PART IV
THE BIBLE IN THEOLOGY AND APOLOGETICS

CHAPTER 16

THREE THEOLOGICAL RESPONSES TO AMERICAN PLURALISM

An American Pluralistic Worldview

Diverse races, societies, cultures, religions, and worldviews are represented in the melting pot of America. In the presence of a plurality of worldview options, many have opted out of explicitly exclusive worldviews in favor of pluralism. Pluralism acknowledges the value and validity of all worldviews, yet calls into question exclusivity within those views. While many individuals in America hold to (or are familiar with) only one general worldview, they are often aware of and open to differing worldviews. This openness to other worldviews is not pluralism until the validity and value of alternate worldviews is assumed. Pluralism espouses relativity in worldviews (all worldviews have equal value and validity) using key words like *tolerance* and *acceptance* (the terminology of pluralism also borrows heavily from the many worldviews it encompasses, yet changes the meanings of those terms to fit its own universal inclusivism). Six important aspects of American pluralism are: (a) consumerism, (b) the spectator mentality, (c) individualism, (d) divine absenteeism, (e) ethical relativism, and (f) Postmodern nihilism and jadedness. David W. Henderson's (1998) discussion of these six aspects and the historical, geographical, and economic factors that initiated and perpetuated them serves as a useful starting point for an analysis of American pluralism.

Consumerism affects every area of American life. Billboards, telemarketers, commercials on the radio and television, and pop-up advertisements on the internet confront Americans every day with new and improved products and services. American citizens are encouraged by their

government to spend more money in order to boost the economy. Americans have trouble picking out what clothes to wear, what food to eat, and what banks to use because of the plethora of options that exist for them. “The idea is that it is beneficial to spend, to accumulate, to buy primarily with thought of one’s own needs . . . (and) selfish desires” (Henderson 1998, 50). Contemporary consumerism grew out of Adam Smith’s economic theories concerning free market economies. Consumerism sped up as the Industrial Revolution produced a flood of new options for buying and selling. America was rich in natural resources and its geographical boarders were always expanding, making more and more resources available for use. Consumer marketing and advertisement exploded in the early 20th century and spread the consumer spirit with it (53). Planes, trains, and automobiles have made products more accessible worldwide. All of these factors have helped to fuel American pluralism. The vast plurality of products has accustomed Americans to getting what they want, when they want it, and how they want it. Consumerism has become a part of many Americans’ worldviews. Alternative worldviews are seen as a matter of taste and consumer decision. Validity is not as important as value, attractiveness, and utility. Americans are shopping for worldviews, and miss-matching thought structures to fit their desires.

Americans are spectators. They would rather watch “The Real Life” on television than live a real life themselves. Inventions like the telegraph, camera, and telephone helped to create this spectator mentality by “removing information from its context” (Henderson 1998, 73). Radio, movies, and television broadened the horizons of human entertainment, but failed to foster a sense of meaning and resulted in boredom. Americans are distracted and pacified in the privacy of their own homes (75–76). This has developed into a distracted, private, and passive approach to worldview formulation and analysis.

Americans are increasingly isolated and individualistic. The humanism of the Renaissance brought with it an emphasis on the significance of the individual (Henderson 1998, 98). The rise of democracies in the west (especially in America) was accompanied by the theme of individual rights. The Enlightenment and its rival movement in Romanticism both emphasized individuality in different ways (the first as the root of reason, the second as the meaning of personhood) (99–100). The founding documents of America are interpreted by many as upholding the rights of the individual above all else. Children are taught the value of "being yourself." Increasing social pressure, self-service, and geographic mobility has fractured the idea of the nuclear family, the extended family, and the community. Many Americans believe strongly in the personal nature of worldviews, and the right of individuals to choose between worldviews or to formulate new worldviews in the context of their own individuality.

Secularism is widespread in America. The scientific revolution, viewed through the lens of the Enlightenment, introduced an enormous gap between humanity and God (Henderson 1998, 127). The Enlightenment gave birth to views of God that found Him distant, absent, or compartmentalized (127–130). Darwinian evolution sounded the death knell for God's existence. God has been pushed from the schools, the sciences, and the philosophical worldviews of Americans. There is no longer any place for Him. American pluralism allows for people's belief in God (or unbelief in Him), but not for God's absolute existence (or absolute knowledge concerning Him) (Hick 1983). In America, secular "Christianity" is increasingly common.

