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## **Acknowledging That God Is Not Limited to Christians**

(shortened by N. R. Wagner from an article in the New York Times, 12 Jan 2002)

by Dr. Joseph C. Hough Jr., president of Union Theological Seminary in New York. He has been calling in recent speeches for Christians to adopt a new theological approach to other faiths, one that goes considerably beyond simple tolerance.

**Q:** *Since the Sept. 11 tragedy, Americans of different faiths have joined together in public prayer services to show national unity. Have you found something essential missing in those gatherings?*

What is missing is not goodwill. I have been deeply moved by the passionate witness of many Americans against religious intolerance in the aftermath of the Sept. 11 tragedy.

Yet many Christians seem unaware that toleration alone, while desirable, is not sufficient in a world of religious pluralism. Even the most influential theologians during the 20th century have failed to see the limitations of toleration. They have conceded only that other faiths may be “lesser lights” (Karl Barth), or that representatives of other faiths can be saved because they are “Christians incognito” (Paul Tillich), or “anonymous Christians” (Karl Rahner). Tolerance like this concedes only minimal value to other religious traditions.

**Q:** *You have said that Christians, to promote peace in a religiously pluralistic world, need to develop a new “theology of religions.” What would that involve?*

It would begin with the recognition that religion is something that we human beings put together in an effort to give some cultural form to our faith. Our faith is a response to the experience of the presence of God.

Since we have only our human language and symbols to use in expressing our faith, religions differ as much as cultures differ. Therefore, we want to be careful about claiming that one religious form is the only one that is authentic or real.

The second element in a new theology of religions would be the development of a greater understanding of religious traditions other than our own. We can hardly evaluate the potential power of another religious tradition if we know nothing about it.

Finally, a new Christian theology of religions will involve the recognition that the fomenting of religious conflict has been and still is a theological problem for Christians, because we have made our claim to God’s revelation exclusively ours. Our history of internal conflict and persecution of

persons of other religions is a grim reminder that we have killed each other and members of other religions in defending that exclusive claim; we have often lived a contradiction of the spirit of Jesus Christ.

**Q:** *But wouldn't many Christians respond that the theological approach you propose would threaten to compromise the uniqueness of the Gospels?*

The fear that openness to other religious traditions will destabilize our Christian faith has led many to resist full recognition of the adequacy of other religions to transform human beings with hope and promise.

What is essential for Christian faith is that we know we have seen the face of God in the face of Jesus Christ. It is not essential to believe that no one else has seen God and experienced redemption in another place or time.

It's the difference between an attempt to bear witness and an attempt to convert. The one is an opening to conversation; the other is closing conversation.

**Q:** *On which theologians do you draw in making your argument?*

I begin with Calvin's doctrine of God's absolute sovereignty. Some interpreted this only in terms of God's absolute power over the entire universe. I do not. Through the eyes of Karl Barth, a leading interpreter of Calvin, I see God's sovereignty manifested to us as God's absolute freedom to do and to be what he wills. Simply put, if God is sovereign over all, then God is totally free, free even to come to human beings as a fellow human being. It is God's freedom that suggests the possibility of God making himself known in Jesus Christ.

But there, according to Barth, God's freedom ends. For Barth, God is not finally free. God's self-revelation of hope for human salvation is limited to one tradition born at one time in one place in the world. Yet I believe that if one follows the logic of God's freedom, there would at least be hesitancy to impose our own limits on God's redemptive action.

**Q:** *Are you saying that all religions are equal?*

No, all religions are not equal for me. For my faith, Jesus Christ is decisive. But I am a Christian who strongly believes that God has always been and now is working everywhere in every human culture to redeem the world. I believe that there is ample evidence in the best of the world's religions, including our own, that God's work is effective. Muslims, Jews, Hindus, Buddhists and others have been and are being transformed by a powerful vision of God that redeems them with hope and infuses their religious practice with compassion, justice and peace.