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# Editorial

Religious world views and values have always been a dominant factor in shaping national cultures. This is very obvious in Asian and African cultures. It is equally true in the West, though less visible and more subtle. The vacuum caused by the collapse of secular modernity—the child of the Enlightenment—is being filled by new spiritualities, whether overtly religious or not. In the West we recognize them as belonging to the family of New Age spirituality and ideologies. We are living through an age of massive cultural change, undergirded by religious and spiritual confusion with tragic moral and social consequences.

In this context the Gospel and the Church are being discredited, ignored and attacked by societies that are fundamentally or increasingly pagan. Christians worldwide need to prepare themselves for new waves of persecution. All this is a cause for rejoicing, not despair, for Jesus Christ is preeminent over all things and in hope and expectation we look for his kingly reign in the life of our churches and in the redemption of ‘creation itself—a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness’. Our agenda is to be partners in the gospel transforming culture.

This issue of ERT seeks to grapple with some of these issues: how the gospel disturbs culture and Christians by maintaining their differences transform culture from within; a better understanding of the cultural assumptions of the biblical writers; the inclusiveness yet exclusiveness of the gospel; how the invisible God is uniquely made visible in Jesus Christ; what it means for Christians to enter into a living dialogue with people of other faiths. It is indeed a privilege to be living in such an age!

## When Gospel and Culture Intersect: Notes on the Nature of Christian Difference<sup>1</sup>

Miroslav Volf

*Reprinted with permission*

In this thought-provoking article on the relationship of the gospel to culture Dr Volf explores the different ways Christians have responded to being marginalised by society. The gospel is always about differences disturbing every culture and challenging Christians to piece-meal transform their own culture by remaining internal to it. He argues that marginalization is a cause for rejoicing and hope for the future—not a retreat to despair.

Editor

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<sup>1</sup> This paper was prepared for ‘The Gospel in Our Pluralistic Culture. A Theological Consultation on Missiology and Western Culture’ in *Bad Urach*, Germany, July 4–8, 1994.



## INTRODUCTION: IN PRAISE OF MARGINALITY

At the threshold of the 21st century, there is a profound sense of crisis in many churches in the West. Once they were dominant social forces; today they find themselves on the margins, with a past they like to boast about and future they seem to dread. Occasionally they still try to insert themselves as major players in the big social game. Invariably, however, they find out that none of the old tricks they knew so well works anymore; they trip over the ball, they don't know how to pass, let alone how to score. So the coaches put them on the bench where they either yell angry and fruitless shouts at the enemy or try to comfort the members of their own team when they come bruised from the field, all this while secretly hoping that they themselves will some day be allowed to step on to the field and present themselves to the world in all their glory. Increasingly, however, there is less and less space for them even on the bench; other, more able players, are already occupying the space. And so the churches find themselves pushed up into the crowd of spectators, rooting for their favourite teams, scheming up ever new and useless ways to return to the field or reminiscing about the good old days when they were still young.

For anyone who remembers the days when the church *was* young and vigorous, there is something profoundly odd about the present sense of crisis. The early church was not simply on the sidelines, it was not even among the cheering spectators. A slandered, discriminated, even persecuted minority, a thorn in society's flesh. Yet, notwithstanding the temptation to backslide or accommodate, the early church celebrated hope in God and proclaimed fearlessly the resurrected Lord as she walked in the footsteps of the crucified Messiah. It was he who taught them: 'Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you' ([Matt. 5:11](#)). For the early church, to be on the margin was not a cause of alarm, but grounds for rejoicing. To be tucked in the dark corner of the public arena was not a sign of failure, but of keeping good company. Much like many persecuted churches in the world today, the early church had resources to deal with its marginality. We in the West do not. And so we despair as we find ourselves unwanted players in the large-scale social game.

The reasons the early church could rejoice in situations in which the contemporary western church moans are many and complex. To claim that there is a simple road that leads from where we are today to where they were then is not to engender hope but to sow seeds of more despair. There is, however, no doubt that one major reason for the difference between the early and contemporary churches lies in *expectations*: we have come to expect to be major players in the first league in our social world: the early church expected nothing more than to be left alone to play their own game, inviting their neighbours and friends to join in and learn the rules. The difference in expectations reflects the difference in attitudes toward culture at large, which in turn reflects social position in that culture. We have come to consider it our home and are frustrated to find ourselves losing control over it; for them it was a land occupied by a foreign force.

There is no need here to trace historically the road which brought us to where we are today. Instead, I wish to look toward the future, to re-imagine the relation between the gospel and multiple cultures in contemporary societies, to explore the nature of Christian presence in these societies. My desire is to defuse the sense of crisis and generate new hope for the church facing the 21st century—both a more modest and a more robust hope than the churches in the West have had in recent history. To state my goal more pointedly, *I want to make us more comfortable with our marginality so that from there we can*

*influence the multiple centres of our societies, more at home with our irrelevance so that from there we can gain new confidence about our relevance.*

My outline is simple. First I will point out four major features of contemporary societies and the kinds of relations between church and culture these societies do or do not allow. Second, I will name three inadequate ways to live as Christians in these societies. Third, I will tell you a better way. And finally, I will draw some implications for mission and theology.

## I. SOCIAL CONTEXT

Before I reflect about the nature of Christian presence in modern societies, let me indicate briefly four features of these societies. They describe the framework in which we need to place our discussion about Christian identity and difference.

- (1) *Voluntarism*. Churches can come into existence and continue to live only through the decisions—choices—of their members. Certainly, it takes more to have a church than the will of its members to belong to a church. Furthermore, much in ecclesiology depends on how we understand theologically the decisions of its members to be a church. Still, without the conscious will of the people to belong to a church, churches cannot exist as social realities. No amount of talk about rediscovery of community and tradition can negate this fact; the community that is being rediscovered today is a (post-modern?) *intentional* community, not a pre-modern ‘natural’ community.
- (2) *Difference*. Churches will be able to survive in modern societies only if they attend to their ‘difference’ from the surrounding cultures. Without difference, churches will dissolve. This is something one can complain about or celebrate, depending upon one’s theological scruples. Irrespective of our scruples, the following principle stands: whoever wants the church must want its difference from the surrounding culture. The dispute between those who want the church can intelligently take place only regarding what ecclesial difference should look like, not whether one should actively pursue it or not.
- (3) *Plurality*. According to Ernst Troeltsch ‘church’ affirms the world whereas ‘sect’ denies it. Today, however, the one world which ‘church’ could affirm or ‘sect’ deny, has splintered into a plurality of worlds that exist in an overarching social framework. These worlds are partly compatible and partly incompatible, partly mutually dependent and partly independent; they form partly overlapping social spaces and create ever-changing hybrid cultures. Simple denial or affirmation of ‘the world’ will not do. Similarly, the simple claim that the Christian message is (or can be made) intelligible to ‘the world’ will not do. More complex ways of relating to multiple cultures will have to be developed to take into account the complexity of the social worlds that make up modern societies.
- (4) *Self-sufficiency*. What sociologists call functional differentiation of society—the fact that various sub-systems specialize in performing particular functions, such as economic, educational, or communication activity—implies (relative) self-sufficiency and self-perpetuation of social sub-systems. And self-perpetuation means that the sub-systems resist influence through outside values. Contrary to the situation in traditional societies, there is no symbolic or actual centre holding societies together, through which influence on the whole can be exerted. To be adequate to the nature of contemporary societies, reflection on the social influence of the church will have to take into account this (relative) self-sufficiency and self-perpetuation of social systems. Otherwise our rhetoric will give us a fleeting sense

that we are doing something significant, but in the long run only engender frustration. The result will be increased marginalization of the church in modern societies.

## **II. THE LIBERAL PROGRAMME: ACCOMMODATION**

How should we think of the presence of the Christian church in the world, given these four features of contemporary societies? Let me first look at what I have come to think are misplaced proposals; in critiquing them, I will be paving the road for getting at what I think is a better way to think about the relation between gospel and culture, church and society in contemporary western societies.

The liberal answer to this question about the nature of Christian presence runs something like this: translate the message into the conceptualities of the culture in which one lives, accommodate to the social practices of the surrounding modern culture. If you do not, you will be run by it. It is not hard to see why Christians would be tempted to reduce distance from their social environments by acculturating. The place of Christian communities in modern societies has become problematic. They appear socially superfluous. Things go their own way, with churches or without them. Being close to a particular culture and its centres of power would let us ‘push’ things in God’s direction—or so it would seem.

Notice, however, what one needs to do in order to maintain closeness to a given culture in contemporary societies—one must be involved in constant reconstruction of the patterns of belief and practice to make them fit the changing plausibilities of that culture. What one gains is that the message appears plausible in a given context. This important gain does not come, however, without a significant loss. In modern societies churches are no longer capable of shaping plausibility structures of the cultures in which they live; other, more powerful forces are at work. So you have to acculturate to what you have not helped to shape. As a consequence, all reconstructions which are guided by existing plausibility structures carry in themselves seeds of Christian self-destruction (Berger 1992, pp. 3ff.). As Hauerwas and Willimon put it: ‘Alas, in leaning over to speak to the modern world, we had fallen in. We had lost the theological resources to resist, lost the resources even to see that there was something worth resisting’ (Hauerwas and Willimon 1989, p. 27). In the best case, what remains for churches to do is to appear after a non-Christian show and repeat the performance in their own way for a few remaining visitors with Christian scruples. The voice of the church is an echo of a voice that is not their own.

## **III. THE POST-LIBERAL PROGRAMME: REVERSING THE DIRECTION OF CONFORMATION**

The post-liberal answer to the question about how we should think of the presence of the Christian churches in modern societies comes out of profound dissatisfaction with the liberal answer. In the words of Nicholas Wolterstorff it consists in ‘reversing the direction of conformation’ (Wolterstorff 1993, p. 2). Instead of translating biblical message into the conceptuality of the social world that one inhabits, as modern theology has done, Christians should describe anew the social world they inhabit with the help of the biblical story.

But when one has nested oneself into the biblical story, what happens to conversation with the culture at large? Has one not closed oneself from it? The post-liberal answer to this question would be, of course, ‘no’. But for the ‘no’ to stick, two conditions need to be

satisfied—two conditions to which post-liberals such as George Lindbeck or Hans Frei have not given sufficient attention.

First, there must be at least some significant symbolic compatibility between the Christian communities and the non-Christian cultural worlds. Even when the churches need to say something that does not quite make sense to the cultural worlds they inhabit, they must still say it in the language of their culture. Churches are distinct communities of discourse, yet they do not speak their own language. Rather, they use *the existing language in a different way*. Religious language of Christians does not come in place of the language of the wider culture, neither does it exist side by side with it. Religious language is rather *a way of using the language of one's culture* (hopefully not an obsolete dialect of that language!). Second, conversation with non-Christians presupposes readiness to listen and learn on the part of Christians. It would be not only arrogant but also foolish of churches to interpret their social environments from their own perspective, not paying attention to how these social environments interpret themselves or how they interpret the churches. Here we come up against the limits of the metaphor or 'reversing the direction of conformation'. Wolterstorff asks rightly:

But is the relation of the Church theologian to the non-theological disciplines exclusively that of melting down gold taken from the Egyptians? Isn't some of the statuary of the Egyptians quite OK as it is? Does it all reek of idolatry? Isn't there something for the Church theologian to learn from the non-theological disciplines? (Wolterstorff 1993, p. 45)

A more selective approach to the question of conformation seems required than what the metaphor of 'reversal of conformation' suggests. Christians ought to be able to decide case by case in which direction the conformation should go. From some neutral standpoint? Such a standpoint is not available. No, from the standpoint we have taken: God's revelation in Christ as mediated to us through the community of faith. God's word in Jesus Christ is 'final and decisive for us'. Yet we occasionally need to revise our understanding of God's revelation in the light of what transpires, say, in the sciences (while at the same time being alert to the functioning of sciences as an instrument of domination rather than simply as a neutral tool for finding the 'truth').

It would seem that the two conditions for Christian conversation with non-Christian cultural worlds call into question the difference of Christian communities, their distance. Both the partial symbolic compatibility and the readiness to learn require a good deal of closeness. If we take these conditions seriously, what happens to distance? Do not the dangers of accommodation lurk around the corner? Yet it would be rather bizarre for Christians to run the risk of parroting as soon as they opened their mouths to speak and ears to hear. So we come up against the important issue of how we should think about the *presence* of the Christian difference in modern societies.

#### **IV. THE SEPARATIST PROGRAMME: RETREAT FROM THE WORLD**

One way to think about the *presence* of Christian difference 'in the world', is to imagine churches as Christian islands in the sea of worldliness. They would then have their own territory that is as clearly set apart from the social environment as are the rocks that protrude from the waters.

In *The Cost of Discipleship*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer describes churches as being 'in the midst of the world' but as those who are 'taken out of the world' (Bonhoeffer 1963, p. 311). Their environment is 'a foreign land' to them. Or, using a more dynamic image, he thought of Christians as strangers 'only passing through the country' (p. 303), like a 'sealed train', as he put it. Bonhoeffer continues,



At any moment they may receive the signal to move on. Then they will strike tents, leaving behind them all their worldly friends and connections, and following only the voice of their Lord who calls. They leave the land of their exile, and start their homeward trek to heaven.

In writing these words, Bonhoeffer was, of course, giving pastoral advice to a church facing a godless Nazi regime. If one extracts them from the situation and elevates them to a programme for Christian presence in the world, serious problems arise. One could ask: Where would Christians go when they strike tents and leave the land of exile? Literally to heaven, like Enoch? Did Enoch not walk with God for 300 years before 'he was no more, because God took him' ([Gen. 5:24](#))? Do not Christians rather move at the bidding of their Lord to a different place *in the land of exile*? And how is it that the homeward trek starts *after* leaving the land and not while still in it? This is because the Bonhoeffer of *The Cost of Discipleship* thinks of Christian presence as *passage*—as the 'wandering on earth' of those who 'live in heaven' (p. 304).

If Christian communities only wander on earth but live in heaven, if they are like islands surrounded by a sea of worldliness, then they will have their own truth and their own values that are determined alone by the 'story' of Jesus Christ and that have nothing to do with truth and value outside of their boundaries. Christian difference would then be in a given social world, but would remain completely external to it; one would be 'in God' but could not be at the same time 'in Thessaloniki' ([1 Thess. 1:1](#); see [1 Cor. 1:2](#))—in Lima, Los Angeles, Delhi or Nairobi, at least not as its genuine citizen.

The trouble with such an external view of Christian presence in the world is a wrong notion of 'Thessaloniki'. It presupposes that the social environment in which churches live is a foreign country pure and simple. Yet this certainly is not the case. The God who gave Christians the new birth is not only the 'Father of our Lord Jesus Christ' ([1 Pet. 1:3](#)) but also the creator and sustainer of the universe. From that perspective, the environment in which Christians live *is not a foreign country, but rather their own proper homeland*, property of their God. If they are alien in it, it is because and in so far as *their own land has been occupied by a foreign power*; if they are estranged from the world, it is because and in so far as the world is estranged from God.

Every social world is God's territory. Hence Christians should not seek to leave it and establish a settlement outside. Rather they should remain in it and change it—subvert the power of the foreign force and bring their environment back from the estrangement into communion with God. Put more abstractly, Christian difference must be always *internal* to a given cultural world.

## V. METAPHORIZING THE DOMINANT ORDER

How should we imagine Christian presence as *internal* difference? Here I find some aspects of Michel de Certeau's thought helpful. Reflecting on the uses people make of cultural goods that are produced for them he writes:

(u)sers make innumerable and infinitesimal transformations of and within the dominant cultural economy in order to adapt it to their own interests and their own rules (de Certeau 1984, xiv).

He explains this creativity of users by looking at that painful process which started on October 12, 1492 when the Spaniard ships sailed up to the shores of Latin America—at the colonization of the indigenous Indian population. We sometimes fail to see that in spite of their oppression and powerlessness, the indigenous population were not simply passive recipients of an imposed culture. He writes:

... the Indians often used the laws, practices, and representations that were imposed on them by force or by fascination to ends other than those of their conquerors; they made something else out of them; they subverted them from within—not by rejecting them or by transforming them (though that occurred as well), but by many different ways of using them in the service of rules, customs or convictions foreign to the colonization which they could not escape. They metaphorized the dominant order: they made it function in another register. They remained other within the system which they assimilated and which assimilated them externally. They diverted without leaving. Procedures of consumption maintained their difference in the very space that the occupier was organizing (p. 32).

The image of conquest and colonization is certainly not adequate to describe the relation between cultures and churches. For one, it inverts the direction of the process: cultures do not colonize churches, but churches spring up within the existing cultures. They can be more or less distant from the culture, but they certainly do not first exist outside of culture so as to be able then to be colonized by it. Second, the culture is not simply a negative power against which one has to fight, but a space in which one lives, the air one breathes. Apart from such inadequacies, however, the image of metaphorizing the culture, subverting it from within is helpful. It rightly suggests that churches should neither abandon nor dominate their cultural environments, but rather live differently *in* them, that their difference should be internal not simply to the cultural space, but to cultural forms.

What does this mean concretely? What are some paradigmatic options open to churches? First, it will be possible for Christians simply to adopt some elements of the cultures in which they live, possibly putting them to different use guided by the values that stem from their being 'in God'. They may live in the same kind of houses, drive the same kinds of cars; they might listen to the same music and enjoy some of the same visual or culinary arts. What Christians might do differently, is put their houses, cars, or musical arts to partly different uses from those of non-Christian neighbours. A house can be a vehicle of service, a meal an occasion of worship.

Sometimes putting things to different uses will require changes in the things themselves. To be a good vehicle of service, a house might need a guest room and larger community room. Or some type of technology might foster more humane kinds of work if it is constructed in a certain way. Which brings me to the second possible way of living Christian difference within a given culture: the majority of the elements of a culture will be taken up but transformed from inside. For instance, one would be using the same words as the general culture does, but their semantic fields would be occupied by new contents that partly change and partly replace the old ones. Take a basic term in Christian vocabulary such as 'God'. It is a term that Christians did not invent; they inherited it from the Hebrew people of God, and these in turn from their environment. Yet just as for Jews the term 'God' came to mean the God of Abraham and Sarah, the God of Moses and Miriam, so also for Christians the semantic field of the term 'God' was partly changed to mean 'the God of Jesus Christ'. A host of other Christian terms would show similar inner transformation. The same is true of Christian practices. Christians take part in particular culturally defined practices, but shape them on the basis of their dominant values. Take marriage, for instance. Many of its elements are the same for Christians as they are for anybody else—or so I take it. Yet for Christians the love between partners in marriage is informed by the sacrificial love of Christ for the church.

Third, there might be some elements of a given culture that Christians will have to discard and possibly replace by other elements. Take slavery. It simply had to be discarded. Since in Christ there is 'no longer slave or free', but 'we all are children of God through faith' ([Gal. 3:26-28](#)), the runaway slave Onesimus should be received by

Philemon as ‘a beloved brother’, and that not only ‘in the Lord’, but also ‘in flesh’ ([Philm. 16](#)). The gospel required an inner transformation of this cultural institution of such magnitude that it eventually amounted to discarding the institution itself.

Taking these three complementary ways of relating to culture together we can say that *Christian difference is always a complex and flexible network of small and large refusals, divergences, subversions, and more or less radical alternative proposals, surrounded by the acceptance of many cultural givens. There is no single correct way to relate to a given culture as a whole, or even to its dominant thrust; there are only numerous ways of accepting, transforming, or replacing various aspects of a given culture from within.* This is what it means for Christian difference to be *internal* to a given culture.

## VI. SOME IMPLICATIONS

The notion of Christian presence as an internal difference has radical implications for mission and theology. I will name here only four.