Moral relativity is on the rise in America. Thinkers during the Enlightenment asserted that humans could be trusted, and that a rights-based morality was justifiable on rational grounds (Henderson 1998, 160). Pragmatism and existentialism pointed to the utility and ultimate meaninglessness of value judgments (161). Many Americans live in large cities where moral

pluralism abounds, and through electronic media the rural population is likewise infected with this tendency for ethical tolerance. *Right* and *wrong* are often treated as oversimplifications of complex behavior and motives, and as matters of taste or social discretion. This relativism has affected Americans' worldviews by destroying any standard for absolute truth, by ignoring distinctions and contradictions, and by establishing individual human autonomy from moral law.

Postmodern nihilism in America has found the rainbow, only to discover that the pot at the end of it is empty and broken. The scientific and mathematical theories of general and special relativity, quantum mechanics, and fuzzy logic, have led to doubt in the existence of an objective perspective (Henderson 1998, 190). The information explosion has inundated Americans with an overwhelming amount of data and of alternative ways of seeing the world. Life is irreconcilably fractured into many parts, some of which are mutually contradictory. Cognitive dissonance is no longer avoided. No absolute meaning is believed to exist, making possible worldview eclecticism, specialization, and compartmentalization.

Pluralism: America's Most Critical Theological Issue

Several critical theological issues in America demand attention. Divine immanence and transcendence, liberation, environmentalism, a loss of biblical authority, and spiritualism all deserve treatment by the modern American theologian, but perhaps no other theological issue is as deeply rooted in American life as theological pluralism. Some form of pluralism is the direct or indirect cause or result of each of these key theological themes. Several key issues characterize religious pluralism in America: (a) a loss of any real sense of objective theological reality, (b) an overemphasis on usefulness, entertainment value, and coherence with materialism,

(c) a sense of theological apathy, (d) a glossing over of exclusivist claims, and (e) a tendency to undervalue a holistic theological methodology.

Religious pluralism has clearly made its mark on modern American Christian apologetics and evangelism. Individual sinners are marketed and entertained. Often very little is said about right and wrong and what it means to be under God's *just* love. Christianity is presented as an elixir for the postmodern blues, but is rarely ever fully articulated and often becomes a jaded form of postmodernism itself. Pluralism should be seen as a significant threat to Christian theology, for apologetics and evangelism are the arm of the church (and God) to the world. If the message is distorted in transmission, eventually the content will be lost (new Christians will know less and less what they should believe, how they should behave, and what they should experience). Not only is this trend dangerous for the transmission of Christianity from generation to generation, it also fails to confront the world with any real, unique, and objective message. While apologetics and evangelism must continue to contextualize their methods, care must be taken not to merely synthesize the content of the gospel with the American worldview (Lingenfelter and Mayers 1986).

An emphasis on subjectivity and tolerance in American culture has led many people (and even professing Christians) to become relativists. The country is neither fully secular, nor fully sacred. It is decidedly noncommittal and diverse in church and state policies. "What is true for you may not be true for me," is heard across America daily in schools, workplaces, and yes, even in churches. Tolerance of other religions and worldviews has become so engrained in American heads that exclusivists are often the only ones that are excluded. Many Americans no longer believe in the objectivity of meaning, logic, or even beliefs. A Bible verse means what you want it to mean and truth is what you make it. This heavily subjectivist context makes the Assemblies

of God's sixteen fundamental truths seem out of place. What is fundamental? What is truth? Is there even such a thing (or sixteen of them)? Many evangelical church organizations and leaders push strongly for an objective view of reality in Biblical interpretation and theology, but those who populate their churches often live by a different code—tolerate others and understand that the truth cannot be monopolized. Christian leaders and theologians struggle with the content of Christian belief, while their followers run the other way, believing that it doesn't matter so much what we believe, or why we believe it. All that is important is that we get along with other people in our worldviews, theologies, and biblical interpretations and remember that all religious beliefs are valuable and valid.

