the economy of the Holy Spirit which knows no bounds of space or time. This Spirit is not only universally present but is active outside the Church."²⁵ Samartha uses the Holy Spirit in his theological framework in engaging with Indian religious pluralism. Eeuwout Klootwijk observes that Samartha's pneumato-centric approach helps understand "More theological space and greater spiritual freedom to grasp the outreach of God's revelation."²⁶ The Holy Spirit is central to Samartha's understanding of theology and mission because the Holy Spirit is active among non-Christians in their search for truth and communion with God.

1916 – 1996, Christ-centered Syncretism Approach (M.M. Thomas)

Thomas' theology and Christian thoughts were centered on the person of Christ. Thomas sought deeper integration of theology into its social and pluralistic contexts. For Thomas, "theology" was not just about Christian thought but "doing" it into the social and political struggles of common people.

In the context of religious pluralism, M. M. Thomas argues that there is a need for more than one Christology. He writes the following,

There is therefore the need for pluralism in Christology to meet the diverse needs of the situation. We must think in terms of Christologies rather than Christology. Each type will have its apologetic problems ... The Indian religious tradition is more prone to emphasize the divinity of Jesus at the cost of his humanity ... The peril of secular temper is that it might deprive Christ of his divine nature.²⁷

M.M. Thomas interprets the gospel with its relevancy to social context. Thomas holds the good news of Jesus and the social concern together. He writes:

The Gospel of Christ offers redemption to the whole of human life. We fail because we try to draw a line between personal and social, and attempt to spiritualize the individual apart from his social relationships. All life is one. The social runs into the personal and this social environment, to a large extent, shapes the inner life of

²⁵ George, "Twentieth century South Asian Christian Theological Engagement with Religious Pluralism," p. 76.

²⁶ Eeuwout Klootwijk, *Commitment and Openness: The Interreligious Dialogue and Theology of Religions in the Work of Stanley J. Samartha*, (Uitgeverij Boekencentrum B.V.: Zoetermeer, 1992), p.326.

²⁷"Editorial: The Christological Task of India", *Religion and Society*, Vol. XI, No.3, (September 1964), pp.5



man...We want the social and political life of mankind to be a reflection of the kingdom of God.²⁸

M.M. Thomas emphasizes that the “Church should create strife to make social justice possible within the framework of faith in the kingdom of God.”²⁹ The Church is a society of God as such should be responsible for the society around it. He asserts Churches' mission is not just evangelism but also should stand for social justice and action.

In 1968, Thomas represented Mar Thoma Church and became the first non-Western layperson to be the chair of the WCC fourth assembly at Uppsala.³⁰ In 1990, Thomas fulfilled his role as the chairperson of the WCC in Nairobi. Thomas was appointed as the Governor of Nagaland in 1990. His position to be as governor did not last more than two years (1990-1992). Robin Boyd writes about Thomas, he was “deeply and intelligently committed to Christ, to the church, to social and political justice, to Christian unity, and ultimately to the unity of the whole human race.”³¹

Thomas longed for a Christ-centered syncretism of the Christian community with non-Christians in the context of religious pluralism. However, Adrian Bird critically evaluates that, “A Christ-centered syncretism” is the first time used “by Bishop Azariah about the Dalit community.”³² Azariah recognized Thomas’ proposal for “Christ-centered syncretistic fellowship.”³³ Thomas’ thoughts on “Christ-centered syncretism or *koinonia*” extend to the whole of humanity whereas Azariah’s concept of “Christ-centered syncretism” is confined to the Dalit community. Thomas sought a Christ-centered fellowship of Christians with non-Christians.

External Approach

In this section of the study, three selected external approaches got engaged with religious pluralism in the Indian context. Namely, the exclusivism of Karl Barth (1886 – 1968); demythologizing of Rudolf Bultmann (1884 – 1976); and the pluralism of John Harwood Hick (1922 – 2012). All of these approaches to religious pluralism seem to be failed in theological and missiological engagements in the context of religious pluralism in India. However, the reason for selecting these external approaches is that they have significantly made a positive or negative impact on Christian missions in the context of religious pluralism

²⁸ Arles, *Missiological Education: An Indian Exploration*, 87.

²⁹ Jeyaraj, “Mission, Missions and Wider Ecumenism,” 89.

