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# Editorial

## *Is Truth Plural?*

If we deny the necessity of one humanity, one truth and one God, the alternatives are racism, confusion and chaos. Deducing backwards, starting from the prevalence of these very facts in our time, one is tempted to infer that after all, reality, is pluralistic. This issue of *ERT* concentrates on the question of pluralism in religions, or (what eventually boils down to the same thing) truth-claims. The articles approach the topic from a variety of angles—theological, epistemological, religious.

This question of pluralism has also engrossed Hindu philosophical systems for millennia of years. They seem to have exhausted all kinds of possibilities in answering the question—yet not exhausted the question itself. Now that the world has come of age and has become a global village, not just Hindu philosophies, but all religions and ideologies are challenged to give an answer—urgently.

Evangelicalism stands or falls on the issue of the finality of God's revelation for man in Jesus of Nazareth. It is this Jesus who is the basis for the two Evangelical pillars, that of the supreme authority of the Bible ('You search the scriptures ... it is they that bear witness to me ...') and that of world missions ('Go therefore and make disciples of all nations ...'). Once the foundational finality of Jesus is questioned the twin pillars are also at stake. It is Jesus of Nazareth—rather than any concept of the cosmic Christ—who is the way, the truth and the life.

But what does all this theologizing have to do with my daily life? It is surprising how much our world-views affect our life and day-to-day decisions. Only when my commitment to this Jesus Christ affects my decisions in my family, church or business life, will I have adequately met the confusion of contemporary pluralistic tendencies. [p. 196](#)

## Hindu response to Pluralism

S. Arles

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*This is an extract from a paper presented in a conference sponsored by Partnership in Mission in London in 1986, with the theme 'Mission in Plural Contexts'. Particularly concentrating on Hindu response to Christianity, Arles discerns several kinds of reactions: mutuality response, mitigating response, merger response, militant response, missionary response, modelling response, and mukti response. He draws our attention to the fact that though there are many secret admirers and believers of Christ in other religions, at least equally significant is the fact that many more are being drawn into the Church, of which Christ is the head.*

Editor

The history of India is not only marked by a series of invasions and conquests, but also by a continual absorption of newer religious faiths. From without came Zoroastrianism, Islam, Christianity, Baha'ism and Marxism; and from within came reformative

heterodoxies like Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism. Without suppressing them Hinduism peacefully assimilated them. The religious aggression of the Moghul and British periods was met with the Hindu attitude of 'tolerance'.

Often the Hindu claims that Hinduism has been tolerant towards other faiths, ideologies and nations. Is tolerance a 'positive' virtue? It could be. But 'toleration' sounds like the kind of attitude we could expect from one who is in a position of rightful authority or ownership who 'allows' or 'permits' or even 'puts up with' someone else who either 'does not belong' or is inferior. Taken in this way, the Hindu claim to tolerance could disclose a really *intolerant* assumption of superiority. It would help here to note the reaction of W. Burnet Easton to the use of the word 'tolerate' in the context of interfaith dialogue. He contends that it is a horrible use of the word to speak of 'the Christian attempt to tolerate the Jew'.<sup>1</sup>

Richard Fox Young argues that it is often the Hindu tendency to 'inclusivism' which is misconstrued as 'tolerance' in the European sense. Tolerance is not the starting point of the Hindu attitude to other faiths or sects. Glossing over real differences, Hinduism always tries to make diverse teachings fit with itself in a hierarchical fashion, high or p. 197 low, in diverse modes of inclusivism. Further, in the history of Hinduism's inter-religious relations, Young observes that 'competing salvation—theories are initially viewed with hostility, but subsequently assimilated once the threat they pose has diminished'. He cites the example that the Buddha, who was disowned as a false *avatara* with a mission of propounding a false religion, was later accepted as one of Vishnu's ten *avataras*. So also Christianity which was seen with 'jaundiced eye' as the 'fearsomely overwhelming juggernaut' in the early nineteenth century was later regarded benevolently when once the threat of its imperial connections ceased at independence. Tolerance is the final privilege for Hindus to enjoy when all fears are averted and threats subdued.<sup>2</sup>

In any case, the intercourse of these faiths was not without effect. Christianity in particular tended to arouse Hinduism to self-consciousness, bringing to birth the reform trends that led to the Indian renaissance of the nineteenth century.<sup>3</sup> The new spirit of Indian nationalism and reform tendency invoked a quest for self identity in the Hindu, who responded to western influence, Christian missions and Muslim separatism through the launching of movements like Arya Samaj, Hindu Maha Sabha, Rashtriya Swayam Sevak Sangh, and Vishwa Hindu Parishad. This meant that Hinduism, which thus far had enjoyed an 'unbounded' freedom, was made rigid through attempts to formulate a definitive theological framework. A renewal of Hindu faith and a recasting of Hindu personality<sup>4</sup> procured an intolerant and offensive political and missionary image for Hinduism and brought about a Hindu schizophrenia: *theoretically* desiring equality and secularism, but *practically* growing cynical and contemptuous of other religions and of secularism. Deifying the land as *Bharatha matha* and *harsha bharath*, and enforcing *suddhi*<sup>5</sup> upon Christian and Muslim converts, are but part of the identity crisis of Hinduism.

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<sup>1</sup> See 'Observations' from W. Burnet Easton's 'The Embarrassing Jews' in *Current Dialogue*, No. 1, Winter 1980/81, p. 5.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. *Indian Journal of Theology*, 30:1, Jan—Mar 1981, pp. 38–39.

<sup>3</sup> See M. M. Thomas, *The Acknowledged Christ of the Indian Renaissance*, London: SCM, 1969, p. 340; J. N. Farquhar, *op. cit.*; D. S. Sarma, *op. cit.*; S. J. Samartha, *The Hindu Response to the Unbound Christ*, Madras: CLS, 1974, p. 202.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. P Spratt, *Hindu Culture and Personality*, Bombay: Manaktalas, 1966.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. J. F. Seunarine, *Reconversion to Hinduism through Suddhi*, Madras: CLS (for CISRS), 1977, p. 105.

Atheism does not seem to feature as an option within the Indian context. This is proved by the 1961 census reports which showed 34,000 atheists in Tamilnadu, 44,000 in Nagaland, and only few p. 198 hundreds in the rest of India.<sup>6</sup> Marxist and Communist ideologies are embraced by many as political creeds, but without doing violence to their upholder's religious identity.

## HINDU RESPONSE TO CHRISTIANITY

Stanley Samartha characterizes the Hindu response to Christ as

highly complex, varying from aggressive rejection to warm welcome, from uncritical appreciation to thoughtful understanding and from vague admiration to partial commitment.<sup>7</sup>

To some the compassion of Christ towards the poor, exploited and hurt; to others his moral and ethical teachings; and to many his example of non-violent love from the cross, become the drawing force. Recognizing the diversity of responses, let us isolate a few general trends in the Hindu reaction to Christ and Christianity.<sup>8</sup>

### 1. Mutuality Response

Hindus have what might be called a 'live and let live' mentality. Eric Sharpe affirms:

Certainly India has for many centuries harboured a bewildering variety of sects and religious traditions, most of which were able to tolerate the others on a 'live and let live' basis.<sup>9</sup>

This tendency derives from the Hindu scriptures and their understanding of reality. Hindu metaphysical tradition held that 'the world of senses, and hence the world of phenomena, is not and never can be given absolute status as the ultimate reality'. Hence, even when disagreeing with one another, the Hindu classical schools of philosophy 'seemed not to be concerned'. They understood that 'religions with their temples, rituals, prayers, sacrifices and pilgrimages, may be good as pathways leading in the general direction of Truth, but are p. 199 valuable only in so far as they lead to a reality beyond themselves'. According to *Rig Veda*, the real one, known by different names—'Indra, Mitra, Varuna, Agni and Garutman'<sup>10</sup>—and existing in many forms as claimed by *Maitri Upanishad*—'fire, wind, the sun, time, the breath of life, food, Brahma, Rutra, Vishnu'—should be meditated upon, praised and then discarded.<sup>11</sup> Truth lies beyond any of these, even as Lord Krishna claimed in *Bhagavad Gita* that all faiths not only led to one reality, but were accepted by that reality:

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<sup>6</sup> Judith M. Brown, *Men and Gods in a Changing World: Some themes in the religious experience of twentieth century Hindus and Christians*, London: SCM, 1980, p. 157 end-notes 2:1. Cf. A.M.A. Ayrookuzhiel, 'A study of the religion of the Hindu people of Chirakkal (Kerala)', *Religion and Society*, XXIV:1 (March 1977).

<sup>7</sup> S. J. Samartha, *op. cit.*, p. 15.

<sup>8</sup> What follows emerges from a paper that I presented at the Centre for the Study of Christianity in the Non-Western World at the University of Aberdeen, on December 9, 1985.

<sup>9</sup> Eric J Sharpe, *Faith Meets Faith*, London: SCM, 1977, p. 60.

<sup>10</sup> *Rig Veda*, 1.164.46.

<sup>11</sup> See R. C. Zaehner (ed.), *Hindu Scriptures* (new edition), London: Dent and Dutton, 1966, p. 226.

Yet even those who worship other gods with love and sacrifice to them, full filled with faith, do really worship Me [Krishna] ... for it is I who of all acts of sacrifice am Recipient and Lord ...<sup>12</sup>

Thus a Hindu cannot but recognise other faiths—including Christianity—as credible forms of faith and worship.

## 2. Mitigating Response

Several Hindus comfortably incorporate Christ into their system as one of many deities. An example of this could be seen in the Sathya Sai Baba Movement. In 1976 my Wife and I were at the foot of the Periamalai hills of Dharmapuri in Tamilnadu, at the mission station of one of our indigenous Christian missions, conducting a weekend teaching mission for their new converts. Our camp was located on the property of a high caste convert from a Hindu sect. A nearby Hindu temple was the site of a Sai Baba all-night *bhajan*.<sup>13</sup> Noticing the musical talents of the team of our students from South India Biblical Seminary, the leader of the Sai Baba group invited us to ‘come and sing’ in the bhajan. Our students sang and taught simple choruses like ‘God is so good’ in its many vernacular forms: *Yesu Nallavar! Yishu Acha Hai! Yeshu Olleva!* No charismatic singing of a western audience could have matched the exuberance with which the Sai Baba devotees—seated in front of Sai Baba’s portrait—sang of Jesus! They were in a pious act of worship, the name or particularity did not matter to them, as Baba claimed to incorporate every expression of the godhead in himself. All particularities submerge into the universality of the one reality, which they willingly addressed in any name or form.

When zealous Christian preaching kindles a reaction, the Hindu p. 200 responds with mitigating benevolence. This reflects Lord Krishna’s claim that he responds to all who call him.<sup>14</sup> Ramakrishna Paramahansa’s experiences in his various visions and *samadhis*<sup>15</sup> with Kali, Rama, Hanuman, Radha, Krishna, Brahman, Mohammed<sup>16</sup> and Christ<sup>17</sup> became a powerful source of mitigation. He contended that

a lake has several ghats; at one, Hindus take water and call it *jal*, at another, Muslims take water and call it *pani*, and at a third Christians call it *water*. The substance is one under different names, and everyone is seeking the same substance; only climate, temperament and name create differences.<sup>18</sup>

In such mitigation, Hinduism challenges the Christian claim to the uniqueness of Christ.

## 3. Merger Response

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<sup>12</sup> *Bhagavad Gita*, ix.23f. See Zaehner, *op. cit.*, p. 228.

<sup>13</sup> Service of songs and praise in worship.

<sup>14</sup> *Bhagavad Gita*, ix.23f.

<sup>15</sup> A ‘trance-like state, so near to death itself, in which the world of the senses is transcended, and in which direct insight is gained into the world of the spirit’, Sharpe, *op. cit.*, p. 63.

<sup>16</sup> Govind Ray, a Hindu influenced by Sufi mysticism, introduced Islam to Ramakrishna.

<sup>17</sup> Jadu Mallick, a Hindu who had chosen Jesus as his *Ishta Deva* (personal God), read parts of the Bible to Ramakrishna.

<sup>18</sup> Sharpe, *op. cit.*, p. 64.

Since Hinduism grants that all religions may serve equally well as pathways to God (or the ultimate reality), it sees no reason why anyone should give up his allegiance to one religious tradition and attach himself to another. Here again, Ramakrishna, whose experiments took *sadhanas*<sup>19</sup> not only of Hinduism, but also of Islam and Christianity as well, claimed that ‘all religions differ only in their manifestations and not in essence’, which ‘substance’ is the same with different names. Eric Sharpe sharply remarks on such a view:

Now what had happened here was that Ramakrishna had temporarily clothed his own intensely personal (and very Hindu) religious experience in the language and symbolism of Islam and Christianity respectively. But this did not make him either a Muslim or a Christian, though it did result in an over-simplified view of the relations between religions.<sup>20</sup>

Ramakrishna’s disciple Swami Vivekananda furthered his views and proclaimed: p. 201

... we accept all religions to be true ... The Hindu is invariably tolerant toward other forms of religious belief and practice, seeking to exclude and excommunicate none.<sup>21</sup>

He fitted all religions within his ‘comprehensive vedanta’.

Similarly, Gandhiji and a host of others, while keeping their Hindu identity intact, began to take the values of other faiths and blend them with their own. This was possible because ‘the Hindu is not concerned with dogmas and definitions’, and as Radhakrishnan pointed out,

While fixed intellectual beliefs mark off one religion from another, Hinduism sets itself no such limits. Intellect is subordinated to intuition, dogma to experience, outward expression to inward realization.<sup>22</sup>

The absence of boundary lines, and the fact that Hinduism can merge values from outside into its ever—evolving identity as a faith and a ‘way of life,’ appears positively a ‘comprehensive charity’ to Radhakrishnan. Sharpe names this the new ‘not to destroy but to absorb’ motto of Hinduism.<sup>23</sup>

This merger response is favourite among educated rationalists and patriotic nationalists. They refuse to accept Jesus Christ’s teaching as the property or monopoly of the church. As Samartha suggests, they have ‘unbound’ Christ, emphasizing both the universality and the accessibility of Christ.<sup>24</sup>

#### 4. Militant Response

A growing pattern in some sectors of the Hindu majority has been to demand ‘India for Hindus’. Muslims, Christians and others must either reconvert to the Hindu fold or quit

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<sup>19</sup> Spiritual discipline.

<sup>20</sup> Sharpe, *op. cit.*, p. 63–64.

<sup>21</sup> For Swami Vivekananda’s address, see J. H. Barrows (ed.), *The World’s Parliament of Religions*, Chicago, 1893, pp. 968ff.

<sup>22</sup> p. Radhakrishnan, *The Hindu View of Life* (Upton Lectures, Oxford, 1926), London: Allen and Unwin, 1964, p. 13.

<sup>23</sup> Sharpe, *op. cit.*, p. 67.

<sup>24</sup> Samartha, *op. cit.*, p. 11.

India. An active reconversion process has been launched by members of the Arya Samaj,<sup>25</sup> Jan Sangh, Hindu Maha Sabha, Rashtriya Swayam Sevak, Shiv Sena and Vishwa Hindu Parishad. Their impulse to militancy<sup>26</sup> runs counter to the national goal of secular democracy. p. 202

The militant response of Hinduism towards Christianity is illustrated by a recent happening on the streets of Delhi, when thousands of Hindu students and farmers participated in a protest march triggered by 27 right-wing Hindu groups. They disapproved of Pope John Paul's tour of India. Banners pictured the Pope 'hammering to pieces a map of India' and declared, 'He wears a mask of peace and unity but his mission is to divide and destroy the country.'<sup>27</sup> This statement discloses two Hindu notions: the Hindu fear that religious pluralism would lead to a disintegration of Indian national unity; and the Hindu bias that India is a Hindu country of Hindu people held together by Hindu faith. While the Muslim separatist tendency and Sikh militancy could contribute to justify such notions, the scattered Indian Christian minority neither desires separation nor is ideologically conditioned to demand it. The onus for Christians has been to work out a theology and practice of 'Christian participation in nation building'. Men like K. T. Paul, P. D. Devanandan, M. M. Thomas and a host of others have challenged Indian Christians to discover their role in Indian national development.<sup>28</sup>

But a number of Hindu fanatics continue to discredit the positive contribution of Indian Christians. Charan Singh, president of the opposition Lok Dal Party, contended that missionaries have had a 'free run' in the strategic north-eastern regions where the Nagas and Mizos are converted to Christ; and that Christian converts might well ask for 'complete independence'. He implored the government of Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi to 'stamp out' Christian missions from the country. In complete contrast to such antagonism, Lal Chhuanliana of the faculty of Aizwal Theological College in Mizoram states that '80% of Mizo tribespeople had become Christians by 1954', giving up head hunting and learning both the 'values of democracy' and their 'tribal identity'; and argues that 'their first political party, Mizo Union, decided to remain within the Indian republic' even as early as in 1949!<sup>29</sup> p. 203

In the protest march referred to above, there were other banners saying: 'Service and education is merely a myth. John Paul has come to convert.' And one of the protest organizers declared, 'We don't mind preaching and we respect the Bible ... what we mind is conversions which take advantage of the weak and ignorant'.<sup>30</sup> Here the blinding effect of militant fanaticism blunts the cutting edge of conscience which knows no party spirit

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<sup>25</sup> S. J. Seunarine, *Reconversion to Hinduism through Suddhi*, Madras: CLS (for CISRS), 1977, p.105. S. J. Samartha notes that reconversions cannot be ignored politically. They ensure votes! Yet Samartha does not count reconversion as minimizing Christ's influence on India and Hinduism (Samartha, *op. cit.*, p. 5).

<sup>26</sup> J. A. Curran, *Militant Hinduism in Hindu Politics: a study of the R.S.S.*, New York: Institute of Pacific Relations, 1951.

<sup>27</sup> See 'Thousands of Hindus march in protest at Pope's tour of India', *The Times*, Saturday, February 1, 1986, p. 5.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. P. D. Devanandan and M. M. Thomas, *Christian Participation in Nation Building*, Bangalore: NCCI & CISRS, 1960, p. 325. The many contributions of CISRS cannot be ingored in this regard. This concern has been shared by evangelical Christians as well, as indicated by the All India Conference on Evangelical Social Action (Madras 1979) and the recent programmes of the EFI Theological Commission on caste and nation building.

<sup>29</sup> See 'Events and People' in *The Christian Century*, 102:38, December 4, 1985, p. 1113.

<sup>30</sup> 'Thousands of Hindus ...', *The Times*, *op. cit.*



in accepting good as good. Even the services of a Mother Teresa appear tainted to such militants. Perhaps the classic failure of Indian Hinduism is the fact that it accepts the presence of the 'weak and ignorant', ignores, uses, exploits and oppresses them, thrives on their services, labour and votes—but, then when some other group like Christianity attempts to alter their 'fate' and make them 'strong and enlightened', can neither bear it nor see it as 'advantageous to the weak and ignorant'. Is it taking advantage of such people when we alter their status for their own good? So it appears to this sector of Hinduism.

After his visit to the Church of South India in January 1986, Lesslie Newbigin wrote of a leader of the RSS in Tamilnadu whose 'prosperous business was destroyed; his wife tried to commit suicide; the local RSS tried and is still trying, to have him killed'—all because he had become a Christian.<sup>31</sup> This demonstrates graphically the impact of Hindu militancy, which is as real as Hindu tolerance.<sup>32</sup>

## 5. Missionary Response

Upon his return from the 1893 World Parliament of Religions, and his four years of accidental travel as 'Hinduism's first missionary to the west', Swami Vivekananda found a 'rapturous reception'; and with him old currents of Hinduism began to flow in new directions.<sup>33</sup> Hinduism became a missionary religion. This Hindu metamorphosis is as real as the emergence of 'third world missions' and 'third world theologies'. Vivekananda took his guru Ramakrishna's insights, experiences and theology and poured them into a missionary mould, p. 204 providing a theological justification with his concepts of *Jivanmukta*<sup>34</sup> and *Karma Yoga*.<sup>35</sup>

The western-based Swami Akhilananda, Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, Swami Satchidananda, Bal Bhagwan, the presently floating Bhagwan Acharya Rajneesh, the India-based Sri Aurobindo and Sathya Sai Baba, are among the popular Hindu missionaries with an appeal to the west.<sup>35</sup>

The success of this missionary thrust should partly be traced to the west's historical legacy; the post-colonial complex is at work economically; the bewildering maze of the

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<sup>31</sup> Lesslie Newbigin in *CSI News* from the CSI Council of Great Britain, No. 98 (February 1986), p. 2.

<sup>32</sup> Cf. Douglas C. Smyth, 'The Social Basis of Militant Hindu Nationalism' in *The Journal of Developing Areas*, vol. 6 (April 1972), pp. 323–344.

<sup>33</sup> Sharpe, *op. cit.*, p. 64.

<sup>34</sup> Cf. M. M. Thomas, *The Acknowledged Christ*, pp. 124ff.

<sup>35</sup> Cf. Swami Akhilananda, *The Hindu View of Christ*, New York, 1949; S. J. Samartha, 'Swami Akhilananda' in *The Hindu Response*, pp. 61–72; Swami Satchidananda, *The Message of Yoga*, Connecticut: Satchidananda Ashram, Yogaville Inc., 1976, p. 26; A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, *The Path of Perfection*, London: The Bhaktivedanta Book Trust, 1979; *Search for Liberation*, featuring a conversation between John Lennon and Swami Bhaktivedanta, London: The Bhaktivedanta Book Trust, 1981; V. C. Samuel, *The Ramakrishna Movement: The World Mission of Hinduism*, CISRS, 1960; Herbert Jai Singh, *Sri Aurobindo: His Life and Religious Thought*, CISRS, 1962; D. P. Sham Rao, *The Contemporary Gurus in Shirdi (Sai Baba) Tradition*, CISRS, 1972.

<sup>35</sup> Cf. Swami Akhilananda, *The Hindu View of Christ*, New York, 1949; S. J. Samartha, 'Swami Akhilananda' in *The Hindu Response*, pp. 61–72; Swami Satchidananda, *The Message of Yoga*, Connecticut: Satchidananda Ashram, Yogaville Inc., 1976, p. 26; A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, *The Path of Perfection*, London: The Bhaktivedanta Book Trust, 1979; *Search for Liberation*, featuring a conversation between John Lennon and Swami Bhaktivedanta, London: The Bhaktivedanta Book Trust, 1981; V. C. Samuel, *The Ramakrishna Movement: The World Mission of Hinduism*, CISRS, 1960; Herbert Jai Singh, *Sri Aurobindo: His Life and Religious Thought*, CISRS, 1962; D. P. Sham Rao, *The Contemporary Gurus in Shirdi (Sai Baba) Tradition*, CISRS, 1972.



complexities of a soulless technocratic consumerism replaces values with 'profit, pleasure and domination motives' and the increasing irrelevancy of the 'faith of our fathers' leaves a resultant emptiness in western culture. Western youth become ready targets for the drug pushers, 'porn' peddlers and antinomian heretics as well as the newer religious sects. Some Hindu gurus blend and accommodate western sensual aspirations with eastern spiritual pursuits and so concoct a new religious product. Rajneesh perhaps stands at the top of the list presently. He was fined \$400,000 on federal charges of immigration fraud in the USA, where he admitted lying on his visa application, and contriving sham marriages in order that the Indian disciples could remain in the USA. When he left Rajneeshpuram, Oregon, and returned to India in mid-November 1985, his foundation was fined \$800,000 in unpaid taxes.<sup>36</sup> Britain has now denied him entry into the country and his private jet has taken him to the West Indies. Whether his missionary theology will take a new direction, is anybody's guess.