- (1) Strictly speaking, Christians never have their own proper and exclusive cultural territory—their own proper language, their own proper values, their proper rationality. To be more precise, their own proper territory is always already inhabited by somebody else: they speak the language they have learned from their neighbours, though they metaphorize its meaning from within; they have inherited the value structure of the culture at large, yet they change more or less radically some of its elements and refuse to accept others; they take up the rules of what makes sense in a given culture, and yet they subvert them and occasionally refuse to follow where they lead. They belong, and yet do not belong; they are present, and yet distant. To become Christian means to divert without leaving; to live as a Christian means to insert a ‘difference’ into a given culture without ever stepping completely outside to do so.
- (2) For Christian difference to be internal to a given culture means that Christians have no place from which to transform the *whole culture they inhabit*—no place from which to undertake that eminently modern project of restructuring the whole social and intellectual life, no virgin soil on which to start building a new, radically different city. No revolutions are possible; all transformations are piece-meal—transformation of some elements, at some points, for some time with some gain and possibly some loss. These transformations are reconstructions of the structures that must be inhabited as the reconstruction is going on. As a result, what Christians end up helping to build resembles much less a suburban development project, all planned out in advance in architectural bureaus, than an ancient city with its ‘maze of little streets and squares, of old and new houses, and of houses with additions from various periods; and this surrounded by a multitude of new boroughs with straight regular streets and uniform houses’. This, it will be remembered, is how Ludwig Wittgenstein described our language; and this is how we should think of the results of the insertion of Christian difference into a given culture.
- (3) Accommodation should not be a part of the Christian project. We are used to hearing that kind of a message from fundamentalists. And in this one thing they are right (though they often fail to live up to their own rhetoric of difference and accommodate in surprisingly banal ways). The children of fundamentalists no less than their older siblings, liberals, do not like to hear that. They like to be at the centre, to be mainstream—theologically and culturally. But we need to retrieve the stress on difference. *It is the difference that matters.* Erase the difference and

literally nothing will remain that *could* matter. Without boundaries groups dissolve. Our task should not be accommodation, but distance from a given culture—a critical distance, to be sure, not a naive distance unaware of its own captivity to what it thinks it has escaped, a productive distance, not a sterile self-insulating distance of those who let the world go to hell. Accommodation is a given; it takes place whether you want it or not. Difference is not given. It is rather an arduous task that needs to be accomplished all the time anew. *Difference*, not accommodation, is the reason why theology needs to be kept fresh.

- (4) Except when the gospel crosses a cultural border for the first time, inculturation or indigenization *should not* be part of a *missionary* strategy. The process of inculturation presupposes that one stands outside a given culture and formulates the gospel in terms that are acceptable to that culture: one translates an (a) cultural message into the conceptualities, symbolic forms, or practices of the receptor culture. But Christians never stand outside of a culture and they never have a gospel that is not enshrined in categories of a particular culture. When the culturally mediated gospel reaches us we are part of a culture; we become Christians in that the insertion of Christian difference disrupts the equilibrium of our cultural identity. If one feels uncomfortable with that disruption, one might as well feel uncomfortable with becoming a Christian. *Without disruption there can be no Christian faith.*

It is, however, essential that the Christian difference remain *internal* to a given culture. This is the main thrust of my argument in this paper. In this sense I have no quarrels with inculturation and indigenization. What I deny is not in-culturation as a result, but inculturation as a theological programme done from the actual or presumed position of standing outside the culture. Theologians are good for many things, but not for formulating the gospel in terms of a culture at large (except, maybe, in terms of a limited intellectual culture of which they are a part). ‘Inculturation’ is best done by the faithful people of God themselves. *Western* theologians—or theologians trained in the West—are good for many things, but not for giving advice to non-western believers on the virtues of a particular kind of inculturation.<sup>2</sup> Inculturation takes place in that the people in their own contexts receive the one gospel of the crucified and resurrected Christ and run with it, living out and expressing the Christian difference in their own terms and symbols, and through their own practices. Theologians also have a role to play in the process, but it is a critical one rather than a creative one.

When the gospel comes into a culture, it always disrupts. If it comes in an authentic way, however, the disruption will remain internal to a given culture. Why? Because the people to whom it comes will remain part of their culture; they will divert without leaving. If they do, inculturation will take care of itself. The real question is not how to ‘inculturate’ the gospel. The key issue in missionary strategy within a given culture is how to maintain Christian difference from the culture of which we are a part and how to make that difference a leaven in the culture.

## **IN PLACE OF A CONCLUSION: DIFFERENCE AND WHAT TO DO WITH IT**

Let me conclude. I have sung the praises of difference and some of you may have been disturbed. You fear that the ghosts of obscurantism and fundamentalism will be attracted

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<sup>2</sup> For an analysis of the problems associated with indigenization see (Harper, Susan Billington, ‘Ironies of Indigenization: Some Cultural Repercussions of Mission in South India’ Typescript 1994).

or that the demons will rush in that make things fall apart and the centre unable to hold. But consider once again, now more generally, the importance of difference. Level the difference and what you have left will be *nothing*—you yourself along with everything else will be drowned in the sea of undifferentiated ‘stuff’ that is indistinguishable from anything. To erase the difference is to undo the creation, that intricate pattern of separations that God established during those unique six days when the universe was formed out of *no-thing*. Literally *every-thing* depends on difference.

Now apply this claim about creation to the relation between gospel and culture. Here too, everything depends on difference. If you have difference, you can have the gospel; if you don’t, you can’t: you will either have just plain old culture or the reign of God, but you will not have the gospel. Gospel is always about difference; after all it means the good *news*. The trick is to know *what* the Christian difference is and where precisely it needs to surface and where not; the trick is how to keep ourselves open to God and God’s reign and at the same time remain internal to a given culture. As I see it, *this* is what the problem of the relation between gospel and culture is all about.

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## Women in the New Testament: A Middle Eastern Cultural View

Kenneth E. Bailey

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With wit, clarity and courage, the author offers his solution to the controversial issue of the role of women in the leadership of the Church. Some readers will vehemently disagree

with his analysis and exegesis of the biblical text. However, I have included it in this number on the Gospel and Culture because the author with his life-long immersion in Middle Eastern culture is uniquely qualified to observe the underlying cultural assumptions that influenced the biblical authors' treatment of the revealed Word of God. This detailed study is valuable for its methodology as well as for its content.  
Editor

The broader topic of the place of women in the family, in society and in the Church is now discussed over much of the Christian world across a wide spectrum of opinion. Few topics have held as much promise and pain, hope and despair, change and deep uneasiness about change as this topic and it is clear that the New Testament is critical to it. This essay focuses on the New Testament. Yet regarding the biblical witness there is a strong tendency to see Scripture through the eyes of traditional interpretation of it, or through the eyes of current ideologies. Here a rigorous attempt will be made to allow Scripture itself to control and correct our understanding of it.

As is known, the NT is deeply influenced by its first century Middle Eastern cultural setting. Trying to discern the fabric of cultural assumptions that underlie the NT has been my life-long focus in NT studies. As a supplement to other historical concerns, this lens will be utilized as we examine our topic.

We will first expose what appear to be two opposing attitudes in the New Testament towards women in the church. We will then see if these two 'opposites' can be reconciled. The problem is simply this: one set of NT texts appears to say 'yes' to women while a second set appears to say 'no'. We turn first to the positives.

## I. POSITIVE ATTITUDES

In the NT, women occupy a remarkable range of clearly identifiable positions. These include:

### Jesus Had Women Disciples

Four texts are significant. *First*, although occurring only once, the word 'disciple' does appear in the NT as a feminine. In [Acts 9:36](#) Tabitha (Dorcas) is called *mathetria* (disciple). *Secondly*, in St. Matthew's Gospel, Jesus' family appears and asks to speak with him. Jesus replies,

'Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?' And stretching out his hand *towards his disciples*, he said, 'Here are my mother and my brothers! For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother, and sister, and mother' ([Matt. 12:46-50](#)).

In our Middle Eastern cultural context, a speaker who gestures to a crowd of *men* can say, 'Here are my brother, and uncle and cousin'. He *cannot* say, 'Here are my brother, and sister, and mother'. The text specifically affirms that Jesus is gesturing to 'his disciples' whom he addresses with male and female terms. This communicates to the reader that the disciples before him were composed of men *and* women.

*Thirdly*, is the remarkable report in [Luke 8:1-3](#). In this text the reader is told,

Soon afterward he went through cities and villages, preaching and bringing the good news of the Kingdom of God. And the twelve were with him, and also some women . . . who provided for them out of their means.

We note that Jesus is *travelling* through cities and villages with a band of men *and* women who are naturally known to be his disciples. This implies that they were spending night after night in strange villages. Today social customs are more relaxed than they were

in the first century (as evidenced from the Mishnah and the Talmudes). Yet in the contemporary Middle East, in traditional society, I know of no place where the social scene presented in the text is possible. Women can travel with a group of men, but must spend their nights with relatives. Three points of amazement appear.

First, the story itself is very surprising for the reasons noted above. Secondly, the women are paying for the movement out of resources under their control. Finally, Luke (a man) admits all of this in writing.

*Fourthly*, in [Luke 10:38](#) Jesus enters the house of Martha. Luke tells us, 'And she had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to his teaching'. In Acts Paul describes himself as having been 'brought up at the feet of Gamaliel' ([Acts 22:3](#)). To 'sit at the feet' of a rabbi meant to become a disciple of a rabbi. So Mary became a disciple of Jesus. Martha, we are told is 'distracted' (not 'burdened') with much serving. To be distracted one must be distracted from something or by something.

Clearly Martha is distracted *from* the teachings of Jesus by her cooking. In the account, Martha then asks Jesus to send Mary to the kitchen to help her. The point is not the need for someone to peel the potatoes. In our Middle Eastern cultural context, Martha is more naturally understood to be upset over the fact that her 'little sister' is seated with the men and has become a disciple of Rabbi Jesus. It is not difficult to imagine what is going through Martha's mind. She says to herself:

This is disgraceful! What will happen to us! My sister has joined this band of men. What will the neighbours say? What will the family think? After this who will marry her? This is too much to expect!

Jesus does not reply to her words, but to their meaning. In context his answer communicates the following:

Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about *many* things. I understand the *entire* list. One thing is needed. What is missing is not one more plate of food, but rather for you to understand that *I* am providing the meal and that your sister has already chosen the good portion. I will not allow you to take it from her. A good student is more important to me than a good meal.

The word 'portion' can mean a portion of food at a meal.<sup>1</sup> Jesus is defending Mary's right to continue her 'theological studies' with Jesus as one of his disciples.

From these four texts it is clear that in the Gospels women were among the disciples of Jesus.

### **These Are Women Teachers of Theology in the NT**

[Acts 18:24–28](#) tells of Apollos' visit to Ephesus. Apollos is praised for his knowledge of the Scriptures and 'the things concerning Jesus'. But 'he knew only the baptism of John'. The text affirms,

... but when Priscilla and Aquila heard him *they* took him and expounded to him the way of God more accurately.

Clearly Priscilla is 'team teaching' theology with Aquila and the student is no beginner, no fledgling catechumen; rather he is the famous, eloquent preacher of Alexandria. Furthermore, Luke's Gospel was indeed sent/dedicated to Theophilus. But there is little doubt that Luke also intended it to be read by the Church. Thus when he identifies Mary

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<sup>1</sup> J. A. Fitzmeyer, *The Gospel according to Luke (X–XXIV)* (Doubleday: New York, 1985), p. 894; cf. LXX [Gen. 43:34](#); [Deut. 18:8](#).

as the author of the Magnificat he indirectly presents her as a teacher of theology, ethics, and social justice for all his readers! The critical discussion about the composition of the Magnificat is known to me. Yet irrespective of one's view regarding sources and authorship, Luke *presents* Mary as the singer of this song and thus as a teacher of the readers of his Gospel. These two texts witness to the fact that in the early church women could (Mary) and did (Priscilla) teach theology to men.

### **The NT Affirms the Presence of Women Deacons/Ministers in the Early Church**

For this topic, two texts must be noted. The first is [Rom. 16:1-2](#), where Paul writes, 'I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a deacon of the church at Cenchreae.'

Phoebe is called a *deacon* (*diakonos*) not a *deaconness*. The evidence for the feminine use of this masculine form is slight.<sup>2</sup> Most likely this masculine ending is used because Phoebe was ordained to a clearly defined ministry, that of deacon (*diakonos*). Thus the formal title appears. Another reason is that the Aramaic word is *shammash*, which is used to describe the High Priest officiating in the temple on the day of atonement (*M.*, Yoma 7:5; *B.T.* Yoma 47a). But the feminine *shammasha* means a prostitute.<sup>3</sup> The need for an honourable title would dictate the use of the masculine in a church where a significant number had Aramaic as a part of their linguistic heritage.

In any case, for centuries scholars have observed the official nature of Phoebe's position. Regarding this verse, John Calvin wrote,

He begins by commending Phoebe . . . first on account of her office, because she exercised a very honourable and holy ministry in the Church'.<sup>4</sup>

In the contemporary scene Cranfield concludes,

We regard it as virtually certain that Phoebe is being described as *a* or possibly, *the* 'deacon' of the church in question, and that this occurrence of *diakonos* is to be classified with its occurrences in Philippians 1.1 and 1Timothy 3.8 and 12.<sup>5</sup>

We would add to this that in [1 Tim. 4:6](#) *diakonos* is applied to Timothy himself where it is usually translated 'minister'. While recognizing that Romans is written when the church's ministry was in an early and more undefined stage, Dunn feels that 'servant' is inadequate. He writes,

*diakonos* together with *ousa* points more to a recognized ministry . . . or position of responsibility within the congregation.<sup>6</sup>

Paul refers to himself and to Apollos as *diakonoi* in [1 Cor. 3:5](#).

Furthermore, Phoebe is called a *prostatis* over/to many. This word was applied to the leader of worship in a Graeco-Roman temple as well as to a governor, a chieftain, and the

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<sup>2</sup> W. Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, tr. and adapted by W. F. Arndt, F. W. Gingrich and F. W. Danker (University of Chicago Press, 1979) (cited hereafter as BAGD) pp. 184f.

<sup>3</sup> M. Jastrow, *A Dictionary of the Targumim, the Talmud Babli and Yerushalmi, and the Midrashic Literature* (New York: Padres, 1950), p. 1602.

<sup>4</sup> J. Calvin, *The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Romans and to the Thessalonians*, tr. R. Mackenzie (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), p. 320.

<sup>5</sup> C. E. B. Cranfield, *Romans, A Short Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), p. 374.

<sup>6</sup> J. D. G. Dunn, *Romans, vol. II* (Waco: Word Publishers, 1990), pp. 886f.



leader of a democracy.<sup>7</sup> Dunn argues for patron/protector, or leader/ ruler.<sup>8</sup> A ninth century Arabic version translated this phrase, ‘*qu’ima ‘ala katherin wa ‘alayya*’, in authority over many and over myself as well.<sup>9</sup>

A second text relevant to women deacons is [1 Tim. 3:8–11](#). Here the qualifications for deacons and for ‘the women’ appear. The two lists exhibit striking parallels which can be seen as follows:

[1 Timothy 3:8–11](#)

Deacons likewise must be:

The women likewise must be:

- |   |  |                |
|---|--|----------------|
| 1.<br>( <i>semnous</i> )                                  | Serious1.<br>( <i>semnous</i> )  | Serious        |
| 2. Not double<br>( <i>dilogous</i> )                      | tongued2.<br>( <i>diabolous</i> )  | Not slanderers |
| 3. Not addicted to much wine                              | 3. Temperate   |                |
| 4. Not greedy for gain                                    | 4. —   |                |
| 5. They must hold fast to the mystery of <i>the faith</i> | 5. <i>Faithful</i> in all things (NRSV)<br>Better: <i>Believing</i> in all things with a clear conscience (NRSV) |                |

These two lists are obviously intended to be parallel. The critical item for our subject is number five. The deacons must hold onto *the faith*. As seen above, the parallel item for the qualifications of the women is ‘*pistas en pasin*’. The other six occurrences of this word in 1 Timothy are translated as referring to the *act of believing* in the faith. Here alone it is consistently translated ‘faithful in all things’, referring to a character trait. Does not the parallel nature of the two lists make clear that ‘believing in all things’ is what is intended? These women can best be seen as engaged in activities directly related to the faith in the same way as the men. Deacons in [Acts 6](#) appear in [Acts 7](#) and [8](#) as *preachers* of the *word* (cf. Stephen and Philip). Regarding ‘the women’ here in 1 Timothy John Chrysostom wrote,

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<sup>7</sup> H. G. Liddell and R. Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, New Edition revised by H. S. Jones and R. McKenzie (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1966), c. 1940 (cited as L. & S.), p. 1256.

<sup>8</sup> Dunn, op cit., pp. 886f.

<sup>9</sup> M. D. Gibson, ed., *An Arabic Version of the Epistle of St. Paul to the Romans, Corinthians, Galatians with part of the Epistle to the Ephesians from a Ninth Century MS. in the Convent of St Catherine on Mount Sinai*, *Studia Sinaitica* No. II (London: Cambridge University Press, 1894), p. 35.

Some have thought that this is said of women generally, but it is not so, for why should he introduce anything about women to interfere with his subject. He is speaking to those who hold the rank of Deaconesses.<sup>10</sup>

### The NT Has Women Prophets

[Eph. 2:20](#) affirms that the household of God is built on 'the apostles and prophets'. Thus, whoever they were, these early Christian prophets occupied a high place in the NT church. Furthermore, some of these prophets were women. In Acts Paul stays in Caesarea with Philip the evangelist whose daughters prophesied ([Acts 21:19](#)).

In [1 Cor. 11:4-5](#) Paul offers advice to men and women prophets on headcovering *while prophesying*. However one interprets this puzzling text, it is clear that both men and women were praying and prophesying. Praying could refer to private devotions. Prophesying is necessarily a public act.

### A Woman Apostle

[Rom. 16:7](#) reads,

Greet Andronicus and Jounian, my relatives and my fellow prisoners; they are notable among the apostles, and they were in Christ before me.

Two people in this text are called 'notable among the apostles'. Our interest focuses on the name Jounian which is the accusative singular of a first declension Greek noun. Unfortunately this particular accusative can be masculine or feminine. The question becomes: What is the nominative of this name Jounian? The first declension allows for two options. It could be Jounia, in which case the person is a woman. This option would mean that Paul was sending greetings to a man and a woman, both apostles, probably a husband and wife like Priscilla and Aquila whom he has just mentioned.

On the other hand, if the nominative form is Jounias (a contraction of Junianus,<sup>11</sup> then the text refers to two men. Which of these options is more probable? Initially we observe that the witness of the Fathers is consistent.

Preaching on this text, Chrysostom said,

'Greet Andronicus and Junia . . . who are outstanding among the apostles.' To be an apostle is something great. But to be outstanding among the apostles just think what a wonderful song of praise that is! Indeed, how great the wisdom of this woman must have been, that she was even deemed worthy of the title of apostle.<sup>12</sup>

Jounian was also read as a feminine by Origen of Alexandria, Jerome, Peter Abelard and others. The Catholic scholar, Bernadette Brooten, quoted above, was unable to find any Latin commentary on Romans that had this name as a masculine before the late thirteenth century. The name appears as a feminine (Junia) in the Syriac Peshitta and in all the numerous MSS and published Arabic versions available to me stretching from the ninth to the nineteenth centuries. The male name Junias first appeared in the Middle East in 1860! In the English language the famous Authorized Version reads, 'Salute Andronicus and Junia . . . who are of note among the apostles'.

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<sup>10</sup> J. Chrysostom, *Homilies on Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, Thessalonians, Timothy, Titus and Philemon*, vol. XII *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Philip Schaff (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), p. 441.

<sup>11</sup> Dunn, *op cit.*, p. 894.

<sup>12</sup> B. Brooten, ' "Junia—, Outstanding among the Apostles" ([Romans 16:7](#))' in *Women Priests: A Catholic Commentary on the Vatican Declarations*, eds. L. and A. Swindler (New York: Paulist Press, 1977), p. 141.

The first noticeable shift from Junia to Junias was apparently made by Faber Stapulensis, writing in Paris in 1512. His work subsequently influenced Luther's commentary on Romans. Luther then incorporated the masculine Junias into his German translation of the Bible which in time influenced other versions. However, the theoretical masculine name Junias has never been found in any Latin or Greek text. The name Junia, however, has appeared over two hundred and fifty times.<sup>13</sup> Thus to insist on this being a masculine name is like finding a text with the name Mary in it and arguing that it refers to a man! Such an argument is theoretically possible but would surely hinge on the finding of at least one text where Mary is clearly a male name.

It appears that during the thirteenth to sixteenth centuries a name known by the Church, East and West, to be female gradually became the name of a man in the West. In the Middle East this shift of gender did not take place until the nineteenth century. The shift in both cases was made without reference to any evidence.