³⁰ Bird, “M.M. Thomas: Theological Signposts for the Emergence of Dalit Theology,” p. 62.

³¹ Robin Boyd, *An Introduction to Indian Christian Theology*, 2nd Edition, (Delhi: ISPCK, 2002), p.90.

³² Bird, “M.M. Thomas: Theological Signposts for the Emergence of Dalit Theology,” p. 216.

³³ M. Azariah, "Growing Together and Sharing in Unity," (Chennai: The South Indian Church, CSI Synod, March 1996).



in India. The following section will describe all of these missions' approaches to religious pluralism.

1886 – 1968, Karl Barth's Exclusive Approach

Karl Barth was born in Basel, Switzerland in 1886. He was a Swiss-German, and a Calvinist theologian. Between 1932 – 1967, his renowned summa the *Church Dogmatics* was published.³⁴ Barth was featured on the cover of *Time* magazine on 20th April 1962. Like any other protestant theologian, Barth was influenced by Adolf von Harnack, Friedrich Schleiermacher, Soren Kierkegaard, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Jurgen Moltmann, Wolfhart Pannenberg, Rudolf Bultmann, and many more. Likewise, Barth's exclusivist approach to Christian theology influenced Indian Christian theologians in the context of religious pluralism in India. For example, Stanley Jedidiah Samartha (1921–2001), whose theology is heavily centered on a particular religious concept of *Advaita Vedanta*.³⁵ Alle Hoekema in his abstract on Barth and Asia: 'No Boring Theology' asserts that, "Karl Barth never visited Asia; yet through discussions with Asian students in Europe, correspondence with scholars in Asia, and visits by colleagues from that continent, he had a vast network of contacts as the Karl Barth Archives show."³⁶ Indian Christian theologians were influenced by Barth's exclusive approach to religious pluralism.

There is no place for particularity in religious pluralism. Therefore, a better starting point for doing a mission or Christian theology would be the concept of a Trinitarian God where there is no particularity stressed in the context of religious pluralism. For Barth, the study of theology is centered on the exclusive particularity of Christology. A Christo-centric particularism will neglect the presence of God, and the Holy Spirit in other religious traditions. Benno Van Den Toren rightly points out the following in this regard,

A Christian theology of religions must be a Christian theology of religions that theologizes based on what Christ has shown us about the trinitarian God. Only from this starting point can we rightly speak about God's relation to the world of religious pluralism and other specific religious traditions such as Hinduism and Buddhism. This does not prohibit open and critical conversation between different religious traditions, but rather makes it possible by allowing

³⁴See PostBarthian, *The Life of Karl Barth: Church Dogmatics Vol IV: The Doctrine of Reconciliation 1953-1967 (Part 7)*. *The PostBarthian*. 5 April 2019. Retrieved 5 April 2019. This has appeared in a website, <https://postbarthian.com/2019/04/05/the-life-of-karl-barth-church-dogmatics-vol-iv-the-doctrine-of-reconciliation-1953-1967-part-7/> (Accessed 11/24/2022).

³⁵See Stanley J. Samartha, "The Cross and the Rainbow: Christ in a Multireligious Culture," in *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness*, ed. John Hick and Paul F. Knitter (London: SCM Press, 1988), 69-88.

³⁶ Alle Hoekema, "Barth and Asia: 'No Boring Theology,'" https://brill.com/view/journals/exch/33/2/article-p102_2.xml (Accessed 11/24/2022).



different religionists to engage in the conversation starting from their particular understanding of religion and religious diversity.³⁷

Barth believes that human religions are unbelief and untrue. For example, Barth argues that, “No religion is true. It can only become true...and it can become true only in the way that man is justified, from without.”³⁸ V. D. Toren argues that, “Barth judges all human religion in light of Christ’s revelation to be Unglaube or “unbelief,” idolatry, and self-justification or justification by works. Human religions are a rejection of God’s gracious revelation and reconciliation offered in Jesus Christ.”³⁹ Barth's particularism or exclusive claim set Christianity over against all other religious traditions. Its exclusivism of Barth puts Christianity at the pinnacle of all other religions. This exclusivism eliminates the existence of goodness and the experience of religious pluralism.

