

## Review of the book Salvations

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## Preprint

S. Mark Heim, *Salvations: Truth and Difference in Religion*, Maryknoll, NY 1995; xii + 242 pp., \$20.00, ISBN 1-57075-040-8.

Mark Heim charges the pluralistic theologies of religion of John Hick, Wilfred Cantwell Smith and Paul Knitter with a fundamental incoherence: while insistently calling for the affirmation of religious pluralism, they `seem equally insistent in denying that, in properly religious terms, there is ... any fundamental diversity at all. The assertion that major faith traditions are independently salvific means ... that they are equivalently effective in achieving a *single human end*' (p.3; my emphasis – MS). Over against this position, Heim contends that we should speak of salvation in the plural – hence the title of his book. His main argument for the hypothesis of multiple religious aims is that only in this way can one do justice to three *prima facie* incompatible elements: (1) the religious significance of careful study of other religions, (2) the recognition of distinctive and salvific truths in these religions, and (3) the validity of different religions' witness to their own uniqueness and superiority in relation to others (p.6-7).

The structure of Heim's argument is as follows. He first discusses the philosophical case for a pluralist *theologia religionum* (Hick; ch.1), then the case from the history of religions (Cantwell Smith; ch.2), and finally the moral case (Knitter; ch.3). In chapter 4 he summarizes his difficulties with these types of pluralistic accounts. In the next three chapters he presents his own `more pluralistic hypothesis,' and tests it philosophically (ch.5), historically (ch.6), and morally (ch.7). Chapter 8 offers Heim's conclusion and surveys the possible implications of his argument.

As a mission statement, this book is largely convincing. Heim certainly succeeds in showing that pluralistic theories up to now have had a strange blind spot about the possibility that different religions embody different concepts of salvation. In order to become a viable alternative for the established theologies of religions, however, Heim's hypothesis would need to be developed into a full-fledged theory, and that still requires a lot of work. The present book remains rather abstract and general in its discussion of other religions, with relatively little attention for their particulars. And even on this abstract level, several issues would require more elaboration. One of these is Heim's epistemological position (e.g., what exactly does he mean by `perspective'?) (ch.5). Notwithstanding these *desiderata*, the blurb's claim that in this book Heim has made a genuine advance in the debate about religious pluralism seems correct.

Marcel Sarot