

# CHRISTIANITY AND OTHER RELIGIONS

What do we as Christians believe about the relationship between Christianity and other religions?

Below are a series of statements by Christian theologians.

Which one's make sense to you?

Which can you not accept?

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## Karl Rahner on Christianity and Other Religions

*From: "Christianity and the Non-Christian Religions," in Christianity and Other Religions, eds. John Hick and Brian Hebblethwaite, pp. 52-79. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985.*

### 1st Thesis

"Christianity understands itself as the absolute religion, intended for all men, which cannot recognize any other religion beside itself as of equal right." (p. 56)

### 2nd Thesis

"Until the moment when the Gospel really enters into the historical situation of an individual, a non-Christian religion ... contains ... supernatural elements arising out of the grace which is given to all men as a gratuitous gift on account of Christ." (pp. 60-61)

"it is a priori quite possible to suppose that there are supernatural, grace-filled elements in non-Christian religions." (p. 61)

"If, on the one hand, we conceive salvation as something specifically Christian, if there is no salvation apart from Christ ... and if, on the other hand, God has really, truly and seriously intended this salvation for all men—then these two aspects cannot be reconciled in any other way than by stating that every human being is really and truly exposed to the influence of the divine, supernatural grace which offers an interior union with God and by means of which God communicates himself..." (p. 63)

"the actual religions of 'pre-Christian' humanity too must not be regarded as simply illegitimate from the very start, but must be seen as quite capable of having a positive significance." (p. 66)

3rd Thesis:

“Christianity does not simply confront the member of an extra-Christian religion as a mere non-Christian but as someone who can and must already be regarded in this or that respect as an anonymous Christian.” (p. 75)

4th Thesis:

“the Church will not so much regard herself today as the exclusive community of those who have a claim to salvation but rather as the historically tangible vanguard and the historically and socially constituted explicit expression of what the Christian hopes is present as a hidden reality even outside the visible Church.” (p. 77)

“The Church is not the communion of those who possess God’s grace as opposed to those who lack it, but is the communion of those who can explicitly confess what they and the others hope to be.” (p. 79)

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## Wilfred Cantwell Smith on Christianity and Other Religions

*From: "The Christian in a Religiously Plural World," in Christianity and Other Religions, eds. John Hick and Brian Hebblethwaite, pp. 87-107. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985.*

"The task of constructing even that minimum degree of world fellowship that will be necessary for man to survive at all is far too great to be accomplished on any other than a religious basis. From no other source than his faith, I believe, can man muster the energy, devotion, vision, resolution, the capacity to survive disappointment, that will be necessary—that are necessary—for this challenge. Cooperation among men of diverse religion is a moral imperative..." (p. 95)

"If we take seriously the revelation of God in Christ—if we really mean what we say when we affirm that his life, and his death on the cross, and his final triumph out of the very midst of self-sacrifice, embody the ultimate truth and power and glory of the universe—then two kinds of things follow. ... On the moral level, there follows an imperative towards reconciliation, unity, harmony and brotherhood. At this level, all men are included: we strive to break down barriers, to close up gulfs; we recognize all men as neighbors, as fellows, as sons of the universal father, seeking him and finding him, being sought by him and being found by him. At this level, we do not become truly Christian until we have reached out towards a community that turns mankind into one total 'we'.

"On the other hand ... the doctrines that Christians have traditionally derived have tended to affirm a Christian exclusivism, a separation between those who believe and those who do not, a division of mankind into a 'we' and a 'they', a gulf between Christendom and the rest of the world: a gulf profound, ultimate, cosmic.

"... the traditional doctrinal position of the Church has in fact militated against its traditional moral position, and has in fact encouraged Christians to approach other men immorally. Christ has taught us humility, but we have approached them with arrogance." (p. 97)

"We are not saved by our knowledge; we are not saved by our membership in the Church; we are not saved by anything of our doing. We are saved, rather, by the only thing that could possibly save us, the anguish and the love of God. While we have no final way of knowing with assurance how God deals or acts in other men's lives ... none the less we must perhaps at least be hesitant in setting boundaries to that anguish and that love.