1926 – Jürgen Moltmann’s Radical Immanence Approach

In 1944, Moltmann joined the German army; however, he surrendered to the British soldier in 1945. He became a prisoner of World War II and was moved from camp to camp between 1945 – 1948. Moltmann met with a group of Christians in the confined camp and was given a copy of the New Testament and Psalms by the American chaplain. After World War II, Moltmann felt that, “Christianity was ignoring the hope offered in its promise of a future life.”⁴⁰ World War II provided the foundation for his prominent work *Theology of Hope*. He emphasized that Christian hope should be a central motivating factor for each Christian in his or her daily life.

Jurgen Moltmann’s doctrine of radical immanence explains how the Trinitarian God in His entirety is exclusively involved in the suffering of human beings. Moltmann's radical immanency provides insight into the explanation of the Trinitarian panentheism that explains a transcendent Triune God becomes immanent into the world of the human material world and becomes an integral part of human suffering. Triss Ingels observes, “By way of Moltmann’s assertion of the entirety of the Triune God being present in the sufferings of humans one can conclude that in this presence God is intimately present in the sufferings of human beings.”⁴¹ Moltmann explains the necessity of an imminent Godhead to become part of human suffering. He writes,

³⁷ Benno Van Den Toren, “Christianity as “True Religion” According to Karl Barth’s *Theologia Religionum*: An Intercultural Conversation with Selected Asian Christian Theologians,” *Asia Journal of Theology*, October, Vol. 35 (2): 155-170, Protestant Theological University, Groningen, The Netherlands, 2021), p.159.

³⁸ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* ½, (T&T Clark: Edinburgh, 1963), pp. 325-326.

³⁹ Toren, *Asia Journal of Theology*, p. 159.

⁴⁰ Theopedia, “Jurgen Moltmann,” <https://www.theopedia.com/jurgen-moltmann> (Accessed 11/26/2022).

⁴¹ Triss Ingels, *Radical Immanence and the Doctrine of Providence*, p.17; See Jürgen Moltmann. *The Crucified God*. (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1993), 245.



The Son suffers in his love being forsaken by the father as he dies. The Father suffers in his love the grief of the death of the Son, in that case, whatever proceeds from the event between the Father and Son must be understood as the Spirit of the surrender of the Father and the Son, as the Spirit which creates love for forsaken men, as the Spirit which bring the dead alive. It is the unconditional therefore boundless love that proceeds from the grief of the Father and the dying of the Son and reaches forsaken men to create in them the possibility and the force of new life.⁴²

From Moltmann's assertion, the Triune God is radically and actively present in the suffering of human beings. The descending of the Holy Spirit at the baptism of Christ is the best example of radical immanent of the Holy Spirit, and the Spirit was still present when Christ died on the cross. Moltmann's immanency is a paradigm to the Hindu concept of pantheism, pandeism, and panentheism in the context of religious pluralism in India. In the context of religious pluralism, Hinduism believes that God is present everywhere; therefore, everything is God. This concept of Hinduism eliminates the possibility of a transcendent God and allows every material object to be venerated as divine and therefore worthy of worship. However, Moltmann's Trinitarian panentheism fails to explain the relationship between the Creator God and the creation. Binu C. Paul in his Ph.D. dissertation, argues that, "His (Moltmann's) Trinitarian panentheism fails to communicate the God of the Bible in the Indian context because it does not make a clear distinction between God and the world."⁴³ Moltmann's radical immanence approach by theological implication poses a major theological problem of Trinitarian panentheism in the context of religious pluralism in India.

1922 – 2012, John Harwood Hick's Pluralistic Approach

From 1979 – 1992, Hick was a professor of philosophy of religion at the Claremont Graduate University, California. While at the University of Birmingham, Hick began to develop his relations with people of other religious faith. Such were Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs communities of immigrants. During his fifteen years of service at Birmingham, Hick developed a significant relationship with various religious faith traditions. In 1944, Hick designed "a new syllabus for religious institutions in city schools."⁴⁴ Hick became the chair of the group *All Faiths for One Race* in 1944. His teaching career at Princeton Seminary during which he began to change his conservative religious thoughts of Christian ideology and belief.

⁴² Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1993), 245.

⁴³ Binu C. Paul, "Trinitarian Panentheism: An Orthodox Evaluation of Jurgen Moltmann's Divine Immanence," (Ph.D. Dissertation, submitted to the Faculty of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, Fort Worth, Texas, May 2021), pp. 267-268.