We must now ask, is the title 'apostle' significant? In the NT this title was primarily applied to the twelve. Paul, James, Barnabas and the two people in this text were also called apostles. From the shortness of the list and the prominence of the first three names, it is clear that they were a highly select group. In 1 Cor. the apostles head the list of church orders ([12:29](#)). As noted, the Church is built on them ([Eph. 2:20](#)). The title is best understood to have maintained its original meaning, which was an eye-witness to Jesus who had received a direct commission from him.<sup>14</sup> Thus, the title of apostle (as applied to Junia) cannot be seen as a casual reference to an insignificant early Christian witness. With Chrysostom, the Early Fathers, Arabic and Syriac Christianity, and the Authorized Version translators, we can affirm with full confidence that Junia (feminine) was an apostle.

### Women Elders

There remains the question of *elders*. The central text is [1 Tim. 5:1-2](#). Initially, the widely-debated question of the authorship of the Pastoral Epistles can be set aside. The material is often called deutero-Pauline. I prefer the view of E. E. Ellis who argues that the Pastorals present Paul at the end of his life addressing new topics through an amanuensis.<sup>15</sup> With a full awareness of the modern debate and the theological and linguistic issues involved, we will look at the text as Scripture handed down to us as a letter of Paul to Timothy, the pastor of the church in Ephesus. Our conclusions, we trust, are valid for our topic irrespective of a composition date from the sixties or the nineties.

The text under consideration is open to two interpretations. The first is reflected in the time-honoured translation of these two verses, which is as follows:

Do not rebuke an *older man* but exhort him as you would a father; younger men like brothers, *older women* like mothers, younger women like sisters, in all purity (RSV).

This translation is built on the assumption that chapter five opens a new subject. At the end of chapter four there is specific reference to *the council of elders* who ordained Timothy. This *council* of elders, the *presbuterion*, was composed of the *presbuteroi*, the elders. That much is clear. The problem arises in [5:1-2](#), where the same word appears

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<sup>13</sup> Dunn, op cit., p. 167.

<sup>14</sup> K. H. Ringsdorf, 'Apostles', *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 1, ed. G. Kittel (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), pp. 422f; Dunn, op cit., pp. 894f.

<sup>15</sup> E. E. Ellis, 'The Authorship of the Pastorals: A Resume and Assessment of Recent Trends' in *Paul and His Recent Interpreters* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), pp. 49-57.

twice, first as a masculine singular (*presbutero*) and then as a feminine plural (*presbuteras*). These two words are usually translated as ‘older man’ and ‘older women’, as seen above. Support for this translation is found in the fact that ‘young men’ and ‘young women’ are mentioned in the text. Thus it is easy to see age references all through the verse. But this is not the only option.

It is also possible to argue as follows. (First, a word of explanation: the science of rhetorical criticism in biblical studies is more than one hundred and fifty years old.<sup>16</sup> But it has been given serious attention only in the last two decades.) One of the frequently used devices, now found to be extensively present in both the OT and the NT, is chiasm, which we prefer to call ‘inverted parallelism’. This particular rhetorical device presents a series of ideas, comes to a climax and then repeats the series backwards. The ideas/units that repeat can be individual lines but often appear as paragraphs. This form of rhetoric is common in both Greek and Hebrew literature. It is so extensive in the NT that Johanna Dewey has observed, ‘The question has now become, where is it not found?’<sup>17</sup>

In regard to our text, if we observe the larger section in which [5:1-2](#) appears, the following outline emerges:

1. These instructions (as a minister) [4:6-11](#)
2. Timothy and the Elders (and the young) [4:12-5:2](#)
3. Older widows (and the young) [5:3-16](#)
4. Timothy and the Elders [5:17-20](#)
5. These rules (in regard to ordination) [5:21-22](#)

[Numbers 1](#) and [5](#) discuss ‘instructions as a minister’ and ‘rules as regards ordination’. They form a pair. Paragraphs 2 and 4 form a second pair and are on the topic of ‘Timothy and the Elders’. The widows form paragraph 3 in the centre. The entire passage discusses *ministry*. With this very simple outline in mind, a closer look at each paragraph is necessary. We will examine each of the ‘pairs’ of paragraphs. Paragraphs 1 and 5 will be examined and compared first. We will then skip briefly to the centre in paragraph 3 and finally observe the thrust of paragraphs 4 and 2 where our text is located.

### **1. The outside pair (1 and 5)**

The first paragraph ([4:6-11](#)) opens with, ‘If you put these *instructions* before the brethren you will be a good *diakonos/minister* of Jesus Christ’. This section most naturally ends with the words ‘*Command* and *teach* these things’ (v. [11](#)). Paragraph 5 ([5:21-22](#)) is clearly parallel to this opening section. It charges Timothy to ‘keep these *rules*’ (v. [21](#)) and to ‘not be hasty in the laying on of hands’ (v. [22](#)). So the topic of ‘*rules* which relate to *ministry*’ is again in focus.

### **2. The centre (3)**

The centre section ([5:3-16](#)) opens and closes with references to ‘real windows’ (vv. [3](#), [5](#), [16](#)) and their *enrolment* (v. [9](#)). In between Paul describes *young widows* who should *not* be enrolled (vv. [11-15](#)).

### **3. The second pair (4 and 2)**

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<sup>16</sup> K. E. Bailey, *Poet and Peasant and Through Peasant Eyes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), pp. 45ff.

<sup>17</sup> J. Dewey, *Markan Public Debate: Literary Technique, Concentric Structure and Theology in [Mark 2:1-3 6](#)* (Chico, California: Scholar Press, 1980), p. 35.

We saw how the topic discussed in the opening paragraph reappeared in the fifth paragraph. The critical question is, are paragraphs 2 ([4:12-5:2](#)) and 4 ([5:17-20](#)) intentionally composed as a pair? I am convinced that they are.

First observe paragraph 4, which is clearly discussing elders who are officials in the ministry of the Church, *not* old men. The material breaks into two sections, vv. [17-18](#) and vv. [19-20](#). The first two verses discuss the ‘good elders’ who are ruling well, busy at preaching and teaching and should be paid for their efforts. In vv. [19-20](#) Timothy is advised about dealing with ‘troublesome elders’.

We turn finally to paragraph 2 ([4:12-5:2](#)) where *presbuteroi* are also discussed. The early Greek paragraph divisions (*kefalaia*) left [6:1-2](#) standing alone. The Fathers who made these divisions were honest enough not to relate these verses to what followed. Did they have a hidden agenda when they chose *not* to attach them to the previous paragraph?

Against the *kefalaia*, Archbishop Langton’s thirteenth century chapter divisions (now in use), attach these verses to the discussion of widows which follow. But those instructions regarding widows have no mention of the *presbuteroi*. Is it not more appropriate to see [5:1-2](#) as a part of the previous paragraph which does mention *presbuteroi*? I am convinced that it is. Did Langton share the hidden agenda mentioned above?

We will examine [4:12-5:2](#) as a unit which focuses on Timothy and the *presbuteroi*.

Once again the *presbuteroi* are of two kinds. Paul first mentions the elders who have ordained Timothy ([4:12-16](#)). Granted, these verses focus on Timothy’s duties as a leader of worship; but the context is that of Timothy’s ordination by elders who are not criticized. He then discusses the *difficult* elders ([5:1-2](#)). These are obviously people whom Timothy is sorely tempted to attack. He is told, ‘Don’t do it’. Treat the *presbutero* like a father, he is advised, and the *presbuteras* (plural) like mothers. Thus the two topics of ‘helpful elders’ and ‘difficult elders’ appear in both paragraph 4 ([4:17-20](#)) and paragraph 2 ([4:12-5:2](#)). In each case the good elders are mentioned first and the difficult elders second. Thus paragraphs 2 and 4 can be seen as parallel discussion of *ministry*. If this is true, then the *presbuteras* in [5:2](#) are women elders ordained and engaged in ministry in Timothy’s congregation. The NRSV places ‘or an *elder*, or a *presbyter*’ as a marginal note to *presbutero* in [5:1](#) but curiously not to *presbuteras* in [5:2](#). In regard to [5:1-2](#), Leonard Swidler, professor of Catholic Studies at Temple University (USA), writes,

... in [1 Timothy] [5:1-2](#) the words *presbytero* and *presbyteras* are usually translated as ‘an older man’ and ‘older women’, but in this context of discussion of the various ‘officers’ of the church, a perfectly proper translation—which, if not more likely, is at least possible—would be ‘male presbyter’ and ‘woman presbyters’.<sup>18</sup>

What then can be said about the references to youth in [5:1-2](#)? Aside from [5:1-2](#) under discussion, twice in the larger passage we have observed references to *youth* in texts that also discuss formal ministries ([4:12-16](#)) and [5:9-16](#)). The same phenomenon occurs in [1 Pet. 5:1-5](#). The two cases in [5:1](#) and [5:2](#) fit easily into this pattern.

In summary, the NT has clear cases of women disciples, teachers, prophets and deacons/ministers. We have near certitude in perceiving Junia to be a female apostle. It is possible to see female elders in [1 Tim. 5:2](#). Thus women appear on nearly all, if not all, levels of leadership in the NT Church.

## II. NEGATIVE ATTITUDES

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<sup>18</sup> L. Swidler, *Biblical Affirmations of Women* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1979), p. 13.

On the negative side are two critical texts. The first of these is [1 Cor. 14:33–36](#) which tells the women to be silent in church. The second is [1 Tim. 2:11–15](#) which adds that they must not teach or ‘have authority’ over men. These two texts seem to affirm the exact opposite of all that we have thus far observed. Faced with both the positives and the negatives, at least five alternatives are available to the reader of the NT.

1. Dismiss the biblical witness as contradictory and thus irrelevant.
2. Take the texts that say ‘yes’ to women as normative and ignore the others.
3. Focus on [1 Cor. 14](#) and [1 Tim. 2](#) and overlook the women disciples, teachers, deacons/ministers, prophets, and woman apostle.
4. Conclude that the NT is at loggerheads with itself and that the Church can only choose one biblical view against the other.
5. Look once more at the negative texts to see if their historical settings allow for more unity in the outlook of the NT than we have suspected.

To borrow a phrase, we will proceed to ‘have a go’ at alternative five. What can be said about [1 Cor. 14:33–36](#) and [1 Tim. 2:11–15](#)?

### **1 Corinthians 14:33–36**

I have argued elsewhere that [1 Cor. 11–14](#) is a single essay.<sup>19</sup> In these chapters Paul’s outline is organized using the same inverted parallelism already noted in 1 Tim. The themes are as follows:

1. Disorders in worship:
  - a. Dress of women/men prophets ([11:2–16](#))
  - b. Disorders in the Eucharist ([11:17–34](#))
2. The spiritual gifts (ch. [12](#))
3. Love (ch. [13](#))
4. The spiritual gifts ([14:1–25](#))
5. Disorders in worship:
  - a. Prophets all talk at once ([14:26–33a](#))
  - b. Women talk in church ([14:33b–36](#))

Disorders in worship open and close this four-chapter section of the epistle. The placing of the two discussions of spiritual gifts creates a second set of parallels. The chapter on love (ch. [13](#)) forms a powerful climax in the centre. Thus, as noted, chapters [11–14](#) form a single unit. Our interest focuses on the discussions regarding women in the Church that open and close this four-chapter unit.

In [11:4–5](#) the men *and the women* are prophesying. Thus the reader knows that the prophets who interrupt one another in chapter [14](#) are comprised of *both* men and women. So when the women in [14:34–5](#) are told to be silent and listen to the prophets, it is clear that *some of those prophets are women*.

Also relevant is the fact that [14:26–36](#) lists three groups of people who are disturbing the worship. These are as follows:

1. The *prophets* are told; Don’t all talk at once. *Be silent* in the church.

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<sup>19</sup> K. E. Bailey, ‘The Structure of 1 Corinthians and Paul’s Theological Method With Special Reference to [3:17](#)’, *Novum Testamentum*, vol. XXV (1983), pp. 170–73.

2. The *speakers* in *tongues* are told:  
If there is no interpreter,  
*be silent* in the church.
3. *Married women* with Christian husbands (who attend) are told:  
Don't ask questions during the worship and don't chat.  
Ask your husbands at home and *be silent* in the church.

Each of these groups is told to be silent when it disturbs worship. Paul is not issuing a command for perpetual prophetic silence! In like manner, when they disrupt public worship the women are asked to be quiet. Thus Paul is saying to the women:

'Women, please keep silent in worship and listen to the female and male prophets. Don't interrupt them with questions, and don't talk/chat in church. If you can't understand what is being said, ask your husbands at home. They understand more Greek than you do and will be able to explain things to you.'

The scene is easy to reconstruct. Corinth was a tough immoral town. Transportation workers, porters and metal workers made up a significant portion of the population. It is easy to assume that the inhabitants came from different places and spoke different languages. Their common language was Greek. The men were naturally 'out and about' more than the women and thus were more likely to be at ease in that common language. It follows that in church the women could perhaps not easily follow what was being said and so would begin to ask questions or lose interest and start 'chatting'.

A documented case of this phenomenon is recorded in a sermon of John Chrysostom, preached in the cathedral of Antioch in the latter part of the fourth century. Stenographers recorded Chrysostom as follows:

Text: And if they (the women) will learn anything, let them ask their husbands at home.  
Chrysostom: Then indeed the women, from such teaching keep silence; but now there is apt to be great noise among them, much clamour and talking, and nowhere so much as in this place (the cathedral). They may all be seen here talking more than in the market, or at the bath. For, as if they came hither for recreation, they are all engaged in conversing upon unprofitable subjects. Thus all is confusion, and they seem not to understand, that unless they are quiet, they cannot learn anything that is useful. For when our discourse strains against the talking, and no one minds what is said, what good can it do to them?<sup>20</sup>

If this was the scene in the cathedral of the great city of Antioch in the fourth century, what can we imagine for Corinth in the days of Paul? Corinth was, no doubt, even more disorderly. (The present writer had personally experienced Chrysostom's predicament in isolated middle-eastern village churches!) The women of Corinth were told (when they disrupted worship) to be silent. Paul assumed that the readers remembered the women prophets of [11:5](#) when he wrote [14:35-36](#). He then reinforced the unity of this four-chapter essay with a brief summary. It reads as follows:

1. If anyone thinks that he is a *prophet* (ch. [11](#))
2. or *spiritual* (ch. [12](#))
3. He should acknowledge that what I am writing to you is a *command of the Lord* (ch. [13](#)). If anyone does not recognize this, he is not recognized.
4. So, my brethren, Earnestly desire to *prophesy* and do not forbid *speaking in tongues* ([14:1-25](#)).

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<sup>20</sup> Chrysostom, op cit., p. 435.

5. But all things should be done in decency and in order ([26-36](#)).

If these four verses are (as we suggest) a summary of the entire essay, then the *command of the Lord* referred to in paragraph 3 is the command to 'love one another', which is definitively explained in ch. [13](#). If however, [14:30-40](#) is read only in a linear fashion, then the 'command of the Lord' becomes the command to tell the women to be silent in church, not the love command. If then the link with ch. [11](#) is forgotten, the women prophets are forgotten. Together these two misunderstandings of the text can have been shaped by some into a club with which to threaten women into silence in the name of 'the command of the Lord'. More recently they have been used by many to attack the integrity of the apostle Paul. Paul's intent is simply to solve a problem strikingly similar to Chrysostom's difficulties with the chatting women of Antioch.

### **1 Timothy 2:11-15**

Finally then, what is to be done with the *crux interpretum* of [1 Tim. 2:11-15](#)? As discussed above, whether 1 Tim. is history from the sixties or carefully written theological drama from the nineties, the Church was still in existence in Ephesus at the end of the first century and the temple of Artemis was also intact and functioning. I am myself convinced of the earlier date, but the following suggestions can, we trust, help clarify the text as Scripture in either case. What then can be said?

First, the author speaks to Timothy as a young man and calls him 'my son'. Secondly, Timothy is ill with stomach problems and other 'frequent ailments' ([4:23](#)). Thirdly, he is apparently under stress and wants to leave because now, for the second time, Paul urges him to stay ([1:3](#)). Finally, some form of a gnostic heresy has broken out in the Church. Chapter [4:1-3](#) offers details. The author warns against those who 'forbid marriage and enjoin abstinence from foods'. For these heretics the body was evil. Obviously someone was pressuring the Church in these directions. Who then was teaching such things?

We can only speculate, but there are a few helpful historical hints. In the early forms of gnosticism known to us, women teachers played prominent roles. Simon Magus is accused by Justin and Eusebius of having had a consort called Helena who was a prostitute from Tyre. She was called *ennois* (divine intelligence). The gnostic document, *The Acts of Paul*, adds a consort called Thekla to Paul. Montanus had Prisca and Maximilla as his female prophetesses. In [2 Timothy 3](#) the author sharply criticizes men but also mentions 'weak women who are swayed by various impulses and who will listen to anybody'. In [1 Tim. 5:15](#) the author specifically mentions 'women . . . who have already strayed after Satan'. To this another dimension must be added.

The great temple of Artemis in Ephesus was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. The roof was supported by 127 columns that were 65 feet high (roughly seven storeys). The building was 221 feet wide and 425 feet long. Within the temple as an institution, women exercised power on two levels. First, the temple was controlled by a group of virgins and castrated men. The later were called *Magabizes*. Then second, under their control were thousands of female priestess-slaves called *hierodules*. There is specific evidence for priestesses, receptionists, supervisors, drummers, bearers of the sceptre, cleaners, acrobats, flute players and bankers. The economy of the town and province was profoundly linked to the temple as an institution (cf. [Acts 19:23-29](#)). The entire town set aside one month a year for ceremonies, games and festivities connected to the cult.<sup>21</sup> The focus of all of this was Artemis, a female goddess with rows of multiple breasts. Thus the

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<sup>21</sup> G. B. Bromiley, ed., *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, Revised 5 vols.*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982-87), vol. 1, pp. 306-308 'Artemis'.



Ephesians lived in a city and district where the huge seven-storey-high temple, a wonder of the world, dominated the skyline. As an institution it was naturally a powerful force in all aspects of their lives. The focus of all this was a goddess whose worship was controlled by virgins who shared leadership with males only if they were castrated.

In such an atmosphere, what kind of female-male relations would have developed? What possibility would any male religious leadership have had for a sense of dignity and self-respect? What kind of female attitudes would have prevailed in such a city? How easy would it have been for the values of the society to have penetrated the Church? Castration being the ultimate violence against the male, would not anti-male sexism in various forms have been inevitable?

No church is ever totally isolated from the sins of its culture. It does not take too much imagination to fill in the spaces between the lines of 1 Timothy and surmise what may have prompted Timothy's desire to leave. It is easy to assume that a group of women had asserted enough power to gain adherents to their heretical views. As noted, avoidance of marriage (and child-bearing), along with abstinence from foods, appear to have been a part of the package which was damaging the social and theological foundations of the Church. As [2:12](#) makes clear (see below), these same women were brutalizing the men in the process.

Timothy was young, sick, depressed and male. He could not manage. Paul, or Paul through an amanuensis, or a student of Paul in Paul's name, was informed that things were going very badly in Ephesus. He wrote this stinging reply hoping to save the Church. With this as a possible scenario, we must examine the text itself. Each section requires scrutiny.

Paul writes, 'Let a woman learn in quietness with all submissiveness'. He opens with a command, 'Let a woman learn. . . .' Judith Hauptmann, in an essay on 'Images of Women in the Talmud', notes Rabbi Eliezer's view that it is better to burn the words of the Torah than to give them to women.<sup>22</sup> By contrast, other Talmudic texts make clear that some women *were* exposed to Torah and Talmud. However there is no command that they should learn. That was for the men. The general view was that the woman's task was to keep the house and free the men to study the tradition.<sup>23</sup> At least from the second century AD each male worshipper offered daily thanks to God for not having made him a woman. Greeks expressed similar views.<sup>24</sup> Misogyny was also a part of Roman society. Indeed it was a part of the times. Against this background Paul gives a clear directive that a Christian woman must *learn* the faith. He is obviously referring to women who need instruction. He does not say, 'Dismiss them from the classroom', or 'They are not capable of understanding'. Rather he commands, 'Let a woman learn!'