Narrative, Process, and Evangelical Theologies Respond to American Pluralism

Narrative Theology's Response to Pluralism

Narrative theology is founded upon three interrelated presuppositions. First, it is assumed that stories are the fundamental building blocks of human understanding (McFague 1982, 15). Second, the Bible and history (personal experiences and literary interpretations of experiences) are primarily stories. Third, the content of truth is only to be understood through the form in which truth is set (which is primarily literary and experiential) (Ryken 1984). Three major approaches to narrative theology are based upon these presuppositions. In the first approach, theology is understood as myth. Theology is said to express the mythical nature of human experience and the importance of myths in societies. All myths are interpreted in terms of their transcendence and renewed imminence (Kliever 1981, 153–184). Individuals and societies

interact with myths by crossing over into the horizon of the myth's world picture, and bringing back that horizon into present reality. In the second approach, theology is understood as biography. Theology centers on characters. This theological approach focuses on the personal and subjective experiences of faith in action, and often derives theology from wholly extra-scriptural sources (often from biographical history). In the third approach, theology is understood as parable. It is contended that theology should look to Jesus' use of parables as a guide. Theology, in this view, is a story that expresses dynamic relationships in the world in novel ways and points to God through unexpected occurrences in everyday life (Kliever 1981). Theology's conclusions are not meant to be propositional, but are to be aimed at challenging the status quo of humanity with the surprising presence of the divine in the world. The metaphor becomes the central tool of the theologian. All of human experience is open to theological inquiry.

Narrative theology responds to pluralism in America with an affirmation of pluralism's importance in capturing universal aspects of the human situation. Theology as myth insists on the value of all myths. Christianity is seen as one of many sources of myths, one of many equally valid worldviews. Theology as biography is an assessment of individual characters in particular circumstances. It places primary theological value in individual personal experience (Kliever 1981). Theology is thus thoroughly personal. Theology as parable finds its center in the metaphor, which is believed to be the building block of humanity's understandings of relationships. No source of metaphors (including the Bible and Christianity) can claim exclusivity of value or validity. Narrative theology openly embraces all religions and worldviews (though often not explicitly). It is believed that pluralism is a positive step toward a holistic human experience of God's actions in the world. This is not a necessary conclusion of narrative

theology, but it is a natural one. Theology as story in America is naturally pluralistic due to its pluralistic cultural, philosophical, and religious context.

Process Theology's Response to Pluralism

Process theology is a synthesis of modern evolutionary models of the universe and the philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead with the Judeo-Christian worldview (Starner 1997, 36). Whitehead was a mathematician and philosopher who pointed to the existence of change in our universe as a clue to the nature of reality and God. God's original purpose or aim is seen in the world's events, and is a dualistic existence (abstract and eternal yet physical and temporal) (Grenz and Olson 1992, 136–137). Whitehead espoused a type of panentheism (as do many of the process theologians).

Process theology has been developed under several leading theologians. Pierre Teilhard de Chardin's major contribution was his evolutionary/Christian view of history. He pointed to a future event that he termed the "Omega point" that was to be the culmination of creative history and the ultimate synthesis of spirit and matter (Grenz and Olson 1992, 134). This event was viewed as fulfillment of the Christ theme in history. John B. Cobb Jr. took Whitehead's philosophy one step further in his synthesis of Christianity and evolution, and introduced a view of Christ that made "Christ" synonymous with cocreative change in the world (of which Jesus was an example) (138–141). Cobb pushed the teleological aspects of process theology to the forefront, and made God the purposer and ultimate end of all things. Charles Hartshorne brought Whitehead's God into further imminence by making Him a physical existence (Surin 1989, 106). God influences and is influenced by the ever-changing world. God's existence is a given truth, bound up in the existence of everything. The world is a part of (but is not all of) God. The two poles of God's existence (the eternal and the temporal) are seen as two parts of one whole

(107–108). Thomas J. J. Altizer saw God's progression in history as a sort of death of the eternal for the life of the temporal (Kliever 1981, 61–62). God, through creation and incarnation, has died and has lifted our world to a new level. God becomes no longer transcendent and in the events of world history becomes "actualized as Total Immanence" (66). Altizer looked forward to a time when the universe dissolves back into the divine immanence, individuals die, and a monistic reality is resurrected (66).

The main philosophical presuppositions of process theology are: (a) Christianity and modern scientific understandings of reality should be merged; (b) science and reason (both of which are a part of natural theology) are the starting point of theology; (c) God is an evolving transcendent being that is interdependent with the physical world (Grenz and Olson 1992, 32). Process theologians interpret scripture in the light of modern scientific understandings of reality. The Bible does not play a primary role in the development of their theology (science and process philosophy are primary), but is synthesized as a secondary worldview with their philosophical preunderstandings. The Bible is viewed as part of God's intimate connection with history and as a revelation of His changing and creative dipolar nature. In process theology, change is primary. "Since all reality exists in such a state of fluctuation, the meaning of a text in scripture cannot be precise or authoritative" (Klein, Blomberg, and Hubbard 1993, 106), and because of this "process interpreters do not search for propositional truth; they simply process what the reader has encountered in the text" (107).