Unsurpassed by most other exponents of Hinduism, Swami Akhilananda engaged leading American theologians in dialogue about the great problems of religion. His mission was based on the conviction p. 205 that occidental Christians suffer from a debilitating religious myopia, the result of a narrow provincialism. Claiming an easier access to the mind of Christ as his oriental birthright, he not only admired Christ but acceded to him the status of an advaitic *vedantin* and reformulated prominent Biblical passages in advaitic mould, making Christ the mouthpiece for propagating advaitic ideas.<sup>37</sup>

It would be easy to fall into the mistake of painting the missionary concern of Hinduism rather too black. Heinrich Barlage contends that Swami Akhilananda has much to teach Christians about the Gospel and the Hindu background against which it needs to be made meaningful. We must take a serious look at the critique of western culture, its concepts of freedom, spirituality, family and community, which emerges from the encounter of Hindu missions with Western youth. The Church of the west has much insight to gain from this encounter for self-criticism of its decaying cultural environment. Similarly the Church in India should be sensitive to the impact of these apostles of modern Hinduism.

## 6. Modelling Response

From K. M. Panikkar's writings, Stephen Neill observed of Asia:

At no point have the foundations of Asian life been touched; the thoughtful and educated classes have considered the Gospel, and, for all their respect for the person of Jesus, they have rejected it as a way of life. Asia is in process of rediscovering its own soul, and in the future will live spiritually by its own resources, and not by anything borrowed from outside.<sup>38</sup>

This is true of India and Hinduism in particular, as there has certainly been a process of rediscovery, renaissance and reform which has included also the process of modelling newer values. Remakrishna Mission exemplifies the 'modelling response' of a Hindu

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<sup>36</sup> See 'Events and People', *op. cit.*, pp. 1112–1113. See Rajneesh's books, such as *Sex and Super-consciousness*, for his views.

<sup>37</sup> Heinrich Barlage, Christ, *Saviour of Mankind: A Christian appreciation of Swami Akhilananda*, West Germany: Steyler Verlag, 1977, p.283.

<sup>38</sup> Stephen Neill, *A History of Christian Missions* (The Pelican History of the Church, vol. 6), Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1966, p. 560. Cf. K. M. Panikkar, *Asia and Western advance*, 1953.

system to Christianity. Two streams of influences caused Vivekananda to shape Ramakrishna mission into a social service orientation. Firstly, after wandering all over India and observing the many castes, customs, races and sects, he meditated on the past, present and future of India at Cape Comorin; there, grasping Ramakrishna's statement that 'an empty stomach is no good for religion', he consecrated himself to serve the starving, oppressed, outcast millions. Secondly, while in the west, he was impressed with the western nations' great concern for their masses; the high culture of the women; the power of organization; and western material prosperity. He concluded that 'unless his countrymen also gave a strong physical basis to their civilization, it would tumble down in the present state of the world'.<sup>39</sup> This humanization of Hindu theology and practice has had significant effects on Hinduism.

Man-centredness in theology is incarnational, and this could be seen in the wider developments in Christian theology.<sup>40</sup> Had he lived longer, Vivekananda might have furthered Hinduism's modelling response. D. S. Sarma laments his death at the age of 39 as a national calamity, saying:

One can imagine what he might have done for India and Hinduism, if he had lived at least to the Psalmist's age of three score years and ten. But he was destined only to be a pioneer. He broke new ground and led his people across and sighted the promised land, but did not live to enter it.<sup>41</sup>

By this Sarma indicates that it was only in the twentieth century that Hinduism was to respond with its gospel to the religious and material questions of the Indian masses. Through the decades of this century Hinduism has adapted itself to values drawn from many corners, including Christianity. The service motto of Christian missions reflects in the many schools, hospitals, village clinics, and service associations; the concern for human rights; a new status and dignity for women, and social consciousness. Such modelling has also protected Hinduism from losing converts to other faiths, particularly Christianity.

## 7. Mukti Response

From Lal Behari Day to Sadhu Chellappa, we note a train of Indian men and women including Nehemiah Goreh, Pandita Ramabai,<sup>43</sup> Sadhu Sundar Singh, Paul Sudhakar, Bakht Singh and a host of others, p. 207 who responded to Christ through conversion. They found *mukti* in Christ.<sup>44</sup> The question of conversion has loomed large in the Indian setting,

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<sup>39</sup> Cf. D. S. Sarma, *op. cit.*, pp. 149–155 and M. M. Thomas, *The Acknowledged Christ*, p. 111 and 124.

<sup>40</sup> Cf. M. M. Thomas, *Salvation and Humanization, Madras: CLS, 1970; Emerito Nacpil, The Human and the Holy: Asian Perspectives in Christian Theology*, Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1980.

<sup>41</sup> D. S. Sarma, *op. cit.*, p. 158.

<sup>43</sup> See Nalini Arles, 'Pandita Ramabai and Amy Carmichael: A Study of their Contributions Towards Transforming the Position of Indian Women', M.Th. thesis, Religious Studies Department, University of Aberdeen, 1986. The thesis traces a Hindu Brahmin woman's pilgrimage to Christ and her struggle with the institutional Church.

<sup>44</sup> See G. MacPherson, *Lal Behari Day, Convert, Pastor, Professor*, Edinburgh, 1900; B. R. Barber, *Kali Charan Banerjea, Brahmin, Christian, Saint*, Calcutta, n.d.; C. E. Gardner, *Life of Father Goreh*, London, 1900; A. J. Appasamy, *Sunda Singh*, London, 1958; Pandita Ramabai, *A Testimony*, Kedgaon, Peona, 1907 (9th edition, 1968, p. 68); *Indian Christians: Biographical and Critical Sketches*, Madras, 1928; Al Krass, 'Proclaiming the Inner Christ of Hinduism—an interview with Paul Sudhakar', in G. H. Anderson & T. F. Stransky (eds.), *Mission Trends* No. 5—*Faith Meets Faith*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans and Paulist Press, 1981, pp. 264–270.

often kindling more heat than light. It incites the militant Hindus to violence. Affirming that 'there is an amazingly persistent response of Hindus to Jesus Christ in spite of the avowed self-sufficiency of modern Hinduism', Samartha argues that it is possible in future that an attitude of commitment to Christ without conversion might become more significant in India's religiously pluralistic context.<sup>45</sup> He calls 'those inside the hedges of the traditional church' to affirm the presence of Christ in Hindu response to Christ, even when that response is not in a familiar pattern.<sup>46</sup> Such an ecumenical approach sounds noble, but will not bring out the sympathies of the evangelical community which certainly would expect a genuine response to Christ to mean a total obedience to the Christ who died outside the gate, by followers who will come outside their own safety circles. While we sympathize with the many 'secret believers and admirers' of Christ, we cannot ignore the remarkable fact that many who believe are being added into the Church which Jesus claims to be building, against whom the gates of hell shall not prevail.

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## Inter-Religious Dialogue

Paul Schrotenboer

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*Tracing primarily the history of dialogue in WCC circles, Schrotenboer raises several key objections to it from an evangelical point of view. He stoutly defends the idea that the evangelical claim to know the truth, Jesus Christ, is not a sign of Christian arrogance, but 'an acknowledgement of grace' which 'should be made in humility yet with conviction'.*

Editor

### INTRODUCTION

The topic of this paper is inter-religious dialogue, not inter-confessional dialogue. The latter, which has become a very popular activity in recent decades, refers to discussions between or among different Christian traditions. The participants in such talks are presumably all committed to Jesus Christ in whom they find their fundamental identity in the fellowship of his people. The differences that exist among them are limited to the distinctions of the various confessional families, each with its own traditions and emphasis.

Inter-religious dialogue takes place between adherents of different religions, that is, between people whose fundamental commitments centre either in Jesus Christ or in some

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<sup>45</sup> Samartha, *The Hindu Response*, p. 7.

<sup>46</sup> *ibid.* p. 4. Cf. Kaj Baago, *The Movement around Subba Rao: A Study of the Hindu—Christian movement around K. Subba Rao in Andhra Pradesh*, Madras: CLS (for CISRS), 1968, p. 32.

other person. This means that the differences in inter-religious dialogue are much deeper than those in inter-confessional dialogue where the participants all belong to the Christian family. The issues involved in inter-religious dialogue are many, are complicated and are fundamental to the ministry of the church.

## DIALOGUE AND WITNESS

One basic issue involved in dialogue is its effect on Christian witness and we may well begin with it. As the term 'witness' is generally used in this connection, it is synonymous with 'confession' or 'testimony'. Witness, as is generally recognized, flows from our faith, our belonging to God's people, our being members of the one holy **P. 209** catholic and apostolic church. Because we believe, we therefore speak. Witness, bearing testimony, is not incidental to the Christian life; it is as essential as faith itself. Jesus warned those people who deny him before men that he would deny them before the angels of God ([Matt. 10:33](#)). He who believes in his heart that God raised Jesus Christ from the dead and confesses with his mouth that Jesus is Lord will be saved ([Romans 10:10](#)). Jesus' last words to his disciples before his ascension were, 'You shall be my witnesses' ([Acts 1:8](#)).

Dialogue, so it is claimed, if it is rightly construed, is a kind of witness, even a necessary kind of witness, or at least a prelude to witness; in no case should it be a substitute for witness. But dialogue today is widely understood by many to take the place of witness and that makes them perturbed. This observation reflects the conflict which the term has evoked and the disagreement which the practice of dialogue has caused.

The intense controversy concerning inter-religious dialogue manifests itself in suspicion and charges from two opposite sources. On the one hand many Christians suspect that dialogue is simply a technique that has arisen out of the study of comparative religions and derives from the conviction that all religions are fundamentally equal. Dialogue is, therefore, in the view of many, at least implicitly, a denial of the uniqueness of the Christian religion and the finality of Jesus Christ.

On the one hand adherents of other religions look upon the interreligious dialogue as an undercover effort on the part of Christians to proselytize them. Stanley J. Samartha asks the question, as put by a non-Christian participant: 'Is dialogue a subtle invitation to the heathen fly to come to the Christian spider's parlour?' (*Courage for Dialogue*, p. 44).

Is there a way in which dialogue can be undertaken in which the objections from both sides can be obviated? That is, can Christians in dialogue with adherents of other religions avoid substituting it for witness and refrain from all clandestine efforts to convert others to the Christian faith? As Samartha has put it, 'How do we state the relationship between dialogue, mission and witness in such a way as to allay the fears of Christians on the one hand and remove the suspicions of people of other faiths on the other?' (*Ibid.*).

The Christian student, no less than other Christians, is called to witness and is confronted with the challenge of dialogue. How should he or she respond to this challenge? Should one engage in dialogue with non-Christian students? Should one discuss differences with other Christians? **p. 210**

If we had sought to discuss inter-religious dialogue a few decades ago, the reaction would probably have been that it was appropriate only for a small group of people, such as missionaries and missiologists, but not for average Western Christians. There was a time, even in the recent past, when we were accustomed to speak of our Western world as the Christian world and the rest of the world, the world out there, as non-Christian. We can no longer do that, for at least three reasons.

The first reason is that some of those lands, such as several in Africa, have been largely Christianized. As a result there is a larger percentage of Christians in certain countries in

sub-Saharan Africa than in Canada or the United States or Australia. Moreover the churches there are growing, whereas we in North America live on a continent of churches which by and large are shrinking, at least in terms of total population, and in many instances, even in actual membership.

A second reason why the distinction no longer holds is that a large number of people in so-called Christian lands have succumbed to secularism or atheistic communism. All of our lands in the West are living in what is in many respects a post-Christian era. In most of the nations of the East, the so-called Second World, Christians comprise a persecuted minority. In free and secular Europe, evangelical Christians comprise a small shrinking minority.

There was a time when some of the dominant motives of the North American continent were Christian. American society still bears many marks of Christian influence. But the faith has retreated more and more from the marketplace, industry and the classroom, especially the university. Secularism is for North Americans a greater danger than communism.

A third reason for the changed situation is the sizeable number of guest labourers, immigrants and refugees (estimated at about 8 million) now in the West from non-Christian lands. Those people are for the most part Muslim, Hindu and Buddhist. The people of the 'other living faiths' are now at our doorstep, especially if we live in a large city. There are more than a half million Muslims living in the USA and Canada today. Moreover, in many of these religions there is a renewed vigour and activity, and a missionary zeal. In the case of Islam, there are also the petro-dollars to fund massive campaigns to win converts.

The Christian student at a modern university must feel keenly the presence of people of other faiths, for his university is becoming more and more a microcosm of modern global society. Some Western students have become attracted to other faiths such as Islam and the Eastern mystic religions. I suspect that many more have simply p.211 succumbed to the pull of secularism, or that, while not openly casting their religious affiliations overboard, they find themselves in a kind of limbo between the faith of the fathers and a life that is oriented to the secular, intellectual world. When their student days are over, they may drift into a no-man's land of no specific religious affiliation.

The movement of peoples has made the relation of the Christian faith to other faiths an increasingly urgent concern not only for missiologists and university students but for the entire Christian community. As religious pluralism becomes more and more a phenomenon in our world, the challenge of inter-religious dialogue presses with greater force upon the Christian community.

Before going further, we should state what 'dialogue' generally means. A number of references may be helpful at this point.

Philip Sharper in *The Dialogue; New Religious Meetinghouse* distinguishes dialogue from other forms of communication as follows:

The idea of a dialogue ... presupposes that we have two real persons seriously attempting serious communication on serious matters. If one does all the talking, it is a monologue. If one expects only to admonish and instruct the other, it is a sermon. If both talk only to score points or to expose the other's weaknesses, it is a debate. If neither takes the subject seriously, it is badinage. If neither takes the other person seriously, it is banter. If each takes seriously both the subject and the other person, it is a dialogue.

Perhaps nowhere has dialogue in the inter-faith forum been advocated and practised as much in recent time as in the World Council of Churches. We select a passage from the Issue I Report of the WCC Sixth Assembly in Vancouver 1983:



Dialogue may be described as that encounter where people holding different claims about ultimate reality can meet and explore these claims in a context of mutual respect. From dialogue we expect to discern more about how God is active in our world, and to appreciate for their own sake the insights and experiences people of other faiths have of ultimate reality.

Dialogue is not a device for nor a denial of Christian witness. It is rather a mutual venture to bear witness to each other and the world, in relation to different perceptions of ultimate reality (*Gathered for Life*, Official Report, VI Assembly of WCC, p. 40).

In a similar vein Vinay Samuel and Chris Sugden, representing an evangelical approach, state that by dialogue they mean

being open to other religions, to recognize God's activity in them, and to see how they are related to God's unique revelation in Christ ... The goal of dialogue is to affirm the Lordship of Christ over all life in such a way that p. 212 people within their own context may recognize that Lordship in them and discover it for themselves (*Sharing Jesus in the Two Thirds World*, p. 22).

Prof. Dirk Mulder, former chairman of the WCC Department on Dialogue and Other Living Faiths and Ideologies, has said that dialogue

is an encounter between adherents of different religions in which they listen to each other with attention and respect and in which one tries to understand the other as he/she wants to be understood, in the deepest intentions and ideals ... Important is the attitude, the approach that hides behind it, the willingness to respect the person of another faith in his own integrity (*Evangelische Commentaar*, 1/6/84).

## THE WORLD COUNCIL OF CHURCHES

To the World Council of Churches, more than to any other organization, must go the credit for having given attention to dialogue. Although at the Uppsala Assembly in 1968 only one paragraph of the official report was devoted to dialogue, since then this topic has assumed an ever broader and more influential role. At its meeting in Addis Ababa in 1971 the WCC Central Committee recognized dialogue as a major concern of the ecumenical movement and accepted an interim policy statement on dialogue, which was converted eight years later to definitive Guidelines on Dialogue.

In the Nairobi Assembly in 1975 an entire section in the official report was devoted to dialogue. Here dialogue was broadened to refer not only to witness (as in the section 'Confessing Christ Today') but also to the context of human community and ideological diversities. As Samartha summarized the Nairobi debate on dialogue, four aspects of the WCC's perceived role in dialogue were emphasized:

- a. as an enabler or partner in dialogues with people of various faiths and ideologies. Attention should be focused on specific issues, such as spirituality, poverty, science and technology, education, the status and role of women, power, land, peace.
- b. as an enabler or partner in encouraging 'inner dialogue' where Christians come to terms with their own cultural loyalties or ideological presuppositions.
- c. as a catalyst in ecumenical thinking and action for theological reflections and for practical cooperation together with people of other faiths and ideologies.
- d. as a 'listening post' for the churches to enable them to see and hear themselves as others see and hear them (*Courage for Dialogue*, p. 62). p. 213

It may be observed that this summary gives very little attention to witness and therefore does not allay the fears of evangelicals that dialogue as practiced in the WCC



tends to give witness short shrift. But we should follow developments in the WCC since 1975 before passing judgment.

In 1977 the WCC organized a Theological Consultation on Dialogue in Community in Chiang Mai, Thailand, and issued a statement as a result. It is in our judgment better than anything that the WCC produced previously on the subject. A few references should give us an indication of what was said:

The Christian community with the human community has a common heritage and a distinctive message to share; it needs therefore to reflect on the nature of the community that we as Christians seek and on the relation of dialogue to the life of the churches, as they ask themselves how they can be communities of service and witness without diluting their faith or compromising their commitment to Christ. Such an enquiry needs to be informed both by a knowledge of different religions and societies and by insights gained through actual dialogues with neighbours.

In an age of worldwide struggle of humankind for survival and liberation, the religions have their important contributions to make, which can only be worked out in mutual dialogue. It is a responsibility of Christians to foster such dialogue in a spirit of reconciliation and hope granted to us by Jesus Christ. We came to see how easy it is to discuss religions and even ideologies as though they existed in some realm of calm quite separate from the sharp conflicts and sufferings of humankind (*The Ecumenical Review*, July 1977, pp. 254, 255).

This consultation saw dialogue as a form of service:

We see dialogue, therefore, as a fundamental part of our Christian service within community. In dialogue we actively respond to the command 'to love God and your neighbour as yourself'. As an expression of our love our engagement in dialogue testifies to the love we have experienced in Christ. It is our joyful affirmation of life against chaos, and our participation with all who are allies of life in seeking the provisional goals of a better human community. Thus we soundly reject any idea of 'dialogue in community' as a secret weapon in the armoury of an aggressive Christian militancy. We adopt it rather as a means of living out our faith in Christ in service of community with our neighbours.

In this sense we endorse dialogue as having a distinctive and rightful place within Christian life, in a manner directly comparable to other forms of service. But by 'distinctive' we do not mean totally different or separate. In dialogue we seek 'to speak the truth in a spirit of love', not naively 'to be tossed to and fro, and be carried about with every wind of doctrine' ([Eph. 4:14-15](#)). In giving our witness we recognize that in most [p. 214](#) circumstances today the spirit of dialogue is necessary. For this reason we do not see dialogue and the giving of witness as standing in any contradiction to one another. Indeed, as we enter dialogue with our commitment to Jesus Christ, time and again the relationship of dialogue gives opportunity for authentic witness. Thus, to the member churches of the WCC we feel able with integrity to commend the way of dialogue as one in which Jesus Christ can be confessed in the world today; at the same time we feel able with integrity to assure our partners in dialogue that we come not as manipulators but as genuine fellow pilgrims, to speak with them of what we believe God to have done in Jesus Christ who has gone before us, but whom we seek to meet anew in dialogue (*Ibid.*, p. 261).

What we find in the official statements of the WCC are clear denials that dialogue replaces witness, denials also that syncretism is unacceptable, and affirmations of the church's historic confession in Jesus Christ.

At the same time there are more than a few references in the documents which seem to be at variance with these affirmations. There seems to be an unresolved tension on the one hand between their claims of the truth of the gospel and on the other the acknowledgment of redemptive truth in all religions. At New Delhi (1961), for instance, the WCC said that in conversations with people of other living faiths about Christ, 'Christ

addresses them through us and us through them' (*New Delhi Report*, p. 82). In the same vein the Chiang Mai statement speaks of meeting Jesus Christ anew in dialogue. This vague language is hardly reassuring.

One of the architects for dialogue in the WCC is Stanley J. Samartha, former director of the WCC Unit on Dialogue with People Living Faiths and Ideologies. In his book *Courage for Dialogue*, referred to above, he affirms that the concern for dialogue is simply obedience to the Lord in accordance with the guidance of the Holy Spirit. He quotes with approval D. T. Niles: 'A pilgrim people must maintain their differentia as pilgrims, but they must belong to the society among whom their journey is set.' He explains the reasons for dialogue in these words:

There are at least three theological reasons why dialogue is and ought to be a continuing Christian concern. First, God in Jesus Christ has himself entered into relationship with persons of all faiths and all ages, offering the good news of salvation. The incarnation is God's dialogue with humanity. To be in dialogue is, therefore, to be part of God's continuing work among us and our fellow human beings. Second, the offer of a true community inherent in the gospel through forgiveness, reconciliation, and a new creation, and of which the church is a sign and a symbol, inevitably leads p. 215 to dialogue. The freedom and love Christ offers constrain us to be in fellowship with strangers so that all may become fellow citizens in the household of God. Third, there is the promise of Jesus Christ that the Holy Spirit will lead us into all truth. Since truth in the biblical understanding is not propositional but relational, and is to be sought not in the isolation of lonely meditation but in living, personal confrontation between God and man, and people and people, dialogue becomes one of the means of the quest for truth. And, because Christians cannot claim to have a monopoly of truth, we need to meet persons of other faiths and ideologies as part of our trust in and obedience to the promise of Christ (p. 11).

## OBJECTIONS TO DIALOGUE

One might well wonder, if this is what dialogue with other religions is about, why are there so many objections to it? Who will not rejoice that the age of disputations is over and the age of dialogue has begun? Nevertheless objections have been many and they have been persistent. We shall note three.

### 1. Dialogue is a way to truth

In modern times it was a Jew, the late Martin Buber, who did much to bring dialogue into vogue. In dialogue, he says, one enters a realm where the point of view no longer holds. Truth is not conceptual but personal. No system of thought can be erected but the truth is somehow a confluence of opposites, and the emphasis is horizontal. His ideas are best expressed in his book *I and Thou*.

These ideas strongly influenced Emil Brunner and Paul Tillich, to mention two, and did affect the ecumenical movement in early years. They appear to be reflected in the statement of the Mexico City Conference, 'Witness in Six Continents', in 1963:

On the relationship between God's action in and through the church and everything God is doing in the world apparently independently of the Christian community we were able to state thesis and antithesis in this debate, but we could not see our way through to the truth we feel lies beyond this dialectic. Yet we believe that all attempts to adapt the structures of the thinking of the Church to match the great changes that are taking place in the world will be doomed to paralysis until we can find the way through to a truer understanding of the relation between the world and the Church in the purpose of God (*Witness in Six Continents*, Ronald K. Orchard, editor, p. 157).

Key questions are, What topics can be subsumed under those on which we can come to a truer understanding by dialogue? Does [p. 216](#) dialogue *replace* revelation or does it only *seek to understand it better*?

In more recent days John Hick has advocated the idea of dialogue as the way to truth. In *Truth and Dialogue in World Religions* (1974), he wrote, 'We must trust that continuing dialogue will prove to be dialogue into truth, and that in a fuller grasp of truth our present conflicting doctrines will ultimately be transcended' (p. 155). In a similar vein D. Dubarle, in 'Dialogue and its Philosophy', *Concurrence*, Spring 1969, wrote, 'The dialogue is a common quest for liberty, and, as a consequence of progress in the liberty of each, a common effort to advance in the direction of Truth.'

That dialogue is a way to truth would appear, at least in the view of Hick and Dubare, to be not just a process of coming to a closer appreciation of authoritative truth given by revelation. It is rather a questioning of the validity of accepting the truth of revelation by faith, or an implicit denial that there is authoritative revealed truth.

## 2. Dialogue leads to relativism

We take a recent (1983) example. John Shelby Spong, Episcopal Bishop of Newark, wrote:

If Christian unity is to be achieved, Christian pluralism will have to be affirmed and the relativity of all Christian truth will have to be established. This reality makes us aware that every narrow definition of Christian doctrinal certainty will finally have to be abandoned; every claim by any branch of the Christian church to be the true church or the only church will ultimately have to be sacrificed; every doctrine of infallibility—whether of the papacy, or of the Scriptures, or of any sacred tradition, or of any individual experience—will inevitably have to be forgotten (*The Christian Century*, June 8–15, 1983).

Obviously if dialogue is understood to be a way of truth in the sense described and leads to the relativism of all religious claims, and to the sacrifice not only of sacred tradition but of the Scriptures as an infallible revelation, then the evangelical Christian will refuse to advocate it and will hesitate to enter the forum where dialogue takes place.