"The God whom we have come to know ... reaches out after all men everywhere, and speaks to all who will listen. Both within and without the Church men listen all too

dimly. Yet both within and without the Church, so far as we can see, God does somehow enter into men's hearts." (pp. 106-107).

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## **Wilfred Cantwell Smith on Christianity and Other Religions**

*From: "Idolatry: In Comparative Perspective," in The Myth of Christian Uniqueness: Toward a Pluralistic Theology of Religions, eds. John Hick and Paul F. Knitter, pp. 53-68. Faith Meets Faith Series. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1994.*

“God does not reveal theologies; He reveals Himself, She reveals Herself, It reveals Itself. Every theological system or idea is a response. It is finite, is mundane, is a human construct. Yet theologies may serve as channels introducing those who ponder them, and especially those who subscribe to them ... to a truth that in turn is more than human; more than finite; to God.” (p. 56)

“No one has ever worshiped an idol. some have worshiped God in the form of an idol; that is what idols are for.” (p. 53)

“For Christians to think that Christianity is true, or final, or salvific, is a form of idolatry. For Christians to imagine that God has constructed Christianity, or the Church, or the like rather than that He/She/It has inspired us to construct it, as He/She/It has inspired Muslims to construct what the world knows as Islam, or Hindus what is miscalled Hinduism ...—that is idolatry.” (p. 59)

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## **John Hick on Christianity and Other Religions**

*From: “‘Whatever Path Men Choose Is Mine,’ in Christianity and Other Religions, eds. John Hick and Brian Hebblethwaite, pp. 171-190. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985.*

“...in the great majority of cases—say, 98 or 99 per cent—the religion in which a person believes and to which he adheres depends upon where he was born. ... Any credible religious faith must be able to make sense of this circumstance. And a credible Christian faith must make sense of it by relating it to the universal sovereignty and fatherhood of God.” (p. 172) “When you visit the various non-Christian places of worship ... you discover ... the same kind of thing is taking place in them as in a Christian church. That is to say, human beings are coming together to open their minds to a higher reality, which is thought of as the personal creator and Lord of the universe, and as making vital moral demands upon the lives of men and women.” (p. 174)

“... that there is but one God, who is maker and lord of all; that in his infinite fullness and richness of being he exceeds all our human attempts to grasp him in thought; and that the devout in the various great world religions are in fact worshipping that one God...” (p. 178)

“...the different world religions have each served as God’s means of revelation to and point of contact with a different stream of human life.” (p. 182)

“Incarnation ... is a mythological idea, a figure of speech, a piece of poetic imagery.” (p. 186)

“When we see the Incarnation as a mythological idea applied to Jesus to express the experienced fact that he is our sufficient, effective and saving point of contact with God, we no longer have to draw the negative conclusion that he is man’s one and only effective point of contact with God. ... We can commend the Christian faith without having to discommend other ways of faith.” (p. 186)

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## **John Hick on Christianity and Other Religions**

*From: “The Non-Absoluteness of Christianity,” in The Myth of Christian Uniqueness: Toward a Pluralistic Theology of Religions, eds. John Hick and Paul F. Knitter, pp. 16-36. Faith Meets Faith Series. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1994.*

“The three central doctrines of trinity, incarnation, and atonement cohere together. ...  
“In the case of each of these doctrines, then, the existing theological spectrum of the Christian tradition, as it has become diversified in the modern period, offers ample resources for theologies that can incorporate religious pluralism. What the pluralistic vision accordingly requires is not a radical departure from the diverse and ever-growing Christian tradition, but its further development in ways suggested by the discovery of God’s presence and saving activity within other streams of human life. The resulting perception is that Christianity is not the one and only way of salvation, but one among several.” (p. 33)

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## **Gordon D. Kaufman on Christianity and Other Religions**

*From: "Religious Diversity, Historical Consciousness, and Christian Theology," in The Myth of Christian Uniqueness: Toward a Pluralistic Theology of Religions, eds. John Hick and Paul F. Knitter, pp. 3-15. Faith Meets Faith Series. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1994.*