Process theology responds to pluralism in America by emphasizing the dipolar nature of God. Cobb (1990) contends that pluralism as it is popularly understood (all religions are equally valid and valuable and should be synthesized) is indefensible, but he goes on to argue for a more fundamental pluralism "that allows each religious tradition to define its own nature and purpose

and the role of religious elements within it" (84). How can such fundamental religious contradictions exist? The answer lies in process theology's understanding of the nature of God. John Hick (1983) stresses that process theology's distinction between divine immanence and transcendence "enables us to acknowledge both the one unlimited transcendent Reality and also a plurality of varying human concepts, images, and experiences of and responses to that Reality" (83). As God changes and becomes immanent He also becomes particularized, jaded, and dead to transcendence (Kliever 1981, 62–66). But the world has hope of meaning and purpose in its future dissolution back into God. The individual is in reality nonexistent apart from his/her unity and interdependence with the world and God. God is not absent, rather He is in us and we are in Him. God takes on American plurality, and exists interdependently with it, changing with it until the culmination of all things comes to pass (i.e., the omega point).

Evangelical Theology's Response to Pluralism

Five central presuppositions of Evangelical theology are: (a) a supernatural world exists which interacts with the natural world; (b) the Bible is God's revelation of Himself in Christ and is the primary source of theology; (c) the Bible is authoritative and inerrant; (d) exegetical methodology should be sensitive to authorial intent; (e) the Bible establishes normative beliefs, behavior, morals, and experience (Fee and Stuart 1993). Evangelical theologians are often faulted for being too authoritarian in their dogmatism. They respond: "Our commitment to the authority of the Bible derives from our prior conviction of its truthfulness" (Klein, Blomberg, and Hubbard 1993, 110). If the Bible is true—it is argued—then its propositions must be adhered to unswervingly.

Evangelical theology responds to American pluralism with a cry for renewed biblical Christocentrism. Jesus taught that Christianity is not a spectator's sport (Matt. 7:24–27). Belief in

Him is not merely useful or pleasing (Luke 9:59–62), it is necessary (John 20:31; Acts 4:12). Individuals must make a personal decision to follow Him (John 21:22), but Christ's body is a diverse and interdependent community (1 Cor. 12). Christ is not absent in American life (Matt. 28:20), and He is concerned with humanity's everyday needs (Matt. 6:25–34). Jesus calls humans to death in Him (Luke 14:25–27), and resurrection by the Spirit (John 8:51; 11:25–26; Rom. 8) so that they might be in good relationship with God and others. Jesus reveals God's absolute moral standard (Ex. 20:1–21; Matt. 5) and condemns to hell all humans who choose to remain in sin (Rev. 21:6–8). Life has meaning and purpose in Christ (John 15:1–8) and the Bible offers humans a holistic and cohesive worldview in Christ (1 John 5:1–5). Jesus claimed to be the only way to God (John 14:6), and His disciples claimed the same for their master (Acts 4:12). Pluralism makes Christ out to be a liar, and makes His death on the cross superfluous. Pluralism attempts to rid Christianity of the exclusivity of Christ's claims in scripture. Pinnock (1992) asserts that "efforts to revise Christology downward are difficult to accept because they go against the evidence, and they appear to be based on special pleading and hostile presuppositions" (69).

An Evaluation of the Three Theological Responses

The Bible as the Standard

God's revelation of Himself in scripture provides a standard by which to judge theological presuppositions, methods, and conclusions. In modern American theology, this has become a central issue. If God has revealed himself in the world, and especially in the recording of His actions in the world, theologians ought to give this aspect of the theological task their utmost attention, for it is here that God speaks clearest. In the midst of a plurality of theological voices in America and around the world, God's voice in His revelation should remain the center.