One should not hastily charge the WCC itself with relativism at this point. At least Willem Visser 't Hooft, the first general secretary, has pointed out that relativism 'would breed a race of spiritually spineless human beings who would live in the sort of night in which all cats are grey' ('Pluralism—Temptation or Opportunity?', *The Ecumenical Review*, April 1966, p. 129). Actually, in his book *No Other Name*, [p. 217](#) Visser 't Hooft makes a strong plea for both the universality of Christ and the uniqueness of Christ.

## 3. Dialogue leads to syncretism

Syncretism usually means the incorporation of essential elements of other religions into one's understanding of one's own, thus significantly altering one's own, or forming a new religion. Visser 't Hooft describes syncretism as

the view that there is no unique revelation in history, that there are many different ways to reach the divine reality, that all formulations of religious truth or experience are by their very nature inadequate expressions of that truth and that it is necessary to harmonize as much as possible all religious ideas and experiences so as to create one universal religion for mankind (*No Other Name*, p. 11).

As Visser 't Hooft explains the modern wave of syncretism in the Christian era, which is the last of four, he notes the effort, on the basis of the study of comparative religions, the philosophy of Karl Jung, and the literary works of such people as D. H. Lawrence and Walt Whitman, to explain practically every aspect of the Christian faith in terms of

concepts and myths which are equally to be found in other religions. He vigorously opposes all attempts at syncretism.

It is obvious that if we have in mind a dialogue that is informed by the components of finding truth, relativism and syncretism, dialogue will become a substitute for witness and will mean the demise of witness. If it is done in the spirit of Prof. John Hick who tells us to move away from 'purely confessional dialogue' to the truth-seeking stance in dialogue, that the loss may be greater than the gain. At stake then is the veracity of the Christian faith.

Those who advocate dialogue usually stress the need for both commitment and openness (see Samartha, *op. cit.*, pp. 9, 43). As a rule of thumb one can say that evangelicals stress more the need for commitment and ecumenically oriented persons emphasize more the need for openness. Likewise evangelicals place greater stress on the normativity of Scripture and ecumenicals on the guidance of the Holy Spirit, which may mean only God in action today.

## REACTIONS TO WCC DIALOGUE

It may be helpful at this point to note some of the varied reactions to the WCC document on dialogue adopted in Addis Ababa in 1971. From Thailand came a word of caution: **P. 218**

Our varied church bodies need seriously to struggle with the fundamentals of the biblical faith before our fellow Christians are engulfed in a dialogue for which they are not prepared intellectually or spiritually (*Courage for Dialogue*, p. 37).

From the United States came this expression of suspicion:

There have always been philosophers and religious thinkers who, lacking a full commitment to the beliefs they profess ... have filled the void in their lives with titillating experience of dialogue ... These men find an outlet for unused spiritual and intellectual energy by engaging in a dialogue with Marxists ... (However), the main concern of Jesus Christ was with the inner needs of men ... (*Ibid*).

From Hong Kong came an expression of concern to grapple with the question of truth:

Can we enter into a dialogue with others without having in our mind some criterion of truth which forms the basis of our judgment? ... Would our faith allow us to be content with the notion of the plurality of religious truth which inevitably suggests a limited validity of the Christian vision of truth? (39).

Behind some of these concerns is the demand for complete openness on the part of some proponents of dialogue. J. G. Davies, for example, speaks of the risk in dialogue:

Complete openness means that every time we enter into dialogue our faith is at stake—the Buddhist may come to accept Jesus as Lord, but I may come to accept the authority of the Buddha, or even both of us may end up as agnostics (*Dialogue with the World*, SCM, p. 55).

The fear here expressed, if viewed only against the background of the official WCC pronouncements, may seem to be largely unfounded. But before these fears are completely allayed, it will be well to note what the former director of the Unit on Dialogue, Stanley J. Samartha, and the present director, Wesley Ariarajah, have recently written on the subject.

Samartha in *Courage for Dialogue* holds to a kind of universalism that puts God's revelation in Jesus Christ in the larger framework of God's universal love for all mankind.

The lordship of Christ, as it relates to other lordships, he says, should be considered not in terms of rejection but in terms of relationships (97). As he sees it, we should recognize God alone as absolute and all religions as relative (97). 'There is no reason to claim that the religion developed in the Sinai is superior to that developed on the banks of the Ganga' (99). At the p. 219 same time he holds that the resurrection of Christ is the true *skandalon* of the gospel (94).

Taking a different approach from that of W. Visser 't Hooft, Samartha seeks to rehabilitate the idea of syncretism (23 ff.). He also holds that real conversion is not from one religion to another but from unbelief to God (32). (A similar effort to rehabilitate syncretism has been made by M. M. Thomas in 'The Absoluteness of Jesus Christ and Christ-Centered Syncretism', *The Ecumenical Review*, Oct, 1985.)

Samartha openly rejects the idea of salvation history. He quotes with approval the opinion of Bertil Albrektson that 'the Old Testament has no real claim to a special kind of history that is in any way distinct from its environment' (p.70). He wonders whether the idea of salvation history, as distinct from ordinary history, is really relevant to Christians in our inescapably multi-religious and multi-cultural societies struggling with the question of how to live together in peace (p. 71). He questions whether Mecca is 'outside the orbit of God's Spirit' (p. 69). The activity of God, he says, is for the salvation for all humanity (p. 79). If God is love, he cannot be partial. If God is free, how can his freedom to act at all times in history be limited to a 'once-for-allness'? (p. 150).

All religions, says Samartha, are relative. Only God is absolute (p. 97). How can we deny 'that Christ is at work wherever people are struggling for freedom and renewal, seeking for fulness of life, peace and joy?' (p. 86). All religions, including Christianity, have an interim character. This enforces the idea of their relativity in relation to God who alone is eternal (p. 103).

Wesley Ariarajah, in *The Bible and People of Other Faiths*, claims, in line with the *Gemeinde Teologie* school, that the early church moulded the New Testament. The New Testament is therefore to be understood as a book of faith. The Bible is 'based on the self-understanding of the Jewish people as the people of God' (p. 8). It is true for Christians as it is true for a young girl to say that her father is the best daddy in the world (p. 25). But the girl next door can make the same claim. The Bible deals not with absolute truths but with the language of faith and love (p. 26). 'Revelation itself is part of the faith-claim and its validity also has to do with the faith of the community' (p. 28).

In my encounter with others, I should believe that 'the other person is as much a child of God as I am and that should form the basis of our relationship with our neighbours' (p. 32). He deplores that Christians tend to shape their attitude to people of other faiths by dwelling mainly on the exclusive texts of the Bible (no other way, no other name, no p. 220 other Mediator) and not on the Bible's central message, namely, that the God whom Jesus called Father, rules over all and is in all (p. 33).

Ariarajah holds that dialogue does not exclude witness, but that our witness today should not take as its pattern the straightforward proclamation found in the Book of Acts. 'In the Acts we meet people who have an entirely different background. They see and understand the human predicament in very different ways from contemporary Muslims or Hindus' (p. 44). 'It would be totally misleading ... to argue that our relationship and witness today with people of other faiths should be modelled on the Acts of the Apostles' (p. 47).

Not only is the Apostles' way not our way, but the General Commission, Ariarajah suggests, derives not from Jesus, but from the early church (p. 49). Moreover, 'witness to the Hindus can never be based on any prior claims about Christ'. The preacher may say that Christ is the only way, but the Hindus would argue that such a statement has no



validity outside the preacher's own experience and conviction (p. 53). In Hinduism 'there is an undeniable experiencing of God's grace and love' (p. 54) and so 'the Hindu is not an object for conversion. He or she is a fellow-pilgrim with whom we share the decisive impact Christ has had on our lives' (p. 56).

As we carry the brief survey on WCC leadership thinking on dialogue one step further, we note the discussion on dialogue in two official October 1985 publications of the WCC, *The Ecumenical Review* and *International Review of Mission*. The simultaneous appearance of the two WCC periodicals on the same topic clearly demonstrates the importance attached currently to the discussion on dialogue in the WCC.

In *The Ecumenical Review*, M. M. Thomas pleads for a Christcentred syncretism. Jan van Butselaar, presenting his contribution as a member of a Reformed church, finds that in the tension between dialogue and witness the converging factors are stronger than those that tend to diverge. Diana L. Eck pleads for dialogue as a means to build the 'world house' of humanity; for her, dialogue is a Christian ecumenical concern.

Bishop Per Lønning sees dialogue as a question about 'religiology', the study of religion. He draws on the writings of John Hick, John Cobb, Hans Küng and George Lindbeck to show the unresolved nature of the debate on the exclusivity of Jesus and universal salvation. We note the following summary statement:

Limiting salvation to those who in this life accepted the Christ of the creeds, would make of God not only the biggest despot but also the biggest loser in p. 221 history. To accept ways of salvation in addition to the sending of Christ will make the cross something less than the focal event of history, or even something superfluous. To suggest that there is some presence of Christ, even where his name is not known, will tend to reduce the living Lord into some universal principle. To make the decisive confrontation with Christ an event after, or at the final edge of life, will relativize our existence here and now. *Apokatastasis*, some final indiscriminate divine acceptance of us all, tends to make robots rather than persons of human beings (*The Ecumenical Review*, Oct. 1985, p. 428).

We welcome the openness and clarity of this statement by Per Lønning and agree with him when he says that inter-religious dialogue requires intra-religious dialogue. That is, dialogue within the Christian community, for central teachings of the Christian faith on which agreement is lacking are directly involved.

It would be fair to say that the concern in the circles of the WCC is surely not limited to the relation of dialogue and witness. Actually, the context is shifting steadily away from concern for witness to that for human community. The emphasis is that all human beings share a common future (S. J. Samartha). We all live in one 'world house' (Diana L. Eck), dialogue is needed for nation building (M. M. Thomas) and for development (Devananda and Fernando). The trend in dialogue has been more and more away from verbal proclamation to social involvement for social change.

## EVANGELICALS ON DIALOGUE

Statements on dialogue by evangelicals are more difficult to find than statements by those who promote the ecumenical movement. Evangelicals have been generally critical of dialogue as it has been advocated and practised in the ecumenical movement. Interesting in this regard is a comment made by the Roman Catholic observer at Nairobi, Dr. Samuel Ryan:

Opposition to dialogue, often strongly expressed by the Evangelicals from Scandinavia, Western Germany, and England, rested on reasoning like the following. Christ is only in the church and nowhere outside. He is present only in the Word and Sacraments. In the



world he may be present as Creator, not as Redeemer. Otherwise why did he become incarnate and teach and die on the cross? Therefore, only sociological dialogue, not theological, can be had with people of other religions. We cannot worship with them, we may not pray together with them; a community of prayer with them is impossible. We have the full truth in the church because Christ is the fulness of truth. Any dialogue with people of other faiths can have only one purpose: to know them in order to evangelize them. Dialogue will p. 222 lead to illegitimate syncretism. We are for community with all people but a community built on Jesus Christ, and not on the shifting sands of uncertainty.

Asian and African participants and theologians who saw their point of view were surprised and shocked at the summary way in which some of their deepest Christian experiences were dismissed and discarded on very flimsy theological grounds. They asked themselves: is every Christian experience and every theological initiative which is not North Atlantic invalid, inadmissible, and unworthy of a hearing? Or is it that the extensive syncretism of the Bible and of Western Christianity is entirely in order while all syncretism elsewhere is to be ruled out a *priori* as illegitimate? Or are the Evangelicals deeply influenced by fear of the unfamiliar and the unknown? Or is it Christian smugness and overconfidence in armchair theologies? One must surely appreciate all honest enthusiasm for evangelism and obedience to the Great Commission. But one must be clear in one's mind that the Great Commission and command is love for people lived concretely in respect and service and sharing. This precisely is the dimension which, in the history of evangelism, has often been lacking. How far it has been present or not is best judged by those of us who have been the objects and victims of evangelism of a sort. What is most distressing, however, is the limited, clannish conception of God and Christ implicit in the refusal of religious and theological dialogue of community of prayer (*International Review of Mission*, Jan. 1976).

Not every evangelical response to dialogue has been negative, however, and one of the most positive but restrained statements is from the Lausanne Covenant (1974):

Our Christian presence in the world is indispensable to evangelism, and so is that kind of dialogue whose purpose is to listen sensitively in order to understand. But evangelism itself is the proclamation of the historical, biblical Christ as Saviour and Lord, with a view to persuading people to come to him personally and so be reconciled to God (The Lausanne Covenant, par. 4, in *Let the Earth Hear His Voice*, p. 4).

In their chapter in *Sharing Jesus in the Two Thirds World*, Vinay Samuel and Chris Sugden explain why evangelicals have not generally been involved in dialogue. The evangelical reluctance, in their view, is a fear of syncretism, a fear of being misunderstood, and a fear that dialogue will result in lukewarmness about evangelism. These fears must be seen against the evangelical involvement in mission among many so-called primitive cultures where they have achieved considerable success. Rather than a community approach of ecumenical dialogue, many non-conciliar evangelicals stress a 'free market' understanding of missions. This understanding, as expressed at the p. 223 1966 Berlin Congress on Evangelism, affirms that 'verbal proclamation is the sum total of mission' (p. 127).

Samuel and Sugden see a crisis of identity among evangelicals today in regard to the subject of inter-religious dialogue (p. 131). In their opinion the time has come for evangelicals, especially evangelicals in Asia, to become dialogically involved.

Just as evangelicals working in Latin America have brought the issue of social change to the fore, evangelicals from Asia in the context of plurality of religions need to bring this issue of inter-religious dialogue to the fore. For in countries where the plurality of religions is the dominant reality, social change on its own is an inadequate way of applying the gospel. The plurality of religions must also be addressed.

In the context of religious pluralism, no social change can take place without a religious reality that promotes this change. Where religion is part of the whole worldview of a people, any Christian claim to bring the truth about life must be related to their worldview if it is to have any meaning and stimulate any change (p. 129).

## AGENDA FOR DIALOGUE

Samuel and Sugden propose an agenda on dialogue for evangelicals which will include a study of man, of the nature of the common ground between religions, of the question where 'God is at work' in other religions and the decisiveness of the Christ-event for the world of religions (pp. 136–139). One may conclude that since their view of mission differs much from the 'free market' view of the Berlin Congress, there will be a need for intraevangelical dialogue in which evangelicals themselves discuss together where they stand in regard to dialogue.

The same would apply with equal force to the international family of evangelical Reformed churches; namely, dialogue should also be on their agenda for there also opinions vary greatly (cf. *RES Mission Bulletin*, Vol. II. No. 2, September 1982). What we need is a biblical rationale for dialogue, one that honours the central themes of creation, fall into sin and redemption by faith in Jesus Christ; one that does justice to the cosmic scope of Christ's redemption, and does not sell short the exclusive claims of Jesus and his apostles.

We do a disservice to all if, in the interest of reaching common understanding with adherents of other religions, we rob the gospel of its *skandalon* character. It is a *skandalon* to human beings generally that salvation is by God's grace alone, and that he has given us only one way in the one name of the one Mediator whose one sacrifice was p.224 sufficient for all and in whose name salvation must be offered to all who believe.

On the evangelicals' agenda for dialogue should be placed the issues that press to the fore in the recent discussions:

1. Is the Bible essentially an expression of the faith of the early church which has meaning for us mainly because it was the initial first-hand witness? Or is it fundamentally a revelation, once-for-all in its kind, which God gave to his people and which the early church and believers of every age acknowledge in faith as from God?
2. Is revelation basically saving revelation? Or must we (continue to) distinguish between the Word that saves when it is accepted in faith and the Word that leaves people in their lostness when they suppress the truth in unrighteousness? ([Romans 1:18](#)). Is the traditional distinction between revelation in creation and saving revelation in Jesus Christ to whom the Scriptures witness still valid?
3. In what way is God present and active with his Spirit in other religions?
4. Is the aim of promoting human community, peace and justice among adherents of various religions a valid reason for Christians to engage in inter-religious dialogue? If it is, should evangelicals not be involved? If they should, on what basis should such dialogue take place?
5. How can we untangle the curious web of current thought regarding the question of how the many opposing theories of truth relate to the truth claim of the Bible? We suggest the following as a beginning:
  - (a) A biblically directed approach requires that we test the various current theories of truth (epistemological, ontological, existential) by the biblical non-theoretical idea of truth. We cannot reverse the order or put them all on the same

plane without doing violence to the idea that God's Word if received in faith is the truth that saves from error as well as from destruction.

(b) The biblical idea of truth includes as essential aspect the two components of *trustworthiness* and of *normativity*. The truth therefore is not only something to rely on, but also that which must be obeyed. It is this last component of obedience that is very largely overlooked in the recent discussions on interreligious dialogue. Truth, it may be said, is that which God does (he is faithful) and which man must do (he must stand in the truth).

(c) To say that the Christian faith is true for me even as the [p. 225](#) Buddhist faith is true for someone else, only sidesteps the question of truth as a norm that holds for all. This norm asks for a response in faith from all who hear.

(d) The truth issue cannot be reduced to opposing truth claims, each having at the outset equal validity, for the basic truth claim is not that of one person against another but that of Jesus Christ who said that he was the Truth ([John 14:6](#)) and that God's word is truth ([John 17:17](#)). If Jesus, as he claims, will one day judge all the nations ([Matt. 25:32](#)) then this truth claim affects all people including those with conflicting truth claims. If this truth claim of Jesus, inasmuch as its scope is universal, does not hold for all, how can it hold for any?

(e) The truth about which evangelicals speak in final analysis is not the result of a quest on their part but of a search by God that has found them.

(f) The truth issue in dialogue will not be settled so long as we continue to view it on the plane of a human quest. There is indeed a human search for truth, but that is never the prime action; the human quest for truth is never more than secondary, a re-action. The divine truth that is embodied personally in Jesus Christ and searches and finds is of a different order from man's search for truth, and stands prior to it. In this truth we must continue to stand, as well in speaking with adherents of other faiths as in our worship of God in the community of his people.

(g) The evangelicals' claim to know Jesus, the Truth, is not a sign of arrogance but an acknowledgment of grace and should be made in humility, yet with conviction. It *would* be arrogance to claim that the truth we proclaim is the product of our achievement, or to assume that our understanding of the truth is of the same order as revelation itself.

(h) At stake therefore is not whether Christians have perfect knowledge, but whether their faith knowledge is sure. The issue is not absolute truth but saving truth.

(i) It is not triumphalism to say that there is no other way than faith in Jesus Christ. If it is done in the spirit of love, it is an expression of humility, as one beggar tells another where to find bread.

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## Divine Revelation

# Chrys Caragounis

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*This paper was presented at the 1986 Theological Consultation of the Fellowship of European Evangelical Theologians in West Germany, the theme of which was Universalism. Caragounis argues for the position that God has not given special revelation to all. He attempts to answer the questions of universality and consistency of special revelation on exegetical findings.*

Editor

The essential meaning of revelation is that somebody reveals something to somebody. This implies four components: a revealer, an act or a process of revelation, a content that is being revealed and someone to whom a revelation is communicated. In our context the revealer is God, the content of revelation is God and his will, and the recipient of revelation is man. It is not likely that there will be any great disagreement about these three points, but the fourth one, the act or process of revelation, which discloses the mode or means of its occurrence, and hence relates to the very factuality of the revelation occurrence, is the pivotal point. Hence this is the chief issue that will engage us in the following discussion.

There are two ways in which divine revelation can be mediated to man: one, by means of nature (sometimes called General Revelation), and two, by means of Special Revelation.<sup>1</sup> I shall discuss briefly both of these questions.

## **NATURAL (OR GENERAL) REVELATION AND ITS LIMITATIONS**

Both the Old and the New Testaments assert that creation bears valid witness to its Creator. For example, the Psalmist muses: 'The heavens declare the glory of God, and the firmament proclaims his handiwork' ([Ps. 19:1](#)).<sup>2</sup> From this it might be concluded that if one were but to turn one's eye's towards the heavens one would discover God. And so one might be tempted to see in this as well as in other texts of similar tenor [P. 227](#) a Natural Theology. And it might be concluded that there is biblical support for the idea that God has given adequate knowledge of himself to all peoples by means of creation. But this is by no means the case. It is, of course, true that the universe is here portrayed as objectively manifesting its Creator, but that manifestation can be perceived only through faith. The *genre* of the texts, too, makes it plain that the language used here is one of faith and worshipful confession. That God's manifestation through nature is not of compelling force upon every spectator is proved by the fact that the 'fool', too, contemplates the sky, but comes to the conclusion that 'There is no God!' ([Ps. 14:1](#); [53:1](#))

The efficiency of Natural Revelation therefore depends upon two conditions: one, the objective manifestation of God through nature, and two, man's apprehension of that manifestation subjectively. The two conditions together constitute what was described above as *revelation occurrence*; in other words revelation *occurs* when it is both given and apprehended. This implies that God's manifestation through nature is not unconditionally experienceable by all. As we shall see these two conditions obtain also in the New Testament, and herein lie the limitations and inefficiency of Natural Revelation.

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<sup>1</sup> Human conscience, sometimes included within Natural (or General) Revelation, is not quite comparable to either Natural or Special Revelation, inasmuch as these imply a communication *ab extra* rather than something continuously residing within man's own self.

<sup>2</sup> See also [Ps. 8:1-3](#).

In what follows I shall discuss briefly some of the ‘classical texts’<sup>3</sup> of Universalism one by one.

[Acts 14:15–17](#). In his address to the Lycaonians Paul calls upon them to turn away from their vain idols<sup>4</sup> to the living God, who in contradistinction to them is the Creator of all things. He goes on to say that in past generations God allowed all nations to go their own way, that is, wander in idolatry, though he did not leave himself without witness, in that his providential care for mankind never ceased. The three central points of this short address are: one, that the pre-Gospel period is understood as a time of ignorance and revolt, when mankind went its wayward way. Now this pre-Gospel period is not simply a temporal marker, but above all an existential marker. Man, any man, of whatever time, place and culture, outside Christ belongs to this pre-Gospel period. The second point is that God’s witnesses here are simply his ordinances in nature, which actually bear sufficient testimony to an intelligent and powerful Architect and Sustainer. But these, while making man’s fall into idolatry fully reprehensible, cannot be said to disclose God’s Person, will and salvation. The third point is [p. 228](#) that now, in the Gospel period, God calls upon men through the preaching of the Gospel to turn to ‘the living God’. It is indeed strange that a text like this, which so clearly refutes Universalism, is sometimes cited in its support!

[Acts 17:22–31](#). This speech, according to Adolf Deissmann ‘the greatest missionary document in the New Testament ... a manifesto of worldwide importance in the history of religions and of religion’,<sup>5</sup> has been looked upon as another cornerstone of Universalism. In particular, the view that the Athenians worshipped the true God without knowing him finds more than an echo in Karl Rahner’s ‘anonymous Christianity’,<sup>6</sup> though this thesis has been vigorously controverted.<sup>7</sup> But on what grounds can it actually be said that the Athenians worshipped the true God? The existence of an altar to the honour of an Unknown God can under no circumstances be a guarantee that the Athenian populace had received authentic revelation from the living God.

According to ancient authorities<sup>8</sup> among the altars erected to a multitude of divinities and even to personifications of virtues and qualities,<sup>9</sup> the Athenians had erected altars to ‘Unknown’ or ‘Anonymous’ gods. Paul had apparently stumbled upon one of these, and quite appropriately took the inscription on this altar<sup>10</sup> as the starting-point of his address. It would be reading too much into Paul’s words to construe them as meaning that the Athenians actually worshipped the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, who had recently

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<sup>3</sup> Knitter, *No Other Name?*, 83, 92.

<sup>4</sup> The Greek word *mataios* is occasionally used of idols, cf. e.g. Jer. (LXX) [2:5](#).

<sup>5</sup> *Light from the Ancient East*, 384.

<sup>6</sup> See, e.g., ‘Christianity and Non-Christian Religions’ in *Theological Investigations*, Vol. 1, Baltimore 1966, 131–34.