“Christian faith (like every other faith) will be seen as one perspective, one worldview, which has developed in and through a long history alongside other traditions...” (p. 9)

“To acknowledge forthrightly and regularly that our theological statements and claims are simple ours—that they are the product of our own human study and reflection ...—is to set us free from these all too easy but false moves toward authoritarianism, which has characterized so much of Christian theology in the past. And simultaneously we are opened to the broad ranges of experience, life, and insight lying outside our own tradition, and provided with a powerful incentive to engage in dialogue and other interchange—on equal terms—with representatives of other religious and secular points of view.” (pp. 12-13)

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## Langdon Gilkey on Christianity and Other Religions

*From: "Plurality and Its Theological Implications," in The Myth of Christian Uniqueness: Toward a Pluralistic Theology of Religions, eds. John Hick and Paul F. Knitter, pp. 37-50. Faith Meets Faith Series. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1994.*

“On the one hand, we do not relinquish our own standpoint or starting point: What is dialogue if our Buddhist partner ceases to be Buddhist or we cease to be Christian? Nor on the other hand do we absolutise our own standpoint—lest no interchange take place at all. On the contrary, we relativize it radically: truth and grace are also with the other, so that now ours is only one way. And yet we remain there: embodying stubbornly but relatively our unconditional affirmations. Or, in reverse, we qualify our acknowledged relativism by participating in our quite particular but still stoutly affirmed perspective. Again, it is in praxis that we uncover a relative absoluteness.”  
(p. 47)

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## **Stanley J. Samartha on Christianity and Other Religions.**

*From: "The Cross and the Rainbow," in The Myth of Christian Uniqueness: Toward a Pluralistic Theology of Religions, eds. John Hick and Paul F. Knitter, pp. 69-88. Faith Meets Faith Series. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1994.*

“India may well be the only place where persons of other faiths, without crossing over the visible boundaries that separate them from Christians, have related themselves to Jesus Christ through art, thus breaking down the walls of exclusiveness. These artists, standing outside the confines of institutional Christianity, make evident that it is not the dogmas and doctrines about Christ or the institutions of the church that have touched the heart and mind of India, but the life and teachings of Jesus of Nazareth, his death and resurrection, the illumination he has brought into the Mystery of God, and the transforming power he has introduced into human life, as he invites all persons to move from self-centeredness to God-centeredness. He is indeed *jivanmukta*, one who is truly liberated in life, and therefore able to liberate others.” (p. 82)

“although Christians belong to Christ, Christ does not belong to Christianity.” (p. 83)

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## **Gavin D’Costa on Christianity and Other Religions.**

*From: "Christ, the Trinity, and Religious Plurality," in Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered: The Myth of a Pluralistic Theology of Religions, pp. 16-29. Faith Meets Faith Series. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1992.*

“the concerns of many of the pluralist contributors to *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness* are better met by an appropriate doctrine of the Trinity, than by the various strategies which they employ, which either ignore, abandon, or under-utilize the most central Christian doctrine of God.” (p. 16)

“it is through Christ that we encounter a Trinitarian God, who makes herself known as she is: as utter and gracious mystery (God the Father), in the Word incarnate (the Son), and in God’s indwelling sanctifying and prophetic presence (the Spirit). Such a Christocentric Trinitarianism thereby facilitates an openness to the world religions, for the activity of the Spirit cannot be confined to Christianity. ... This Trinitarian approach requires Christians to really listen and learn from the world religions and in this process be open to the judgment of God upon the Christian community.” (p. 17)

“THESIS ONE: A trinitarian Christology guards against exclusivism and pluralism by dialectically relating the universal and the particular.” (p. 18)

“It is through the Spirit and the Son that God is disclosed. Hence any attempt to limit or monopolize God in terms solely of Jesus turns into a binatarianism or unitarianism, which fails to account for the fullness of the self-disclosure of God.” (p. 18)