⁴⁴ John Hick, "A Pluralist View," *More Than One Way? Four Views of Salvation in a Pluralistic World*, Eds. Dennis L. Okholm and Timothy R. Phillips, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1995), pp. 27-59.



Hick began to question “Whether belief in the Incarnation required one to believe in the literal historicity of the Virgin Birth.”⁴⁵ Hick's theology of philosophy, religions and pluralistic thoughts drawn heavily from his relationship with the community of other religious faith traditions and his influence by Emmanuel Kant. From a conservative evangelical perspective, he moved towards pluralism as the means to reconcile God's love with the people of inter-faith groups and the non-Christian community. For Hick, pluralism is the way to convey God's love and grace to the non-Christian world. Thus, according to Hick, all religions lead to the possibility of salvation.

Each of the above approaches has been used by Christians to proclaim Christ in the Indian pluralistic context. The plurality, as defined by Gnanakan “refers to the context we live in – a diversity of religions, cultures, and ideologies.”⁴⁶ Therefore, as identified by Gnanakan, the actual challenge before us is not only the plurality of religion but also to respond to the need for our relationship to pluralistic ideologies. Every religion makes truth claims. For instance, Islamic fundamentalists claim that Islam is the only true religion. Conversely, Christians on the other side make decisive claims about Christ. The result, therefore, is a clash of commitment and conflicting claims. Gnanakan points out that “Christians had rightly claimed uniqueness at one time, but today's situation is hostile to such claims.”⁴⁷ Therefore, we need to be greatly sensitive toward religious diversity and cultural identity.

New Approach: Pneumato-Logos-Christo Centric Approach

The Holy Spirit is present and active everywhere outside of the church and in constant dialogue with the people of other religions and the rest of God's creation because God's common good and providence are offered to all of his creation including humans. Michael Amaladoss quotes from the Second Vatican and affirms, “The Holy Spirit offers to all the possibility of being made partners, in a way known to God, in the paschal mystery.”⁴⁸ In a pluralistic country like India, the “spiritual warfare” is much greater than in any other country in the world; therefore, there is a need for more dependence on the Holy Spirit for His miracles of actions. A Hindu blog states, “Indra, the king of Devas, sat upon his divine golden throne surrounded by the assembly of 33 crores of gods – that's 330,000,000.”⁴⁹ In his *Church Planting Movements*, David Garrison identifies that “India is home to 330 million

⁴⁵ John Hick, “A Pluralist View,” *More Than One Way? Four Views of Salvation in a Pluralistic World*, Eds. Dennis L. Okholm and Timothy R. Phillips, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1995), pp. 27-59.

⁴⁶ Gnanakan, *Proclaiming Christ in a Pluralistic Context*, 10-11.

⁴⁷ Gnanakan, *Proclaiming Christ in a Pluralistic Context*, 11.

⁴⁸ Amaladoss, “Pluralism of Religions and The Proclamation of Jesus Christ in The Context of Asia,” (CTSA Proceedings 56, 2001): 1.

⁴⁹ Abhilash Rajendran, “330 million Gods in Hinduism - Reason - Meaning - Symbolism Of 33 Crore Devi Devatas,” May 15, 2019). These gods and goddesses are various forms of Brahman. For Example, "Devi-devatas."



gods.”⁵⁰ As a pre-evangelistic encounter with the people of other religions, the Holy Spirit is already active in the context of religious pluralism. For example, Holy Spirit is preparing people for Christ in a way that is known to God. Therefore, the emphasis is given more on the Pneumato-centric (Holy Spirit) approach than the theocentric approach.

In a pluralistic context, people live in a constant struggle with spiritual forces, but Western Christianity is more in a comfort zone. Spiritual warfare is not very much evident in Western Christianity. Therefore, the Christians in the West do not have many struggles with spiritual warfare. In this context, Christian missions need to rely more on the power of the Holy Spirit to stand against the spiritual forces of religious pluralism in India.

The Logos of God is in constant dialogue with all of the humans regardless of religious differences. Amaladoss affirms that God’s “Providence, evident goodness, and saving designs extend to all people.”⁵¹ He further states, “The seeds of the Word which lie hidden among them.”⁵² At this level of Logo-centric approach, we need to emphasize the Word which has the power to transform the world. Christ is the Logos who is already engaged in the world with all cultures of religious pluralism (John 1:10). Christ was already in the world even before the Word was incarnate in the flesh, he was in constant dialogue with people of other faith, and culture.