How is biblical revelation to be understood? Is the Bible God's primary revelation of Himself and His plan of salvation, or is scripture just one small (and imperfect) part of God's revelation? Jesus is presented in scripture as God's primary self-revelation to the world, and as the only source of salvation (Acts 4:12; Col. 1: 15–23; Heb. 1:1–3). All other revelation must be understood as it relates to Jesus. Paul is adamant about the exclusivity of God's revelation in Christ: "If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let him be eternally condemned" (Gal. 1:9). Biblical revelation must be viewed through this paradigm of exclusive Christocentricism. As such, it is God's revelation of His historic actions and words in the world, recorded by human authors in human language and literary form. All of scripture is God-breathed. God revealed Himself in the way He desired to reveal Himself. Theologians must listen to His voice in scripture's stories, poetry, parables, letters, and prophecies. Theology must seek to come to grips with the stories of the Bible, understanding divine and human elements in the scripture as holistic revelation. God has revealed Himself in the Bible (Rev. 1:8), Christ is the revelation of God in the Bible (2 Tim. 3:15), and the Bible is God's word of teaching, correcting, training, and equipping the believer (3:16). Theology, if it is to provide humans with a rational understanding of God in Christ, should seek to understand the Bible—experientially, historically, literarily, and systematically.

While scripture is not specifically intended to provide scientific or philosophical data, it is nevertheless accurate in its descriptions of events and its prescription of a Christocentric worldview. Christianity is a religion that is based on historical events (i.e., the creation of the world, humanity's fall into sin, Jesus' death and resurrection) and must be approached as a worldview (a holistic way of looking at reality). Humans may err in their interpretation, systemization, and application of biblical revelation, but the Bible itself is inerrant. The Bible is

God-breathed, and so is "good." Its purpose is to bring humans to salvation in Christ and to full development as Christians (2 Tim. 3:15–16). It is God's revelation of Himself, not man's search for God. It is God who initiates theology, and man who accepts and seeks to understand God's own self-revelation. The Bible is the standard by which to judge narrative, process, and Evangelical theology's responses to American pluralism.

An Evaluation of Narrative Theology's Response to Pluralism

Narrative theology's first presupposition (stories are the fundamental building blocks of human understanding) fails to deal with abstract, mathematical, and logical thinking in a straightforward manner (these types of thought systems cannot be built from stories). Its second presupposition (the Bible and history are primarily stories) is correct, but narrative theology often fails to acknowledge the importance of historical and abstract theological details, themes, and forms in scripture. Its third presupposition (the content of truth is only to be understood through the literary and experiential form in which it is set) has a tendency to overemphasize the form and neglect the original content. Narrative theologians interpret the task of the theologian as involving a literary analysis of the biblical texts, but often fail to systematize their particularized findings (Ryken 1984).

Theology as myth subjectivizes faith and relativizes religion. All religions are seen as equally useful mythical systems. While it must be admitted by the conservative interpreter of scripture that the Bile is a story, narrative theology goes too far in relativizing the content of the story, so that in the end all stories are the same. This is not a distinctly Christian theology, and is overly universalistic. Theology as biography falls prey to the same problems (i.e., relativity and subjectivity) as does theology as myth. Theology as parable is correct in its emphasis on the importance of the metaphor and human experience in theology, but denigrates the abstract truth

of scripture in favor of the pictorial and concrete nature of parables. This seems to miss Jesus' point with parables (i.e., to teach [Ryken 1984, 152]) and to make the formulation of standard beliefs impossible. All three approaches to narrative theology suppose that the only propositions to be adhered to are their own stated presuppositions concerning the narrative nature of life and reality.

Narrative theology is often reader-oriented in its interpretation of scripture. The reader provides the meaning and becomes the final authority of meaning in the text unless "controlling factors" are utilized (i.e., the use of more objective and holistic methods of analysis) (Starner 1997, 41; Ryken 1992). Its reader-oriented approach focuses on the reader's (not the writer's) intentions in the text (McNight 1988, 150). "Biblical texts are perceived and interpreted in quite different ways as a result of changes in worldview and in social surroundings within any given worldview" (149). Narrative theologians view the Bible as a book, with a plot, episodic development, characters, and settings. This is diversely understood as following the paradigm of the parable, myth, and biography. The reader experiences another world. The Bible plays the role of a story in the wider world story. Narrative theologians focus on the Bible in the context of other religious books, myths, and traditions (McKim 1997, 127). They focus on the characters of the Bible and compare them with historical Christian characters to assess what Christianity ought to look like in the reader's life (128). They look at the Bible as a source of metaphors that address the human situation and use scripture's symbols, metaphorical relationships, and stories to challenge contemporary existence (128–129). The gospel becomes "a story that gives you a way of being in the world" (Hauerwas and Burrell 1977, 73).