Secondly, we have traditionally translated the full command, 'Let a woman learn *in silence*'. The Greek can also be translated, 'Let a woman learn in quietness', which is perhaps more appropriate to the tense situation in the church in Ephesus. Angry students forced into silence learn little. But an atmosphere of 'quietness' encourages study and fosters understanding. In regard to this text Chrysostom writes, 'He was speaking of quietness . . .'.<sup>25</sup> This legitimate translation option appears in a variety of Arabic versions for a thousand years. In 867 AD Bashir ibn al-Siri translated 'let a woman learn in

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<sup>22</sup> J. Hauptman, 'Images of Women in the Talmud', in *Religion and Sexism: Images of Women in the Jewish and Christian Traditions*, ed. Rosemary R. Ruether (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1974), p. 203.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 209.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 196.

<sup>25</sup> Chrysostom, *op cit.*, p. 435.

*tranquility* (*tata' allim fi sukun*).<sup>26</sup> *Sukun* is a rich Arabic word that means 'calm, tranquility, peace'.<sup>27</sup> This word brilliantly picks up the nuances of the total scene in Ephesus to which Paul was writing. As we will see below, these women had become counterproductively aggressive. The author asks them to calm down and to pursue theological instruction in tranquility.

Thirdly, they are to submit; but to what? We are not told. Yet in the context of the extended discussion of 'sound doctrine' with which the epistle opens, the natural assumption is that the author intends them to submit to the orthodox teachings of the Church. Paul has instructed Timothy in 'sound doctrine' ([1 Tim. 1:10](#)) and here a wayward part of Timothy's parish is told to accept the authoritative nature of the theological instructions Timothy has received.

Paul continues with:

I            permit            no            woman            to            teach,  
 or            to            lord            it            over            the            men,  
 for she is to be in quietness.

It is possible to hear this text contradicting all of the positives observed above. But Priscilla taught Apollos, and every reader of [Luke 1:46-55](#) was instructed by Mary. The women prophets of Corinth ([1 Cor. 11:5](#)) and Caesarea ([Acts 21:9](#)) edified the Church. Each section of this verse requires comment. The first line can be understood as follows:

I permit none of these theologically ignorant women (in Ephesus) to teach, because they have brought their syncretistic religious beliefs with them into the Church.

We are obliged to ask, were all of the women in Ephesus heretics? Certainly not. However Paul *cannot* expect the young Timothy to administer theological exams in the midst of a crisis! The Gordian knot must be cut or its rope will strangle all of them. Paul cuts it with 'I permit *no* woman to teach' *All* of them are asked to study the faith! Is this not an appropriate ruling, given the tensions of such circumstances?

The second line of this sentence illuminates the precise situation in Ephesus. The key word is *authenteo* (to lord it over) which appears only here in all of the NT. The noun form of this word (*authentēs*) entered the Turkish language as *effendi*, the title for the Sultan with his life and death powers over the people of his empire. It is a very strong word and can also be translated 'to commit murder' or 'assert absolute sway'.<sup>28</sup> Marcus Barth translates it with the Authorised Version as 'usurp authority'.<sup>29</sup>

It is impossible to see this ruling as a general principle that everywhere governed the life of the NT Church. As a deacon/minister of the church in Cenchreae, Phoebe surely exercised *some* form of authority over men. Priscilla had theological authority over her student Apollos. The women prophets naturally carried the authority which their message gave them. Lydia is prominent in the founding of the church in Philippi. The weight which Mary the mother of Jesus carried in the Early Church is unknown, but it is

<sup>26</sup> H. Staal, ed. and tr. *Mt. Sinai Arabic Codex 151*, vol. 1, *Pauline Epistles, Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium, Scriptorum Arabici Tomus 40*, (Lovanii: A. E. Peters, 1983), p. 185. See also: *Vatican Arabic MS. No. 13* (8th century), J. Dawud, tr. *Novum Testamentum Domini Nostri Jesu Christ, Versio Arabica* (Mosul, Iraq: Typis Fratrum Praedictorum, 1899)

<sup>27</sup> H. Wehr, *A Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic*, ed. J. M. Cowan (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1961), p. 418.

<sup>28</sup> L. & S., p. 275.

<sup>29</sup> M. Barth, *Ephesians*, Anchor Bible vol. 34A (New York: Doubleday, 1974), p. 714, n. 6.

impossible to imagine that she had none! Older women in middle-eastern society are generally powerful figures. Are we to imagine that the apostles totally disregarded her views? Did the one who 'kept all things in her heart' have no opinions on any aspect of the faith and life of the Church? So what is intended here?

I would submit that the overtones of this rare, very strong word, make clear the author's meaning. In Ephesus some women had acquired absolute authority over the men in the church and were verbally (and perhaps theologically) brutalizing them. Paul calls for a halt to this dehumanizing attack. Again our centuries-long middle-eastern exegetical tradition is instructive. The Peshitta Syriac (fourth century) translates with *mamraha*. The root of this word has to do with insolence and bullying. The early Arabic versions, translated from Greek, Syriac and Coptic, read either '*yata' amaru'* (to plot; to be domineering; to act as 'lord and master'; to be imperious<sup>30</sup>) or '*yajtari'* (to be insolent). The last two centuries have preferred '*yatasallat'* (to hold absolute sway). Thus middle-eastern Christianity at least from the third century onward has always remembered that something dark and sub-Christian was involved.

As noted, the male leadership in the local temple was castrated. The author of 1 Timothy was perhaps saying to the Ephesian Christians, 'There is no place for any carry-over of these Ephesian attitudes into the fellowship of faith in Jesus Christ as Lord of women and men'. An expanded and interpreted translation of the intent of this verse might be:

I do not allow these ignorant women to batter the men. They are to stop shouting and calm down.

Two wrongs do not make a right. The great standard set in [Galatians 3:28](#) affirms that 'in Christ . . . there is no longer male and female' (NRSV). Progress towards that goal of full equality cannot be made if either gender is asserting de-humanizing power over the other. In Galatians Paul is very harsh with male heretics. Here he deals with female destroyers of the faith. It is only fair to observe that in some places in the English-speaking world today, anti-male sexism is sufficiently intense that men find themselves intimidated, with leadership opportunities denied them because they are male, and under constant hostile monitoring for any failures in rigid linguistic conformity. Biblical theology is under attack by radical feminists and in some quarters academic freedom is on the verge of being threatened. Neither gender is completely innocent of mistreating the other and if Paul's vision in Galatians is to be followed neither gender has the right to absolute control over the other. This text can be seen as relevant to a part of this collection of problems.

### ***Adam and Eve***

Verses [11–12](#) are as follows: 'For Adam was formed first, then Eve. And Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor.' Difficulties continue: What is meant here? This text appears to be in direct clash with [Gal. 3:28](#) on the one hand and [Rom. 5](#) and [1 Cor. 15:21–22](#) on the other [Gal. 3:28](#) (as noted) says that in Christ there is no more 'male *and* female' (NRSV). Paul is quoting [Gen. 1:27](#) and affirming that in Christ this order is no longer relevant.<sup>31</sup> Here, apparently it is significant. This is indeed a *crux interpretum*. Yet in this text Paul is angry and is surely not attempting to write a calm

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<sup>30</sup> Wehr, op cit., p. 26.

<sup>31</sup> K. Stendhal, *The Bible and the Role of Women*, (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1966), passim.

dispassionate essay that can be critically compared to what he wrote decades earlier in another time and to another situation.

Furthermore, we can observe at least one other occasion of stress where Paul affirmed opposing views on a single topic. In [1 Cor. 12:4-11](#) he carefully states that God gives *different* gifts to different people as *he* wills! Then, returning in ch. [14](#) to the subject of the spiritual gifts, and fully warmed to his subject, Paul blurts out, 'Now I want you all to speak in tongues!' ([14:5](#)).

In this latter text it appears that all must have *one* gift (tongues) which all are free to choose as the right gift for themselves! In this second statement Paul appears to affirm the exact opposite of what he has just said in [12:4-11](#)! However, in our middle-eastern culture people are expected to become emotional over the things they care about. When they do, they are permitted to make their point by exaggeration. No one presses the logic of these exaggerations. This rhetorical style may well be the key to [1 Cor. 12](#) and [14](#). It may also assist us with the text before us.

The second problem is as follows: In Romans Paul says, 'Sin came into the world through *one man*'. The same idea appears in [1 Cor. 15:21-22](#) which reads, 'by a man came death . . .' But here, as in Ben Sirach ([25:24](#)), Eve is blamed for everything! If someone in the Pauline theological circle rather than Paul is the author, the problem remains. What can be said?

Chrysostom is again helpful. He makes a connection between [Romans 5](#) and this text. He writes,

After the example of Adam's *transgression* . . . so here the female sex *transgressed*, not the male. As all *men* died through one (Adam), because that one sinned, so the whole *female* race transgressed because the woman was in the transgression.<sup>32</sup>

Building on Chrysostom's insight, the following is a possible reconstruction of the situation in Ephesus. It is generally assumed that Paul wrote 1 Corinthians while resident in Ephesus. As noted, 1 Corinthians, like Romans, affirms ' . . . in Adam all die'. There can be little doubt that Paul's second-Adam theology, set forth in [1 Cor. 15:42-50](#), was also proclaimed by Paul in the city of Ephesus. If any first century person was so inclined, Paul's views set forth in [Rom. 5](#) and [1 Cor. 15](#) could have been understood as *very* bad news for men. In [Rom. 5:12](#) the reader is told, 'Sin came into the world through *one man*. . . .' In vv. [13-19](#) which follow, there is a total of eight further references to that *one man's sin*!

On the basis of these texts, it is theoretically possible to accuse Paul of harbouring bitter anti-male biases! Trespass (*parabasis*) is the key problem and one man is held responsible for *all* of it. The question is not, what did Paul mean? Rather we would ask, could anti-male women have used such ideas for their own purposes? Obviously, they could have.

Thus perhaps some theologically illiterate women in Ephesus had been exposed to Paul's views in some form and had concluded that *men* had polluted the earth with their sin. Therefore the more innocent women must push them aside. The author of 1 Tim. may be responding by taking up the story of Genesis with a bold statement, '*Eve was a transgressor!*' meaning, she *also* is to be blamed, not only Adam. Chrysostom seems to have understood our text as the other side of the coin to Paul's first-Adam/second-Adam theology. Chrysostom's views turn the text into a thoughtful response to what appears to have been a critical misunderstanding.

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<sup>32</sup> Chrysostom, op cit., p. 436 (italics mine).

The last section of the text is as follows:

... and she will prosper (*sozo*) through bearing children if *they* continue in faith and love and holiness and good judgment.

There are two attractive ways to understand this text. The first is to take 'the childbearing' as meaning one specific occurrence of childbearing, namely the birth of Jesus. In this case the text would need to be translated, 'and she will be saved through the birth of the child.' The intent of the text would then be:

How can these heretics teach women not to bear children when God entered history to save *through childbearing*!

However, many interpreters argue from internal evidence that here the definite article refers to childbearing in general. If this be true, there is a second possible way to understand the text.

The verb *sozo* (save?), which is at the heart of this text, has a variety of meanings. In this same chapter Paul affirms that we are *saved* (*sozo*) through Jesus Christ 'who gave himself a ransom for all' (2:6). The reader is told that salvation is through the cross of Christ. Are we then to understand him, ten verses later, to say, 'Well, actually for women there is a second way to be saved, have a baby!?' This cannot be the intent of the author. A solution to this problem is available when we observe that *sozo* *can* refer to salvation, but it can also mean 'good health' and occasionally has a more general sense of 'to prosper'.<sup>33</sup> As noted, someone in the Church in Ephesus was teaching the women that they should not get married, and thus naturally, not have children. Paul counters with:

Childbearing is not an evil act! It is an act blessed by God. A woman can *prosper* through childbearing; if *they*, (the husband and the wife) continue in faith and love and holiness with good judgment.

The text shifts from a singular 'she' to a plural 'they'. This plural is best understood to refer to the husband and wife and not to women in general. Children can be a blessing to the family. But if faith, love, holiness and good judgment (*sofrosune*)<sup>34</sup> are missing, the family will not necessarily prosper by having children.

In conclusion, when history is taken seriously, [1 Cor. 14:34-35](#) and [1 Tim. 2:11-15](#) tell women to be silent when they disrupt public worship and when they teach heresy. Special problems in Corinth and Ephesus were dealt with firmly for the sake of the upbuilding of the body of Christ in those places. I submit that these admonitions can be understood to be in harmony with the clear affirmations of the presence of women as disciples, teachers, prophets, deacons, (one) apostle, along with the possibility of women elders.

In this manner all the NT texts considered can be seen as supportive of the great vision in [Gal. 3:28](#) where 'in Christ . . . there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus'.

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<sup>33</sup> BAGD, p. 798.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., p. 802: cf. [Acts 26:25](#).

# Is Jesus the Only Way to God?

Bruce Nicholls

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This article has been prepared for use by study groups in churches. The author discusses the human phenomenon of the religious quest; the uniqueness of Jesus as the incomparable man, preacher, teacher and healer; the significance of his death, resurrection and promised return; leads up to an understanding of his visible likeness to the invisible God; and finally the way for the Jesus of history to become the Christ of our faith. The discussion is set in the context of other Faiths—in particular Hinduism.  
Editor

The question, 'Is Jesus the only way to God?' is a very controversial one, for none of us is a spectator of religious truth. We are all active players in the game of living and we all have a world view and a set of values, whether we consciously acknowledge this or not. We belong to one or more cultures in which worldviews, cultures, social behaviour and customs cohere. Religion or the denial of it is always a dominating factor. We may be followers of a particular religion, or secular and indifferent to all religions, or ideologically atheistic or, as many are now doing, seeking for a New Age synthesis of many faiths. None of us can live in a cultural vacuum. To attempt to do so would result in insanity.

The question is ambiguous, for language has meaning within the tradition that uses it, as Ludwig Wittgenstein has clearly shown. The word 'God' carries different and contrasting meanings to people of different faiths. For some it is the personal Creator of all things; for others it is a stage to Ultimate Reality; to some it is 'life-force', for others it is the spirit world that pervades all of life and nature. The way to God implies a definable concept of salvation. Here too, people understand salvation and the way to obtain it in a multitude of ways. Later we will explore some of these ways.

I write as an unashamed follower of the way of Jesus Christ. I can do no other for he is my deliverer from evil, shame and guilt and Lord of my life in all its relationships. It is an illusion to think I can step outside my world-view and objectively debate the issues of ultimate truth and justice as the rationalists have argued since the eighteenth century European Enlightenment. Does this mean then that certainty of finding the way is impossible? Certainly not. If, as Christians argue, truth and justice are issues of personal relationships to God, to other people and even to nature itself, then the search is meaningful, and the experience of finding God confirmed. Truth to have meaning is never irrational. However, if the way to Truth is beyond all personal knowledge then its goal becomes the annihilation of self and knowledge itself. This is the goal of both Hinduism and Buddhism. It is total absorption in Ultimate Reality, as a river loses its identity on reaching the sea. The Ultimate is unknown. It is *neti neti*, 'not this, not that'. The answer is silence.

Using words in a Christian context, Christians affirm that Jesus is the only way to God. The purpose of this discussion is to unravel what this means and to find the way to experience it. One of the reasons I find this way to God convincingly true is that in Jesus the quests of other faiths find a coherent answer. Each religion or ideology is unique. It has its own sun around which the planets move. For example, Hinduism grapples with the nature of self, Buddhism grapples with the nature and cause of suffering, Islam with the way to submit to the Almighty Creator, primal religions with overcoming evil spirits, and so on. The Bible is a fascinating book showing how God in Christ fulfils each of these human aspirations and shows the way to a satisfying relation of peace and harmony with

the living God and with humankind. Jesus said to Thomas, 'I am the way, the truth and the life; no one goes to the Father except by me' ([John 14:6](#)).

## I. THE HUMAN ENIGMA

We begin our discussion with reflections on human behaviour, and observe two contrary trends common to all people, religious or secular. The search for God begins here.

### We Are Insatiably Religious

Everyone is insatiably religious or, to be more accurate, spiritual. Everyone, whether or not they are aware of it, has spiritual yearnings even though they might not actually be religious.

By this we mean they reach out for the reality that is beyond sense experience. They are looking for peace, harmony and justice, for stable values for themselves, their family and the community. Normally the intensity of this search grows with increasing age. Some search for these spiritual values within themselves, some for a transcendental reality and others turn to the realm of nature. Everybody is searching for something that is authentic, comprehensible and coherent—a worldview that makes sense and values that are appropriate for it.

In a world that is disintegrating with increasing poverty, violence, sexual abuse, corruption and fear of death, men and women are giving high priority to justice. We live in a world that is increasingly secular, materialistic and hedonistic. Yet in the midst of the obvious gains of modern society people are becoming increasingly dissatisfied and disillusioned. It is not surprising that more and more people are turning either to New Age philosophies and spiritualities, or to authoritarian faiths such as Islam. People are spiritually hungry. How else can we explain that our NZ weekly TV Guide regularly gives seven to eight pages to horoscopes, palmistry, clairvoyance, tarot and psychic readings and counselling. People may reject religion but they cannot escape the pull of spirituality.

During this century we have witnessed the rise and fall of another way to spiritual satisfaction. Marxists, who are generally atheists, have developed their own form of spirituality and even religion. They have a strong sense of social justice, a willingness to sacrifice for the future good of humanity. Their books are authoritative and sacred to them, and they see their leaders as saviours of the world. They strive for comradeship in community and share a vision for the whole world. Cuba and North Korea continue to pursue this path of cultic spirituality.

In some cultures the depth of the spiritual search is very real and intense. For 2500 years millions of sincere Hindus have prayed daily the sacred Upanishadic prayer. 'From delusion lead me to truth. From darkness lead me to light. From death lead me to immortality' (*Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* 1.3.28). Throughout the history of Hinduism there have been many saints who have pursued reality with great intensity. One such was Tukaram, a grain seller who lived near Pune, India 350 years ago. He followed the path of *Bhakti* or intense devotion. In one of his poems he cries:

As on the bank the poor fish lies  
And gasps and writhes in pain,  
Or as a man with anxious eyes  
Seeks hidden gold in vain,—  
So is my heart distressed and cries  
To come to thee again  
Have mercy Tuka says.

It is very unlikely that he had any knowledge of Jesus but the intensity of the images used suggests that the living God was calling him. His search for God proved to be the bridge over which the great 20th century Brahmin Marathi poet, Narayan Vaman Tilak, came to faith in Jesus Christ.

The intensity of Hindus searching for God is a rebuke to Christians. In the Himalayas I have been privileged to climb to the sacred temple at Kedarnath at 13,000 feet and see the endless stream of pilgrims crying out to Shiva for a *darshan* or vision of God. I have also stood by the banks of the sacred Ganges where it breaks out of the Himalayas at Rishikesh and Hardwar, and empathized with the thousands of people bathing in the cold waters to be cleansed from their past sins. I have watched Tibetan Buddhists incessantly turning their prayer wheels and Zen Buddhists sitting perfectly erect in the traditional lotus position disciplining their minds to glimpse the meaning of life beyond rationality. I have often been awakened before daybreak by the call to prayer of the minaret. I have watched faithful Muslims prostrating themselves in a railway carriage or in the airport at the hour of prayer. Muslims have an intense desire to be faithful to God and no sacrifice is too great for them to make in the defence and proclaiming of their faith. Yes, the whole human race is incurably spiritual.

The Bible gives a clear explanation of this universal phenomenon. First, God the Creator of all things has created the human race, male and female, to be like himself ([Gen. 1:26–28](#)). We humans differ from the rest of the animal kingdom in that we have ‘eternity in our hearts’. We have the capacity to communicate directly with our creator, who has given us an innate awareness of right and wrong which we call conscience, the ability to attain personal freedom and the urge to create ideas, images and symbols, as we see in our art galleries, concert halls and factories. Television and computers are the creations of our own generation; we can only guess what future generations will create. To be human is to be spiritual and religious.