“THESIS TWO: Pneumatology allows the particularity of Christ to be related to the universal activity of God in the history of humankind.” (p. 19)

“THESIS THREE: A Christocentric trinitarianism discloses loving relationship as the proper mode of being. Hence love of neighbor (which includes Hindus, Buddhists, and others) is an imperative for all Christians.” (p. 19)

“THESIS FOUR: The normativity of Christ involves the normativity of crucified self-giving love, Praxis and dialogue.” (p. 20)

“THESIS FIVE: The church stands under the judgment of the Holy Spirit, and if the Holy Spirit is active in the world religions, then the world religions are vital to Christian faithfulness.” (p. 22)

“if we have good reason to believe that the Spirit and Word are present and active in the religions of the world ..., then it is intrinsic to the vocation of the church to be attentive to the world religions.” (p. 23)

“in the process of indigenization elements from another tradition will be adopted by Christianity according to its own narrative structure and according to its own paradigmatic rules and procedures.” (p. 26)

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## Christoph Schwöbel on Christianity and Other Religions

*From: "Particularity, Universality, and the Religions: Toward a Christian Theology of Religions," in Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered: The Myth of a Pluralistic Theology of Religions, pp. 30-46. Faith Meets Faith Series. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1992.*

"Both approaches, the conservative exclusivist and the pluralist in its different versions, seem to have difficulties in providing an adequate basis for interreligious dialogue. For the exclusivist approach dialogue is, if not expressly rejected, a means for proselytizing. The pluralist approach that associates itself programmatically with interreligious dialogue seems to see the possibility of such a dialogue only by bracketing, reinterpreting, or relativizing the particular truth claims of particular religious traditions. This immediately provokes the danger that a dialogue which suspends religious truth claims cannot even develop into a dialogue of religions, but turns into a dialogue of cultural traditions based on principles such as universal tolerance and respect, whose foundation is very often not to be seen in the religions themselves but in a humanist critique of all religions. A dialogue which is perceived along these lines can all too easily turn into a new guise of Western imperialism where subscribing to the principles of the Enlightenment becomes a precondition for participation in dialogue." (p. 33)

"The basis of [Christianity's] universal claims can be expressed in the assertion that this particular God who is disclosed in Jesus Christ through the Spirit is the ground of all being, meaning, and salvation." (p. 37)

"A Christian theology of religion loses its particular identity if it attempts to base its understanding of the religions not on the universality of God, who is disclosed in Christ, but on some supposedly universal anthropological constant such as an alleged 'religious a priori.'" (p. 39)

"The claim that salvation occurs only solo Christo by no means states the necessity of membership in the Christian church or acceptance of Christian doctrine for salvation, but only asserts that wherever salvation occurs as a divine work it happens through Christ. When we ask further what this 'through Christ' means, we find that the formulae of sola gratia and sola fide express precisely this content. ... Therefore it is only the acceptance of God's grace sola fide which is required for salvation, the absolute trust that we are saved by God's grace and not by any human merit." (p. 41)

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## **M. M. Thomas on Christianity and Other Religions**

*From: "A Christ-Centered Humanist Approach to Other Religions in the Indian Pluralistic Context," in Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered: The Myth of a Pluralistic Theology of Religions, pp. 49-62. Faith Meets Faith Series. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1992.*

“Christianity had direct influence in the movements of renewal of Hindu religion and culture from the time of the Bengal Renaissance.” (p. 52)

“any Christian approach which takes seriously the common mission of all religions and ideologies for cultural renewal and humanization of corporate structures of life in India’s modern historical setting cannot minimize the centrality of Jesus Christ and the implication of that faith for a realistic humanism.” (p. 55)

“faith in Christ needs to be distinguished from all its historical expressions in religion and culture and be seen as transcending them. This transcendence is the basis of their continued re-formation through their openness to other religions and cultures.” (p. 55)

“Should not then the cross be preached today in the conviction that because Christ rose again, ‘religion which is the reign of law dividing humankind is abolished, creating a new koinonia in Christ transcending the division between Christians and adherents of other religions and no religion.’” (p. 56)

