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Extra Ecclesiam Nulla Salus

A Statement of the Department of Systematic Theology

The September 1984 issue of *The Cresset* carried an article by Valparaiso University Professor Theodore M. Ludwig, entitled, "Does God Have Many Names?"

The March 1986 issue of *The Cresset* printed a signed letter from Professor Ludwig, expressing regret for "unclarities" in the previous article which had led to "misunderstanding." The letter further states:

It is of the very essence of Christianity to believe that God gives eternal salvation only through Jesus Christ as the center of the divine plan of salvation and that Christians are to share this good news with all other people. My article presupposed this central Christian teaching.

It would be gratifying to accept that this fine confession was indeed presupposed by the 1984 article, and that any other interpretation is simply a misunderstanding. Such a facile explanation, however, flies in the face of the following facts:

1. The 1984 article repeatedly attacks the exclusive claims of Christianity as represented in the old formula, *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* (outside the church there is no salvation). Prof. Ludwig's attacks on this formulation apply equally well to the Lutheran Church's confession in the *Large Catechism*, Creed, §§56 and 66: "But outside the Christian church (that is, where the Gospel is not) there is no forgiveness, and hence no holiness. . . . Therefore they remain in eternal wrath and damnation. . . ."

2. The 1984 article by implication criticizes Karl Barth for teaching in his *Church Dogmatics* that Christianity "alone has the commission and the authority to be a missionary religion, i.e., to confront the world of religions as the only true religion, etc." Barth may be criticized for many things, but he should not be attacked for resisting modern "theories which relativized Christian claims," as the 1984 article does.

3. The 1984 article states: "Among Christians there is a growing feeling that the long-standing tradition of exclusivism, which

sees truth and salvation only in Christianity, is no longer viable for the needs of the church and the world in this pluralistic age. . . .” This development is supported throughout the article, and “among deeper theological reasons” for it there is cited the alleged fact that “we today have a strong sense of the relativity of knowledge, including religious truth.”

4. The 1984 article argues that “we would be poorer as Christians if there were no longer any Muslims, any Hindus, any Buddhists, Sikhs, or Confucianists. To say that, however, is to suggest that these various religions of the world have a place in God’s purpose for humankind. . . .”

5. The 1984 article deals at some length with the Karl Rahner-Vatican II scheme, according to which salvation was indeed obtained by Christ alone, but is distributed through the various religions, so that devout Buddhists, etc., are “anonymous Christians.” This scheme the article criticizes, not as one might expect of a Lutheran, for detaching salvation from the revealed Gospel, but for not going far enough: “In holding Christianity as the final and absolute religion, other religions can in no way be approached as equals, however much respect and affirmation is given. . . . The arrogance of the exclusivistic view is surely softened by this model but reappears in a more subtle form.”

6. The 1984 article criticizes relativism and pluralism not because they deny the absoluteness of Christianity, but because they fail “to take the truth-claims of the various religions seriously. By giving up the claim to finality and absoluteness of Christianity, at the same time something vital to all religions is relativized: the claim of each religion to ultimacy.”

7. According to the March 1986 letter, the “central problem” in the 1984 article had been the “arrogant and hostile attitude” often shown to individuals belonging to non-Christian religions. In point of fact the 1984 article deals not with relations among individuals, but with the relations among religions as such. In that context “arrogance” is not some personal attitude, but the assertion of Christianity’s “exclusivistic” claims. Thus the concluding section of the 1984 article argues that

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- “The discussion has clearly moved beyond the ‘outside the Church there is no salvation’ model, so that people of other religions can now be approached with some respect and openness.”
 - “Truth is to be sought in living personal confrontation with God where he reveals himself in the Scriptures and in human culture and religion.”
 - “A model that looks to dialogue with other religions as a theological resource must accept in a basic way the pluralism of religions; if other religions are met as basically inferior, something other than dialogue takes place in the meeting.”
 - The goal of dialogue “is not to convert but to share and to challenge and to contribute in a common quest for understanding the Mystery. And the contribution will be mutual. . . . Yet if God is at work also in these religions, Christians can also learn something of the Mystery from them.”
 - “Christianity must be viewed as a unique, historical reality—not the exclusive possessor of truth and salvation, . . . challenging and being challenged by the other pilgrims on the way towards a fuller understanding of the Mystery.”
 - “If God intends these religions to be present in our world, to be faithful we must recognize them in our theology and seek to be present to them in dialogue.”

The entire thrust of the article is that Christianity is “not the exclusive possessor of truth and salvation.” The 1984 article represents therefore a fundamental assault on the basic New Testament confession that Jesus is Lord. Such radical apostasy calls for unconditional retraction, not for excuses or explanations of alleged misunderstandings.

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