Further, the Bible depicts God as not only the Creator but also the Sustainer of all creation, the Liberator and the Redeemer. The God of the Bible is a God of compassion and love, a God who cares for the smallest and most insignificant sparrow and the flower in the field, but especially for the whole of the human race without distinction of ethnic heritage or culture. He is not an absentee god, who like a watchmaker, no longer has anything to do with his product, but a living God who moment by moment is calling all people to come back to him and he does this through his Spirit. He is patient and does not want anyone to be destroyed but wants all to turn away from their sins ([2 Pet. 3:9](#)). It may be better to think of God as a gardener who with loving care watches over each plant in his garden through each of the seasons of the year. When we gaze in wonder at the stars and planets of the heavens or examine a mountain flower or marvel at the eye of a bird, nature’s harmony, beauty, grandeur and purpose fill us with awe. We bow in worship and wonder at our own insignificance. A Biblical poet put it so well:

When I look at the sky, which you have made,  
At the moon and the stars, which you set in their places—  
What is man that you think of him; mere man, that you care for him?  
Yet you made him inferior only to yourself;  
You crowned him with glory and honour ([Psalm 8:3–5](#)).

We can understand why few atheists remain atheists on their deathbeds! The Holy Spirit of God is the hound of heaven who never leaves us alone.

### **We Are Incurably Rebellious**



A second observation on human nature is equally important. We humans are in constant rebellion against God; we want to be the masters of our own fate. In selfishness and greed we refuse to live according to the moral laws of God, common to all religious faiths, but clearly expressed and summarised in the Ten Commandments given to Moses by God ([Exod. 20:1-17](#)) and personalised by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount ([Matt. 5-7](#)).

In our independence and desire for autonomy we want to be like God, to be equal to God or even be God. The universal expression of this state of rebellion is that we all create God in our own image or likeness or that of the created world, and then we seek to control God by our cultic practices ([Rom. 1:21-25](#)). In Biblical language we are all idolaters. For many the images created are visual images, some beautiful, some grotesque symbolizing the wrath and anger of God (such as Kali whose tongue drips blood and whose garland is made of skulls). Buddhists create images depicting the serenity of the enlightened Buddha. Others who reject idolatry in practice elevate their Holy Scriptures to the level of a sacred image. In the west our TV and glossy magazines idolise sexuality, wealth and fame. None is able to escape the downward pull of idolatry.

The Bible leaves us in no doubt as to the cause of this sad state of affairs. The story of the fall from innocence and purity by Adam and Eve vividly told in Genesis chapter [3](#) describes both the cause and the consequence of their fall. Men began to oppress women; the delicate balance of nature was upset as humankind began to abuse their calling to be stewards and gardeners of creation; family life broke up in dispute and ended in murder as in the story of Cain killing his brother Abel ([Gen. 4](#)). Adam and Eve were turned out of paradise and came under the judgement of death, a death that resulted in separation from the Creator.

In the New Testament Paul expounds this state of affairs with uncomfortable realism in his letter to the church in Rome ([Rom. 1-3](#)). He warns that although God's eternal power and divine nature is plain for all to see, yet men and women do not honour him as God but rather boast of their own wisdom. We are all without excuse and our conscience, which is the way we respond to God and his law, tells us so. The terror of human idolatry, whatever form it may take, is that we become slaves of the images we create. Idolatry, like drugs, is addictive. It ends in tragedy and death. In foolishness we deny the reality of our own sinfulness. The idealism of Marxism failed because communist leaders ignored the depravity of human nature. Every other utopia, religious or otherwise, will end in tragedy if this reality is ignored. Today poverty, violence, sexual abuse and racial oppression have more to do with selfishness and greed than with the failure of our political systems. Neither reason nor science nor democracy can stop the downward spiral of human society. World leaders live in fear of the future.

This a gloomy picture and we must be honest and recognize its reality, but we need not despair. Chaos and death are not inevitable for our world. There is hope. I want to put the case that this hope is in Jesus Christ. He is for the whole world. He deserves a hearing.

## II. JESUS—THE INCOMPARABLE MAN

The apostle John wrote his story of the life and message of Jesus Christ with great compassion and insight into human nature. His Gospel is a very people-centred story. But it is of great significance that half his account is taken up with the death of Jesus Christ, his resurrection to a transformed life and his final appearance to his followers because John believed that the hope of humankind lies in this story. The Gospel according to John differs from the other three gospels. It does not begin with the birth stories of Jesus but with an extraordinary statement that the Word of God was with God from the beginning, shares in the creation of the world and is the source of life ([John 1:1-4](#)). John then makes

the astounding statement that this Word became a human being, was full of grace and truth and lived among us. 'We saw his glory, the glory he received as the Father's only son' ([John 1:14](#)). In order to understand this statement we have to begin by examining for ourselves the life and teaching of this man Jesus, who claimed to be God incarnate.

### **Did Jesus Live?**

The first question we must ask is, 'Did he ever live or is he a myth of human imagination?'

The two gospel stories, Matthew and Luke, leave us in no doubt as to the locality of his birth in Bethlehem. The details of his life from the age of 30 until his death three years later are told with exact care, especially the details of his death on a Roman cross and the evidence for his rising from the dead. While each of the gospels tells the same story, the perspective of each differs. While there is evidence that they used some common sources or oral traditions the writer have their own priorities in the selection of stories and events.

We should think of the gospels as painted portraits rather than photographs. It is a mistake to think that we can reconstruct an objective history of Jesus any more than we can do this of any great figure of the past. It is generally understood that these gospels were written between 30 to 60 years after his death. Modern research and the hundreds of manuscripts of the gospels which have come down to us, some as fragments and others as whole accounts, suggest with confidence that the text we now possess is essentially the same as that of the original authors. *Are the New Testament Documents Reliable?* by Professor F. F. Bruce is a useful introduction to this subject for those who wish to pursue it further. So also is *The Evidence For Jesus*, by R. T. France, and *Jesus Christ, Man or Myth?* by E. M. Blaiklock.

However, the witness of his followers is not enough. We need the confirmation of historical evidence from outside his community. One of the earliest records is from Pliny, the Roman Governor of what is now North Turkey. In his numerous reports to the Emperor written about 112 AD he reports on the Christians in his province and their worship of Jesus Christ as God. Again, after the fire of Rome in 64 AD, Cornelius Tacitus, the Governor of what is now central and south Turkey, describes the death of Christians at the hands of the Emperor Nero and he notes that the name 'Christian' comes from the name Christ, who was executed in the reign of Tiberius by the procurator Pontius Pilate, whose governorship ended in 36 AD. The above books list other support for Christ's existence.

### **A Unique Person**

From the records it is clear that Jesus was a dynamic and youthful man in his early thirties who challenged all who met him, friend or foe. He was humble, deeply sensitive to the material needs of the poor, the sick and the diseased. He was at home with both the rich and the poor. He was able to show compassion to women, even prostitutes, and he had a love for children.

But he was no weak and effeminate man. In righteous anger he drove the greedy merchants from the courts of the temple of Jerusalem where they were charging extortionist prices for items needed in temple worship and in the exchange of money into temple currency. He accused them of turning the holy temple into a 'den of thieves' ([Matt. 21:12-17](#)).

Yes, Jesus was truly human. He knew hunger and thirst, joy and sorrow. He wept at the death of his friend Lazarus. He confessed the limitations of his knowledge of the time of his return to earth ([Mk. 13:26-34](#)). Yet he never made a false statement.

When he called men and women to follow him, he chose mainly fishermen and working class people. They immediately left their homes, friends and even their means of

livelihood and in faith followed him, sharing a common life and a common purse. He chose twelve men and bound them together into a unique community of disciples. There was the impetuous Peter, the gentle John, the hardened tax collector Matthew, Simon, the Zealot, the inquiring and critical Thomas and sadly, Judas who later betrayed him.

The women who followed and supported him in a much less structured way, were equally colourful and in the crisis at the crucifixion proved more courageous and faithful than did the men. Jesus' attitude to women was revolutionary for its time. He was a man of deep emotion and compassion, especially for the poor, the hungry and the diseased, but he was severe in his condemnation of hypocrisy especially amongst the Jewish religious leaders.

### **A Man of Faith and Integrity**

Jesus was a man of prayer. He lived in constant communion with his heavenly Father and some of his prayers are preserved in the gospel records. His prayer life was real and spontaneous and in times of crisis he was known to have prayed all night. He enjoyed the quietness of the hills as places of prayer. At their request he taught his disciples how to pray. The Lord's Prayer ([Matt. 6:9-13](#)), the best known and most loved of all his recorded prayers, is a model for every Christian community to follow. He often fasted in times of prayer and encouraged his disciples to do likewise, so that with a clear mind and concentration they might give themselves to the sacred task of communion with God. His prayers of petition were always interlaced with prayers of thanksgiving and praise.

The moral life of Jesus was beyond reproach. His disciples who lived with him for three years could find no fault in him, nor could his critics and enemies. None could accuse him of being guilty of sin. At his trial before the Roman procurator his enemies had to resort to false evidence against him based on a misunderstanding of his teachings and claims. Pilate, the procurator, washed his hands of the responsibility of judging him for he could find no fault in him. Although Jesus constantly rebuked others for sinfulness, hypocrisy, selfishness and pride, none of his accusers could refute him. He spoke the truth but always with grace. He rebuked his disciples when they wanted to call down the fire of judgement on the Samaritans ([Lk. 9:54](#)) and yet he appealed to Judas for his support at the Last Supper with his disciples, knowing that Judas had planned to go out and betray him. On that fateful night before the crucifixion Peter lost courage and denied his Lord three times. Later he was broken hearted and full of remorse for his denial. Then it was the risen Jesus who came to him and with great sensitivity, asked him three times, 'Simon, son of John, do you love me?' ([John 21:15ff](#)).

He suffered temptation, whether alone in the wilderness or travelling with his disciples when they failed to understand him. Even his three closest disciples, Peter, James and John, failed him in the hour of temptation in the garden of Gethsemane as he contemplated the physical and spiritual suffering of the cross he was about to embrace. The moment on the cross that none of us can fathom is when he cried out, 'My God, my God, why did you abandon me?' ([Matt. 27:46](#)). It was not just his strength of will but the uniqueness of the sustaining relationship to God his Father that kept him faithful in the times of temptation.

### **A Miracle Worker**

Another sign of his uniqueness was his ministry as a miracle worker.

Miracles do happen. Science can explain some but not all. In the case of healing from sickness and disease the process of decay and death is reversed. There is a return from chaos to order. Much of Jesus' life was taken up with the healing of the sick and the diseased and such incidents are prominent in the gospel record. Jesus also had the

prophetic gift of knowledge of the unseen, of people's thoughts and of future events. His miracles were always a sign of redemption and in accord with the purposes of God. In some cases faith was important in the healing process; in others it was not.

However, the most impressive evidence of Jesus' power as a miracle worker was in the radical transformation in the lives of the people he met in his travels and in the lives of his disciples. Fishermen became fishers of men. Tax collectors gave their wealth. Critics became faithful followers and prostitutes became women of nobility and compassion. Sometimes their conversion was sudden and dramatic, while in some it appears to have been a quiet and slow transformation. Jesus always meets people at the point of their personal need.

Closely connected with his work of miracles was his supernatural power over the realm of unseen spiritual and demonic evil. He exorcised evil spirits that in some cases were associated with mental disorders such as schizophrenia, but in others were not ([Lk. 7:21](#); [9:42](#)). He took seriously the reality of demonic power, a sphere of reality that is not well understood today in the west and often denied. Having spent a working life in an Asian country where many willingly opened their lives to satanic power, I have no doubt about the reality of the spirit world nor of the power of Christ to overcome these unseen forces. The unseen world of spiritual powers is real and ever present but limited by the greater power of God.

When Moses confronted the Pharaoh of Egypt with the appeal to let the Hebrew slave community go, Moses demonstrated the power of the God of his people with a series of miraculous interventions. It is significant that the court magicians were able only up to a certain point to manifest similar miraculous power. The same is true today. The Hindu guru Sai Baba who lives in South India is noted for his miracles and his psychic powers. His devotees, who now number millions, hold him in honour as a 'god-man'. But like the magicians of Egypt, Sai Baba's power are limited. With Jesus it was different. With all the resources of heaven at his disposal he healed the sick and diseased and he exorcised evil spirits. He chose to exercise his miraculous powers to give honour to God and not to draw attention to himself. The difference in motivation, lifestyle and purpose between Jesus Christ and Sai Baba is self-evident.

### **A Preacher of the Kingdom of God**

An equally impressive facet of Jesus' life was his unique gift of showing the way to God. While he taught that he was the true way to God he did so without any sign of boasting or of self-centredness. He called all who were burdened with heavy loads to come to him and he offered to share with them the yoke of burden-bearing ([Matt. 11:28](#)).

Jesus began his public ministry by preaching the Good News of the Kingdom of God. 'The right time has come,' ([Mk. 1:15](#)). This Good News of the Kingdom of God was central to all his teachings. He taught that it was not a material realm of power but an inward reign of God's presence, dynamic and life changing. 'The Kingdom of God is within you,' he said ([Lk. 10:9](#), [17:21](#)).

Entering the Kingdom is the miracle of conversion or what John calls 'receiving eternal life'. To enter the Kingdom then is to receive Christ as Saviour and Lord. He is the source of the Kingdom's presence and power and in this sense he is the Kingdom. The Church as the people of God is called to make the Kingdom visible. But this happens only when Christ reigns supreme in the lives of its members and in their acts of service to others. The Church is the agent of Christ's Kingdom in the world and has the enormous responsibility to be faithful in witnessing to Christ and to the Kingdom. Jesus claimed that he was fulfilling the Old Testament prophecies about the coming of God's reign on earth but he shattered the complacency of his Jewish hearers when he taught that the Kingdom was

not just for them but for those who do the Father's will ([Matt. 7:21](#)). Further, he emphasized that some who thought they had a sure ticket to heaven would be rejected. In parables and stories he warned that many of the religious leaders would be left out of the Kingdom and that the poor, the lame, fallen women and even children would share in the Kingdom banquet ([Lk. 14:15-24](#)).

Jesus taught that in his coming death and resurrection from the dead he was inaugurating a new age in which both Jew and Gentile would share in the banquet of the Kingdom. Jesus knew from God's word to Abraham that all the peoples on earth would be blessed through him and that his coming into the world was to fulfil this prophecy of God. But he taught that the door to the Kingdom was narrow. When asked, 'Lord, are only a few people going to be saved?' he replied that only those whose lives were consistent with their words would be able to enter through the narrow door. And then against the background of the crushing condemnation that the last will be first and the first last he said, 'People will come from east and west and north and south and will take their places at the feast in the Kingdom of God' ([Lk. 13:29-30](#)).

### **A Teacher of the Ethics of the Kingdom**

Jesus taught that to enter the Kingdom is not enough. The test is to live lives according to the Kingdom. In the well known Sermon on the Mount ([Matt. 5-7](#)) Jesus spelled out in detail the ethics of the Kingdom, calling for purity of motive and desire as well as outward action in attitudes, anger, marriage, promise keeping, love of enemies and compassion for the poor.

Many people of other faiths have been attracted to the teaching of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount but few have been willing to enter through the narrow door. It was my privilege to visit Mahatma Gandhi's Ashram in central India, which was near where I worked, and to hold his Bible in my hands. I noted that [Matthew 5-7](#) was heavily underlined. Gandhi often quoted from the Sermon on the Mount but he made the mistake of believing that one could live according to the ethic of the Kingdom without acknowledging the reign in one's life of the one who was the king.

Yes, we have to enter the Kingdom before we have the power to keep its ethic. Jesus' teaching is unique. No other religious teacher has been able to penetrate so deeply the mystery of the relationship of thought and action and of inward and outward righteousness.

Jesus had the gift of teaching profound truths through parables and the use of symbols drawn from nature and from daily life. He was able to make the invisible visible and help people to understand the truth. He talked to the people about sheep and shepherds, salt and light, grapes and vinedressers, tenants and labourers, virgins and widows. Without any sign of egotism Jesus taught that he himself was the way to knowing God; 'I am the bread of life; he who comes to me shall never hunger and he who believes in me shall never be thirsty' ([John 6:35](#)). He saw himself as the light of the world, as the resurrection and the life. He called God his Father in a way that differentiated his relationship to God from that of his disciples. Jesus was the true guru in the sense that there was perfect harmony between what he taught and how he lived. His life was an open secret.

## **III. JESUS' ENCOUNTER WITH DEATH AND BEYOND**

### **His Authority to Forgive Sins**

The most important part of Jesus' teaching was about the meaning of his coming death on the cross, and his resurrection from the dead and his ultimate return to earth.

He explained to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem, suffer violence at the hands of the religious leaders, be killed and on the third day be raised to life. His followers must be willing to take up their own cross and follow him ([Matt. 16:21-24](#)). In light of his self-understanding of who he was and why he came to earth he demonstrated his authority and power to forgive sinners.

A paralytic lying on a cot was carried to him by his friends and was let down through the roof into a crowded room. Jesus said to him, 'My son, your sins are forgiven' and then he healed him. To the religious leaders this was blasphemy. Jesus knew he had the right and the power to forgive people their sins because he knew that his forthcoming death on the Roman cross was a sacrifice for the sins of the world and the ground of God's reconciliation of sinners with himself. Referring to himself as the Son of Man he said, 'The Son of Man did not come to be served; he came to serve and to give his life to redeem many people' ([Mk. 10:45](#)). Jesus was conscious that he came as a servant to suffer and die in the place of others. The way to God passes through the narrow door of repentance and faith—narrow because those who enter must do so in humility and in complete faith in Christ and his gospel. Jesus' message to a world of anger, violence and oppression began with an offer of forgiveness. Jesus saw himself as a good shepherd who sacrificed his life for the security of his sheep ([John 10:11](#)). While other religious teachers offer forgiveness to the righteous, Jesus offered forgiveness to sinners and the outcasts of society.

His death on the cross was a voluntary act of sacrifice for the sins of others. He came to serve and to give his life as a ransom to redeem many ([Mk. 10:45](#)). He was conscious that in his healing ministry and in his death he was fulfilling the prophecy of the suffering servant of [Isaiah 53](#) ([Matt. 8:16-17](#)). In the garden of Gethsemane he struggled with the costliness of his sacrifice, knowing that in death the love and justice of God were reconciled.

### **His Power to Give New Life**

If Jesus' death was a victory over sin, his rising from the dead was a victory over death. He taught his disciples that on the third day he would rise from the dead and this happened. A careful study of the gospels is very convincing. Jesus died on a cross on a Friday afternoon, was buried in a tomb hewn out of rock and the entrance was sealed. On the Sunday morning he rose from the dead. The tomb was empty; he had passed through the burial clothes as a transformed body. He appeared to his followers, first to the women and in the evening to the whole group of disciples ([John 20:19-29](#)). During the next forty days he appeared again and again. His risen body was unique. His hands and sides bore the marks of the cross. He ate bread and fish with his disciples ([John 21:4-10](#)). They recognized his voice and appearance. Yet there was something radically different. His body was changed. It was no longer subject to the laws of space and time. He could appear and disappear and finally he ascended bodily into heaven.

His resurrection is the unique fact of history. As we have seen he demonstrated the continuity of his resurrected body with his earthly human body, and yet it was a new and transformed body: the sign and seal of heaven made visible. Jesus had raised several men and women from the dead who would die again in the process of time. But his resurrection marked the beginning of a new creation and a new hope for his followers, that they too would share in this hope of being transformed into the image of Christ.

Hindus may believe in many *avatars*, descents of God to earth; they may venerate the cross as an act of self-denial and self-sacrifice, which is a Hindu ideal, but they have no answer to the resurrection of the body. If Jesus is the only way to God it is because the salvation of the person, body and spirit, is a hope profoundly different from all other religious hope. It gives a new dimension to salvation not found anywhere else. It is true

that Muslims hope for the resurrection but as a recovery of the pleasures of this life, and certainly not to be transformed into the glory of the image of the risen Christ.

Such a miracle had never happened before and has not happened since and this being so it is not subject to scientific proof. The most convincing proof of his resurrection was the radical change that came in the lives of the disciples who had met the risen Christ. Before the resurrection they were cowardly and afraid but after meeting him risen from the dead they worshipped him with joy, their fears giving way to boldness and courage. Before he returned to the Father, the risen Christ commissioned his disciples to go into all the world and make disciples of all people, baptizing them in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit ([Matt. 28:19–20](#)). With this vision before them and empowered by the Holy Spirit who came upon them at Pentecost the disciples went out, turned the world upside down and took the Good News to the ends of the earth. It is believed that Thomas came to India, Mark went to North Africa and later disciples travelled as far as China. This radical change in the life of the disciples is inexplicable if Christ did not rise from the dead.