<sup>7</sup> E.g. H. Küng, *On Being a Christian*, New York 1976, and Knitter, *No Other Name?*, 128ff.

<sup>8</sup> See Pausanias, *Attica*, 1, 4; V, 5; XVIII, 9; Philostratus, *Vita Apollonii*, VI, 3; Diogenes Laertius, I,x,110.

<sup>9</sup> Such as *Eleos*, *Aidōs*, *Phēmē*, *Hormē*, (see Pausanias, *Attica*, XVII, 1).

<sup>10</sup> Jerome thought that Paul had changed the plural, witnessed by ancient writers, to the singular; but these altars were probably dedicated each to one unknown deity; cf. F. F. Bruce, *The Acts of the Apostles*, London 1952, 336; *id.*, *Commentary on the Book of Acts* (NICNT), Grand Rapids 1954, 356, and B Gärtner, *The Areopagus Speech and Natural Revelation*, Uppsala 1955, 244ff.



given his final self-revelation through Jesus Christ. It is obvious through the circumstances that Paul seizes the fact of reverence toward unknown deities, which being unknown are undefined and consequently empty of any content, and pours into the term the content of his own Object of [p. 229](#) proclamation. The sentence ‘what therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you’ indicates neither continuity nor identity of being between the two. This is further corroborated by the use of the neuter form of the relative pronoun, which does not so much refer to the person worshipped (since the masculine would then have been more appropriate) as to the fact of worship,<sup>11</sup> a worship in ignorance.<sup>12</sup>

Paul goes on to present God as Creator of the whole cosmos, at the same time administering to their idolatrous practices a criticism which has at once precedents in Old Testament prophets<sup>13</sup> as well as in such Greek authors as Xenophanes and Euripides.<sup>14</sup> He underscores the unity of the human race, perhaps consciously opposing the Athenian claim to being *autochthonous*<sup>15</sup> or perhaps for regarding all non-Greeks as inferior and barbarous.<sup>16</sup> He asserts that God created men in order to live on the earth and to seek him,<sup>17</sup> in the hope that they might *feel after* him and find him, just as a blind man or a man with sight in total darkness fumbles or gropes after something.<sup>18</sup> The term *psēlaphaō* which modifies the meaning of *heuriskō* and purports a most inadequate acquaintance with the object of search, expresses well the kind and degree of knowledge which Paul could concede to Natural revelation. While the *modus potentialis* underscores that even such an inadequate acquaintance with God was and remained at best a very remote possibility. This is so even despite the fact that God is not far from men, as heathen poets have said themselves. The concessive clause in vs. 27b shows that men have not found God by [p. 230](#) their fumbblings. In light of this the earlier mention of the worship of the unknown god can under no circumstances be understood to imply a genuine discovery of the true God.

Vs. [29](#) is an incisive criticism of idol-making, couched in Old Testament language<sup>19</sup> and v. [30](#) characterizes the pre-Gospel period as ‘times of ignorance’. With the advent of the Gospel a new aeon has broken in. God, having overlooked all past ignorance, now

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<sup>11</sup> Cf. G. Schneider, *Apostelgeschichte* (HTKNT), Freiburg 1980, 238.

<sup>12</sup> *Contra* Heanchen, *Acts*, 529, who seems to think of a true worship of God in ignorance.

<sup>13</sup> See, e.g., [Isa. 44:9–20](#).

<sup>14</sup> E.g. Xenophanes, *frgs.* 11, 12, 14, 15, 16 and 23; Euripides, *Heracles*, 1345; *frgs.* 63 and 292.

<sup>15</sup> Euripides, *Ion*, 29; Aristophanes, *Vespae*, 1076.

<sup>16</sup> Bruce, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 337.

<sup>17</sup> The infinitives *katoikein* and *zētein* have been understood as epexegetic of *epoiēsen* (Bruce, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 337), but they are most likely final; so most commentators: H. Conzelmann, *Apostelgeschichte*, 99; E. Heanchen *The Acts of the Apostles*, Oxford 1971, 523; G. Schneider, *Die Apostelgeschichte*, Freiburg, etc. 1980, 240; J. Roloff, *Die Apostelgeschichte*, Göttingen 1981, 262; I. H. Marshall, *The Acts of the Apostles* (TNTC) Leicester 1980, 288; see also J. Munck, *The Acts of the Apostles* (AB), New York 1967, 171. Similarly, A. T. Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research*, Nashville 1934, 1020f.

<sup>18</sup> The word *psēlaphaō* means properly a fumbling with the fingers as of a blind person. See Homer, *Odyssey* I, 416 of the blinded Cyclops. In Aristophanes, *Ecclesiazousai* 315 ‘feel after’ occurs together with ‘find’. See also Plato, *Phaedo* 99B.

<sup>19</sup> cf. [Isa. 44:9–20](#).



commands all men everywhere to repent. It would be difficult to find a more emphatic phrase in order to express the absolute universality of the Gospel.<sup>20</sup> The command to repentance, and the announcement of the coming judgment by a Man whom God appointed by raising him from the dead, underscore the gravity of the new situation and the severity of God in judgment because of the special and full revelation which God has given now of himself, in sharp contrast to the gropings of men during the times of ignorance!

I conclude therefore that the Areopagus speech does not offer a Natural Theology, nor any support for the view that all peoples have been the recipients of authentic divine revelation. On the contrary, the speech regards the discovery of God by means of men's efforts as an academic possibility which has never been realized.

[Rom. 1:18-23](#). Following a superficial interpretation of its statements to the effect that God has revealed to men what can be known of him, so that the revelation assumed as given is adequate to render them without excuse, and then combining this data with [Rom. 2:14-15](#), where Gentiles without the Law are said to be fulfilling the Law, the text is often supposed to open the door to Universalism.

For a proper understanding of the passage we need to begin with v. [16](#): 'I am not ashamed of the Gospel of Christ, because it is God's power [or effective working] unto salvation to everyone who believes'. This verse no doubt gives the theme of the Epistle.<sup>21</sup> In the next verse 'For in it the righteousness of God is revealed ...' the word 'righteousness' comes very close to being the equivalent of salvation (*sōtēria*)<sup>22</sup> p. 231 in v. [16](#). Now there is a conscious juxtaposition between v. [17](#)—'For in it [that is, the Gospel] the righteousness of God is revealed'—and v. [18](#) 'For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven'. This twofold revelation marks the difference between special revelation and natural revelation. If we are therefore to understand what is been treated in vv. [18-23](#) we must see them in their relation to w. [16-17](#), and not in isolation.

And now, Paul charges mankind with a wilful perversion of the truth, which renders us inexcusable. From this it might be concluded that (a) God has actually revealed himself, and (b) mankind has had access to this revelation; in other words, that both the objective and the subjective aspects of the revelation occurrence obtain here. And from this the conclusion may again be drawn that the revelation occurrence is a continuous process, wherefore all peoples on earth today may be considered as being constantly involved in this ongoing process. In this way the passage may be turned into another pillar of Universalism.

The key to a correct understanding of what Paul is saying is to realize that Paul is treating mankind collectively and not individually. Thus, when in v. [19](#) he says that 'what can be known of God is manifest to [or among] them' Paul is treating mankind as a unity.

At the same time the present tense 'is manifest' underlines the fact that the revelation is there—objectively. Now the manifestation is there because God 'manifested' it to them—aorist tense, of a past historical manifestation. V. [20](#) states that 'his invisible things [or aspects] ever since the creation of the world are seen by the mind through the things

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<sup>20</sup> cf. Gärtner, *The Areopagus Speech*, 229ff.; J. Roloff, *Apostelschichte*, 265f.

<sup>21</sup> Similarly C. E. B. Cranfield, *Romans*, I, 87; J. Murray, *Romans*, 26; C. K. Barrett, *Romans* 27.

<sup>22</sup> The Hebrew *tsedaka* often bears this sense in the OT, as in e.g. [Isa. 42:6](#); [45:8](#); [46:13](#); [51:6](#), [8](#) (see C. R. North, *The Second Isaiah*, Oxford 1964, 111f., 118, 152 and 166) and [Ps. 24:5](#); [31:1](#); [98:2](#); [143:11](#) (see H. J. Kraus, *Psalmen* (BKAT), Neukirchen 1978, I, 395; II, 847). Also Barrett, *Romans*, 29f.

that are made, his invisible things, namely, his eternal power and divine nature'.<sup>23</sup> Here, as the passive *kathoratai* shows, the point is not any subjective, factual, continuously recurrent apprehension of God's manifestation, but the means by which this manifestation is mediated and apprehended.<sup>24</sup> The point may be brought out better if we add the auxiliary 'can' just as the Modern Greek Version has done: 'the human mind can see them through the things that are created.'<sup>25</sup> This does not imply that every one who looks at nature at the same time catches a glimpse of God, but given certain conditions and attitudes, one can see that behind this amazing p. 232 universe stands an intelligent and powerful Creator, rather than that it all came about as a result of an accidental 'Big Bang'.

Since a true manifestation of God is there and man has had the possibility of apprehending it, he is without excuse for his refusal to recognize the Creator. Vv. 19 and 20 stated the naked fact that God manifested himself to mankind, and the means by which he did it, as well as the means by which he was to be apprehended. In vv. 21-23 Paul goes on to discuss mankind's response. He begins with a *participium conjuncture* with concessive significance, conceding to them the knowledge of God and thus enhancing their responsibility, and then uses a series of aorist indicatives<sup>26</sup> in order to describe mankind's negative response. These aorist indicatives show that Paul is not thinking of men's individual actions, but of mankind's original revolt against God through those who actually had knowledge of God. In other words, his argumentation is similar to that in Rom. 5. Paul is not therefore saying that each individual human being of his own day, who is confronted with God's objective manifestation in nature, has the possibility of apprehending God, but instead chooses to reject it and take to idol-making. No, this is a historical event, which transpired at the very beginning of history, though by his persistence in idolatry every man says his own individual 'Yes' to the original revolt and thus comes under judgment, in a similar way as all have sinned in Adam as well as in their own persons individually. There is thus an ambivalence between the historical event and the repeated occurrence (cf. 1:32). This text therefore does not hold out the promise of any revelation of God to mankind in general. Instead it deals with the manner in which the original revelation was rejected as well as the present plight of man as a result of that choice.

1 Cor. 1:21. The limitations and hence the weakness of natural revelation become evident in 1 Cor 1:21. A word-for-word translation might be: 'Because since in the wisdom of God the world did not know God through the wisdom, it pleased God through the foolishness of the preaching to save those who believe.' Now there are at least four *prima facie* ways of construing (A) 'in the wisdom of God', and (B) 'through the wisdom' into two groups of two alternatives each:

- 1:a. A and B refer to God's wise plan p. 233
- 1:b. A refers to God's wise plan, and B to human wisdom (that is, intellect or philosophy)

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<sup>23</sup> On *theiotēs* see Käsemann, *Romans*, 41.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. O. Kuss, *Römer*, 36: 'Seit der Weltschöpfung ... ist die sichtbare Welt dem Menschen ein Weg zu einer Erkenntnis Gottes'.

<sup>25</sup> Similarly M. B. Newman - E. A. Nida, *A Translator's Handbook on Paul's Letter to the Romans*, UBS, Stuttgart 1973, 23.

<sup>26</sup> Actually all the verbs in these verses (apart from the present participle *phaskontes*, which, too, takes on past time) are aorists: *edoxasan*, *eucharistēsan*, *emataiōthēsan*, *eskotisthē*, *emōranthēsan*, *ēllaxan*.

- 2:a. A and B refer to God's wisdom manifested through creation  
 2:b. A refers to God's wisdom manifested through creation, and B to human wisdom

In 1:a and 2:a the two statements are almost tautologous, and the resulting meaning is clumsy. 1:b neutralizes the force of 'since' which thus becomes nonsense.<sup>27</sup> 2:b is by far the best alternative and is supported by four considerations: (1) Whether the 'wisdom' of these early chapters of 1 Corinthians is Greek wisdom (that is, philosophy) or Gnostic,<sup>28</sup> it is clear that Paul treats it as human wisdom ([21b](#)), from whose viewpoint the Gospel appears 'foolish', even if Paul does not shrink from applying the term also to God ([21a](#)); (2) [Vv. 19f.](#) shows that Paul is concerned with wisdom as a human means for apprehending God. Now Greek wisdom was not simply abstract speculation, but in fact an attempt to arrive at Truth Invisible through the observation of things visible (cf. for example Plato); (3). This interpretation gives 'since' its proper force, showing that the 'foolishness of preaching' becomes necessary because men cannot by the application of their minds to creation obtain such knowledge of God as can lead to salvation; and (4) this interpretation is in line with the texts discussed above, especially [Rom. 1](#),<sup>29</sup> according to which men can no longer arrive at a proper knowledge of God because of their perversion.

In view of the above reasoning, the passage should be translated: 'Because since the world through [the exercise of its] wisdom did not come to know God in wisdom [as revealed by creation], it pleased God through the foolishness of the preaching to save those who believe.'<sup>30</sup>

The conclusion from the above discussion is that while the Bible recognizes the witness of Nature to God, and holds men inexcusable for their unbelief, perversion and idolatry, it does not consider God's manifestation through nature an adequate self-disclosure of God capable of leading to authentic knowledge of his person, his will and his salvation. [p. 234](#)

## HAS GOD GIVEN SPECIAL REVELATION TO ALL?

In a lecture delivered in Uppsala in April 1986, Helmut Koester made the passing remark that it is illegitimate to distinguish between natural revelation and special revelation, because all the religions of the world have received adequate revelation from God. Indeed, many Universalists would not be content simply with natural revelation. They would claim that the religious insights of the living faiths (Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam) constitute genuine revelations of God. They would, of course, often recognize that the Bible does not state explicitly that God has given special revelation of himself through all religions. But they are of the opinion that certain biblical statements in combination with other factors tend to support Universalism. Some of the arguments put forward here are: the love of God, the unity of the human race, the fact that the Gospel has barely reached 20% of the earth's population during the 2,000 years of its proclamation; and so forth. It is thus argued that God must have other means at his disposal than merely the Christian Messiah. Thus, the 'indian' pluralist Stanley J. Samartha puts the religion of the River Ganga on a par with Christianity, while his 'compatriot', Raimundo Panikkar, rejects the

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<sup>27</sup> This is Barrett's view, in *Corinthians* (BNTC), London 1968, 53.

<sup>28</sup> See U. Wilckens, article *sophia* in TDNT VII, 519-22.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. H. Conzelmann, *Korinther* (REKNT), 2nd ed., Göttingen 1981, 64.

<sup>30</sup> This interpretation is adhered to by the Modern Greek Version of 1985; G. Bornkamm, *Gesammelte Aufsätze*, II, 1959, 120f.; U. Wilckens, TDNT VII, 521.

co-extensiveness of Jesus with Christ, who may be revealed as Jesus, Rama, Krishna, Ishvara, Purusha or Tathagata.<sup>31</sup> But here we stand on non-biblical ground.

From the biblical perspective, the argument is based partly on a number of texts which seem to speak of the salvation of all men, and partly on texts that appear to support universal revelation.

### 1. Texts using such expressions as 'all men' and 'whole world'

Among these may be mentioned [Jn. 12:32](#): 'And I, when I am lifted from the earth, will draw *all men* to myself'; [1 Tim. 2](#); [3-4](#): 'God our Saviour, who desires *all men* to be saved ...'; [Heb. 2:9](#): 'By the grace of God he might taste death for everyone'; [1 Jn. 2:2](#): 'He is the expiation/ propitiation ... for the sins of the whole world'.<sup>32</sup> In texts like these the expressions 'all men' and 'whole world' are taken to imply that all individuals without exception are considered as saved. This simplistic interpretation breaks down on two scores: (1) the expression 'all men' (Gr. *pantes*) is used in Scripture sometimes [p. 235](#) representatively rather than inclusively. Thus, for example, [Mt. 3:5](#) tell us that 'all Judea and all the region about the Jordan' went to John's baptism. It would be, however, absurd to deduce from this that Matthew meant that every single individual in Judea had become a follower of John. Besides, such a supposition is expressly contradicted by [Mt. 3:7](#) and [21:32](#). Similarly in [Jn. 12:19](#), 'the whole world has gone after him' simply means that Jesus had convinced a large number of people, but obviously not the whole world, in the case of [1 Tim. 2:3-4](#) 'all men' presumably means all men, but the text speaks of God's desire that all men be saved, not of their actual salvation. That the salvation of all is not contemplated in Scripture is proved by the fact that Scripture does speak of the perdition of some! (2) These passages in one way or another involve the activity, particularly the death, of Christ, as the pre-condition for the announced salvation. Thus [Jn. 12:32](#) speaks of all men being drawn to none other than Jesus as the Christ as a result of his crucifixion and resurrection, but this so far from being the solution to the Universalist's problem would actually be *anathema* to his position! The same holds true of texts like [Rom. 5:18](#), and [1 Tim. 2:3-5](#), and [Tit. 2:11-14](#), and [Heb. 2:9](#), and [1 Jn. 2:2](#), and [2 Cor. 5:19](#). In each of these texts salvation does not come to men directly from heaven but through Jesus Christ. It would therefore seem that God has no dealings with mankind apart from Christ.

### 2. Does the New Testament recognize Special Revelation on a universal scale?

The most important text here would be [Rom. 2:12-16](#),<sup>33</sup> which is normally understood as in some way setting forth Paul's classical statement of the heathens' salvation outside Christ. This text has often been treated in isolation from its context, as if it were a parenthesis containing Paul's view of the salvation of Gentiles outside of Christ. Thus, the very difficult problem of the fate of those Gentiles who never heard the Gospel is supposed to get its answer in vv. [12-14](#). [p. 236](#) This is no doubt very convenient. It is another matter, however, whether this is what Paul is discussing here.

It appears to me that this text must be viewed in the light of Paul's argument in chs. [1-3](#). Paul's overall argument in these chapters is to show that all mankind without national

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<sup>31</sup> See Panikkar, *The Unknown Christ*, 1981 ed.; Knitter, *No Other Name?* 152ff.

<sup>32</sup> Other 'universalistic' texts include [Acts 3:21](#); [Rom. 5:18](#); [2 Cor. 5:19](#); [Col. 1:20](#); [Tit. 2:11](#), [1 Pet. 3:9](#).

<sup>33</sup> On the exegesis of this text see Barrett, *Romans*, 49ff.; Murray, *Romans*, 69ff.; E. F. Harrison, *Romans* (EBC), 30ff.; E. Brunner, *Romans*, 21; Sanday-Headlam, *Romans*, 54; Barth, *Romans*, 65ff.; Bruce, *Romans*, 88f.; O. Kuss, *Römerbrief*, 68-82; P. Achtermeier, *Romans*, 43-9; O. Michel, *Römer*, 117-26; H. Schlier, *Römerbrief*, 75-81; U Wilckens, *Römer*, 131-46; Käsemann, *Romans*, 61-8; Cranfield, *Romans*, I, 153-63.

or individual exception is guilty before God. In ch. [1](#) Paul has established the guilt of all mankind corporately, before it was divided into Jews and Gentiles. In [2:1](#) Paul addresses the man, any man, who judges others, but who does the very same thing himself. Who is this man? Some commentators understand this to refer to certain Gentiles, who did not indulge in the gross sins mentioned at the end of ch. [1](#).<sup>34</sup> But this is hardly tenable. The man in view must be none other than the Jew. (With this judgment concur a number of commentators.)<sup>35</sup> This view finds support in vv. [4-5](#) which speak of his 'hardness of heart', a term particularly applicable to Jews;<sup>36</sup> in vv. [9-15](#), according to which the Jew stands out as one who regards himself as superior to the Gentiles and is therefore put in his place by Paul; and in vv. [17-29](#), which identify the judgmental 'man' expressly with the Jew.

How does Paul prove that this man, the Jew, is guilty of the things he criticizes in the Gentiles? He does not argue for it; he just assumes it. On what grounds? Again, he does not indicate, but the grounds may be presumed to be, first the original, corporate revolt of mankind against God, treated in ch. [1](#), which naturally includes the Jews as well; and, two, the empirical knowledge that Jews also do come short of keeping the Law.

Vv. [7-10](#) are chiasmically structured, having two groups in view: [7](#) and [10](#) talk of 'those who by patience in well-doing seek for glory and honour and immortality' and w. [8](#) and [9](#) 'those who are factious and do not obey the truth'. Now it is interesting that each of these groups include *both* Jews and Gentiles. What has happened here is that Paul overturns the old, Jewish, distinction between Jews and Gentiles, and instead divides mankind into two groups each of which is constituted by both Jews and Gentiles! But how shall we understand this? Is Paul saying that there are some Jews and some Gentiles who are evil and therefore will be judged according to their evil works, and again, there are some Jews and some Gentiles who do good and therefore will be [p. 237](#) saved? This is a usual way of understanding Paul's statement. But had he meant this he would be delivering the funeral speech over his own mission and preaching! According to Paul the only ground upon which Jews and Gentiles are brought together and united in one body is Christ.<sup>37</sup> Conversely, if Paul had admitted for a moment that Jews *as* Jews fulfilled God's law, that would disrupt his whole fundamental understanding of human guilt, faith and salvation, and would conflict too flagrantly with (e.g) [3:9](#), [20](#), and [23](#). As Cranfield puts it, 'the inconsistency which this explanation attributes to Paul is altogether too colossal and too glaring to be at all likely'.<sup>38</sup> The two groups must therefore be Christians and non-Christians of both Jewish and Gentile descent. This is the only legitimate division of mankind which Paul as a Christian recognizes.

In v. [11](#) Paul takes up the Jew's special problem, namely the false notion that since God favoured him with his law, God is going to show also special favour and leniency towards him. Paul tells him that this is not so. God is impartial. V. [12](#) may be interpreted as supporting a double way of salvation but what that verse actually does is to speak only of the damnation of Gentiles and Jews; *not* of their salvation, The verse deals with one of the two groups, the group that is outside of Christ and is composed of both Jews and Gentiles.

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<sup>34</sup> E.g. Bruce, *Romans*, 86f. thinks of Stoics like Seneca.

<sup>35</sup> See e.g. Murray, *Romans*, 54; Brunner, *Romans*, 20; Sanday-Headlam, *Romans*, 53; Cranfield, *Romans*, I, 138, where see for reasons.

<sup>36</sup> Cf. e.g. the LXX text in the following passages: [Ex. 33:3, 5](#); [34:9](#); [Deut. 9:6, 11, 27](#); [2 Chr. 30:8](#); [Ps. 95:8](#), as well as [Mt. 19:8](#) and [Mk. 10:5](#); [Acts 7:51](#).

<sup>37</sup> [Gal. 3:26-29](#); [Eph. 2:11-22](#).

<sup>38</sup> *Romans*, I, 152.



With respect to the other group, those that are in Christ, inasmuch as Paul is arguing against Jewish bigotry and exclusivism on the grounds of physical descent, he singles out for treatment only the Gentile element of this second group, just the element that is problematic to the Jew. Paul first tells the Jew that his possession of the Law without the performance of it is worthless before God, and then states that Gentiles (note the absence of the definite article!) who by nature do not have the law,<sup>39</sup> perform the things commanded by the Law, and thus show that the [p. 238](#) Law is written on their hearts. Without doubt we have here a reference to the new covenant in [Jer. 31:33](#), which commentators without good reason have dismissed.<sup>40</sup> The Gentiles referred to here are the Gentile part of the Christian Church.<sup>41</sup> The written law is, of course, the *distillation* of Moses' law as in (e.g.) [Mt. 7:12](#); [22:40](#); [Rom. 13:8–10](#).