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## **John B. Cobb, Jr., on Christianity and Other Religions**

*From: "Beyond 'Pluralism,'" in Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered: The Myth of a Pluralistic Theology of Religions, pp. 81-95. Faith Meets Faith Series. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1992.*

"I am making a claim to Christian superiority. ... The claim is only that a tradition in which Jesus Christ is the center has in principle no need for exclusive boundaries, that it can be open to transformation by what it learns from others, that it can move forward to become a community of faith that is informed by the whole of human history, that its theology can become truly global." (pp. 92-93)

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## Wolfhart Pannenberg on Christianity and Other Religions

*From: "Religious Pluralism and Conflicting Truth Claims: The Problem of a Theology of the World Religions," in Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered: The Myth of a Pluralistic Theology of Religions, pp. 96-106. Faith Meets Faith Series. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1992.*

“The parable of the last judgment does also imply, however, that Jesus and his proclamation are the final norm in deciding on whether a person will be admitted to or excluded from the communion of the kingdom. He is the norm even in relation to those who never knew him in their lifetime. The conclusion is that many do in fact belong to Jesus and in the kingdom he proclaimed who were not members of the Chosen People of Israel or of the Christian church. But it is the affinity of their lives to Jesus’ mission and proclamation that will prove decisive in their eternal salvation. Thus Jesus remains the final criterion for all human beings, while only the members of his church know about this criterion and can be certain about their salvation providing they live according to their faith.” (pp. 98-99)

“A theology of the world religions that wants to be true to the empirical situation in the way the religious traditions confront each other must not evade or play down the conflict of truth claims.” (p. 102)

“It is the encounter of conflicting truth claims that challenges each religious tradition to reaffirm itself in facing those challenges.” (p. 103)

“In order to engage in genuine interreligious dialogue, Christianity ... must be open and ready to accept whatever truth the Christian can accept and learn from other religious traditions in order to incorporate those elements of truth into our own understanding of God and of his revelation..” (p. 103)

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## **S. Wesley Ariarajah on Christianity and Other Religions**

*From: The Bible and People of Other Faiths. Geneva: WCC, 1985; reprint, Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1989.*

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...exclusive statements about Christ can never be understood unless we recognize the different levels in which language is used, and the different standpoints from which claims are made. Let me illustrate.

When my daughter tells me that I am the best daddy in the world, and there can be no other father like me, she is speaking the truth. For this comes out of her experience. She is honest about it; she knows no other person in the role of father. ...

[26]

But of course it is not true in another sense. ... in the next house there is another little girl who also thinks that her daddy is the best father in the whole world. And she too is right. ... It is impossible to compare the truth content of the statements of the two girls. For here we are dealing not with absolute truth, but with the language of faith and love. ... The language of the Bible is also the language of faith. Whether we are speaking about the chosen people, or about Jesus as the only way, we are expressing a relationship that has profound meaning and significance for us. We do not say it lightly, for such belief is at the heart of our whole experience. But we should never claim that such beliefs are formulated or held to discredit other beliefs.”

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## Lesslie Newbigin on Christianity and Other Religions

*From: "Religion for the Marketplace," in Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered: The Myth of a Pluralistic Theology of Religions, pp. 135-148. Faith Meets Faith Series. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1992.*

"It is indeed true that the being of God is beyond comprehension by the human mind. But this does not mean that we are free to make our own images of God. Nor does it warrant the denial that God could have acted to make himself known. ... In Christ we find both a holiness that must burn up all that is unholy, and a tender mercy and compassion which goes to the uttermost limit to receive the unholy. No human mind can grasp the depth of that mystery. But, having been laid hold by it, no human being can think of it as merely one among many symbols of an unknowable reality. To affirm that this is truth, not merely truth for me but truth for all, is not arrogance. It is simply responsible human behavior.