The story is told of a critic who asked the preacher how he knew Jesus was alive. In simplicity he replied, 'Because I talked to him for half an hour this morning.' This subjective answer may not convince everybody, but it does suggest that the risen Jesus draws near to those who open their lives to him.

### **His Promise to Return**

There are more than 250 references in the New Testament to the return of Jesus. His promise to return is the climax of his teaching ministry. At the end of the present age, a time of great distress, all people will witness his return in 'power and great glory' ([Matt. 24:29–31](#)). Every eye shall see him. His coming will be sudden and unexpected. He will return to complete his Kingdom on earth, and as judge to establish the rule of righteousness. He will banish death, destroy all satanic power and judge the living and the dead. He will gather the nations before him and separate people as a shepherd separates sheep from goats—some to eternal happiness and others to remorse and eternal separation from God ([Matt. 25:31–46](#)). It is not for us to speculate on the details of Christ's final judgement but rather to take care that we are faithful in following Jesus in service to all in need—the poor, the sick and the prisoner.

## **IV. JESUS THE VISIBLE LIKENESS OF THE INVISIBLE GOD**

Our response to the question, 'Is Jesus the only way to God?' is determined first of all by our understanding of the word 'God' and how people of other faiths use the term. In his letter to the Church at Colossae in Asia Minor (now Turkey), Paul boldly states, 'Christ is the visible likeness of the invisible God' ([Col. 1:15](#)). God is spirit and not visible to the human eye. No one can bear the light of God's being and live. Yet, says Paul, in Jesus Christ we see God, not in his ontological being or essence but in his attributes of love and holiness and in his relationship to God as Father and God as Holy Spirit. The Biblical doctrine of God is consistently monotheistic: 'Hear, O Israel, The Lord our God, The Lord is one' ([Deut. 6:4](#) NIV) Yet God is eternally personal and has revealed himself to his covenanted people as Father, Son and Holy Spirit—three centres of personal being and activity in creation and in redemption. The reality of God as one yet three was quickly grasped by the early New Testament Church, but it took the Church several centuries to develop a coherent theology of the Trinity to counter the alternative views of the word 'God'. Similar situations continue today. The Hindu rejoices to add Jesus to his pantheon of 'incarnations' of God, but to speak of God as the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ is

foolishness to him as it is a stumbling block to Jew and Muslim. For the Christian, Jesus is the visible image of the invisible God because the incarnation was an unrepeatable event in time and space; the cross a once and for all atonement for sin; the resurrection the beginning of a new order of creation. The Christian hope is that when Jesus returns to reign on the earth 'we shall be like him because we shall see him as he really is' ([1 John 3:2](#)). This hope has implications for daily living. John continues, 'Everyone who has this hope in Christ keeps himself pure, just as Christ is pure' (v. [3](#)).

Jesus makes God visible because the incarnation is God's saving act in human history. It reduces all other claims of God appearing on earth to myth. In Biblical times Greek religion conceived of the gods becoming men. In fact when Paul and Barnabas visited Lystra in what is modern Turkey and performed miracles of healing, the people thought that Paul and his companion Barnabas were human manifestations of their gods Hermes and Zeus and they wanted to worship them ([Acts 14:8-18](#)). Hinduism also takes seriously the possibility of the gods becoming men. Of the ten avatars or descents of Vishnu (God), Ram and Krishna are the best known and most loved of God in human form. Until recent times Hindus were willing to accept the stories about these *avatars* as mythical stories teaching religious truth. However, today there is a growing movement to believe that Ram and Krishna were historical persons born at a specific place and time. The prolonged rioting between Hindus and Muslims over the site of the birth of Ram at Ayodhya in North India indicates the importance that history now has for Hindu understanding. This movement from myth to history is no doubt in part the result of the impact of Christianity on Hindu India.

The Christians' celebration of Christmas and Easter has inspired Hindus to look for alternatives in their own religious faith. Lord Krishna is perhaps the most loved and honoured of *avatars*. He came to protect the good and destroy the evil and to establish righteousness on the earth. Yet his dalliance with the village cowgirls questions his ethical integrity. His disguise as a charioteer and his sudden escape back to heaven in time of difficulty further question the reality of his humanity. It is said of Krishna that when he walked on the sand he left no footprint. Hindu *avatars* come again and again, some in the form of humanity and others in the form of animals (such as a fish, tortoise, boar or a man-lion). *Avatars* emanate from God and return to God in an evolutionary process. They are sent to destroy the wicked but Jesus Christ came to save sinners and to reconcile them to God. Christ and Krishna are not alternate names for God as understood in trinitarian terms.

Today there are some Christian theologians as well as leaders of other Faiths who argue that all religions are equally true and valid paths to truth and salvation. While Hindus are searching beyond myth to history there are scholars in the west who are seeking to reduce history to mythology and believe that any claim to the uniqueness of Jesus is only in the realm of myth—human stories about God as Ultimate Reality. In this process of reductionism the word 'God' is emptied of all recognizable and knowable reality. All that can be said about God is '*neti neti*'—not this, not that. God is a word without specific content.

Paul in his letter to the Colossians continues: 'For through him God created everything in heaven and on earth, the seen and the unseen things, including spiritual powers, lords, rulers and authorities. God created the whole universe through him and for him' (v. [16](#)). This is an amazing statement. That the one we know as Jesus is also the creator of all that is. Paul then adds that Jesus Christ sustains and holds together the whole of creation, each part having its proper place. In our lifetime we have seen the wonder of man releasing the enormous power of the atom. What holds the universe from disintegrating in one Big Bang? It is none other than God in Christ!



Then Paul stretches our understanding further. This Son has entered into creation, become our redeemer and is now head of the body, his Church (vv. [18–20](#)). He is the Lord from Heaven who has become the Saviour of the world, It is only with the eye of faith that we can affirm that Jesus Christ is truly man and truly God. Such an incarnation can happen only once and need not happen again because Christ's work of liberation and redemption was completed on the cross and confirmed in his resurrection from the dead. It is not surprising that his followers believe Jesus Christ to be unique and final and the only way to God.

## V. GRACE ALONE, THE ONLY WAY TO GOD

### The Path of Merit

One of the marks of our fallen human nature is that we instinctively believe that we can find the way to God by our own effort. This is true of the followers of all religions, alas, including some Christians! Sadly many Christians with a nominal faith, hope that because of their church attendance and their living good and honest lives, God will have mercy on them and accept them into his Kingdom. In such cases they have no assurance of salvation. Some feel it would be presumptuous even to believe such a certainty.

Hinduism offers three paths to God, though the word 'God' has diverse and contradictory meanings within the Hindu fold. *Karma marga* the way of good deeds and faithful cultic practice is the most common. It centres on temple worship, pilgrimage and festivals through which merit is gained. The second, *Bhakti marga* is the way of devotion and love to God. It comes closer to the Christian understanding of steadfast love (*hesed*). Again its goal is to merit God's favour. The third way is *Jnana marga*, the way of higher and mystical knowledge. This is achieved through yogic discipline and ascetic practices. It is more a way of philosophy than popular religion. This is the path of the few.

The most loved of all Hindu Scriptures, the *Bhagavad-Gita*, offers all three ways as complementary. These paths are common to other faiths as well. They all have one thing in common. Gaining merit through self- action is necessary to win the favour of God(s) or to reach the negation bliss of nirvana.

Biblical Christianity rejects all three ways as merit earning paths to God, but uses all three in the pursuit of living the Christian life. Keeping the Law as a way of salvation is an impossible pursuit but law as a way of living is a necessity for the Christian believer. What makes the difference? The answer is the grace of God.

### The Path of Grace Alone

Grace is God's sovereign act of his free will. It is the unmerited and undeserved gift of God to those who least deserve it.

Glimpses of grace are found in every religion for there is an awareness among all people of the majesty of God, the Creator ([Rom. 1:20](#)) and of the law of conscience ([Rom. 2:14–15](#)). In moments of true self-knowledge men and women despair of finding God by their own effort and cry out to God for mercy. This awareness of shame and guilt is itself evidence that the living God through the Holy Spirit is at work in every human heart calling them back to God. It is a sign of God's grace. Two examples of the sign of grace are sufficient. The Southern Vaishnavite faith since the days of Pillai Lokachari (1264–1327) has taught that salvation is by grace alone. Lokachari's guiding scripture was the *Charama Sloka* (verse) from the Gita where Krishna says, 'Abandon every duty, come to me alone for refuge. I will release you from all sin' (18:6). Yet even here grace became a crutch to salvation. Apart from the cross the true meaning of grace cannot be fully understood. The

second example comes from the *Pure Land* school of Japanese Buddhism, where instead of strict asceticism implicit faith in the name of Amida Buddha (the Buddha of Infinite Life and Light) ensures the grace of Enlightenment.

In contrast, the good news of Jesus Christ is that salvation is by grace alone. Paul summarised this way when he wrote 'For it is by God's grace that you have been saved through faith. It is not the result of your own efforts but God's gift so that no one can boast about it' ([Eph. 2:8, 9](#)). The realization of this truth gave birth to the European Reformation of the sixteenth century.

The human response is the empty hand reaching out in faith to receive God's free gift of grace. This path of grace alone demands our response of faith alone! To the question, 'Is Christ the only way to God?' our answer is shaped by our understanding of grace or the lack of it.

## CONCLUSION

How then do we discover that Jesus is the true way to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ? The first step is to begin to pray, yes, pray to Jesus. The story is told of Bilquis Sheikh, a high born Muslim and influential lady of Pakistan, who in her pilgrimage to faith made that leap of faith when at midnight she knelt by her bed and for the first time in her life dared to call God 'Father', a step no orthodox Muslim would dare to take. She knew from the Quran that Jesus was a prophet but now she understood that he was also the saviour of the world and her saviour. In the 13th century Anslem, archbishop of Canterbury, put it this way: 'I do not seek to understand that I may believe, but I believe that I may understand: for this I also believe, that unless I believe I will not understand.' When we take that step of faith we begin to discover that Jesus was not only an ideal man, a great miracle worker and one who sacrificed his life for others, but that he is the one who makes God visible to those who have faith. For some it is a giant leap of faith, for others it is one small step at a time. The path to God always begins with a first step. If people of other Faiths turn from their sinful ways and cast themselves entirely on the mercy of the creator-redeemer God, even if they do not know his name, this is a sign of God's grace upon them. We cannot claim that the grace of God is limited to the boundary of the Christian Church, but we can affirm with the early Church, 'Salvation is to be found through him [Jesus] alone; in all the world there is no one else who God has given who can save us' ([Acts 4:12](#))

It is not for us to judge others and God's response to them. At present we see through a glass darkly, but when Jesus returns we will see him face to face and those things which are hidden from us now will be revealed.

Jesus' call to us, his followers, is clear: 'to know him and to make him known'.

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\* All quotations are from *Today's English Version* (Good News Bible) unless otherwise stated and used with permission.

# Why Christianity of All Religions?

# Klaas Runia

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Why Christianity of all religions is a central issue of our time. Are all religions pathways to God? The author systematically and with fairness deals from an historical and theological perspective with many of the ontological issues that arise from this question. He argues that the resurrection of Jesus Christ is our starting point.  
Editor

One of the songs of George Harrison of Beatles' fame is called: 'My sweet Lord'. The refrain of the song is: 'I really want to know you, Lord, but it takes so long.' These words give the impression that this is a Christian song, but this is a mistake. In the background we hear a choir singing 'Hallelujah', but halfway through the record the Hallelujah gives way to Hare Krishna, Krishna, Krishna, and later on the names of other Indian deities are mentioned.

This song is typical of the thinking of many people in our day. They believe that all religions are pathways to God. They like to compare the various religions with spokes of a wheel: they all run to the same centre, the axle. In a similar way all religions lead to the same hidden centre of all reality: God. For this reason it does not really make any difference which deity one worships. It is also possible to insert aspects of other religions into one's own religion. In the past this approach was particularly characteristic of Asian religions. In his book *No Other Name* W. A. Visser 't Hooft, the first secretary-general of the WCC, quotes the following Sufi-hymn:

O God, in every temple I find people that seek thee.  
In every language I hear spoken, people praise thee . . .  
Sometimes I frequent the Christian cloister and sometimes the mosque,  
But it is thou I search for from temple to temple.<sup>2</sup>

In recent years the same approach has become rather popular in the western world too, largely due to the influence of eastern religions and of the New Age movement. In some theological circles, especially in the English-speaking world, it has become the predominant view. It is therefore not surprising to see that common worship services of Christians, Jews and Moslems are becoming more frequent. In such services portions of the New Testament, of the Old Testament and of the Koran are read side by side, and together the worshippers pray to the heavenly Father of Jesus Christ, to Yahweh and to Allah, for they are all names for the One and Only God, the Creator of heaven and earth.

## WAVES OF SYNCRETISM

It is common to speak here of religious pluralism. One can also speak of syncretism. Visser 't Hooft gives the following definition of syncretism: 'It is the view which holds 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 and 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' (21).

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<sup>2</sup> W.A. Visser 't Hooft, *No Other Name?* (1963), p. 84.

According to Visser 't Hooft there have been four great waves of syncretism that had a bearing on the life of the church. The *first* one occurred in the days of King Manasseh, who lived in the century before the Jewish Exile. He introduced foreign cults into the temple and worshipped all the host of heaven, serving them next to Yahweh. The *second* wave occurred in the days of the Roman Empire. All kinds of religions found their way to Rome: from Asia Minor, from Syria, from Persia, from Egypt and from many other countries. Their gods were very welcome and each of them obtained his or her own place in the Pantheon, the famous temple at Rome, where the gods of all nations were worshipped together with the Emperor and his 'divine' predecessors. In a letter to the Emperor the Roman prefect Symmachus summarized the underlying concept: 'What does it matter how anyone seeks the truth? It is impossible that so great a mystery should be approached by one road only' (22). No wonder that the Christians who believed that there is only one God, the Father, and only one Lord, Jesus Christ ([1 Cor. 8:6](#)), and who therefore refused to partake in the cult of the Emperor, were bitterly persecuted by the authorities.

The *third* wave broke over Europe in the 18th century, the age of the Enlightenment (22ff.). Thinkers and writers, such as Rousseau, Goethe and Lessing, believed that we should eagerly receive all the wealth of the varieties of religious experience without excluding any. Christianity was just one aspect of the wider religious synthesis. One of the best known examples of this limitless syncretism is Lessing's famous parable of the three rings. A father has three sons whom he loves equally. He can give his ring with magic power to only one of them. Since he does not want to offend any of his sons he has two perfect imitations of the true ring made, and before he dies he blesses each of his sons and gives him one of the rings. Each of the three believes he possesses the true ring and considers the others false. So they all go to the wise judge Nathan who speaks for Lessing himself and for the whole Enlightenment when he offers the following judgement: 'Let each think that his own is the true ring' and in the meantime show forth 'gentleness, a heartfelt tolerance, good works and deep submission to God's will'.

The *fourth* great wave of syncretism is taking place in our own day. It is promoted by various factors, such as the science of psychology, the end of the colonial period, the revival of the old religions of Asia, the vitalist philosophy, which is a marked feature of modern literature, etc. (28ff.). In recent years the wave has been strengthened by the ideas of New Age, which are based on the premise that all that exists is 'one'. Everything coheres and is connected with everything else; God, nature, the cosmos, the plant, the animal and man – they are all 'one'. In addition, the soul or spirit of man is nothing but a spark from the divine fire or a droplet from the divine ocean, and every religion is nothing but the striving of this spark or droplet to return into the great and eternal fire or ocean.

All these various and varied forms of syncretism have one common structure. They all believe that there are many pathways to God, for God is 'too great, too unknowable to reveal himself in a single revelation and once for all' (48). Syncretism in all its forms is 'essentially a revolt against the uniqueness of revelation in history'. Syncretistic thinking abhors the idea 'that God has actually made himself definitely known in a particular person and event at a particular time'. In our own day this view is strongly and persuasively advocated by such theologians as William Cantwell Smith, John Hick and Paul Knitter. All three of them are of the opinion that we have to abandon the idea that Jesus Christ is the very centre of God's self-revelation. Our religious thinking should not be 'christocentric' but 'theocentric'. Hick calls this the 'Copernican Revolution' that is taking place in our day. 'We have to realise that the universe of faiths centres upon *God*, and not upon Christianity or upon any other religion. God is the sun, the originative source

of light and life, whom all the religions reflect in their own different ways.’<sup>3</sup> Paul Knitter essentially agrees with Hick,<sup>4</sup> although he himself prefers to speak of a ‘salvation-centred’ approach, for such a conception would call on the different religious believers to work for ‘a shared liberative praxis’.<sup>5</sup>

## CHRISTIAN RESPONSES

What is our answer as Evangelical Christians? Almost instinctively we reject this kind of syncretism with an appeal to certain passages of Scripture, such as [John 14:6](#), where Jesus says: ‘I am the way, the truth and the life; no one comes to the Father but by me’; or the words of Peter in [Acts 4:12](#), ‘And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved’; or the words of Paul in [1 Tim. 2:5](#), ‘There is one God and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus’.

For my part, I wholeheartedly believe what is said in these passages. However, an appeal to them is not the correct starting point in a discussion with people of other faiths. For us who belong to the Christian Church, the Bible contains God’s self-revelation to his chosen people. But an appeal to this revelation is valid only for those who believe in Jesus Christ and share the same faith with the Bible writers. The adherents of other religions also appeal to their own holy writings as revelations of God and they are convinced that these writings offer them the truth about God. In a discussion with people of other religions a simple appeal to revelation means that we arrive at a deadlock.

In addition, there is the fact that today these very same passages are interpreted in a different way by fellow-Christians. The Roman Catholic scholar Paul Knitter, for instance, believes that these passages apply to Christians only. When Christians see Jesus as the way, the life and the truth, they actually say no more than that this is the way they personally experience Jesus. Knitter ranks it with the exclamation of a husband to his wife: ‘You are the most beautiful woman in the world.’<sup>6</sup> We have to do here with ‘love’ language, which means that the passages I quoted should not be taken in an absolute sense, but as confessions that hold true within the Christian community only.

Are there other ways to find an answer to our question?

Since the rise of the science of comparative religion, scholars have tried to discover the essence of the phenomenon of religion. The next step, naturally, was to determine which of the various religions met this criterion best. But this method did not provide an answer either.

In the first place there was the problem of the criterion itself. Often it was formulated in such a general and broad manner that every religion was covered by it. Take, for instance, the idea of the holy. This idea, in one form or another, is present in all religions. We encounter it in both the so-called primitive religions (such as Buddhism and Hinduism, Judaism, Christianity and Islam).

A second problem is that nearly always the scholar uses his own view of the essence of religion as the criterion for determining which is the highest religion. The natural result

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<sup>3</sup> J. Hick, *God Has Many Faces* (1980), p. 52.

<sup>4</sup> In his book *No Other Name?*, 1986, he also speaks of a ‘theocentric’ approach.

<sup>5</sup> Paul Knitter, ‘Theocentric Christology: Defended and Transcended’, *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, Vol. 24 (Winter, 1987), 47.

<sup>6</sup> Paul Knitter, *No Other Name?*, p. 187.

is that one finds what one is looking for. One's own religion appears to be the highest form of religion.

A third problem is that in essence all religions are unique. All religions have their own characteristic features and even when they use the same word (e.g. God, or revelation, or salvation), this word appears to have its own inalienable and non-transferable content.<sup>7</sup> Christianity, Judaism and Islam all use the word God, but their conceptions of God differ in various respects, e.g. in the idea of the Fatherhood of God. Both Christianity and Islam claim to be based on revelation, which was written down in the Holy Book. However, there is a decisive difference. For Moslems the Koran is the written transcript of an eternal tablet in heaven, the 'Mother of the Book', and it was transmitted to Mohammed through the angel Gabriel. For Christians the self-revelation of God is to be sought primarily in the person of Jesus and only secondarily in the Bible. Both Christianity and Buddhism are religions of redemption, but in Buddhism it is a redemption from desire and suffering, while in Christianity redemption means the liberation from sin and guilt, from the powers of evil and from death.