### 3. Is universal Revelation free from inconsistency?

Finally, God's revelation of himself through various religions must exhibit continuity and coherence. Not only must a clear continuity be discernible, but in addition, since God cannot contradict himself, the revelation given to various religions may be complementary (i.e. *additive*) but not contradictory. We may remind ourselves of one of the basic principles of exegesis, the assumption that an author tries to be consistent in what he writes and does not intentionally contradict himself. This rule certainly applies to God, too. If he were to give contradictory pictures of himself and his will, how could humans ever be accountable to him, or be sure of his will? Thus, by studying the various religions—if there is genuine revelation from God—one ought to be able to discern the same Revealer and the same Revealed One! If these indispensable presuppositions of

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<sup>39</sup> The expression 'by nature', which is usually understood as belonging to the following words, 'do the things of the law' (so Käsemann, *Romans*, 63f.; Wilckens, *Römer*, 134; Schlier, *Römerbrief*, 77; Kuss, *Römerbrief*, 69; C. H. Dodd, *Romans*, 37; Michel, *Römer*, 117) can with equally good reason be connected with the preceding 'Gentiles who do not have the law', that is, *by nature*, in other words, by virtue of their descent. For this connection speaks verse [27](#), where the uncircumcised are said to be such by nature, and which, according to the argumentation, are the same as 'Gentiles who do not have the law by nature' here! Grammatically the other alternative is fully possible—hence the wide support it enjoys—however, theologically it is less probable. See Cranfield, *Romans*, I, 156f. Achtermeier's remarks against the usual interpretation are apposite: 'If Gentiles know by nature what is good and they do it, they are morally superior to the Jews, who need the law to tell them what is good and how to do it. Such inherent moral superiority of Gentiles over Jews not only makes the chosen people morally inferior to all other but it also makes nonsense of Paul's argument ... we ought to relate the phrase in [2:14](#), not with 'do the law', but rather with 'have not the law'. Paul is describing Gentiles who 'by nature' (by birth) do not have the law ... not Gentiles who 'by nature' (inherently) do what the law requires (God's will)'.

<sup>40</sup> Because the Jeremiah reference is to an eschatological act of God on Israel. So, e.g., Michel, *Römer*, 80, 83; Bruce, *Romans*, 91; Barrett, *Romans*, 52; Käsemann, *Romans*, 64. But as Cranfield, *Romans*, I, 159 appositely remarks, 'As soon as it is recognized that the Gentiles whom Paul has in mind are Gentile Christians, the objection to seeing here an intentional reference to [Jer. 31:33](#) disappears; for it is abundantly clear that Paul did think that God's eschatological promises were already beginning to be fulfilled through the gospel in the lives of believers, both Jews and Gentiles'.

<sup>41</sup> Two of the earliest writers to voice this interpretation were Ambrosiaster and Augustine. It is also supported by Barth in his shorter commentary on Romans, p.36, and Cranfield, *Romans*, I, 156. The majority of commentators prefer to see here heathen people rather than Gentile Christians, without, however, making any strong case for their view. (Cf. e.g. Wilckens, *Römer*, 133, who thinks that reference to Gentile Christians is excluded because 'das artikellose *ethnē* sowie die Konjunktion *hotan* (nicht *ean*) zeigen, dass er nicht etwa die Heiden insgesamt den sündigen Juden gegenüberstellt!' others include Schlier, *Römer*, 77; Michel, *Römer*, 117; and Käsemann, *Romans*, 65, who speaks of 'Augustine's mistake', though he does not offer a positive argument for the contrary view.

continuity and coherence do **p. 239** not obtain, then the revelations claimed by the various religions cannot *all* be authentic.

One final matter. Universalists often explain the variety of religion as a cultural phenomenon. Thus, Christianity is said to be a religion for Westerners, Hinduism a religion for Orientals, and so on. This, of course, still leaves the plurality of religions in the East unexplained! At the same time it reduces God's self-revelation to what human culture makes of it.

Moreover, it is misleading to say that Christianity is a Western religion, for it is, in fact, if anything, a Near Eastern religion. It is true that it has received certain Greek elements. But this circumstance cannot validate the notion that, just as a Western (i.e. Greek) superstructure was placed upon a Semitic foundation, so now we may erect an Eastern superstructure again in order to make Christianity accessible to the Eastern mind. This is nothing to do with Paul's becoming all things to all men. The Greek element entered Christianity during its formative stage, and it was inserted by those who under God's sovereignty and guidance gave Christianity its normative form. The changes which pluralists like Panikkar, Samartha, Ariarajah, Wilfred Cantwell Smith, John Carman, Paul Knitter and others advocate are of a nature that (as the Jewish scholar, E. B. Horowitz, pointed out), Christianity cannot admit and still be true to itself.<sup>42</sup>

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## **Exclusivism, Tolerance, and Truth**

Harold Netland

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*Christian 'exclusivism' has increasingly come under sharp attack for supposedly being indefensible in our religiously pluralistic world. In this article several influential arguments against exclusivism—arguments which claim that it must be rejected since it is inherently intolerant or that it is based upon faulty notions of religious truth—are critically examined and are convincingly shown to be wanting. He concludes that if we are to have a view of the relation among religions which is epistemologically sound, and accurately portrays the values and beliefs of the respective religions, something like traditional Christian 'exclusivism' is unavoidable.*

Editor

Few issues confronting Christians today are as significant or as controversial as the problem of the relation of Christianity to other religious traditions. What makes religious pluralism so problematic is the fact that adherents of various religions seem to be making very different, even contradictory, claims about the human condition and its relation to the religious ultimate. At the centre of issues stemming from religious pluralism is the

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<sup>42</sup> in 'A Jewish Response' in *Christian Faith*, 64ff.

inescapable and knotty problem of conflicting truth claims.<sup>1</sup> Theravada Buddhists, Muslims, Advaita Vedanta Hindus, and Christians make wildly differing claims about the religious ultimate, the human predicament, and the nature of salvation or enlightenment. Who, if any, is correct?

For centuries it was accepted that since incompatible truth claims are being made, not all of the claims of the various traditions can be true. Some must be false. And thus it has traditionally been held that the Muslim and the orthodox Christian cannot both be correct in their respective beliefs about the identity of Jesus. Christians, convinced that the central affirmations found in the Bible are true, have regarded the person and work of Jesus Christ as unique, definitive, and normative, and the beliefs of other faiths which conflict with Scripture as being at best distorted or incomplete, if not simply false. This traditional position is reflected in the Lausanne Covenant of 1974: [p. 241](#)

We also regard as derogatory to Christ and the Gospel every kind of syncretism and dialogue which implies that Christ speaks equally through all religions and ideologies, Jesus Christ, being himself the only God-man, who gave himself as the only ransom for sinners, is the only mediator between God and man. There is no other name by which we must be saved (Douglas 1975:4.)

For lack of more adequate terminology, let us call this the Christian exclusivist position. Christian exclusivists, then, are those who maintain the uniqueness and normativity of the person and work of Jesus Christ, the truth and authority of the Bible as God's definitive self-revelation, and who assert that where the claims of Scripture are incompatible with those of other faiths, the latter are not to be accepted as truth.<sup>2</sup>

It is important to recognize that Christian exclusivism is a species of a more general exclusivist position regarding the relation among religions. In this general sense, exclusivism can be defined as the position which holds that the central claims of one's own religious tradition are true, and that where beliefs of other traditions appear to be incompatible with those of one's own tradition, the former are to be rejected as false. What is often overlooked is that most religious traditions (with the possible exception of certain forms of Hinduism) are exclusivist in this sense. Theravada Buddhists, for example, characteristically reject as false those claims made by Christians which are incompatible with Buddhism.

In spite of its dominant position in the church throughout the centuries, Christian exclusivism has fallen upon hard times in recent years. Increasingly, it is being attacked by theologians and missionaries as naive, intolerant, and the product of an immoral religious imperialism. Waldron Scott speaks of the 'sheer incredibility to the modern person of an exclusivist approach' to the relation among religions (Scott 1981:69). Today a growing consensus exists among both Roman Catholics and Protestants that exclusivism is indefensible and must be rejected by sensitive Christians.

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<sup>1</sup> By 'truth claim' I mean any explicit or implicit claim to truth; that is, any statement which explicitly or implicitly affirms that a particular state of affairs obtains. 'Today is Friday', 'My dog is brown', and 'There is no God but Allah and Muhammad is his prophet' are all examples of truth claims.

<sup>2</sup> The use of the term 'exclusivism' is unfortunate in some respects, since it has, at least for some people, some undesirable connotations, such as narrow-mindedness, arrogance, insensitivity, self-righteousness, and so forth. The term is adopted here because of its wide use in the literature to refer to the position represented by the Lausanne Covenant. It is the thesis of this essay that a properly defined exclusivism need not have these undesirable associations. Further as defined here, Christian exclusivism does *not* entail that all of the claims of non-Christian religions must be false or that other religious traditions are without any inherent value.

Criticisms of exclusivism usually fall into one of three general [p. 242](#) categories: those which argue that exclusivism is intolerant or otherwise morally blameworthy, those which argue that exclusivism is somehow epistemologically deficient, and those which hold that exclusivism is not demanded by the data of Scripture. In this essay attention will be focused upon some arguments from the first two classes.<sup>3</sup> While fully aware of the difficulties associated with exclusivism, I am convinced that the widespread rejection of it is unwarranted and is largely based upon faulty reasoning as well as a misunderstanding of the implications of exclusivism. Since the issues involved are essentially epistemological in nature, the discussion will at times resort to philosophical analysis. I make no apologies for this. The central issues in the current debate over pluralism are inextricably linked to epistemology. Clear thinking on the relation of Christianity to other traditions demands careful and rigorous work in epistemology as well as a thorough understanding of the respective traditions themselves.

## EXCLUSIVISM AND INTOLERANCE

For some people the sheer fact of religious pluralism is sufficient reason for rejecting exclusivism. That, simply because there are many different and even conflicting claims to religious truth we should conclude that *none* of them can be exclusively true. Since the exclusivist claims of any given religion can always be countered by those from other traditions, we ought to reject all exclusivist claims to truth.<sup>4</sup>

However, some careful reflection exposes the fallacy here. Simply because there is a variety of competing claims to truth, it hardly follows that *all* such claims must be regarded as false. It is certainly logically possible that at least some are true. Surely each claim deserves to be evaluated carefully on its own merits.

Much more damaging, however, are arguments which call into question the moral integrity of Christian exclusivism. Such arguments—increasingly influential in contemporary discussions—assume that there is something inherently arrogant, intolerant, or morally blameworthy in exclusivism.

Exclusivism strikes more and more Christians as immoral. If the head [p. 243](#) proves it true, while the heart sees it as wicked, un-Christian, then should Christians not follow the heart? Maybe this is the crux of our dilemma (W. Cantwell Smith 1981a:202).

The conservative Evangelical declaration that there can be authentic, reliable revelation only in Christ simply does not hold up in light of the faith, dedication, love, and peace that Christians find in the teachings and especially in the followers of other religions (Knitter 1985:93).

But if we restrict our attention to the great world traditions, the only criterion by which any of these could be judged to be the one and only true religion, with all others dismissed as false, would be its own dogmatic assertion, in its more chauvinistic moments, to this effect (Hick 1982:90).

At a time when the histories of different nations are increasingly being drawn together, when different communities of faith are in dialogue with each other as never before, and when people of the world for good or bad share a common future the exclusive claims of particular communities generate tensions and lead to clashes (Samartha 1981:22).

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<sup>3</sup> That proper interpretation of the biblical data demands a kind of exclusivism is demonstrated in the excellent article by Professor Christopher J. H. Wright (1984).

<sup>4</sup> This position seems to be implicit in some statements by John H. Hick (1982:118–119 and 1984:157) and Stanley Samartha (1981:28f).

The exclusive attitude of the past which regard its own opinions as supreme and others as not worth discussing is no longer useful, if ever it was (Parrinder 1976:32).

Similarly, the historian Arnold Toynbee asserted that the only way to purge Christianity of the 'sinful state of mind' of exclusive-mindedness and intolerance is to shed the traditional Christian belief that Christianity is unique (Toynbee 1957:95f.).

These are harsh words indeed, and if accurate would require the rejection of exclusivism by all morally sensitive persons. But in Christian exclusivism necessarily intolerant of other faiths? is the exclusivist necessarily guilty of arrogance, pride, or insensitivity to others? Is exclusivism necessarily an obstacle to greater global understanding, cooperation, and peace?

In considering such questions we must begin by admitting the shameful fact that throughout history religious exclusivists have often acted in highly barbarous and intolerant ways to those of other faiths. Not only is this the case in Christian church history but it is true of Hinduism, Islam, and Buddhism as well (cf. Parrinder 1976: chapter 3). Cardinal Newman's apt comment is unfortunately all too accurate in depicting a long tradition of persecution and intolerance in religious history: 'Oh, how we hate one another for the love of God!' However, our concern here is not so much with history, nor even with the way people do in fact act in the present, as it is with the notions of exclusivism and tolerance themselves. Is there anything in the concept of Christian exclusivism itself which demands such intolerance and arrogance?

Let us examine the concept of religious tolerance more carefully. p.244 Today a widely accepted assumption exists that being tolerant of other religions involves holding a positive attitude toward them, or responding favourably to adherents of other faiths. Often this positive attitude is directed not simply toward adherents of other religions but to their beliefs as well. Thus, Raimundo Panikkar seemed to imply that if one is truly tolerant of others he or she will not judge or critically evaluate other religions (Panikkar 1978:xviii). On this assumption, it follows that the Christian exclusivist who accuses Hindus or Buddhists of holding false beliefs is grossly intolerant.

Now there is an important truth here. By tolerating some entity  $x$  I am in some sense accepting  $x$  or displaying a favourable attitude toward  $x$ . Conversely, by being intolerant of  $x$  I am refusing to accept  $x$ . But it is crucial to see that in tolerating  $x$  there is also an important sense in which I am *not* approving of  $x$ . That is, tolerance involves acceptance in one sense of something toward which one has a negative estimation (cf. Newman 1978:187). It hardly makes sense to speak of tolerating something of which one heartily approves! Thus Maurice Cranston defines toleration as 'a policy of patient forbearance in the presence of something which is disliked or disapproved of' (Cranston 1967:143). Toleration has an element of condemnation built into its meaning.

Jay Newman correctly notes that it is widely and mistakenly assumed that tolerating a belief is primarily a matter of having a favourable judgement about the content of that belief (Newman 1978:188). Thus Christians who are willing to accept the claims of other religions as true (or at least not completely false) are regarded as tolerant while exclusivists who reject some such claims as false are said to be intolerant. But this reflects a confused notion of religious tolerance. For religious tolerance involves acceptance in some sense of something (e.g., a belief) toward which one has a less than positive estimation. Thus, if one tolerates a religious belief  $p$  then one accepts  $p$  in some sense while still not necessarily endorsing the content of  $p$ . One can tolerate  $p$  while still regarding  $p$  as false, or at best dubious. It is simply nonsensical to speak of tolerating a belief that one happens to accept as true. A fundamental distinction emerges here: it is one thing to accept someone's holding a particular belief, or someone's *right* to hold a



particular belief, but quite another matter to accept the content of the belief itself. Religious tolerance does imply the former, but not the latter.

An example might help to clarify the point. I have before me the August 10, 1986, issue of the *Japan Times*, which contains a letter to the editor from a Jodo-Shinshu Buddhist priest. In it he complains of a [p. 245](#) Christian missionary who regularly drives past the Buddhist temple during funerals and other services, blaring over loudspeakers, 'You heathens had better consider the afterlife and repent, or else you will roast in hell!'

I suspect that few would hesitate to call this highly intolerant behaviour, and it is reproach to the cause of Christ that this kind of activity occurs at all. But notice *why* we condemn this as intolerant. Intolerance is marked by the refusal to accept something one can and ought (morally) to accept. The missionary in the example is intolerant because he refuses to recognize the right of the temple to conduct religious rites and services in peace, without interference from outside. It is not the fact that he happens to believe that the priest and the others are on their way to hell (distasteful as this may be) that marks him as intolerant: nor is it the fact that he is trying to win converts to Christianity. Rather, it is the highly insensitive and repugnant manner in which he expresses his views and seeks to persuade that compels us to call him intolerant.

In tolerating a belief *p*, then, one is not adopting a special attitude toward the content of *p* itself (one might still regard it as false); rather, one is adopting a certain acceptance of someone's believing in *p*.<sup>5</sup> It would seem, then, that there is nothing necessarily intolerant in maintaining that religious beliefs which are incompatible with central Christian beliefs are false. This is not to deny that someone holding this position might act in a highly intolerant manner toward those of other faiths. The point here is simply that such intolerance is not *demanded* by exclusivism. There is no necessary connection between holding the beliefs of a particular group to be false, and the radical mistreatment of members of that group (Griffiths and Lewis 1983:77f.). Certainly one can consider the beliefs of another to be false and yet treat that person with dignity and respect. To deny this is to suggest that we can respect and treat properly only those with whom we happen to agree. But surely this is nonsense. Is it not a mark of maturity to be able to live peaceably with, and act properly toward, those with whom we might profoundly disagree?

A further question arises, however, regarding attempts to persuade others to convert to Christianity. Is this not intolerant? [p. 246](#)

As the example cited above indicates, there certainly are insensitive, intolerant, unethical means of persuasion, and it is to our shame that those who call themselves Christian sometimes engage in such practices. However, provided one abides by the appropriate social and cultural norms and does not in any way infringe upon the dignity and freedom of the individual, I fail to see how attempting to persuade *in and of itself* should be rejected as intolerant. When conducted properly, attempting to persuade a person to give up a particular belief in favour of an alternative belief need not be morally questionable. Notice that if we do not accept this view of tolerance, the implication is that any time people engage in discussion or dialogue in order to overcome disagreement in belief they are being intolerant of each other!

## EXCLUSIVISM AND EXCLUSIVISTIC TRUTH

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<sup>5</sup> 'So it would seem that tolerating a religious belief is not primarily a matter of making a judgement about the content of that belief. It is not acceptance of the belief *per se*, rather, it is acceptance of someone's holding a belief which one considers to be significantly inferior to one's own alternative belief, if not by the standard of truth and falsity, then by some other standard' (Newman 1978:189).

It is not uncommon to come across arguments which suggest that exclusivism must be rejected because it is epistemologically naive, or because it is based upon outdated 'Western' concepts of truth and belief which are inappropriate in dealing with the realities of pluralism. When one really appreciates what religious truth and faith are all about, it is claimed, then it will be clear that maintaining that the beliefs of other religions are false is simply inappropriate.

One variation on this theme comes from those who hold that Christian exclusivism is based upon a Western (viz., Greek) notion of truth as exclusive and 'either/or', and that this conception of truth is inadequate. Wilfred Cantwell Smith claims that 'in all ultimate matters, truth lies not in an either-or but in a both-and' (Smith 1965:17). And Paul Knitter asserts,

Today such a model of defining truth by exclusion, by making either/or absolute judgements, has been opened to criticism from various fronts.... Our contemporary historical consciousness has recognized the ongoing, pluralistic nature of truth. (Knitter 1985:218).

From now on, he claims, we must recognize that '... all religious experience and all religious language must be two-eyed, dipolar, a union of opposites' (Knitter 1985:221).

That we must stop looking at religious traditions through an exclusivistic, 'either/or' framework and should adopt a holistic, dipolar, 'two-eyed' approach is the thesis of Bishop John A. T. Robinson's provocative book, *Truth Is Two-Eyed* (1979). Robinson draws a contrast between two distinct approaches to religious phenomena—a p. 247 'one-eyed' approach and a 'two-eyed' approach. The former emphasizes just one dominant conception of the religious ultimate, and carries with it an implicit or explicit claim to exclusivity. On the other hand, the 'two-eyed' approach rejects any such claim to exclusivity, and incorporates two basic visions of reality which are found in varying degrees in both Hinduism and Christianity—the religious ultimate as personal and as nonpersonal. Robinson claims that the 'one-eyed' approach carries with it an unwarranted exclusiveness which is narrow-minded and negative, and is the product of bigoted ignorance (Robinson 1979: x, 16, 24, 54). Religious truth can be attained only by transcending the 'either/or one-eyed' approach of exclusivism.

But truth may come from refusing this either-or and accepting that the best working model of reality may be elliptical or bi-polar, or indeed multi-polar (Robinson 1979:22).

We should observe that Robinson is not calling for a naive syncretism, 'taking up partial insights from every quarter, fusing and absorbing them into an all-embracing whole' (Robinson 1979:21). Rather, he is concerned to discover how one can be faithful to both visions of the religious ultimate (viz., as personal and nonpersonal) at once, 'without the exclusive and negative corollaries of a one-eyed approach' (Robinson 1979:21). Although one should not minimize or ignore basic differences in religious traditions, one should push beyond such differences toward the 'unitire pluralism' which, while recognizing the differences, allows for a 'unity of vision' among the two polar centres (Robinson 1979:39, chapter 4).

Similarly, Paul Knitter calls for a new model of truth:

Truth will no longer be identified by its ability to exclude or absorb others. Rather, what is true will reveal itself mainly by its ability to *relate* to other expressions of truth and to *grow* through these relationships—truth defined not by exclusion but by relation. (Knitter 1985:219).

These proposals are difficult to assess, since it is not entirely clear just what is being advanced as the preferred alternative to exclusivistic truth. Much of the language (especially in Robinson's case) makes use of suggestive metaphors and symbols, but what one gains in literary style of one often sacrifices in perspicuity. There seem to be at least three ways to interpret the above comments:

(1) Exclusivism is to be rejected because of its narrowmindedness and unwillingness to learn from, and be informed by, other religious traditions. p. 248

(2) Exclusivism is to be rejected because of its acceptance of the principle of noncontradiction, in religion one must not be limited by the 'either/or' exclusivism of the principle of noncontradiction, but must go beyond it to recognize the dipolar nature of truth.

(3) Exclusivism is to be rejected because it fails to recognize that in spite of genuine differences in beliefs, ultimately the truth claims of the major religions do not contradict each other but are complementary.

Each of these possible interpretations will be briefly examined. I will argue that only (1) is epistemologically defensible, and that it poses no threat to a properly construed Christian exclusivism.

1. Perhaps Robinson and Knitter are indicting exclusivism simply because it is perceived to be a position which fails to recognize that no religious tradition can have exhaustive knowledge of God and that there is much that the Christian can learn from the Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, and others. If so, their criticism is well taken. For it would be the height of hubris for any human to claim complete or exhaustive knowledge of the divine. (Can one have *exhaustive* knowledge of anything?) Notice, however, that it does not follow from rejection of the claim to exhaustive knowledge of God that a particular religious tradition cannot be justified in claiming accurate and reliable (though admittedly not exhaustive) knowledge of God. And, while undoubtedly there are exclusivists who are narrow-minded and are unwilling to learn from other religions, there is nothing in Christian exclusivism as defined in this essay which rules out Christians learning and benefitting from interaction with other religions. A Christian exclusivist certainly can and should be willing to learn from other religious traditions.

2. But I suspect that more than this is intended in the attack upon exclusivistic truth. Although not explicitly stated in this manner, it is possible to interpret Robinson's and Knitter's comments as a rejection of exclusivistic truth because of its dependence upon the principle of noncontradiction. Strict adherence to the principle of noncontradiction is frequently regarded as a hindrance, rather than an asset, in understanding religious 'truth'. There is often a subtle (or not so subtle!) distrust of clear-cut logical categories and distinctions.

However, even in religion, the price one must pay for rejecting the principle of noncontradiction is simply too high. The principle of noncontradiction can be expressed in both its logical and ontological forms.<sup>6</sup> The logical principle applies to propositions,<sup>7</sup> and states that a p. 249 proposition cannot be both true and not true (false). The ontological principle applies to states of affairs (viz., anything that is or is not the case) and maintains that something cannot simultaneously both be and not be in the same

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<sup>6</sup> The classic statement of the inescapably basic nature of the principle of noncontradiction is found in Aristotle. *Metaphysics*, 1005b, 15–1009a. See also Copi (1978), 11. pp. 306–308.

<sup>7</sup> A proposition is, roughly, the *meaning* expressed by a declarative sentence. For our purposes we can think of propositions as roughly synonymous with statements. Whereas sentences are always formulated in a given language, propositions are translinguistic in that the same proposition can be expressed in a variety of languages (cf. Gorovitz *et al.*, 1979, pp. 85–98).

respect. Contradiction has a strict definition: it is the affirmation and denial of the same meaning. The price of rejecting the principle of noncontradiction is forfeiture of the possibility of meaningful affirmation or statement about anything at all—including statement about the religious ultimate. One who rejects the principle of noncontradiction is reduced to utter silence, for he or she has abandoned a necessary condition for any coherent or meaningful position whatsoever.