"But it is also more than this. It is an acknowledgment of the fact that the true center is not me and my need of salvation, but God and his glory." (pp. 138-139)

"Every proposal for human unity which does not specify the center has the self as its unacknowledged center. The Christian gospel is the Good News that a center has been provided around which it is possible for human beings to become one." (p. 139)

"The scientific part of our culture continues to flourish because it does not accept pluralism. It does not assume 'the parity of all scientific views.' ... It would seem that a proposal to sever the search for 'salvation' from the business of distinguishing truth from error, is a sign of the approaching death of a culture." (p. 143)

"What the church does and must always do is to point to the total fact of the incarnation—Jesus in his birth, ministry, death and resurrection—as the point where the Absolute has been present among the relativities of history." (p. 145)

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## Lesslie Newbigin on Christianity and Other Religions

*From: The Gospel in a Pluralist Society. Geneva: WCC, 1989; reprint, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989.*

“The very heart of the Christian message, as it is set forth for instance in the Fourth Gospel, is that the particular life-story which it tells is the decisive manifestation within history of the one who is the source and goal of all history. One may dismiss this belief as preposterous, as the writers of these essays do, but that merely demonstrates their captivity within the plausibility structures of our contemporary Western society.” (p. 164)

“It is not easy to resist the contemporary tide of thinking and feeling which seems to sweep us irresistibly in the direction of an acceptance of religious pluralism, and away from any confident affirmation of the absolute sovereignty of Jesus Christ. It is not easy to challenge the reigning plausibility structure. It is much easier to conform. The overwhelming dominance of relativism in contemporary culture makes any firm confession of belief suspect. To the affirmation which Christians make about Jesus, the reply is, ‘Yes, but others make similar affirmations about the symbols of their faith; why Jesus and not someone or something else?’ Thus a reluctance to believe in something leads to a state of mind in which the *Zeitgeist* becomes the only ruling force. ...

“We also want that unity [of mankind], and therefore seek the truth by which alone humankind can become one. That truth is not a doctrine or a worldview or even a religious experience; it is certainly not to be found by repeating abstract nouns like justice and love; it is the man Jesus Christ in whom God was reconciling the world. The truth is personal, concrete, historical.

“To make that confession does not mean, as critics seem to assume, that we believe that God’s saving mercy is limited to Christians and that the rest of the world is lost.” (pp. 169-170)

“I believe that we must begin with the great reality made known to us in Jesus Christ, that God—the creator and sustainer of all that exists—is in his own triune being an ocean of infinite love overflowing to all his works in all creation and to all human beings. ... I believe that no person, of whatever kind or creed, is without some witness of God’s grace in heart and conscience and reason, and none in whom that grace does not evoke some response—however feeble, fitful, and flawed.” (p. 175).

“In the debate about Christianity and the world’s religions ... there has been an almost unquestioned assumption that the only question is, ‘What happens to the non-

Christian after death?’ I want to affirm that this is the wrong question and that as long as it remains the central question we shall never come to the truth.” (p. 177)

“For anyone who has understood what God did for us all in Jesus Christ, the one question is: ‘How shall God be glorified? How shall his amazing grace be known and celebrated and adored? How shall he see of the travail of his soul and be satisfied?’” (pp. 179-180)

practical consequences:

1. “we shall expect, look for, and welcome all the signs of the grace of God at work in the lives of those who do not know Jesus as Lord.” (p. 180)
  2. “the Christian will be eager to cooperate with people of all faiths and ideologies in all projects which are in line with the Christian understanding of God’s purpose in history.” (p. 181)
  3. “It is precisely in this kind of shared commitment to the business of the world that the context of true dialogue is provided.” (p. 181)
  4. “the essential contribution of the Christian to the dialogue will simply be the telling of the story, the story of Jesus, the story of the Bible. The story is itself, as Paul says, the power of God for salvation.” (p. 182)
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## **William Johnson on Christianity and Other Religions**

*From: Christian Zen. New York: Harper & Row, 1971*

"I have had some contact with Zen ... it has deepened and broadened my Christian faith more than I can say. ... Contact with Zen ... has opened up new vistas, teaching me that there are possibilities in Christianity I never dreamed of." (pp. 1,2)

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