The Bible tends to take a secondary role in narrative theology under the reader's experiences and understandings. It is important mainly as a piece of literature in continuity with

human existence. The Bible is one among many sources for theology. All stories have equal authority. In contrast, the Bible in propositionist theology is important as the primary foundation of truth. For liberal theology, the Bible is a flawed (though useful) human conception of the God-man relationship and dialogue, but is useful for its symbology (a vein shared by narrative theology). In process theology, the Bible is important as a source of human experience and is to be synthesized with modern understandings of reality, but is understood more abstractly than in narrative theology (which emphasizes concreteness). Reader-oriented narrative theologies have the danger of subjectivity and relativity. Narrative theology is inclined to undervalue the importance of historical intentionality and the uniqueness of God's revelation in scripture and in Christ.

American theologians tend to emphasize the abstract, scientific, and often dehumanizing aspects of theology. Narrative theology presents a challenge to these tendencies. It explores the function of stories in the dissemination of the gospel, the construction and analysis of theology, and the evaluation of the human situation. Stories are central to the human psyche. Narrative theology points to the significance of form, relationship, and function, and the role of the reader in interpretation. It is open to the metaphorical and literary aspects of the Bible. It seeks to open up new worlds for the reader to experience (not just accept).

Narrative theology, however, fails at several points. First, and most importantly, narrative theology can easily become too reader-oriented (and therefore subjective). This reader-orientation in hermeneutics is made more dangerous by narrative theology's unrestrained openness to all stories, characters, myths, and metaphors. It consigns scripture to a back seat in theological construction and analysis. Without an absolute standard for theology, it fails to achieve normativeness for Christian belief, behavior, morals, or experience. Second, it often

relativizes religious belief (and approaches universalism). Third, it overlooks important didactic, propositional, and historical agendas, themes, and details in scripture. Fourth, it undervalues the import of objective abstract (or even concrete) truth. It emphasizes description of the human situation and neglects prescription. Literary explication can and should be used as a complementary tool with historical-grammatical analysis in the exegesis of scripture, but narrative theology's wholesale dismissal of propositionist theology is unacceptable in view of its own weaknesses. It fits comfortably within an American pluralistic worldview. Christian theology becomes the story of increasing pluralism.

An Evaluation of Process Theology's Response to Pluralism

The assumptions of process theology are questionable in light of a biblical view of reality. Process theology deviates widely from traditional Christian theology and distorts the nature of God and the world. While science's views on the nature of reality are in constant state of flux causing major paradigm shifts, God is proclaimed by the Bible as being immutable (Num. 23:19; Psalm 102:26–27; 33:11; Mal. 3:6; James 1:17) (Erickson 1998). A self-revealing God is the only sure starting point of God-knowledge (31–35). The fall has affected humankind's relationship with God so that nature and reason are not perfectly untainted revelations of God. The Bible teaches that God is different than the world (Gen. 1:1; Is. 55:9; Jer. 10:10–11), and that He created the world not because it was necessary or because He was dependant on its existence, but rather because His will purposed to create in order to show His transcendent love to His creation through the death of His Son on the cross (John 5:26; Acts 17:25) (Erickson 1998, 294–298).

Process theology's basis in evolution and dipolar theism differs greatly from the presuppositions of the Bible's "world horizon" (Dockery 1992). McKim (1999) offers two

functions of scripture for the process theologian: (a) it is a source of doctrine (119–120), and (b) it is a presentation of "possibilities of experience that go beyond the experience of a society not informed by scripture" (121). While these two functions are likewise affirmed in traditional theism, the Bible's secondary role in the development of process theology relegates scripture to a place in which distortion is a constant danger. The Bible is not viewed as self-authoritative, but must cohere with what is "self-evident" to the interpreter (121). Process theology's philosophical presuppositions are the basis of this self-evidence. The Bible is viewed as a part of God's unfolding action. Thus, Jesus of Nazareth in scripture is God incarnate self-evidently, and the interpreter's perceptions of God's love in Jesus "tells us that God's subjective form in feeling the world is love" (Suchocki 1982, 104). In process theology, human philosophy and "prehension" is a tyrant over original scriptural meaning.

Process theology has several positive features. It seems to cohere easily with modern scientific theories (mainly evolution). It focuses on the immanence of God. In process theology, God suffers with the world, and is with us in our present fallen state. It views history and revelation as a process with teleological momentum. The culmination of historical purpose helps give meaning to seemingly insignificant human drama.