That the principle of noncontradiction is inescapably basic to all thought and being can be demonstrated as follows. Suppose that someone asserts that in religious matters one should not be limited by the principle of noncontradiction but must advance beyond it to recognize the ‘unitive pluralism’ of religious truth. Let us use ‘P’ to stand for the statement of this position.

P: In religion one should not be limited by the principle of noncontradiction but should go beyond it to recognize the ‘unitive pluralism’ of religious truth.

Clearly, the one asserting P does so with the presumption that what is expressed by P is true, that the state of affairs to which P refers actually obtains. (If this is not the case, then, of course, there is little point in considering P!) And in advancing P as true he or she implicitly rejects what is incompatible with P as false. For to deny this is to imply that what is being claimed by P is both that in religion one should not be limited by the principle of noncontradiction *and* that in religion one should be limited by the principle of noncontradiction. But clearly this latter position is absurd. Now, if in asserting P one is implicitly rejecting what is incompatible with P as false, then one is actually appealing to the principle of noncontradiction in the assertion of P. That is, the principle is actually being presupposed in the very statement of the rejection of the principle! p. 250

It is simply impossible to refute the principle of noncontradiction since it is a necessary condition for *any* coherent, intelligible, or meaningful position whatsoever. And it is crucial to see that this is not simply a Western presupposition which is not necessarily binding in a non-Western context. The fact that Aristotle (a Greek) happens to have been the first to formulate the principle explicitly is entirely irrelevant. The principle is binding upon all humans—Chinese, Japanese, Indians, as well as Greeks. The principle is irrefutable since any attempt at refutation necessarily makes implicit appeal to the principle itself (cf. Hackett 1979:6–7, 118; Copi 1978:306f.). Significantly, no less a critic of exclusivism than R. Panikkar admits the exclusive nature of truth:

A believing member of a religion in one way or another considers his religion to be true. Now, the claim to truth has a certain built-in exclusivity. If a given statement is true, its contradictory cannot also be true. And if a certain human tradition claims to offer a universal context for truth, anything contrary to that ‘universal truth’ will have to be declared false (Panikkar 1978:xiv).

3. It is possible to interpret the earlier comments of Knitter and Robinson as not calling for rejection of the principle of noncontradiction, but as advocating the position that although beliefs among the various religions may initially appear to be contradictory but are complementary. Exclusivism is then to be rejected since it naively maintains that there are contradictions between, say, the basic beliefs of Christianity and Buddhism when in reality this is not the case.

This is an increasingly popular position today, and it finds its most persuasive spokesmen among those who accept what Paul Knitter calls the ‘theocentric model’ of the relation among religions. In addition to Knitter, W. Cantwell Smith, J. A. T. Robinson, R. Panikkar, S. Samartha, and J. Hick are articulate apologists for this view. Roughly, the theocentric position holds that ultimately it is the one divine reality who is at the centre

of reflection and devotion in all the various religions, and that no single tradition can legitimately claim superiority or definitive truth. While readily admitting significant differences among beliefs in the various traditions, it is maintained that ultimately all the major religious traditions are authentic historically and culturally conditioned responses to the same divine reality.

Space limitations prevent consideration in depth of this proposal here. However, several brief comments are in order. Since the theocentric model is a comprehensive theory about all the major religious traditions its adequacy will be a function of at least two [p. 251](#) factors: (i) the accuracy with which it reflects and the ease with which it accommodates the various traditions, and (ii) the internal consistency and plausibility of the theory itself. I have argued elsewhere that this model is seriously deficient in both respects (Netland 1986). In particular, I have argued that the theocentric model fails as a general explanation of religious pluralism, since it is forced to deal with troublesome exclusivistic doctrines (e.g., *satori* in Zen Buddhism and the doctrine of the incarnation in Christianity) by reinterpreting them so as to eliminate problematic elements. But such reinterpretation actually distorts the respective traditions.

Further, the theocentric position is logically committed to the position that the many different conceptions of the divine or religious ultimate (Allah, Shiva, Krishna, Yahweh, Nirvana, Sunyata, etc.) are all various culturally and historically conditioned images of the same single divine reality. This entails that term such as 'Allah', 'Jesus Christ', 'Krishna', 'Shiva', 'Nirvana', and 'Emptiness' ultimately all have the same referent, although the connotations of the respective terms may differ. However, the implausibility of this position becomes clear when one carefully considers the meanings of these terms as they are used in their respective traditions. It is difficult indeed to avoid concluding that the ontological implications of the Judeo-Christian image of the divine as Yahweh, who is ontologically distinct from, and independent of, the created world, are incompatible with the ontological monism of the notion of Nirguna Brahman from Advaita Vedanta, or the monistic idealism of the Yogacara school of Buddhism.

Interestingly, even Harold Coward, hardly an advocate of exclusivism, recognizes the difficulty posed by traditions such as Advaita Vedanta and Yogacara Buddhism for the theocentric model. 'Christian theologians, even those with considerable exposure to Buddhism and Hinduism, seem almost wilfully to turn a blind eye to this problem' (Coward 1985:45).

## EXCLUSIVISM AND PROPOSITIONAL TRUTH

The notion of truth operative in Christian exclusivism has been attacked from yet another perspective. Exclusivism is based upon the idea that *beliefs* are integral to religious traditions and that religious beliefs are either true or false. But a number of recent thinkers has argued that this emphasis upon beliefs and their accompanying truth value exhibits profound confusion over the nature of religious faith and practice. In this connection perhaps no one has been as influential as [P. 252](#) the Islamic scholar and historian of religion, Wilfred Cantwell Smith. Smith's many writings are always stimulating and provide much material for reflection and discussion. Our concern here is primarily with his attack upon exclusivism because of its dependence upon the notion of propositional truth and his own alternative theory of religious truth as personal truth.

Smith is insistent that truth and falsity, as generally understood, are inapplicable to religious traditions.

Further, I would contend that man's religious life is liberated, not devastated, when it is recognized that 'a religion' cannot in and of itself be true or false. The notion that a given



religion may be true, or even more, that it may not be true, has caused untold mischief. Or again, that one religion is true while another is false; or equally misleading, that all religions are equally true (which is, of course, nonsense). We must learn that this is not where religious truth and falsity lie. Religions, either simply or together, cannot be true or false—as one rejoices to recognize once one is emancipated from supposing that there are such things in our universe (Smith 1962:322).

It is dangerous and impious to suppose that Christianity is true, as an abstract system, something ‘out there’ impersonally subsisting, with which we can take comfort in being linked—its effortless truth justifying us and giving us status. Christianity, I would suggest, is not true absolutely, impersonally, statically; rather, it can *become* true, if and as you or I appropriate it to ourselves and interiorize it, insofar, as we live it out from day to day. It becomes true as we take it off the shelf and personalize it, in actual existence (Smith 1967:67–68).

There are two reasons for Smith’s rejection of the notion that religions can be true or false. First, he claims that it is a serious error to think of ‘a religion’ as a distinct, ‘systematic religious entity, conceptually identifiable, and characterizing a distinct community’ (Smith 1962: 119; cf. also 1981b:93–94). Rather than thinking in terms of Buddhism, Hinduism, and Christianity as distinct religious systems, it is more helpful to concentrate upon the personal faith of religious individuals, which collectively makes up the religious history of humankind. Second, Smith holds that when we speak of truth in religion we must not think in terms of the truth and falsity of religions or religious beliefs as such but rather of the personal truth of religious faith.

We cannot here consider Smith’s thesis that it is a confusion to think in terms of ‘a religion’, or of distinct religions.<sup>8</sup> But we should observe p. 253 that even if it is granted that the notion of a religion as a distinct entity is somehow mistaken, the problem of the status of religious beliefs and conflicting truth claims in religion still remains. For we would still have individuals who accept and propagate certain beliefs, dogmas, teachings, and the like, and presumably these are all accepted by the individuals in question as true. We would still have, for example, Augustine maintaining that an omnipotent God exists who created the universe *ex nihilo* and Vasubandhu asserting that it is simply the product of karmic effect. So simply shifting attention from religions as such to the religious orientation of individuals does not dispose of the question of the truth value of the religious beliefs of believers.

What does concern us here, however, is Smith’s contention that when the adjective ‘true’ is applied to religion, it must be understood not as propositional truth but as personal truth. For this constitutes the heart of his attack upon exclusivism.

Truth and falsity are often felt in modern times to be properties or functions of statements or propositions: whereas the present proposal is that much is to be gained by seeing them rather, or anyway by seeing them also, and primarily, as properties or functions of persons ... The very suggestion that truth is not an inert and impersonal observable but that truth means truth for me, for you, is challenging ... I particularly wish to query the vision that it is legitimate or helpful to regard truth, and falsity, as pertaining to statements considered apart from the person who makes them or about whom they are made (Smith 1974:20, 29, 31).

Religious traditions cannot be dubbed true or false, in the sense of simplistic logic. They can be seen as less or more true in the sense of enabling those who look at life and the universe through their patterns to perceive smaller or larger, less important or more important, areas of reality, to formulate and to ponder less or more significant issues, to act less or more truly, less or more truly be (Smith 1981b:94).

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<sup>8</sup> But see the incisive critique of Smith by Niniam Smart (1974:45–47).

The truth of anything that pertains to man lies—has lain, historically—not sheerly in that thing, but in man’s involvement with it (Smith 1981b:67).

Truth, I submit, is a humane, not an objective, concept. It does not lie in propositions (Smith 1981b:190).

Unfortunately, Smith never provides a clear definition of just what is meant by personal truth, but what is intended seems to be something like the following: The locus of truth is not propositions, statements, or beliefs but persons. Religious truth does not reflect correspondence with reality so much as it signifies integrity and faithfulness in a person, authenticity in one’s life, or existentially appropriating certain beliefs in one’s life and conduct. [p. 254](#)

Human conduct, in word or deed, is the nexus between man’s inner life and the surrounding world. Truth at the personalistic level is that quality by which both halves of that relationship are chaste and appropriate, are true (Smith 1974:26).

Clearly there is a strong moral element in personalistic truth. ‘There is no room here for that kind of truth that leaves unaffected the moral character and private behaviour of those who know it’ (Smith 1974:37). Personal truth is not something abstract and detached from one’s own life; it demands existential appropriation. ‘No statement might be accepted as true that had not been inwardly appropriated by its author’ (Smith 1974:35). Further, there is nothing static or unchanging about personal truth. Beliefs—and even religious traditions—can *become true*, or might be ‘true for me but false for you’. A religious tradition ‘... becomes more or less true in the case of particular persons as it informs their lives and their groups and shapes and nurtures their faith’ (Smith 1981b:187).

Acceptance of personal truth has far-reaching implications for exclusivism. For instead of regarding truth and falsity as properties of propositions and beliefs which are accepted by believers in the various traditions, truth will be regarded as a dynamic, changing product of the faith of individuals. The assumption that religious beliefs are integral to religious traditions, that they have objective truth value and that sometimes beliefs from different traditions conflict with each other—an assumption basic to Christian exclusivism—will have to be rejected as grossly misleading. No longer would it make sense to speak of the truth of, say, the doctrine of the incarnation without also making reference to the response of faith to that doctrine. The doctrine could only be said to be *true for someone*, and it would only be true to the extent that someone existentially appropriated belief in the doctrine.

What are we to make of this proposal? We should begin by observing that Smith’s emphasis upon the subjective, personal dimension of religious phenomena is quite legitimate: religion is a complex dynamic which is centred around the religious faith of individuals. He correctly points out that religion cannot be reduced to a tidy set of religious beliefs. And our concern in studying religion should not be simply an academic interest in beliefs themselves but in understanding the comprehensive religious orientation of believers. Further, it is possible that he intends his proposal to be simply a reminder that in religious matters mere intellectual assent to propositions is insufficient: one must appropriate beliefs so that one’s character and conduct are significantly altered (we are to be *doers* of the Word and not hearers only!). If so, this is certainly a necessary [p. 255](#) reminder, even if it is somewhat misleadingly presented as a theory of truth. But I suspect that more is intended than simply this healthy exhortation. For throughout his writings personalistic truth is presented as the preferred alternative to propositional truth. However, there is a pervasive ambiguity in his discussion which allows for at least three possible interpretations:

- (4) Personal truth can legitimately be applied to religion whereas propositional truth cannot.
- (5) Both personal and propositional truth can be applied to religion, but personal truth is somehow more basic and fundamental than propositional truth.
- (6) Both personal and propositional truth can be applied to religion, but propositional truth is more basic than personal truth.

I will argue that only (6) is epistemologically acceptable, and that on such an interpretation the problem of conflicting truth claims—and thus exclusivism—is still with us.

The major difficulty with (4) and (5) is that the epistemologically most basic notion of truth in any realm whatsoever is that of propositional truth. Of course, ‘truth’ and ‘true’ can have a wide variety of meanings in ordinary use: we can thus say ‘the purse is true alligator’, or ‘he is a true Democrat’, or ‘Jesus is the Truth’, or ‘her music is full of truth’, or ‘his speech just doesn’t have the ring of truth’, and so on. And it may even be that something like the concept of personal truth is indispensable to understanding religious phenomena. But what Smith fails to recognize is that there is an important sense in which propositional truth is logically basic and is presupposed by all other meanings of ‘true’.<sup>9</sup> p. 256

This can be illustrated as follows. Let us use ‘S’ to stand for the statement of Smith’s theory of personal truth.

In religion, truth is to be understood primarily as personal, that is, as having its locus in persons who satisfactorily appropriate religious beliefs.

It is crucial to see that if p. is offered as something which we should accept as true (and surely this is Smith’s intent), then it is itself dependent upon the notion of propositional truth. For p. expresses a proposition which makes a claim about reality; it asserts that reality is such that truth is primarily personal and has its locus in persons who satisfactorily appropriate religious beliefs. And in proposing p. Smith is suggesting that we accept it because it is *true*, that is, that reality actually is as the proposition expressed by p. asserts it to be. It is important to see here that the sense in which p. is presumed to be true is *not* that of personal truth. For if p. were said to be true only in the sense of personal truth, then it would be true only insofar as you or I appropriate it to allow it to impact significantly upon our lives. p. might then be true for Smith but false for me, or true for me but false for you. But clearly this is not what Professor Smith has in mind. Thus in advancing his theory he is implicitly presuming that p. is true in the logically basic sense of propositional truth.

Further, the suggestion that religious beliefs *become true* to the extent that they are internalized and appropriated—if meant to exclude the notion of propositional truth—is

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<sup>9</sup> Smith has little use for what he disparagingly calls ‘Western logic’: ‘Modern western logic, I myself am pretty sure, though serviceable for computers, is in other ways inept and is particularly ill-suited, it seems, for thinking about spiritual matters’ (Smith 1981a:201). Unfortunately, Smith gives little evidence of understanding what logic is all about. While there is a sense in which we can speak of ‘Western logic’ or ‘Indian logic’, etc., the most basic principles of logic—such as the principles of noncontradiction and identity—are normative, universal, and transcultural in that they are necessary conditions of all rational activity and communication, regardless of the culture or language in which these occur. One must distinguish between rejecting and refuting these principles. While there have been individuals in Western and non-Western cultures who have rejected the principles of noncontradiction or identity, no one has refuted them, since any attempt at refutation necessarily makes appeal to these very principles. For more on the objectivity of logic see Roger Trigg (1973); Hilary Patnam (1981: chapter 5); and the classic work by Edmund Husserl (1970: vol.1. chapters 1–8).

confused. For one will appropriate such beliefs only if he or she already accepts them as true in a nonpersonalistic, or propositional, sense. That is, the belief that Allah is a righteous judge will only 'become true' in a personal sense if the Muslim first accepts the proposition expressed by 'Allah is a righteous judge' as true. To put this in other terms: we might admit that 'true' can be used to mean 'authentic', 'genuine', 'faithful', and so on. Religious truth would then be a quality of life in the believer such that there are no glaring gaps between what one professes and the manner in which one lives.

To say that 'Allah is a righteous judge' is true would then be to recognize that a particular Muslim's life and conduct is congruous with belief that Allah is a righteous judge. But this presupposes that the Muslim accepts and appropriates not only a set of practices and a manner of life but also a set of beliefs and values which taken together articulate a comprehensive perspective on reality. And such beliefs will be accepted in the first place because the Muslim regards them as true. That is, as accurately portraying the way reality actually is. Thus personal truth should not be regarded as an alternative to propositional [p. 257](#) truth, for it presupposes propositional truth (cf. Wainwright 1984:358f. and Wiebe 1981:212f).

Donald Wiebe correctly notes that Cantwell Smith seems to be confusing the question of truth with that of response to the truth, or with the existentialist concern with 'authentic existence', of not living a lie (Wiebe 1981:213). But the truth value of a belief or proposition and the degree to which one allows that belief to impact upon one's life are two very different things.

We should note in conclusion that Smith's theory also fails to recognize that propositions are inseparable from religious belief and commitment. To be sure, 'belief' and 'proposition' are synonymous, and there is more to believing than simply giving mental assent to a proposition. But in believing one always believes *something*, and *what* one believes is a proposition. Believing may involve more than simple assent to propositions but it cannot be reduced to something less than that. Wiebe correctly notes that 'talk of truth in religion must concern itself primarily with belief [doctrine]' (Wiebe 1981:185). The fact is that adherents of the various religions believe certain propositions about the religious ultimate, humanity, and the nature of the universe to be true. And where these beliefs conflict—as they occasionally do—we have the problem of conflicting truth claims.

## CONCLUSION

We have critically examined several influential arguments which have been levelled against Christian exclusivism. I have argued that, properly construed, there is nothing in exclusivism itself which demands an intolerant or insensitive approach to other religious traditions. Further, there is nothing in the concept of tolerance which is incompatible with holding that some of the beliefs of other traditions are false. Similarly, I have argued that attempts to discredit exclusivism by showing the inadequacy of an exclusivistic, propositional understanding of truth cannot succeed. To the contrary, any adequate understanding of religious truth must include the notions of the exclusivity and propositional nature of truth.

Of course, we must recognize that there is much more to religion than mere religious beliefs. And certainly religious traditions can be appreciated and evaluated on a wide variety of grounds. We might for example, evaluate them on the basis of their historic record in contributing toward promotion of literacy or medical care, or on the basis of their tendency to provide social cohesion and stability, or to promote justice and equality, and the like. But I suggest that the most [p. 258](#) important question is not what a religion

does for society, but rather whether what it affirms about the nature of reality is in fact the case. The most significant question we can ask of any religious tradition is whether its fundamental claims are true.<sup>10</sup>

If we are to take seriously the concepts and beliefs of the various religious and portray them accurately, and also have a view which is epistemologically sound, I do not see how we can avoid something very much like the traditional Christian exclusivist position. And if the central claims of the Christian faith are true—as I am convinced that they are—then it follows that those claims made by other traditions which are incompatible with Christianity are false. As the late Bishop Stephen Neill put it,

The Christian faith claims for itself that it is the only form of faith for men. By its own claim to truth it casts the shadow of imperfect truth on every other system. This Christian claim is naturally offensive to modern man, brought up in the atmosphere of relativism, in which tolerance is regarded almost as the highest of the virtues. But we must not suppose that this claim to universal validity is something that can be quietly removed from the Gospel without changing it into something entirely different from what it is. (Neill 1984:30).

Christian exclusivism does not entail that *none* of the claims made by other religious traditions are true. But what it does deny is that beliefs of other traditions can be true when they are incompatible with those derived from Scripture. Further, as noted earlier, Christian exclusivism certainly cannot boast of exhaustive knowledge of God. There is a vast sum of knowledge about God and the world of which we are unaware. And finally, there is no room for exclusivism, properly understood, for any pride or arrogant triumphalism. All of us are, at best, no more than sinners saved by God's grace. Nor should we forget that adherents of other religious traditions are, like us, created in God's image and the objects of God's limitless and unfathomable love. Humility and genuine respect should characterize our interaction with those of other faiths.

But it is a serious error to presume that such humility and respect demand glossing over the question of truth. [p. 259](#)

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<sup>10</sup> Stanley Samartha makes the curious statement that 'the question of truth is indeed important, but God's love is even more important ... Love takes precedence over truth' (1981: 54–55). But surely this is unacceptable as it stands. Important as the love of God is, the concept of God's love would have no relevance for anyone apart from the truth of certain key propositions—e.g., that there is a God, that God loves all persons, that God's love is supremely manifested in the incarnation, etc.



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# Universalism and New Testament Christianity

Andrew Olu Igenoza

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*The religious situation in Africa is as pluralistic as elsewhere in the world. Not surprisingly, the Christian claim of the uniqueness of Christ has met with a great deal of opposition and resentment. Writing from African soil, Igenoza declares, 'It is a God-given calling to proclaim the gospel to every creature. The proclamation of Christ is a great responsibility and should be done with humility, persuasion and love, and not with a "holier than-thou" attitude ... Universalism is no more than an empty and an irresponsible truce which is alien to the spirit of the New Testament. It would only further confuse an already confused situation.'*

Editor

## INTRODUCTION

Africa is at the cross-roads. That continent is fast becoming a breeding-ground for every form of religion and ideology, thanks to modern means of transportation and communication from any corner of the globe to another. Thus, 'light from the East' not only beams its rays as far as the West, but also wields its influence in the African heartland, 'the land of whirring wings which is beyond the rivers of Ethiopia' ([Isa. 18:1](#)). The influence of Western civilization, the Communist impact, the rising tide of Islamic Fundamentalism, the current effort to revive African religions and culture—they all have made modern Africa a religious and an ideological battle-ground, thanks to modern technological facilities. Says E. Bolaji Idowu. 'We are, in fact, being presented, without consultation, with the phenomenon of the unification of the world—unification of compulsory "nearness" if not of voluntary fellowship.'<sup>1</sup>

An inevitable question in this kind of situation is: 'Can any group of people in Africa with a history of colonization, in an increasingly pluralistic context afford particularity in religion?' Again we could ask, 'Is such a stance not eccentric and dangerous in a more tolerant world?' Is the doctrine or belief in universal salvation, or of the ultimate salvation of all mankind, not the most sensible alternative? Is it not offensive and a show of intolerance for any Christian evangelist [p. 262](#) to proclaim that Jesus is 'the way, the truth and the life', and that no one can have access to God the Father except through him? In the same manner, should the Muslim adherent regard a person of another faith, or perhaps of no faith at all, as *Kafir*, a hopeless infidel? Why cannot all people of all faiths live together in harmony? After all, are not all peoples heading for the same eternal destination? The kind of answer we give to this series of questions is absolutely crucial, for it will unmistakably affect the way we theologize. A positive response to the above questions places us on the threshold of universalism, and its corollary of syncretism, i.e. the 'fusion or blending of religions'. The syncretist does not see why the best ideas of all the world religions cannot be brought together for the benefit of mankind. But the question is: how viable is this option, at least from the point of view of New Testament Christianity?

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<sup>1</sup> E. Bolaji Idowu, 'Faiths in Interaction', *Orita: Ibadan Journal of Religious Studies*, Vol. IV, No. 2, Dec. 1970, p. 85.

The task of this paper is, first of all, to attempt a survey of the religious situation in Tropical Africa, and to underscore the way in which this is related to Universalism; and then, secondly, to evaluate this from a New Testament perspective. My contention is that every religion found in Africa should be given the freedom to express and propagate itself in a peaceful atmosphere, and that under no circumstance should the Christian theologian or evangelist in Africa compromise the authentic New Testament message of salvation through Christ.

In African institutions of higher learning, and in the big cities, an observer is likely to come across religious banners or posters of all sorts, erected not only by Catholics, Baptists, Anglicans or Methodists, but also by the adherents of Eckankar, Krishna Consciousness, the Grail Message, the Rosicrucian Order (AMORC), the Baha'i Faith, Christian Science, and so on. One now comes across a phenomenon which was hardly observable in the pre-independence, and in the immediate post-independence, era—Africans clad in white wrappers, with their hair scraped to the skin, leaving a tuft somewhere, aspiring to practise the Krishna faith. There are those who travel to the USA, India or elsewhere as orthodox Christians (if only nominally) but who return as Hindus or as 'Christian Scientists'.