When H.M. Kuitert states, in his last book, that the three great monotheistic religions (Judaism, Christianity and Islam) share the idea of transcendence, for they all believe in God as The Creator who can never be confused with his creatures<sup>8</sup>, he makes a similar mistake. Using a philosophical and rather abstract idea of transcendence he regards these three religions as the guardians of transcendence. Consequently, he goes on to argue for the rehabilitation of 'theism'. In the second to last sentence of his book he writes: 'The churches, the synagogue, the mosque they are able, better than hitherto, to teach their people that they do not have to be anybody's servant, if they believe in God' (202). However true this statement may be in itself, it is based on the faulty presupposition that these three religions have the same view of divine transcendence. Kuitert, too, works with a criterion that he has first devised (namely 'theism'). But the fact that it applies equally to three quite different religions is proof that in this way we shall never find an answer to the question: Why Christianity of all religions? On the basis of theism there appear to be three candidates!

## RELIGIONS AS FALSE OR PARTIALLY TRUE

The next question that we encounter in this context is: How do Christians regard the other religions? Can the answer to this question provide a solution? When we look back at the history of the Christian Church there appear to be two main views.

The first is to regard all other religions as false religions. This was the view of Tertullian and many Church Fathers. It was also the view of the medieval church. It adopted the formula, first introduced by Cyprian '*extra ecclesiam nulla salus*' (there is no salvation outside the church). In his bull *Unam Sanctam*, issued in 1302, Pope Boniface VIII reaffirmed it and stated: 'That there is only one holy, catholic and apostolic Church we are compelled by faith to believe and hold; we firmly believe in her and simply confess her; outside her there is neither salvation nor remission of sins'.<sup>9</sup> The Council of Florence (1438–1445) repeated and confirmed this view when it said: 'Outside the Catholic Church

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<sup>7</sup> Cf. Harold A. Netland, *Dissonant Voices. Religious Pluralism and the Question of Truth*, 1991, especially chapters II and III about 'Conflicting Truth Claims'.

<sup>8</sup> H.M. Kuitert, *Zeker weten* (1994), p. 201.

<sup>9</sup> *The Teaching of the Catholic Church* (ed. Karl Rahner), 1967, 203, No. 872 in Denziger's *Enchiridion Symbolorum*.

no one, neither pagans nor Jews nor heretics nor schismatics, can obtain eternal life, but will go to the everlasting fire . . . , unless before the end of life they are received into the Church.’<sup>10</sup> Basically this was also the view of the Reformers. Luther spoke for the entire Protestant tradition when he called Christianity the *vera et unica religio* (the true and unique religion). According to Calvin Scripture condemns ‘as falsehood and lying whatever of divinity had formerly been celebrated among the heathen’.<sup>11</sup>

The second view regards the other religions as a mixture of truth and error, the latter obscuring the former. Yet, because of those elements of truth, the non-Christian religion may function as a *praeparatio evangelica* (an evangelical preparation) for the gospel of Jesus Christ. Since the 19th century this view has become predominant in Roman Catholic teaching and theology. The *lumen naturale* (the light of nature), by which the adherents of other religions live, is the antechamber to the true Church of God, the Roman Catholic Church. In the documents of the Second Vatican Council in particular we encounter this ‘fulfilment’ theory. Thus we read in section 16 of *Lumen Gentium*: ‘Those also can attain to everlasting salvation who through no fault of their own do not know the gospel of Christ, or His Church, yet sincerely seek God and, moved by grace, strive by their deeds to do His will as it is known to them, through the dictates of conscience. Nor does divine Providence deny the help necessary for salvation to those who, without blame on their part, have not yet arrived at an explicit knowledge of God, but who strive to live a good life, thanks to his grace. Whatever goodness or truth is found among them is looked upon by the Church as preparation for the gospel. She regards such qualities as given by Him who enlightens all men so that they may finally have life.’<sup>12</sup>

### EXCLUSIVE? INCLUSIVE? OR PLURALIST?

In our own day we still encounter these differing attitudes toward other religions. In fact, today it is customary to make a threefold distinction: the exclusivist, the inclusivist and the pluralist or liberal approach. Since time does not allow me to deal with them extensively I will make a few short comments on each position.<sup>13</sup>

*The exclusivist view* was generally held by the Church up to the Middle Ages, and by the Reformers. In our century it was strongly advocated by Karl Barth and Hendrik Kraemer. Barth rejected all divine self-revelation outside Christ and declared every form of religion (including the Christian ‘religion’, which he distinguished from the Christian gospel) to be sheer unbelief.<sup>14</sup> Likewise Kraemer regarded all religion, all philosophy and all moralism as constituting various ‘endeavours for self-redemption’.<sup>15</sup> In one of his last books he repeated this same view and wrote that in the light of Christ (and not in that of Christianity!) ‘the first thing we have to say *point-blank* about the “other” religions is that in their deepest and most essential intentions all of them are errors’.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> *op. cit.*, 342.

<sup>11</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes* I, v. 13. In another place he calls the human heart a ‘fabricator of all kinds of idols’.

<sup>12</sup> *The Documents of Vatican II* (ed. Walter M. Abbott), 1966, 35.

<sup>13</sup> For a more comprehensive discussion, see my article ‘The Gospel and Religious Pluralism’ in *Evangelical Review of Theology*, vol. 14, no. 4 (October 1990), 341–379.

<sup>14</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, Vol. I, 2, 299ff.

<sup>15</sup> H. Kraemer, *The Christian Message in a Non-Christian World*, 1938, 70.

<sup>16</sup> H. Kraemer, *Waarom nu juist het Christendom?*, 1960, 84.

In my own Reformed tradition we encounter a rather similar view in the works of J.H. Bavinck and J. Verkuyl. They differ from Barth in that they both believe that there is, in addition to the revelation in Christ, also a general self-revelation of God in creation, in the work of the law written on the heart of every human being and in the human conscience. But they also believe with Paul that fallen man suppresses the truth of this general revelation by his wickedness ([Rom. 1:18](#)). Bavinck sees behind all idolatry 'rebellion against God, vain illusion, and self-deceit'.<sup>17</sup> J. Verkuyl, Bavinck's successor to the chair of missiology in the Free University of Amsterdam, is of the opinion that at no point are the religions of this world identical. 'They differ deeply in the wells from which they draw and in their contents and in their aims.'<sup>18</sup> He also agrees with Kraemer that self-redemption is the hidden motive of all the non-Christian religions (116). Therefore, he cannot possibly agree with the view, rather popular in some Roman Catholic circles, that all religious systems are ways of salvation, as long as they have not yet met Christ.<sup>19</sup>

The exclusivist view is also held by the great majority of evangelical theologians. In the famous Lausanne Covenant (1974) evangelicals from all over the world professed: 'We affirm that there is only one Saviour and only one Gospel . . . We recognize that all men have some knowledge of God through his general revelation in nature. But we deny that this can save, for men suppress the truth by their unrighteousness. We also reject 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.'<sup>20</sup>

*The inclusivist view*, though never quite universally adopted, has quite a long pedigree, too. We find traces of it already in the writings of Justin Martyr, one of the early Apologists (c.100–c.165). In one of his writings he affirms: 'It is our belief that those men who strive to do the good which is enjoined upon us have a share in God; according to our traditional belief they will by God's grace share his dwelling. And it is our conviction that this holds good in principle for all men.' Behind this affirmation lies the idea of the eternal divine Logos, which as the philosophical principle of coherent rationality permeates the basic reality of the universe as a whole. Because Justin identifies this Logos with Christ he can write: 'Christ is the divine Word in whom the whole human race share, and those who live according to the light of their knowledge are Christians, even if they are considered as being godless.'<sup>21</sup>

As stated before, in recent Roman Catholic teaching and theology the inclusivist approach takes on the form of the 'fulfilment' theory, meaning that the qualities of goodness and truth which non-Christian religions may possess come from Christ and reflect rays of that Truth that enlightens all men (cf. [John 1:19](#)).<sup>22</sup> The Vatican II *Decree on the Church's Missionary Activity (Ad Gentes)* seems to go even further when it says that 'whatever truth and grace are to be found among the nations, as a sort of secret presence

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<sup>17</sup> J.H. Bavinck, *Introduction to the Science of Missions*, 1960, 84.

<sup>18</sup> J. Verkuyl, *Zijn alle godsdiensten gelijk?*, 1981, 41.

<sup>19</sup> J. Verkuyl, *Contemporary Missiology. An Introduction*, 1978, 480.

<sup>20</sup> *Let the Earth Hear His Voice* (ed. J.D. Douglas), 1975, 3/4. John Stott, who was the principal drafter of the Lausanne Covenant, advocates the same view in his book *Christian Mission in the Modern World*, 1975.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Alan Race, *Christians and Religious Pluralism*, 1983, 42f.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Abbott, op. cit., 662 (from the *Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to non-Christian religions (Nostra Aetate)*).



of God, this (missionary activity) frees from all taint of evil and restores to Christ its Maker' (595/6). Individual Roman Catholic theologians have moved even beyond this cautious approach of their church. Karl Rahner, for instance, believes that, even though creation may not be identified with grace, grace always accompanies it. For this reason the faithful adherents of other religions can be saved through the faithful practice of their religion. Rahner calls these people 'anonymous' Christians.<sup>23</sup> The Asian theologian Raymond Pannikar takes a big step further, when he states: 'The good and *bona fide* Hindu is saved by Christ and not by Hinduism, but it is through the Sacraments of Hinduism, through the *Mysterium* that comes to him through Hinduism, that *Christ* saves the Hindu normally.'<sup>24</sup> Some Eastern Orthodox theologians move in the same direction. Metropolitan Georges Khodr speaks of the hidden Christ within other religious traditions. 'Christ is hidden everywhere in the mystery of his lowliness. Any reading of religions is a reading of Christ. It is Christ alone who is received as light when grace visits a Brahmin, a Buddhist or a Mohammadan reading his own scriptures.'<sup>25</sup>

Even though the inclusivists show very considerable appreciation of the non-Christian religions, they refrain from saying that those religions themselves can save a person. It is always *Christ* who saves by his hidden presence in the other religion.

The third approach, which is often called the *pluralist or liberal approach*, moves beyond this, no longer having a place for the uniqueness of Jesus Christ. In the early decades of this century the German theologian and philosopher Ernst Troeltsch already disclaimed Christianity as the supreme expression of religious life. All evidence we have for such a claim is 'the evidence of a profound experience', but this kind of evidence is valid only for those who share this experience. Christianity, therefore, is no more than one faith among many others.<sup>26</sup>

In preparation for the World Conference at Tambaram (1938) W.E. Hocking, a liberal Harvard professor, wrote the report *Re-Thinking Mission* (1932). In it he wrote: 'The missionary will look forward, not to the destruction of these religions, but to their continued existence with Christianity, each stimulating the other in growth toward the ultimate goal, unity in the completest religious truth' (443/3). Some twenty years later he advocated the idea of one universal world religion. His premise was that all religions contain an inalienable core of truth. 'In proportion as any religion grows in self-understanding through grasping its own essence, it grasps the essence of all religion.'<sup>27</sup> Hence there is no need to relinquish one's own religion and convert to another religion, but staying in his own religion the believer should aim at 'reconception', that is, a new conception of his own religion, complemented and enriched by his contact with other religion.

In our own day the pluralist approach is strongly advocated and defended by such theologians as William Cantwell Smith, John Hick and Paul Knitter.<sup>28</sup> Cantwell Smith is of

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<sup>23</sup> Cf. K. Rahner, *Theological Investigations* vol. 5, 1966, 131, and vol. 6, 1969, 393ff. Cf. also Race, op. cit., 45ff.

<sup>24</sup> Raymond Pannikar, *The Unknown Christ of Hinduism*, 1964, 54.

<sup>25</sup> Georges Khodr, 'Christianity in a Pluralistic World', in *Sobornost*, The Journal of the Fellowship of St Alban and St Sergius, Series 6, No. 3, Summer 1971, 171.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. Race, op. cit., 78ff.

<sup>27</sup> W.E. Hocking, *Living Religions and a World Faith*, 1940, 198.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness* (ed. John Hick and Paul F. Knitter), 1987.

the opinion that the adherents of other religions are also 'people of the faith'.<sup>29</sup> In his contribution to the 1988 issue of the *International Review of Missions* which commemorated Tambaram 1938 he wrote that in the one world in which we live today we realize that the great religions are 'great movements of the human spirit', each 'of great spiritual depth, and many would now add, of salvific force' (361). What began in Bethlehem is not God's only mission, but just part of it. 'Few of us Christians know much about God's mission in the Islamic venture; God's mission to India, and nowadays . . . to the world, in the Buddhist movement' (366). This entire mission is the work of the Holy Spirit. Everyone who denies this is disloyal to Christ and is blaspheming God (367)!<sup>30</sup>

John Hick, who wrote many books on the subject, states in one of his last publications: God is 'the sun, the originative source of light and life, whom all the religions reflect in their own different ways'.<sup>31</sup> The title of his very last book speaks for itself: *The Rainbow of Faiths* (1995). The title of the last chapter reads: 'A Christianity That Sees Itself as One True Religion among Others' (125). In the last part of this chapter he offers a 'spirituality in a pluralistic age', which is drawn from a number of non-Christian writings, Talmudic, Hindu, Sikh, Buddhist, Taoist, Moslem, etc. (139ff.).

Paul F. Knitter who is another spokesman for the pluralist view wrote the book *No Other Name?* (1986). The question mark in the title is telling and indicates where his problem lies. He rejects the mainline Protestant model that ties salvation to the Christ event (119), because Christ does not limit his working to the Christian faith; one can encounter him in other religions as well. The Catholic model (many ways, one norm) is better, for it recognizes that grace (which is of Christ) operates also through non-Christian religions (123) and that authentic religious experience also takes place in them (14). Knitter himself prefers the theocentric model (many ways to God) or better still, the salvation-centred model (many ways of salvation). There is no reason to believe that God's full offer of grace was given only once (191). Incarnation was not a unique event that took place literally and historically, but we should see it as a meaningful myth, indicating that in the encounter with Jesus Christ we encounter God himself. The final bar of religious truth is 'an authentic experience of the divine that gives one a secure place to stand and from which to carry on the frightening and fascinating journey, with other religions, into the inexhaustible fullness of divine truth' (220).

## PHENOMENOLOGY OR REVELATION?

The pluralist approach is largely built on the phenomenology of religious experience. Hick does not deny that there are differences in the mode of experience, but he regards such differences as consequences of the fact that the Ultimate exceeds all our thoughts and speculations and is indefinable.<sup>32</sup> Our image of God is always a 'human' image and therefore inadequate and incomplete. For that same reason the various experiences are not mutually exclusive but rather complementary. This, however, is not a conclusion based on the factual data that came to light in his investigation of the various experiences, but it already served as the premise of his phenomenological investigation and at the end

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<sup>29</sup> Cf. W. Cantwell Smith, *Faith and Belief*, 1979.

<sup>30</sup> For a systematic account of his view, see Edward J. Hughes, Wilfred Cantwell Smith. *A Theology for the World*, 1986, with a Preface by John Hick.

<sup>31</sup> John Hick, *God has Many Names*, 1980, 52.

<sup>32</sup> Cf. J. Hick, 'The Outcome: Dialogue into Truth', in J. Hick, ed., *Truth and Dialogue*, 1974.

of the investigation it is simply repeated. Rightly Ninian Smart observes that 'from a phenomenological point of view it is not possible to base the judgment that all religions point to the same truth upon religious experience'.<sup>33</sup> The great 'phenomenologist' G. van der Leeuw already observed: 'Vor der Offenbarung macht die Phänomenologie halt'. (Phenomenology comes to a halt when it encounters revelation.)

It is obvious that in this approach there is no place for the idea of a real Incarnation. One may still use the term, but it no longer describes factual history. It now belongs in the same group of categories of language as parable, story or image.<sup>34</sup> It is not, strictly speaking, descriptive language, but language designed to evoke a response of faith and commitment in the person who hears or reads it.' It is no longer possible to believe that at a certain point of time in the history of this world the Second Person of the Divine Trinity came to earth in order to live here as a human being, for the salvation of the world, but the story of the Incarnation is a religious story that tells us that the encounter with the man Jesus was and is, in some sense, an encounter with God. Here the idea of the Incarnation as one of the criteria for the truth of revelation has been discarded and abandoned.

As we all know, the Christian faith does not say that the revelation in Jesus Christ is the only revelation. With a few exceptions (for instance, Karl Barth) Christian theology has always recognized a general self-revelation of God in nature and in man's morality and conscience, but it also recognized that this revelation is always suppressed by man's wickedness ([Rom. 1:18](#)), the result being that all religions are a mixture of truth and error, of true and false trails. For this reason a new revelation was necessary, a revelation that started immediately after the Fall and had its culmination in the appearance of Jesus Christ. This new revelation, however, does not negate the reality of the general revelation. Most Christians believe that to some extent the general revelation still shines through the various religions. The norm for the evaluation of all religious knowledge and experience, however, is the revelation in Jesus Christ.

I accept that what I have just said is a statement of faith that cannot be proved at the bar of pure science, including the science of the phenomenology of religion. But for a Christian who through the work of the Holy Spirit has been touched and reached by the gospel, Jesus Christ is the central revelation of the only true God who is the Creator of heaven and earth. As Hendrikus Berkhof has put it: 'for the Christian the divine revelation in Christ is not exclusive, but it is normative'.<sup>35</sup>

So the question, 'Why Christianity of all religions?' cannot be answered by means of comparative religion or the phenomenology of religion. That way leads to a dead end. Therefore we have to start somewhere else and ask another question, namely, what is the unique character of the Christian gospel. I use the term 'the Christian gospel', and not 'Christianity', deliberately. Christianity is the particular religious and/or cultural form of a society or a segment of society that was addressed and touched by the Christian gospel. Such a Christian society is always a mixture of Christian and non-Christian elements. This was also the reason why both Barth and Kraemer in their critique of the phenomenon of religion included the Christian religion.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> N. Smart, 'Truth and Religions', in *Truth and Dialogue*, 50.

<sup>34</sup> Cf. Alan Race, *op. cit.*, 118.

<sup>35</sup> Hendrikus Berkhof, *Christian Faith*, 1979, 48.

<sup>36</sup> Cf. H. Kraemer, *Waarom nu juist het Christendom*, 70, 82, 100ff. Even seen as a religion Christianity is not the best of all religions in the sense that in comparison with the other major religions it presents the 'best and noblest' expression of divine truth and experience. During his many travels Kraemer noticed that

Therefore, if we want to find an answer to our question, we cannot take Christianity or the Christian religion as our starting point. Not even Christian theology or the Christian faith can serve as a starting point. Even the latter is not an absolute norm, for it is the human response to the gospel and therefore always incomplete and imperfect. There is only one correct starting point, namely the Person of him who is the spring and the object of the Christian gospel and the Christian faith.

It is precisely here that we find an essential difference between the Christian faith and the other religions. At the centre of every other religion is, not the founder, but his teaching or doctrine. Gautama Buddha told his followers that only his teaching was important. Mohammed called himself the last of the prophets. But Jesus, the man of Nazareth, not only claimed that his teaching came from God, but also that *he himself* came from God (cf. [Matt. 21:37](#); [Mk. 12:6](#); [Lk. 20:13](#)). We observe this claim not only in the Fourth Gospel, but in the Synoptic Gospels as well. In all the gospels Jesus made his own person the decisive and final criterion, both for this life and for the life to come. 'Every one who acknowledges me before men, I also will acknowledge before my Father who is in heaven' ([Matt. 10:32](#); cf. [Lk. 12:8](#)). 'He who receives you receives me, and he who receives me receives him who sent me' ([Matt. 10:40](#); [Mark 9:37](#); [Luke 10:16](#)). 'Whoever would save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it' ([Matt. 16:25](#)). According to the Gospel of John Jesus says to Thomas and the other apostles: 'I am the way, the truth and the life; no one comes to the Father, but by me. If you had known me, you would have known my Father also; henceforth you know him and have seen him' ([14:6, 7](#)).