In spite of its positive attributes, process theology is not an adequate Christian theology. It ascribes ultimate authority to modern ideologies of science. It is panentheistic (something process theologians must realize is foreign to traditional Christianity and Judaism). "Dependence on the processes of the world compromises quite seriously the absolute and unqualified dimensions of God" (Erickson 1998, 306). It dissolves the person of Christ into a theme, utilizing Jesus as a mere metaphor. God becomes no longer a personal being and is made "little more than an aspect of reality" (306–307). It is syncretistic in its attitudes toward other religions and

borrows much from eastern thought. Process theology is attractive to Americans because it makes no absolute claims on their lives, it offers a God that is as jaded as they are, and it seems to fill the world with purpose. But it fails to achieve any normativeness in its own precepts or to establish any objective truth claims. What makes Whiteheadian philosophy self-evident truth? If process theology were truly based on self-evident truth, why have its presuppositions and conclusion not been universally recognized as such? Process theology has become its own self-evident truth. Process theology overemphasizes divine immanence, and distorts the meaning of transcendence. In process theology, God changes, dies, creates the world in order to dissolve it into Himself, is in the world, and the world is in Him (Grenz and Olson 1992, 137–138). This is not the God of Christianity.

An Evaluation of Evangelical Theology's Response to Pluralism

Evangelical theologians focus primarily on the authority of scripture, and secondarily on the role of tradition, the church, reason, and experience. They seek to defend the Bible's inerrancy at every turn and presuppose a supernaturalistic worldview, although many (excluding Charismatics and Pentecostals) are hard-pressed to provide explanations about the seeming contradiction between their faith in biblical supernaturalism and disavowal of contemporary supernaturalism. They use reason and historical, scientific, philosophical, linguistic, and literary tools to analyze the Bible's message, which is their primary source for theology (Fee and Stuart 1993). Evangelical theologians have at times become isolationist as they have sought to stay true to the scripture (establishing new seminaries, denominations, and international associations), but have also been the greatest proponents of the growth of Christianity around the world (Grenz and Olson 1992). A tendency for authoritarianism is a constant danger, but has often been averted by referral back to the basic authority of scripture over the authority of reason, tradition, the church,

or experience. They conclude that God has revealed Himself in and through scripture and that He is both transcendent and immanent. They reaffirm ancient articles of the faith (especially in the area of Christology) as they seek to grapple with current political, moral, and spiritual issues and debates.

There has at times been an overemphasis on personal experience in the Evangelical camp (especially in the areas of conversion and spirituality), but this experiential dimension has lent much to their apologetic effort (Grenz and Olson 1992). In the end, their biblically-based theocentrism has allowed them to remain a relatively stable theological approach. Evangelical presuppositions, methods, and conclusions seek to stay true to the biblical revelation of God, and bring the good news of God's self-revelation in Christ to an all-too-often relativistic American culture.

Conclusions

Narrative and process theology both fail to be convincing theological responses to American pluralism because they deny any objective truth (making their own presuppositions, methods, and conclusions fully subjective and thus not necessary). They can claim only to be alternative opinions in an ocean of theological options in America. More importantly, they fail to be distinctively Christian. Their neglect of the Bible's authority has estranged them from the community of faith. Evangelical theology's affirmations of objective reality, the authority of scripture, and the importance of biblical presuppositions, holistic methodology, and exclusivist conclusions separate it from main stream theology in America. Pluralism ostracizes such wholesale exclusivism and claims to objectivity. Evangelical theology seeks to remain true to biblical Christianity, relying heavily upon the Bible as its standard. Contemporary Americans may view Evangelical theology as stale, isolationist, intolerant, and premodern, but its stability,

separateness, exclusivism, and biblical authoritarianism are its greatest strengths. A pluralistic America needs to see the value and validity of a single cohesive worldview.

In the final analysis, biblical theology in contemporary America should be rational and experiential if it is to be meaningful. It should not overlook past influences that have led to the present pluralistic worldview, but should focus on God's Christocentric self-revelation in scripture as an answer to pluralism. The God of evangelical Christianity satisfies the consumer, involves the spectator, reconciles the individual with the community, reveals Himself to the secularist, establishes a moral standard for the ethical relativist, and gives meaning and purpose to the postmodern American. "But God demonstrates His own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom. 5:8); while Americans were still pluralists, Christ provided them with one true path. "In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now He commands all people everywhere to repent" (17:30).