Christ is not only active in the church but also his works and active presence is available outside of the church. For example, an Indian Christian theologian and a missiologist, M. M. Thomas argues that the work of Christ extends beyond the walls of the Church into society: “Christ is active in society, releasing men from the false absolutes they have created for themselves.”⁵³ The Triune God is alive and active in the world, particularly in constant interaction with the people of religious pluralism.

Recommendations for Pneumato-Logos-Christo Centric Approach

In the context of exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism, our engagement with religious pluralism needs to be practical and profound. Therefore, the following considerations are proposed as a result of this research paper for witnessing Christ in a pluralistic context.

1. Accept the diversity of religious plurality while holding Christian convictions and belief.

⁵⁰ David Garrison, *Church Planting Movements: How God is Redeeming a Lost World* (Midlothian, VA: WIG Take Resources, 2004), 36.

⁵¹ S. J. Michael Amaladoss, “Pluralism of Religions and The Proclamation of Jesus Christ in The Context of Asia,” (CTSA Proceedings 56, 2001): 1-14.

⁵² Michael, “Pluralism of Religions and The Proclamation of Jesus Christ In The Context Of Asia,” p. 1-14.

⁵³ M.M. Thomas and P.D Devanandan (eds), *Christian Participation in Nation Building* (Bangalore: CISRS, 1960), 48, 113.



2. Initiate inter-religious dialogue with people of other faith.
3. Be inclusive in our approach and exclusive in our witness to Christ.
4. Cultivate a positive attitude towards people outside the Christian community.
5. Avoid unfriendly environment towards people of other religions.
6. Demonstrate a greater sensitivity towards the cultural diversity of our pluralistic context.
7. Exercise friendly dialogue with people of other faith and traditions.
8. Appreciate the pluralistic context and respect the religious opinion of others.
9. Interpret Christ's life into real-life issues of people of other faith and practice.
10. Relate the relevance of Christian gospel to the contemporary issues of human life.
11. Conduct unthreatened seminars and conferences with people of other faith.
12. Avoid condemnation and confrontation towards hostility with other religious faith.
13. Change our superior attitude toward people of different faith and practice.
14. Understand the universality of God's mission which extends to all of God's creation.
15. Avoid outdated styles that provoke the listeners in the context of religious pluralism.
16. Carefully adapt the changing context with Christian love and claims.

Conclusion

Christian approaches to religious pluralism in India vary significantly, as theologians grapple with how to present the Gospel in a diverse religious setting. These approaches range from exclusivism, which rejects other religions entirely (Karl Barth), to inclusivism (Karl Rahner), which acknowledges elements of truth in other religions while maintaining the supremacy of Christ. Pluralism, championed by John Hick, promotes the view that all religions are equally valid. In the Indian context, theologians like M.M. Thomas and P.D. Devanandan proposed Christ-centered syncretism, which seeks to engage with other religions while maintaining the centrality of Christ.

Key Indian theologians, such as Stanley Samartha and Samuel Rayan, have proposed contextual approaches to religious pluralism, emphasizing the Holy Spirit's active presence in non-Christian religions and the liberative aspects of faith traditions. Samartha's pneumatocentric approach, for example, highlights the role of the Holy Spirit in engaging with other faiths, while Rayan's liberation approach focuses on the struggle for justice as a common thread across religions.

The proposed "Pneumato-Logos-Christo Centric Approach" offers a thoughtful framework for engaging with religious pluralism, particularly in the context of India's profound spiritual diversity. By emphasizing the active presence of the Holy Spirit and the Logos (Christ) both within and outside the Church, this study proposes a theology that appreciates the work of God in all cultures and traditions.

This approach aligns well with a missional strategy that is respectful, dialogical, and sensitive to cultural nuances while still upholding Christian distinctiveness. The practical recommendations provide a balanced method for engaging other faiths, avoiding



confrontation, and promoting peaceful interfaith dialogue. Moreover, it underlines the need for Christian missions to rely on the power of the Holy Spirit in combating spiritual warfare and interacting with other religious traditions.

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