These new trends promote universalism and syncretism. Baha'ism, for example, has a temple of nine doors in Wilmette near Chicago. These doors, it is claimed, represent the 'nine religions of the world' which ultimately lead to God.<sup>2</sup> The great Hindu mystic, Rama-Krishna, p. 263 reportedly spoke of himself as 'the same soul that had been born before as Rama, as Krishna, as Jesus, or as Buddha'. His doctrine is that 'all paths lead to the same God'. Many liberal theologians, like Schleiermacher and Hocking, hold the notion that all adherents of all faiths are climbing the same mountain and will meet at the top.<sup>3</sup>

It seems obvious that groups like Eckankar, the Grail Message, and Krishna Consciousness, whose doctrines are finding an entrance into many an African heart, are neo-gnostic and syncretistic in intention. In 1975, the late B. H. Karo raised an alarm that the stage was well set for universalism in Africa.<sup>4</sup> That trend seems even more glaring now than when Karo wrote. Tokunboh Adeyemo has also had the reason to sound a note of warning about this trend.<sup>5</sup> The factors believed to be responsible for this state of affairs have been identified.<sup>6</sup> The first is the increasing tide of universalism in the countries where the foreign missionaries working in Africa have come from. There are perhaps fewer foreign missionaries in Africa today than heretofore; and thus the impact of their presence may be less felt; however, it remains considerable. And since many of the growing number of African theologians have been trained (and still train) in Universities and Seminaries in the West; and since they read textbooks and commentaries mostly written by Western scholars—or, at times, by African scholars greatly influenced by Western scholarship—any among such African students who has no real commitment to Christ is most likely to be swayed by the scepticisms which often characterize most of these theologies. This liberal approach results in a situation in the West where there are numerous Christians 'who have never come to an understanding of the meaning of Christian doctrine and are inclined to agree ... that most of what they hear from the pulpit

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<sup>2</sup> J. N. D. Anderson, *Christianity and Comparative Religion* (London: IVP, 1970), p. 14.

<sup>3</sup> Tokunboh Adeyemo, *Salvation in African Tradition* (Nairobi: Evangel Pub. Co., 1979), p. 11.

<sup>4</sup> B. H. Kato, *Theological Pitfalls in Africa* (Kisumu, Kenya: Evangel Pub. House, 1975), Cf. p. 1.

<sup>5</sup> Tokunboh Adeyemo, *op. cit.*

<sup>6</sup> B. H. Karo enumerates about ten reasons in his book (*op. cit.*, pp. 11–12).

is merely [an] unnecessary mystification ... and complication of something that in itself ought to be simple'.<sup>7</sup> Liberal theologies imbibed in the lecture rooms have a way of influencing people in different parts of the world.

The search for political solidarity and identity in Africa, in the context of the solidarity of the human race, contributes to the new trend of universalism in that continent. If all human beings can be p. 264 brothers, why preach a doctrine of 'division' with 'father against son, and son against father' (Lk. 12:51-53)? Why should there be any thought of 'separation' as between sheep and goats in the final judgment (Mt. 25:31-33)? There is also the emotional consideration which arises out of what appears to be genuine love for the ancestors who had died without any knowledge of Christ. 'What will happen to our forefathers who died before Christianity was brought to us?' is a recurring question asked by African youngsters in Christian camp meetings. Added to this there are many Africans, seemingly of good character, who continue to practise some form of indigenous religion, which in recent times is being refined and revived. Ignorance about what the Bible teaches *vis-à-vis* these emotional factors so easily combine to fan the embers of universalism. Thus, as B. H. Kato claimed, 'many pastors [in Africa] have swallowed the pill of universalism without knowing the premise nor the end result'.<sup>8</sup> He was therefore of the opinion that Christianity ought to be expressed in such a way that Africans really understand and see themselves at home in it. The superficiality of the Christian religion as often practised in Africa often causes members of the Church to turn to their former ways of life at crisis moments. The cause of universalism gets a further boost in Africa through general Marxist intellectualism which abhors religion, but especially Christianity which it labels as the religion of the capitalist exploiters. The increasing secularization of society in Africa also undoubtedly promotes universalism.

Though different foreign ideologies and Eastern religions impinge on African minds, the three main religions practised in that continent are African Traditional Religion (which we will abbreviate to ATR), Christianity and Islam. Attention needs to be focussed on their bearing on universalism, or otherwise, in Africa in recent times.

## AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGION IN RECENT SCHOLARSHIP

*Mutatis mutandis*, ATR is comparable to the religions of ancient Greece and Rome. There are no known founders; there are no dogmas, or doctrines, or credal statements to be believed in. There is no question of a special revelation of faith 'once for all delivered' to its adherents. As a religious system, ATR believes in the existence of a Supreme Being, the Creator of all things. But there are also other gods thought to be his servants. Then there are the ancestors, the p. 265 innumerable spirit-forces which cannot be properly defined. There are also the widespread practices of divination, magic, mediumship, sacrifices, invocations, libations and incantations. This religious system has been a subject of intense academic study in universities and colleges both within and outside Africa for the past half century at least. Recent African writers have adopted varying attitudes towards the religion. Three of such attitudes may be identified. First there are those who romanticize and exalt the system unequivocally so as to present it as being sufficient for the salvation of the African; and who maintain that there is nothing unique or peculiarly desirable about any 'imported' religion.

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<sup>7</sup> See Stephen Neill, *Christian Faith and Other Faiths* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), pp. 64-65.

<sup>8</sup> B. H. Kato, *op. cit.*, p. 14.

Okot p'Bitek has pointed out that many modern African scholars now claim that African deities are eternal, omnipresent, omniscient and omnipotent; in other words, African deities have all the attributes of the Christian God.<sup>9</sup> If this is granted, there is no reason why the deities of ATR cannot save. It is not too surprising therefore, for Ngindu Mushete to believe that 'there exists a universal revelation above and beyond the bounds of any "special" revelation [such as the Judeo-Christian one], and that salvation can be obtained through nonecclesiastical channels as diverse as the various ideals and humanisms nurtured by human beings'.<sup>10</sup> At the popular level it is not uncommon to hear practitioners of ATR claiming that 'we are all serving the same God, only that our approaches are different'.

The intellectual repudiation or denigration of orthodox Christianity is, at times, backed up practically by the establishment of a 'church' with the place of Jesus taken over by an African deity. Among the Bini of Nigeria an *Oba* (paramount traditional ruler) some time ago established the syncretistic '*Aruosa Church*' where *Osanobua*, the Supreme God, is worshipped through his son, *Olokun*, the deity of healing and fecundity. Among the Yoruba, also of Nigeria, there is the 'Church of Orunmila', the oracle divinity, through whom *Oladumare* is worshipped. Even though these people have deliberately repudiated Christianity, they use the scaffolding of the Christian Church to erect a belief in an African divinity as the messenger of God to the black race.<sup>11</sup> p. 266

A new dimension in these attempts to modernize ATR and make it more acceptable is that these new protagonists and exponents of the system strive to win converts through preaching. There is an air of sophistication and intellectualism about it. They separate the shrines where sacrifices are offered from the 'Church building' where they regularly congregate for 'worship'. They compose and sing hymns to reflect their beliefs. For example, the 'Orunmila Church' has the following:

1. Jesus belongs to the white man [Europeans]  
 Muhammad belongs to the people of the East [the Arabs]  
 Orunmila belongs to us,  
 From here till Ife-Ile [i.e. our eternal home].
2. Let us all believe in him [Orunmila]  
 His holy light of Ifa [method of divination]  
 Shines through out the whole world;  
 Orunmila is worthy of our worship;  
 Let us believe in him.

The above appears to be an unambiguous expression of universalism.

Secondly, there are those African writers who, though are willing to accept the uniqueness of Jesus, are still able to exalt and glorify ATR beyond all reasonable proportions, so much so that the impression created in the minds of their readers is that the various autochthonous systems of worship suffice for the salvation of their devotees. By their very nature the pronouncements of this group of scholars are very evasive and

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<sup>9</sup> Okot P'Bitek, *African Religions in Western Scholarship* (Kampala, Nairobi, Dar es Salaam: East African Literature Bureau, 1970), pp. 7, 28.

<sup>10</sup> Ngindu Mushere, 'The History of Theology in Africa: From Polemics to Critical Irenics' in K. Appiah-Kubi and S. Torres (eds.), *African Theology en Route* (New York: Orbis Books, 1979), p. 24.

<sup>11</sup> See E. Bolaji Idowu, *African Traditional Religion: A Definition* (New York: Orbis Books, 1973), pp. 206–207.



ambiguous, to the extent that the average reader is left in doubt about their precise intent. Some of these 'nationalist' thinkers are clergymen, and therefore owe some form of loyalty to the Church; but at the same time, in their struggle to preserve the dignity of the traditional African, they give undue respect to ATR. Bolaji Idowu, for example, bases his thesis about the sufficiency of ATR for salvation on [Acts 14:17](#) which states (in part) that God has not left himself without any witness. He writes: 'If we are true to the spirit of the Bible and of our faith, we must admit God's self disclosure is, in the first instance, to the whole world and that each race has grasped something of this primary revelation according to its native capability'.<sup>12</sup> Pursuing the argument further, Idowu says:

All religions in which God is not a mere abstraction but a personal, present, living, active and acting, succouring Reality, are each in its own way a p. 267 consequence of the divine activity of the loving God who is seeking man, and of man's responsive soul reaching out (however feebly and uncertainly) for Him, each according to its native capability.<sup>13</sup>

Thus, in Idowu's understanding, Islam, African Traditional Religion, Christianity and indeed all religions, have a meeting point somewhere. As Adeyemo rightly interprets Idowu: 'The fact that God has not left Himself without a witness is understood to mean that God has ordained the worship of African Traditional Religion. In the final end, it seems to imply that Christianity cannot claim the monopoly of salvation. Thus, universalism is evident'.<sup>14</sup>

To say the least, Idowu's understanding and application of the first part of [Acts 14:17](#) is faulty. He has used that text out of context. The witness intended is clearly stated in the latter part of that verse. It is that of divine providence for all living things in creation: 'he [God] did good and gave you from heaven rains and fruitful seasons' ([Acts 14:17b](#); cf. also [Mt. 5:45](#); [Ps. 145:16](#); [Ps. 147:8-9](#)). This revelation in creation and provision does not amount to salvation but a kind of *praeparatio evangelica*. As St. Paul has argued, natural revelation through creation and providence does not suffice for salvation. Rather, human beings because of their perverted nature exchange the glory of the immortal God seen in creation 'for images', worshipping and serving the created order rather than the Creator (cf. [Ro. 1:19-25](#)). This does not in any way contradict the theology of St. Luke as represented in the context of [Acts 14:17](#). The men of Lystra who were going to sacrifice at the temple of Zeus were restrained by Paul and Barnabas with the words: 'Why are you doing this? We ... bring you good news, that you should turn from these vain things to serve a living God' ([Acts 14](#): see vv. [13-15](#)).

Perhaps because of his ecclesiastical background, Idowu was able to express the view that of all the religions and ideological forces contending for the African soul, Christianity by its very nature stands the best chance of meeting the deep spiritual needs of the African. But later on, elsewhere, he gleefully contrasted the efficacy and triumphs of African Traditional Religion with the seeming impotence of Christianity and of those who preach it. He said: 'In matters concerning providence, healing and general well-being ... most Africans still look at their religion as "the way"'.<sup>15</sup> He was more p. 268 forthright still elsewhere, in support of universalism but under the guise of citing another writer: a certain Seyyed Hossein Nasr: 'The essential problem that the study of religion poses is

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<sup>12</sup> *Sunday Sketch*, a Nigerian newspaper printed in Ibadan, Oyo State, March 9 1986, pp. 8-9.

<sup>13</sup> K. Dickson and P. Ellingworth (eds.) *Biblical Revelation and African Beliefs* (N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1969), p. 1.

<sup>14</sup> E. Bolaji Idowu, *Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief* (London: Longmans, 1962), p. 32.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

how to preserve religious truth, traditional orthodoxy, the dogmatic theological structures of one's own religion, and yet gain knowledge of other traditions and accept them as spiritual valid ways [sic] and roads to God.'<sup>16</sup> Idowu therefore expects the Christian, for example, to 'preserve' the theological structures of his own religion while at the same time 'accepting' other religions 'as spiritual valid ways and roads to God'. Idowu's theological position is therefore full of ambiguities, but its universalistic tendency is not in doubt.

The third category of scholars of ATR comprises the few who study it with caution, detached objectivity and some discernment. This crop of African scholars accept the uniqueness of Jesus as the only Saviour. While they are willing to recognize whatever good qualities there might be in ATR—as there is no people on earth totally devoid of goodness—they accept at the same time its limitations, especially as regards ultimate salvation. It is true that God has revealed himself to all peoples through creation, providence, and the conscience—'the moral law within'. But this kind of revelation cannot result in spiritual salvation. To hold otherwise is to ignore totally God's soteriological action in Christ. Adeyemo and Kato belong to this third group of scholars. For example, Adeyemo writes with reference to ATR:

Salvation in the thought of traditional African peoples ... implies acceptance in the community of the living and the living-dead; deliverance from the power of evil spirits, and a possession of life force. Only in limited cases are the people really searching and seeking after God, or to fill a perceived gap.<sup>17</sup>

These scholars declare that through the study of ATR the genuine religious aspirations of Africans may be correctly identified. This can help the Christian minister in his attempt to address these aspirations. The failure to recognize and meet legitimate spiritual needs can result only in despair, rejection of Christianity, and an inclination towards universalism. But the Christian scholar is also called upon to recognize the limitations of ATR.

## ISLAMIC AMBITIONS IN MODERN AFRICA

From about 1050, Islam began effectively penetrating the West African **P. 269** sub-region. Today, it is one of the dominant religions of the area. Islam in Northern Nigeria received a great boost through the *Jihad* of Usman dan Fodio (1804–1810). The Muslim faith also spread through peaceful means such as commerce, Quranic teaching and preaching, the practice of medicine and fortune-telling by peripatetic *malams*. The spread of Islam into the forest zones of Nigeria and other parts of Africa was held in check by natural forces, and by the strategies of missionary societies like the Sudan Interior Mission and the Sudan United Mission, which began to operate in the Middle Belt and in the northern parts of Nigeria. However, Islam has become popular among the Yoruba of the South-western part of Nigeria, but not generally in the South-eastern part where Christianity pre-dominates.

The propagation and growth of Christianity in tropical Africa in recent times, which in many cases has led to the conversion of the offspring of some staunch Muslims, has been a matter of great concern to the Muslims themselves. The number of Christians with Muslim parental background seems to be growing. Tokunboh Adeyemo, now a Christian,

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<sup>16</sup> Idowu, *African Traditional Religion: A Definition*, pp. 205–206.

<sup>17</sup> See Adeyemo, *op. cit.*, pp. 80–86, for his assessment of Mbiti.

claims to have been born 'to a wealthy Muslim family'.<sup>18</sup> Before colonization and political independence, it was easier for Islam to spread in many parts of sub-Saharan Africa through the *Jihad* of the sword. But circumstances are such now that it is becoming increasingly difficult for Muslims to successfully launch such holy wars. The Maitatsine Islamic riots which took place in some northern Nigerian towns in the recent past (mostly in the 1980s) in all probability were designed as *jihad*s to purify and spread Islam by force. In most cases anti-riot policemen and soldiers with modern weapons had to be used to quell these Islamic riots.

The peculiar claim by Christians that Jesus is the only valid way to God had always been offensive to Muslims right from the time of Muhammad. According to the Qu'ran: 'They say "no one shall enter paradise except those who are Jews or Christians"—these are their wishful thoughts'. Not only are many Muslims willing to regard their faith as another valid way to God, they also see it as the only means of salvation now available for mankind, in view of their belief that the prophethood of Muhammad supersedes all others, including that of Jesus.

Even though *jihad*s in the literal sense are not easily fought these days, there have been sporadic incidents in which Muslims have p.270 attacked Christians and burned churches. During a Palm Sunday procession in Ilorin, Nigeria, in 1986, Christians were attacked.

In Islam, state and religion are inseparable, and the ultimate aim of the religion is the political domination of the country where it is present, and ultimately of the whole world. The belief of the Muslim is that 'God through Muhammad revealed a total pattern for the life of man in which politics, ethics, economics, social order are bound together in an indissoluble totality by the will of God'.<sup>21</sup> This explains why the *Sharia* system of law is practised side by side with whatever legal system has been inherited from the colonial masters in those areas of Africa with strong Islamic presence. The influential Muslim elements of the Yoruba area of Nigeria, where Christianity also has a strong representation, have been clamouring that they should as of right be allowed to practise the *Sharia* form of law; without which, they believe, there can be no real justice for them. The Christians and some other enlightened elements among them have so far successfully resisted this move. But Islamic ambitions will not be deterred. With large sums of money from the Islamic countries of the Middle East and beyond, Islamic institutions such as mosques and schools are being built in different locations. The civil war in Sudan today is not unconnected with the imposition of the *Sharia* law by the ruling Muslim class (from the northern part of the country) on the South, which is mainly made up of Christians and the adherents of ATR.

Islamic political ambitions also, perhaps, explains the recent surreptitious manner in which Nigeria was 'smuggled' into the organization of Islamic Conference (OIC) as a full member, because of the so-called economic benefits; but the move was made ultimately for political reasons. In Nigeria, the Christians under the umbrella of the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) are not allowing these sensitive p.271 religious issues to lie low. Through communiques and press releases, they vigorously protest against any measures which they discern to be potentially dangerous to their faith.

The point is that Christians who are willing to embrace Universalism could easily be overrun in such circumstances. If we shall all get to heaven after all, what difference does it make whether we follow Muhammad, Orunmila, Buddha or Jesus? Why suffer

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<sup>18</sup> Cf. Harry Boer, *A Brief History of Islam* (Ibadan: Daystar Press, 1969), pp. 49, 107.

<sup>21</sup> Qu'ran 2: Verse 11.

persecution or martyrdom for the sake of Jesus? But most Nigerian Christians have vowed not to compromise their faith.<sup>23</sup>

## UNIVERSALISM: CHRISTIAN APPROACHES

Gerald H. Anderson points out that there are two distinct approaches in the history of Christian thought to the problem of Universalism. He claims that these two different traditions have the support of the New Testament. In the first approach, the non-Christian religions are viewed as the various efforts of human beings to apprehend their existence, whereas Christianity is the result of the self-disclosure of God in Jesus Christ, God has spoken to humanity only in the person of Jesus Christ and 'there is salvation in no one else' ([Acts 4:12](#)). The second tradition, according to him, while recognizing the uniqueness and universality of Christ, emphasizes the continuity of God's revealing and redeeming activity in Christ with his activity among persons elsewhere. It views the Christian faith as the climax of a divine revelation that began long before human history and has been available to everyone. In this view, Christ is crucial, normative and definitive but not exclusive. What is true of Jesus Christ in a focal way is pervasively true of the whole cosmos. The word of God is not limited to the revelation in the historic person of Jesus. John's Gospel affirms that the same light which was in Jesus enlightened everyone. [Acts 14:17](#) assures us that God did not leave himself without witness even among those who knew nothing of biblical revelation. Thus, it is claimed, the *logos spermatikos* is active everywhere sowing seeds of truth and preparing the way for the gospel. However, we have already in this essay tried to show the type of witness intended in [Acts 14:17](#); and if [John 1:9](#) is placed in the context of in. [1:12](#); [3:14-20](#); and [14:6](#), the light which 'enlightens every man' does not automatically mean *saving* light, but rather *rationality*, the idea of moral goodness, and so on, which all human beings possess. P. 272

In Protestant circles, Paul Tillich has propounded the concept of 'the latent Church'. From Roman Catholic ranks, Karl Rahner talked about 'the anonymous presence of God in the non-Christian world'.<sup>24</sup> We also have Hans Küng who explicitly stated: 'Every human being is under God's grace and can be saved; and we may hope that everyone is. Every world religion is under God's grace and can be a way of salvation'.<sup>25</sup> In our view, it is unsafe and perhaps exegetically unsound to conclude from the New Testament passages often cited in support of universalism that everybody will be saved. To do so is to contradict the whole New Testament evidence. If the light which everyone already had before the incarnation was enough for salvation why then the incarnation and the suffering of Christ? St. Paul makes it plain that all men stand condemned before God ([Rom. 3:9-23](#)). The reality of the separation of the saved from the damned, and the reality of heaven and hell is painted for us in the New Testament, no matter how unpalatable, cannot be taken too lightly because of human emotion. Though God makes 'acquittal and life' available to all ([Ro. 5:18](#)); though Jesus is the Saviour of all men ([1 Tim. 4:10](#)), and has given himself a ransom for all ([1 Tim. 2:6](#)); and though he does not wish that any should perish ([2 Pet. 3:9](#)) but desires that all should be saved ([1 Tim. 2:4](#)), and so on; it is however doubtful if all men will eventually be saved. To think so is to forget the important element

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<sup>23</sup> As contained in a two-page document entitled 'Some Suggestions for Consideration At The Heads of Churches Meeting' in Kaduna Northern Nigeria, July 15 1986, p. 1.

<sup>24</sup> See Gerald Bray, 'Origen' in *The Lion Handbook of Christian Belief* (Tring, Herts: Lion Publishing Co. 1982), p. 431.

<sup>25</sup> Gerald H. Anderson, *op. cit.*, p. 107.

of freedom and choice in human life. What may be safely inferred from the New Testament is that some people who were no 'Christians' in their lifetime may be saved. After some critical analysis, Professor J. N. D. Anderson (in *Christianity and Comparative Religion*) comes to the conclusion that in the apostolic *kerygma* we have a unique salvation, and that through the Incarnation and in the doctrine of the Trinity we have a unique disclosure of God. He concedes that God has, in part, revealed himself in many different ways, and in almost all world religions. So the term 'unique' as he uses it 'is intended to signify that the historical event on which Christianity is founded is itself without parallel, and is also in its fullness and essential nature—the salvation which it offers and the self-disclosure of God which it enshrines'.<sup>26</sup> After considering a number of New Testament passages p. 273 including [In. 10:8](#), [In. 14:6](#) and [Acts 4:12](#), Anderson submits: 'It seems to me that the consistent teaching of these verses as a whole—indeed their necessary and inescapable import—is that it is only through Christ that any man can come to a personal knowledge and fellowship with God, and only through his life, death and resurrection that any man can come to an experience of salvation.'<sup>27</sup>

What then will happen to the countless millions of people, including Africans, who have died without hearing about Christ through no fault of theirs? What about the many Muslims, the votaries of ATR, the Buddhists and the many of today who have no specific religion, who though they know of Christ have not, for one reason or another, considered or accepted him as their Saviour? At the time of Jesus, there were many leading Jews who believed in him, but 'for fear of the Pharisees they did not openly confess their faith lest they should be put out of the synagogue' ([In. 12:42-43](#)). J. N. D. Anderson holds that God is capable of speaking directly to the human heart, bringing before it its sinfulness and the need for forgiveness through Jesus. That may be true but there is no concrete evidence in support. Even the classical case of Malam Ibrahim and his followers, who more than thirty years before missionaries got to Kano were convinced about the mediatorial role of Jesus through the study of the Qu'ran,<sup>28</sup> is not sound enough. That conviction did not come *ex nihilo* but, at least, with the study of the Qu'ran. We must think about stark illiterates who can neither read the Qu'ran or the Bible, or anything else for that matter, and who are not in any way in touch with the outside world or with missionary activity. We may still believe that the omnipotent and omniscient God, by his Spirit, can speak directly with no form of mediation whatsoever to the hearts of people, making them realise their need to cast themselves on the mercy of God. But then, what becomes of missionary activity?

It is at this point that I beg to differ slightly from J. N. D. Anderson. I do not agree with him that the motive for missionary activity lies only in obeying the dominical injunction to preach, or in the need to teach the convert who would have been saved in any case, or in the need to give assurance, joy, peace and power through faith in Christ to such a convert.<sup>29</sup> There are many people who may never feel the need for forgiveness, and therefore might be lost eternally. But through God-sent preachers, this need could be positively aroused in them. p. 274 Preachers are therefore partners with God, and the Holy Spirit uses them to bring the need for God's mercy to as many as possible. The revelation to Ezekiel more than two thousand five hundred years ago still holds good: 'If I say to the wicked ... you shall surely die, and you do not speak to warn the wicked to turn away from

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<sup>26</sup> As cited in Adeyemo, *Salvation in African Tradition*, *op. cit.*, pp. 12-13. He was citing Owen C. Thomas (ed.) 'The Freedom of Religions' in *Attitudes Toward Other Religions*, p. 216.

<sup>27</sup> J. N. D. Anderson, *op. cit.*, p. 92.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 97.

<sup>29</sup> J. N. D. Anderson, *op. cit.*, pp. 106f.



his way, that wicked man shall die in his iniquity but his blood I will require at your hand. But if you warn the wicked to turn from his way and he does not turn ... he shall die in his iniquity, but you will have saved your life ... yet, if he turns from his sin and does what is lawful and right ... he shall surely live' ([Ezek. 33:8-9, 14-15](#)). Unless God's spokesman warns the wicked, he may never turn, and thus risks the possibility of dying everlastingly. In Pauline thought, everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved. But Paul asked: 'How are men to call upon him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without a preacher?' ([Rom. 10:13-14](#)). We may conclude therefore that the role of preachers is vital for the salvation of people, and goes beyond the mere conferring of assurance, joy, peace, power or right spiritual knowledge on believers here on earth. Even the preacher who does not exercise self-control, or does not continue to walk the path of submission and obedience to God, could be disqualified in the end ([1 Cor. 9:27](#)).

Concerning the millions who died and still die without any knowledge of Christ, St. Peter's statement that the crucified Christ 'went and preached to the spirits in prison, who formerly did not obey, when God's patience waited in the days of Noah' perhaps applies (See [1 Pet. 3:19-20](#)). God gives everyone a chance for salvation only through Christ. It is Adeyemo's submission that those who have never heard the gospel will be judged according to the measure of light they have received, and that for those who die in childhood, 'God's love in Christ is completely effective'.

## CONCLUSION

The hope of the African, and of all peoples, for salvation cannot be realized through any scheme of Universalism. Jesus, as the New Testament boldly claims, is the way to God and all men are admonished to consider him. The religious situation in Africa is as pluralistic as elsewhere in the world. The preaching of the unique Christ may naturally arouse resentment and opposition from different quarters. In the words of J. N. D. Anderson: 'The Church does not—and must not—apologise for the fact that it regards Christ as wholly **P. 275** unique; and that it wants all men to know him and to follow him. It is a God-given calling to proclaim the gospel to "every creature".'<sup>30</sup> The proclamation of Christ is a great responsibility and it should be done with humility, persuasion and love, and not with a 'holier-than-thou' attitude or antagonism. As much as is possible, dialogue with other faiths and mutual understanding should be encouraged. But to promote Universalism, either in theological scholarship or by some other means, is no more than an empty and irresponsible truce which is alien to the spirit of the New Testament. It would only further confuse an already confused situation.

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<sup>30</sup> Tokunboh Adeyemo, 'Is Everyone Saved?' in *The Lion Handbook of Christian Belief*, op. cit., p. 419.

# Theology, Theologizing and the Theologian

Ken Gnanakan and Sunand Sumithra

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*The authors are primarily concerned about three aspects of Asian Church and theological activities—theological methodology, Church worship, and Christian lifestyle. They opine that an evangelical stance here, namely a ‘looking unto Jesus’, is the best antidote to the growing influence of secularism and pluralism.*

Editor

The church in Asia today will be able to stand against opposing forces, both from inside and outside, only as it manifests maturity in theology and theologization. What is needed is not merely a reaffirmation of our theology, nor even a spelling out of the content of our theological treatises for a theological creativity relevant to the Asian challenge. Very simply put, it is the ‘how’ of theology and not just the ‘what’. The whole exercise has been referred to recently as ‘doing theology’ or, for convenience, ‘theologizing’.

Almost all the theological confusion we are now facing can ultimately be traced back to a confusion in one Christian doctrine particularly: our doctrine of God. Unfortunately, along with other LatfricAsian regions, Asia is gradually and increasingly attempting to approach reality and every aspect of it without God. This is secularism: a world outlook which necessarily leaves God out. Obviously the roots of such secularism are to be found not in Asia but in Europe, in the so called European Enlightenment (better ‘endarkenment’). Since then reason has become the supreme authority and man the measure of all things, and God is increasingly pushed out of every area of human life—individual or corporate.

## THE ANTIDOTE TO SECULARISM

Asia has so far offered the best possible resistance to the process of secularization, for the simple reason that more than any other country or region Asia is the home of religions. Hence, if the philosophy of secularism and the process of secularization take hold in Asia then they have finally won indeed. So it is of paramount importance that Asian evangelicals establish an adequate theological defence against **P. 277** secularism. Till now the confrontation of the gospel in Asia has been primarily with Asian religions and understandably so. But as the influence of secularism grows in both church and society, there is a burning need to spell out the relevance of the gospel to non-religious situations. If Asia does not develop a convincing response to the threat of secularism, she may also follow the path of the so-called Christian nations of the West, and end in social chaos and spiritual vacuum.

Over two decades ago Harvey Cox had talked about the ‘secularization of religion’. Proponents of it are attempting to establish their credibility and relevance by relating their religious experience to the needs of man today. Rather than being attracted by messages of future life and salvation, people are being lured into being followers because of the physical and psychological effects of yoga and meditation in this life itself. It is concern for the relevance of Christianity within such secularized environments that made

Cox ask: 'How do we maintain an affirmation of transcendence in a culture whose mood is radical and relentlessly immanentist?' This could be the key question for Asia today.

The question for theologians is how we develop a theological antidote to secularism. To start with we need to return to the very root of the meaning of the word *theology*. We have been rightly reminded that theology is not simply *theos* plus *logos*, that is, an intellectual analysis or a science of God. Ever since Abelard used it in this sense in the 12th century we have continued this unchallenged. Going further back in history, we discover theology to have been seen as *theos* and *logia*, to connote the praise and worship of God. In this sense theology becomes a doxological adoration of God rather than the intellectual and academic involvement it has been accepted to be. If such an emphasis is restored we are certain to recapture some of the lost richness to theology which will enable it to stand by itself as an adequate antidote to secularism.

Asia is confronted with the resurgence of traditional religions. Whether in Islamic or Hindu contexts there is a fervour with which devotees are spreading their claims, of which the church will have to take note. For one thing it speaks of the failure of the Church to have adequately communicated Christ when the doors were open and the opportunity was ours to accept. The Hindu Revival movements flourished in the context of the preaching of the gospel, indicating that the message was not acceptable to the thinking strata of society that the missionaries were attempting to reach.

Primarily Asian people are worshipping people. In the West, by contrast, the tradition of secularism gained its strength by appeal to [p. 278](#) human reason as a supreme authority. Hence, rather than challenging this claim by pointing out the inadequacy of human reason, only a positive restoration of theology in all its doxological brilliance will meet the need of Asians who want to worship God. Our exposition, our teaching and preaching, our worship, in fact our whole life should be adorned with this doxological desire that will in itself counteract the false claims of secularism in a soil to which such an ideology is undoubtedly foreign.

The primary task of theology is not to approach God intellectually, for God is never the object of our search but the very subject. The Bible, especially the Psalms, makes it abundantly clear that the appropriate approach to God is the doxological approach. The Scriptures depict people who had a vision of God bursting out in praise and worship of him, and not merely making intellectual statements concerning him. It is of vital importance to note that even the Apostle Paul bursts out into doxology right within the context of his theologization.

Each of us are so created by our Creator that at the core of our being we are so designed to worship someone or something. An intellectual approach in theology and secular understanding of reality has robbed us of this rightful response of worship, perhaps the most essential element in any theology.

This must inevitably take us to the very rationale for theological education because this is where theologization ought to begin. If we are convinced that theological education is involved in training up men and women, to serve God, the topmost priority ought to be to impart a knowledge of God. It is this knowledge that would form the basis of communicating truths about God. No matter how much one strives to teach about God and godliness, if it is not producing a deep spiritual impact on the student, there is hardly any difference between theological education and any other form of education. A wrong emphasis in theology has obviously produced a wrong effect in our theological education.

J. I. Packer points out in his book 'Knowing God', in a chapter aptly titled 'The people who know their God', how it is possible that 'one can know a great deal about God without much knowledge of Him', or even 'know a great deal about godliness without much knowledge of God' (*Knowing God*, Hodder and Stoughton (1975), p. 22f.). He clarifies the

distinction between *knowing God* and merely *knowing about him*. This kind of emphasis will certainly assist the whole task of theologizing in becoming what it truly must be. Even our theology itself will then reflect a longing it must demonstrate for revealing God [p. 279](#) *himself* rather than merely something *about* God. However, if we can recapture the essence of theological education as the imparting of the truths of God in order to change and equip the learner to impact them to others, we can see the necessity for such effort to be founded completely on doxological undergirdings. It is imperative, for example, that every course on theology has as its overall aim the objective of maturing the students' relationship with God so that they may more ardently praise him, fear him and love him—in the sense of the first commandment Jesus taught his disciples.

The recent phenomenal growth among Pentecostals and Charismatics, the mushrooming of the basic ecclesial communities in Latin America, the unparalleled Church growth in Korea can in some way be attributed to such a doxological approach to God, the desire to come to him in fear, and love, in adoration and worship. We 20th century Christians have not really grasped the meaning of the old saying, 'The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom'. If only we acknowledge such a burning need in all our theological activities—he need to come to God as a living, loving and holy person and to approach him in fear and worship, to praise and to adore—we would experience a total transformation. However, this will only be seen when we see our theology just as we see our worship, that is in a doxological adoration and not just in logical affirmations. This does not mean we limit ourselves to liturgy, but it calls for a realization of the glory of God as the purpose of theology at every level.

## **A THEOLOGICAL METHODOLOGY NEEDED**

When we talk about the need for theologization in Asia we are at once faced with the lack of an adequate theological methodology. It is only during the last quarter of this century that the significance of theological methodology has become central in theological debates. Here the concern is not so much what we produce in our theologies but how we produce them. It is not so much about practising a proper theology or grasping its theological truths, but rather the very basic question which the liberation theologians have posed to evangelicals. Though as evangelicals we cannot completely concur with liberation theology and its results, the questions it raises are of such magnitude that we must take them up most seriously in order to offer biblical answers. Otherwise the very survival of our theology is at stake.

For example, it does no one good just to reject the notion that praxis is the starting point in theology, or to argue that the context is primary. The real question is: have we an alternative we can supply in its place? [p. 280](#) I am sure we have—but it still needs to be articulated in a responsible and acceptable way. It is precisely for the lack of such an alternative evangelical theological method that in most of Asian theological writings we still refer only to European and American theologians and theologies, but hardly to any Asian works.

It may not be true in this decade to say that Asian theology is still a 'potted plant', but it *is* true to say that many of the questions we discuss are simply carried over from Western theological debates. Hence, another accusation holds good, and that is that Asian theologies are not unanswered questions, but unquestioned answers. Any because we do not yet have an articulated evangelical way of doing theology, even the problems we are dealing with are to a great extent irrelevant. We are sure that subjects such as the likelihood of creation or evolution, the deity of Christ, the relationship between science and religion, faith and religion, ideology and theology, and so on, though of first magnitude

in importance, are not the questions Asians are asking. We are glad to note increasing attempts during the last several years to deal with relevant topics, such as an evangelical response to ancestral worship; a biblical approach to the caste system; the question of Asian Christian identity; the urban Asian Church; Asia's role in world history; the question of multinationals; and so on. No doubt a particular theological method may have different applications. Even in the New Testament itself different contexts produced different types of solutions. In the same way, we too need to consolidate a principle of contextualization (and indigenization) relevant to Asian issues. But still the fact is, the teaching of theology in our seminaries smacks of woodenness, since it was for the most part developed in situations other than Asian.

Here again we note the lack of the proper foundation which theological institutions should be providing for students. Our whole emphasis on heavily academic curricula, final examinations, accreditation, and so on, has robbed theological education of its very essence. Theological education must prepare people for Christian ministry. No 'body of facts' or quantum of knowledge acquired will serve in facing the challenges of life. When the student is equipped with tools to face life as a disciple of Jesus Christ, he is taking with him the requirements for relating that which he has learned to the situations he faces. Our present educational systems may be producing topnotch scholars but poor servants. God is always looking for men and women who will serve him in their generation, communicating the things of God to people who need to hear God.

It is the lack of holistic approach to theological education that has [p. 281](#) resulted in fossilized forms of theology and communication. The lack of an adequate theological methodology displays a lack of concern for communication within our context. We are not asking for 'contextualization' in the restricted sense it recently has gained, but for a sensitivity to the context that will be expressed in attempts to theologize relevantly.

A commitment to relevance will start with an awareness of the people to whom we are communicating the gospel. The prime objective of any theological methodology is to evolve a message that will be relevant to real men and women in real life situations and faithful to the Scriptures and Church historical development.

What this means is that we must not hand down packages of theology which we feel can universally communicate whether in America or Asia. Universal communication is not impossible if we believe that it is ultimately the Holy Spirit who is the communicator of the truths of God. But we tend to forget that theology is itself a human attempt to show the relevant of the truths of God to people in their context. Methodologies in this sense are *all* man-made; but that does not exempt us from seeking a biblical method to evolve our theology for the varied contexts of Asia.

Even at its most basic level, all communication is really an attempt to theologize. Between the Bible, the message, and the receiver, the people in their context, theology is the inevitable link. The moment we try to communicate the gospel to people in a meaningful and responsible way in order to evoke a response to Jesus Christ we have already entered into the realm of theologizing. No one will argue about the fact that the urgency to communicate in context presses on us. If theology is seen as the inevitable link then the need for theologizing, and therefore a need for a theological methodology, is urgent. To remind ourselves again, it is *how* we get involved in the whole of the theological challenge, rather than *what* we say, that is confronting us. An evangelical theological method is the burning need for the Church in Asia today.

## **THE POWER OF JESUS CHRIST IN OUR THEOLOGY**



Finally, the theology that Asia needs today is the kind that will exalt Jesus Christ. Jesus said, 'If I be lifted up I will draw all men to myself'. The question that arises, then, is whether we have truly lifted Jesus up in our individual contexts. We still get criticized for introducing a foreign religion. Christianity is said to have come to India with the Apostle Thomas, long before it reached Europe or America. We have [P. 282](#) yet to show that Jesus belongs to the soil of Asia, much more than he belongs to the West. He is not someone we are struggling to make relevant to a strange land.

One of India's great orators, Keshub Chandra Sen, gave a stirring address entitled 'India Asks: Who is Jesus Christ?'. In it he reminded his audience that India was being touched and transformed by a superior power. He went on to state: 'Gentlemen, you cannot deny that your hearts have been touched, conquered and subjugated by a superior power. That power—need I tell you—is Christ ... It may seem strange, but it is a fact that India knows not yet this power, though already so largely influenced by it. She is unconsciously succumbing to its irresistible influence. Therefore India ought to be informed as to the real character of the source of this dominant moral influence, Christ. None but Jesus, none but Jesus ever deserved this bright, this precious diadem, India; and Jesus shall have it ...' (Keshub Chandra Sen, p. 199).

But the sad fact is that we have not been able to sustain that power. Paul even at the end of his ministry longed to 'know the power of his resurrection'. Where is that longing in our Church in Asia today? We argue over right doctrine and denominational distinctives. We even maintain the priority of the gospel but have failed to show all the potential Jesus Christ has for Asia. In India we constantly face the question: 'What is the difference between Christianity and Hinduism? You conduct your life the same way we do.' Here is the heart of the matter. We move from theologization to the theologian, from the message to the messenger.

What we are pleading really is that relevant theology for Asia must come from men and women who have personally experienced the power of Christ and who possess a passion to make this power known. What a Christian leader said recently was most appropriate: the crucial issue for me today is not whether I am known as leader, a minister, a Bishop or Archbishop, or even a world renowned evangelist, but whether I am a disciple of Jesus Christ. Theology written by disciples of Jesus Christ will breathe of the power that Asia awaits.

This is where our theological institutions need to take note. What kind of men and women are we producing? Mere academics or disciples of Jesus Christ? A pastor narrated his experience in seminary. Fresh from the freedom of university life, he reacted against the disciplines which were part of seminary living. Having complained to the Principal, he received a very apt response: 'What are you wanting to be at the end of your seminary life? A graduate with a theological degree or a pastor?' What we need is pastors, teachers, preachers and [p. 283](#) theologians longing to experience the power of Christ and to share it with people who are powerless.

If it is true that the blind man came to believe in Christ because of the power and the character of Jesus, how much more true it is that the Hindus and the Muslims accept our message to the extent we as the messengers live it out. And this is the theological issue, not in the sense of an intellectual clarification but in the sense of theology as doxology, whether my life brings praises or glory to God. We have here already entered into the practical aspects of theology. But as Martin Luther discovered, true theology is always practical. What is needed urgently in Asia today is the 'living' of the power of the gospel, the demonstration of the Holy Spirit's involvement in the disciple's life. Ultimately, theologization in Asia has to do with credibility and creativity that will show from the

courage of the theologian who is bold enough to release all of the potential of Christ for our context.

The onslaught of secular ideologies within the Church, and even questionable theological methodologies, can only be counteracted by the revival of the fundamentals of what biblical theology and theologization is all about. Our theology will ultimately stand or fall depending on whether it has taken into account the inherent power of Jesus Christ it has to demonstrate. The power in our theology will only be there if we have experienced that power. Theology as doxology will restore to theologization and theology the dimension of worship which displays an ultimate adoration of all that God is. Paul expresses this so clearly and powerfully:

Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God,  
How unsearchable his judgements, and his paths beyond tracing out!  
'Who has known the mind of the Lord? or who has been his counsellor?  
Who has ever given to God, that God should repay him?'  
For from him and through him are all things.  
To him be the Glory forever. Amen.

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## Book Review

### PERSONAL COMMITMENTS

by Margaret A. Farley  
(Harper & Row, San Francisco: 1986)  
138 pp. US \$13.95

Reviewed by Lewis B. Smedes in *The Reformed Journal* Vol. 37, Issue 3, March 1987

Margaret A. Farley, who teaches ethics at Yale Divinity School, has given us a first-rate ethical study of commitment. Dr. Farley examines the cumbersome moral concept called commitment thoroughly and, above all, intelligently. For this reason, but also because her book is, as far as I know, the only systematic analysis of commitment around, it will be of intense interest to anyone who wants to think hard about why we make commitments, why we are obligated to keep them, and when we are justified in breaking them. She says she spent fifteen years at it. I, for one, am grateful that she did not wait any longer.

Most people have at least some vague sense that we *ought* to keep our commitments. But why should we? Why shouldn't our investment in our private pursuit of happiness have as much validity as any promise we make to stick with someone we made a commitment to? Farley provides a reasonable answer, in keeping with moral tradition: when we make a commitment to a person we give that person a claim on us, we surrender to him or her a right to expect us to keep it. In short, when we make a commitment we obligate ourselves to honour the rights that our commitment concedes to the person we make it to, and when we break our commitments we violate that person's rights. There

are more reasons why our commitments create moral obligations, and why our duty to keep them outweighs our 'right to happiness', and Dr. Farley notes them, but this will give an idea of Farley's thought on obligation.

The tough part comes as she draws her delicate lines through the relativities of and exceptions to our general moral duty to keep our commitments. That the obligation to keep commitments is not absolute is obvious enough: for one thing irresponsible people sometimes make commitments for destructive ends to unworthy people and evil causes, and when they do, they are surely not only permitted, but morally required, to break them. So the sheer act of making a commitment does not obligate anyone unconditionally.

But what about commitments responsible people make to worthy persons for a loving cause? Are such commitments also only relatively binding? Do we always answer anyone's question: 'May I release p. 285 myself from my commitment?' with the ethicist's perennial favourite: 'It all depends'? If so, what comes of the very notion that commitments by definition are a sort of promise that says, 'I'll be there *no matter what*?' How can we think of commitments as binding and also admit that they are not *always* binding, and never binding absolutely?

Well, that's life.

When the clear light of moral duty passes through the prism of real human existence, it gets refracted; its straight rays of obligation are bent, they become conditioned, qualified, maybe compromised, by the hard conflicts and stubborn confusions in the prism of our lives. So the job of the ethicist is to pave a way for moral duty to get to us through the prism of our human condition without being bent out of shape so badly that we cannot recognize it for the moral duty it is. Dr. Farley does this for us with the duty of commitment keeping, and does it with style.

The first thing to remember, she advises, is that all commitments are instrumental—not ends, but means: they are meant to serve a good, and the good they are meant to service is love. But the love that commitments are meant to keep alive is a *just* love. And thereby hangs almost everything about commitment keeping.

A just love, she explains, is a love that 'affirms truthfully the concrete reality of the beloved'. One concrete reality of the beloved is that he or she has a claim on the person who made the commitment. That is, when I commit myself to love a woman with a just love, I have to love her as the concrete person who has a right to fidelity to my commitment. And so I ought to keep it.

Unless! Unless what?

Unless circumstances change so much after making my commitment that keeping it (1) becomes impossible, or (2) loses its point, or (3) is superseded by other obligations. And here we have the kernel of Dr. Farley's contribution to the contemporary, if not the hip, question: When may we release ourselves from commitments to other people?

As for when it becomes impossible to keep our commitments, we all walk the edge of deceit. Being difficult and costly is not the same as being impossible; we all know this in the abstract, but when we feel trapped in a relationship that has stopped paying dividends to us, 'difficult' feels like 'impossible'.

The second test is 'loss of meaning'. When do commitments lose their meaning? Commitments are human instruments; they are not for their own sakes, and they lose their point when they cannot be used to do what they were meant to do. Commitments to people are for the sake of love. But, argues Farley, a relationship can deteriorate so badly p. 286 that it no longer serves love; indeed, it may serve only to do the destructive work of bitterness, violence, and hate. So although we may have committed ourselves to a particular framework for love (marriage, friendship, church membership) we are not bound to that commitment if it no longer serves the end of love.

God knows, and so do we, that this test is an open-ended invitation to self-deception. 'My marriage has lost its meaning' often really means: 'My marriage no longer brings me the joys I expected from love.' But so what? Anyone can blindfold himself and fall between the cracks of absolutism. The cracks are there, nonetheless, and have to be there because committed human relationships do in fact become incurably destructive to people so that commitments to them lose their point. And when they do, argues Farley, surely the very meaning and purpose of the relationship is undone, rendering the obligation to keep one's commitment to it at least questionable and maybe void.

The third test is called 'alternative superseding obligations'. This means that we can experience conflicts between competing commitments. Usually, they are not conflicts between commitments, but conflicts between specific obligations of commitments. For instance, my commitment to be with my family on Christmas Eve may compete with an urgent call to be with a dying parishioner in the congregation to which I am also committed. But the conflicts can also be more basic—like between commitment to a spouse and commitment to a lover, a conflict that we all know how to resolve. But what about conflict between commitment to one's own *self* and to one's spouse? Can such a conflict ever release us from commitment to another so that we can keep our commitment to good old numero uno? Dr. Farley knows how slippery such a test could be, but sees some validity in it nonetheless—for example, when it comes to commitment to one's own self-respect in a committed relationship to a partner who demeans, diminishes, and all but destroys one's ability to respect herself or himself.

I have said enough, I think, to indicate the sort of book Dr. Farley has given us. It is a superb piece of ethical analysis that does exactly what needed to be done to a moral reality that is as fundamental to humane living as it is fuzzy and slippery to the understanding. It is a book, however, that a pastor may have to interpret for the average parishioner whose mid-life passage has taken him through a 'meaningful relationship' into conflict with his 'meaningless marriage'. Its reasoning is careful, detailed, and necessarily nuanced, so the pastor who isn't used to ethical discussion will have to sweat a bit himself or herself. But why not?