## THE RESURRECTION AS OUR STARTING POINT

But how do we know that such statements are really true? In today's theological climate it is not enough to say: 'Well, that's what I read in the Bible and the Bible is God's Word for me'. Undoubtedly this is a good Christian answer and yet it is not enough. We all know of the historical-critical research of the Bible that has been going on since the end of the 18th century and has boomed in this 20th century. Many of the leading theologians are of the opinion that we can no longer read the gospels as if they present us with a truly historical picture of the real, historical Jesus, that is, the beginning of the Christian era. These questions are, unfortunately, beyond the scope of this essay, but we cannot pretend that they do not exist.

This is the reason why I take my starting point in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. This, in my opinion, is the only proper point of departure for obtaining a good and reliable picture of the real Jesus. The gospels themselves were written from this perspective. I know, of course, that according to historical-critical research into the New Testament the fact of the resurrection itself is by no means certain. Most of the theologians and historians involved in this research do believe that after Jesus' death on the cross something must have happened that evoked the idea of a resurrection in the minds and hearts of the disciples, but whether it was a real resurrection we do not and cannot know on the basis of the evidence available. The data we find in the gospels are scant and contradictory. The only thing we really know is that a few days after Jesus' death on the cross the idea that Jesus was raised from the dead was present and alive in the minds and hearts of the disciples.

For a Reformed church and a Reformed theologian this view is utterly unacceptable. The resurrection of Jesus on the third day after his death is not an 'idea' that one can

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certain religious feelings and attitudes are much better expressed in other major religions than in Christianity, op. cit., 104/5.

accept or reject. Jesus' resurrection is the very centre of the entire New Testament. All four gospels mention it. It is also the foundation and heart of the apostolic preaching as reported in the book of Acts. All the letters in the New Testament presuppose it. In other words, all the early witnesses speak of it as a truly factual event. All four gospels mention several witnesses who met the risen Lord. Paul, whose letter to the Corinthians was written much earlier than the gospels, mentions quite a list of witnesses. 'He appeared to Cephas (Peter), then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brethren at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me' ([1 Cor. 15:5-8](#)). Very intriguing is the reference to an appearance to five hundred brethren at one time. This appearance is not mentioned in its factuality. Paul's formulation is quite striking. It is as if he is saying: 'If you don't believe me, go to Palestine and talk to those brethren, for most of them are still alive'. All the writers of the New Testament are absolutely certain that the same Jesus who in the late afternoon of (what we call) Good Friday died on the cross was raised from the dead by God himself on the first day of the following week. As a matter of fact, God is the only one who can do this. The resurrection is a divine miracle. Yes, we may say: it is the greatest miracle of all times. It is a pure *novum*. It is also different from all the other raisings mentioned in both the Old and the New Testament. The son of the widow of Zarephath ([1 Kgs. 17](#)) and the son of the wealthy woman of Shunem ([2 Kgs. 4](#)), the little daughter of Jairus, the young man of Nain and Jesus' friend Lazarus were also raised from the dead, but they all returned to this life and therefore had to die again. Their resurrections were strictly personal and had no consequences for the fate and future of other people. They were at most a signal that death does not have the last word. Jesus' resurrection was quite different and unique. He did not return to this world and this life, even though he did appear to his disciples during the forty days between his resurrection and ascension, but he went, so to speak, right through death and arrived at the other end of it in order so to enter into the eternal life with his Father in heaven. His resurrection was also unique in that it had consequences for other people. Paul says that he was raised as the 'first fruits of those that have fallen asleep' ([1 Cor. 15:20](#)). A little further he says: 'As in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive ([22](#)). Jesus' resurrection is the anticipation of the great eschatological resurrection that shall take place at the end of the history.

## THE MIRACLE OF RECONCILIATION

From the unique perspective of Jesus' resurrection the disciples of Jesus looked back at Jesus' life and discovered things they had never seen or understood before. From this perspective they realized there was a mystery in Jesus' life, even a double mystery. First, there was a mystery in what he did and why he had to die. Second, there was a mystery in who he was: not an ordinary man, not even an extra-ordinary man, but more than man.

During the years that the disciples followed Jesus, while he travelled around the country and preached the gospel of the Kingdom, they were deeply impressed by what he did and said. With their own ears they heard that the Kingdom of God was at hand ([Mk. 1:15](#); [Matt. 3:17](#); [Lk. 10:9, 11](#)). With their own eyes they saw the signs of the Kingdom. But they had little idea of what this Kingdom was and who this Jesus who announced it was. A very clear example of this lack of understanding is the story of Peter's confession of Jesus as the Messiah, the Son of the living God ([Matt. 16:16](#)). This must have been a high point in Jesus' life. At long last some one recognized him as the Messiah sent by God. But he also realized that Peter, and the other disciples as well, still had an entirely wrong conception of his messiahhood and of his messianic task. This becomes apparent when

Jesus immediately after Peter's confession begins to speak about his suffering and death. Peter at once rebukes him, saying: 'God forbid, Lord! This shall never happen to you' ([Matt. 16:22](#)). In turn, Jesus rebukes Peter and even calls him 'satan': 'Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me'.

During those years of close companionship the disciples did love Jesus (I think that this also holds true of Judas, most certainly in the early years) but they understood very little of him and his work. And when Jesus' words about his suffering and death come true, they all abandon Jesus and flee. When a few days after Jesus' death some women tell them that they have met Jesus again, none of the disciples believes them. They regard this story as an 'idle tale' ([Lk. 24:11](#)). Even during the last appearance they still see the promised Kingdom in earthly and Jewish-national terms, as appears from their question: 'Lord, will You at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?' ([Acts 1:6](#)). Jesus waves this question aside and commands them to wait for the coming of the Holy Spirit who will make them his witnesses ([1:8](#)).

After the outpouring of the Spirit on the day of Pentecost we see that they gradually begin to understand the meaning of Jesus' life and death. It is a step-by-step process of enlightenment. In his first sermon on the day of Pentecost Peter does proclaim that Jesus' death was according to the plan of God ([2:23](#)) and that it was God who had raised Jesus ([2:24](#)), but he is not yet able to say what the full import of this death and resurrection is. Due to the illumination of the Spirit the disciples progressively discover that the cross was much more than a judiciary mistake or a judicial murder. No, God himself was involved in this death. On the cross the great miracle of the reconciliation of man with God took place. Jesus himself had already intimated this in those mysterious words spoken at the Last Supper: 'This bread is my body for you. This is my blood of the covenant, poured out for you' (cf. [Matt. 26:26-29](#)). At that time these words must have been rather obscure for the disciples, but afterwards they began to understand them. Already in one of the earliest documents of the New Testament, Paul's letter to the Galatians, written in the early fifties, we read that 'Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us' ([3:13](#)). In all his other letters we again and again encounter the idea that Christ died for our sins. We also encounter it in the letters of Peter and John and the letter to the Hebrews. They all express it in their own way, but the refrain is the same: he died for our sins.

According to the authors of the New Testament this meaning of Jesus' death was not something that in retrospect was added to the messianic life of Jesus, but from the very beginning this was God's plan with his Messiah. John writes: 'God so loved the world that he gave his only-begotten Son' ([3:16](#)), and Paul writes to the Romans that 'God shows his love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us' ([5:8](#)). According to Luke Jesus himself, during one of his last appearances, says to his disciples 'that everything written about me in the law of Moses and the prophets and the psalms must be fulfilled'. We do not know why God chose this way. We can only say that sin is apparently so awful that it has to be 'burnt away'. The church has always believed that this happened in particular when during the three hours of darkness that enveloped Calvary and the cross Jesus cried out: 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?'

At times I have a feeling that poets understand this better than many theologians. I am thinking of the poem 'You have broken the high secret', by the Dutch poet Gerrit Achterberg. I render it here in my own translation:

You have broken the high secret, Lord Jesus,  
between us and the Father; according to your Word,  
we may be without sin and new beings,  
whatever may have happened in our life.

I did, of all that could be done,  
the most criminal and was damned.  
But you, God, have named a new name  
together with mine. Now it has become quiet,  
like a summer blooming around the villages.

And even though the flowers will wither again:  
my loins will be girded; my feet are shod.  
Born once again from your hand,  
I stride to You out of the darkness.

## THE MIRACLE OF THE INCARNATION

This is no cheap poetic language; Achterberg speaks about the ‘most criminal thing’ – he had shot and killed his landlady, an act that could never be redressed. The guilt of this act pressed as a heavy burden on his soul; ‘I was damned’. But Jesus entered into his life and gave him a new name. Then his life began to bloom ‘like a summer around the villages’. The poet does realize that one day he will have to die (‘the flowers will wither again’), but he also knows: ‘out of the darkness I stride to You’.

But there is still another mystery about Jesus. The resurrection shed new light not only on his work, but also on his person. Already during his lifetime people wondered who he was. They gave various answers. They said: He is a rabbi (e.g., [John 3:2](#)) or a miracle worker ([Lk. 9:43](#); [Ac. 2:22](#)) or a prophet ([Lk. 7:16](#); [John 6:14](#)). Some even called him Elijah, of whom it was generally believed that he would return before the coming of the Messiah. As we have already seen, the majority of today’s critical theologians also believe that Jesus was a miracle worker and a prophet. But the New Testament itself goes much further. In several passages Jesus is called the Son of God and that in a very special sense. In [Gal. 4:4](#) Paul writes that ‘when the time had fully come God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law’. The expression ‘his Son’ occurs ten times in Paul’s writings. In the letter to the Romans he twice calls Jesus God’s own Son ([8:3](#), [32](#)). Eight times we encounter the expression ‘his Son’ in the letters of John. In his Gospel he even calls Jesus the only or only-begotten Son of the Father ([John 1:14, 18](#); cf. also [1 John 4:9](#)).

Admittedly, this is hard to imagine. We are speaking about a human being, a man of flesh and blood, as Paul says: ‘born of woman’. And of this man we believe that at the same time he is God’s only or only-begotten Son. It is no wonder that it took the church a very, very long time to reflect on this and to understand some of its ramifications. The first traces of this understanding we find in the early baptismal creeds, in which Jesus was professed as the one Lord and as the only-begotten Son of the Father. However, it was not before the year 325 that the Eastern Church, represented by all its bishops, confessed in the Nicene Creed:

We believe . . . in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of his Father before all worlds, God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father.

He is *vere Deus* truly God! But immediately after these words we read:

Who for us men and for our salvation came down from heaven, and was incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the Virgin Mary, and was made man.

He was also *vere homo*, truly man.<sup>37</sup>

Naturally, the mystery of Jesus Christ is not unveiled in these words, but merely indicated. It is not surprising either that after Nicea and Constantinople the question arose: How is this possible? How can one person be God and man at the same time? In the decision of the Council of Chalcedon (451) the church made an attempt to say a little more about this unfathomable mystery. It spoke of one Person having two natures, a divine and a human nature. In the one Person these two natures are so conjoined that there is no confusion or change, neither division nor separation of the two natures.

The final step in this confessional development was the confession that God is triune in his innermost being. To say it in the words of the Heidelberg Catechism: We speak of thee: Father, Son and Holy Spirit, 'because that is how God has revealed Himself in his Word: these three distinct persons are one, true eternal God' (Lord's Day 8). This is a mystery beyond all our comprehension, but it also means riches beyond all comprehension, for as the Father God is our Creator, as the Son he is our Redeemer and as the Holy Spirit he is our Renewer. As the Triune God he is God-above-me, God-with-me and God-in-me! And I may confess this, because I have come to know Jesus as my divine Redeemer.

## DISBELIEF OR BELIEF?

In our day, it is true, many leading theologians no longer accept this classical Christology. Many Roman Catholic theologians (e.g., P. Schoonenberg, E. Schillebeeckx and Hans Küng) and Protestant theologians as well (e.g., E. Flesseman, H. Berkhof, H.M. Kuitert, C.J. den Heyer and S. Schoon),<sup>38</sup> no longer believe that Jesus is the incarnate Son of God, even God's own or only or only-begotten Son. Most of them interpret the term 'Son of God' entirely within the context of the Old Testament. There it is used of Israel (e.g. in [Hosea 11:1](#)) and is indicative of a very special covenant-relationship between God and Israel. Jesus' sonship must be seen within this same covenantal tradition. Berkhof says: 'He is pre-eminently the obedient and therefore beloved covenant partner'. 'He is man, the perfected covenant man, the new man, the eschatological man.'<sup>39</sup> He is not God the Son, but a human being whose 'human "I" is, out of free will, fully and exhaustively permeated by the "I" of God.'<sup>40</sup> H.M. Kuitert says it in his own way. The expression 'Son of God' means that Jesus is 'occupied, "possessed", filled to the brim by God'.<sup>41</sup>

Anglo-Saxon theologians often say that in expressions such as Son of God or Incarnation we have to do with 'mythological' language. To quote Alan Race once more: 'It is not, strictly speaking, descriptive language, but language designed to evoke a response of faith and commitment in the person who hears or reads it.'<sup>42</sup> It indicates that encountering Jesus is, in some sense, encountering God. Frances Young believes that the 'symbolical model' of incarnational language conveys a twofold meaning. First, it is the

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<sup>37</sup> The original Nicene Creed dates from the Council of Nicea, 325, and was revised and reaffirmed by the Council of Constantinople, 381.

<sup>38</sup> Cf. my book *The Present-day Christological Debate*, 1984, 47ff. and 66ff.

<sup>39</sup> *Christian Faith*, 283.

<sup>40</sup> *op. cit.*, 287.

<sup>41</sup> H.M. Kuitert, *Het algemeen betwijfeld christelijk geloof* 1992, 140.

<sup>42</sup> Alan Race, *op. cit.*, 118. Cf. also J. Hick (ed) *The Myth of God Incarnate*, 1977. In the Preface the expression 'God incarnate' is called 'a mythological or poetic way of expressing his significance for us' (5).



story of a man who lived as the 'archetypal believer', living and dying in trust in God. Secondly, it is the story of God involved in the reality of human existence with its compromises, its temptations, its suffering, its pain, its injustice, its cruelty, its death.<sup>43</sup>

Undeniably, all these theologians also want to maintain the uniqueness of Christ, but this uniqueness is of a different kind or order from what the Church always meant in its 'classical' Christology. Jesus' divine Sonship is no longer of an 'ontological' order, but must be understood 'functionally'. On the one hand, God uses this particular human being, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Mary and Joseph, to achieve his divine purpose, namely, the liberation of this world from the forces of evil, including death; on the other hand, this man Jesus allows himself to be used by God. I recognize that this functional Christology still allows for the possibility of reconciliation and redemption but this reconciliation and redemption is now the fruit of the cooperation between God and man.

This new Christology is quite different from that of the ancient church. This church fought the Christological battle because it believed that the gospel itself was at stake. They were deeply convinced that we can be saved only by God himself! When later on the Church became divided all the divided churches adhered to the ancient Christology. It is still the confessional stance of the Roman Catholic Church, of the Eastern Orthodox Churches and of the Churches of the Reformation. It is the faith of the Younger Churches and of the Evangelical Movement, of the Pentecostal Churches and the Charismatic Movement.

## WHY CHRISTIANITY OF ALL RELIGIONS?

I believe that this twofold mystery of Jesus Christ, both of his work and of his person, is the answer to the question: 'Why Christianity of all religions?' We can also formulate it in the famous *solas* of the Reformation: we are saved by God's grace alone (*sola gratia*) as it was manifested in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ (*solus Christus*), and this salvation is ours only by faith (*sola fide*). No other religion knows of this mystery of a God who sends his own Son, sharing in his own divine being, to the world in order to redeem this world. It is an unfathomable mystery of which we can actually speak only in doxological terms, as Paul did in the hymn he quotes in [Philippians 2](#). The hymn speaks of 'Jesus Christ, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father' ([Philp. 2:5-11](#)). This early Christian hymn expresses in all clarity the uniqueness and finality of God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ.

Does this mean that there is no truth in all the other religions and that all the adherents of the other religions will be lost for ever? Some of the 'exclusivists' do take this position. The Congress on World Mission at Chicago in 1960 stated: 'In the years since the war, more than one billion souls have passed into eternity and more than half of these went to the torment of hell fire without even hearing of Jesus Christ, who he was, or why he died on the cross of Calvary'.<sup>44</sup> When in 1968 I attended the World Congress on Evangelism in

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<sup>43</sup> *The Myth of God Incarnate*, 37.

<sup>44</sup> *Facing the Unfinished Task*, (ed. J.O. Percy), 1961, 9.

Singapore we had a special conference hymn that spoke of the billions that were lost. I believe such statements go beyond what we are allowed to say. In his *Reformed Dogmatics* Herman Bavinck rightly wrote: 'With regard to the salvation of the heathen and of children dying in infancy, we can, on the basis of Scripture, only refrain from a definite judgment, in either a positive or a negative sense.'<sup>45</sup>

Bavinck's nephew, the missiologist J.H. Bavinck, who was a firm exclusivist and refused to regard the other religions as ways to God or ways of salvation alongside the way of Christ, nevertheless also wrote: 'No-one can say what is going on in the heart of the individual, no-one can imagine what the endless patience and goodness of God may work in such a heart.'<sup>46</sup> In another book he approvingly quotes the words of a missionary who for many years worked in a prison in Pretoria, South Africa: 'I have frequently found God in the soul of the South African Bantu. Certainly, it is not the full revelation of the Father. But nevertheless, God himself is the one who lies hidden behind a curtain, as a shadowy figure, but the main outline is visible. A surprising and glorious experience! And when I experienced the moment that a soul surrenders, I understood that the Master had been there earlier.'<sup>47</sup> Even Hendrik Kraemer, who regarded all other religions as 'endeavours for self-redemption', wrote in his last book that he did not mean to say that 'the other religions are erroneous in their totality and in every respect'.<sup>48</sup>

It is evident that Bavinck and Kraemer are rather circumspect in what they say. J. Verkuyl is more outspoken. He, too, is an exclusivist. He fully maintains the uniqueness and finality of Jesus Christ, as appears from the following statement: 'Jesus Christ is unique, incomparable, irreplaceable and decisive for all ages and peoples.'<sup>49</sup> At the same time he tries as much as possible to do justice to the other religions within a trinitarian framework. At times he goes rather far in his positive appreciation of what he finds in them. I give a quotation from each part of his trinitarian approach. From the part about God the Father: 'How was God involved when the Vedas were being transmitted? What went on between God and Gautama Buddha when the latter received the Bodhi? What transpired between God and Mohammed when he mediated in the grotto?' (356) From the section on Christ: 'A theologian or religions who remembers this christological dimension will keep looking for evidences of this Christ who is ceaselessly active; he will be alert for signs of the messianic kingdom in the religious life of mankind both inside and outside the church' (359). From the section on the Spirit: The convert need not leave everything of his former life behind. 'His manner of being, living, and thinking may well contain much that stems from God himself, which, when placed within the context of a Christocentric universalism and directed toward Christ, can shoot forth in new blossom' (360). After these quotations it does not surprise us anymore that Verkuyl agrees with Max Warren, when the latter says that 'the Holy Spirit is latently active in so many ways among those people who live within the context of other religious traditions'. Verkuyl even asks the question: 'Is it really possible for any one of us to believe that human beings

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<sup>45</sup> Herman Bavinck, *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek*, vol. 4, 708.

<sup>46</sup> J.H. Bavinck, *Religieus besef en christelijk geloof*, 1949, 100.

<sup>47</sup> J.H. Bavinck, *An Introduction to the Science of Missions*, 227.

<sup>48</sup> H. Kraemer, *Waarom nu juist het Christendom?*, 69.

<sup>49</sup> J. Verkuyl, *Contemporary Missiology*, 358.

can be found somewhere who have *not* been touched by the hand of Jesus Christ who goes out to them in reconciliation?’<sup>50</sup>

I am not sure whether we have the right to be so expansive, but I do know that if it is possible that people of other faiths may be saved, they most certainly will not be saved by their own religiosity, by their own religious experiences and rites<sup>51</sup>, but only because the Spirit of Christ was active in their lives and because by his work the secret of Christ became manifest to and in them, too. For it remains true for all times and all people: ‘There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved’ ([Ac. 4:12](#)).

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# Confessing Christ in a Multicultural Society

Lesslie Newbigin

*Reprinted with permission from Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology, 12:2, 1994*

Lesslie Newbigin, one of the great missiologists and churchmen of this century entered into his rest on January 30th, 1998. He had recently celebrated his 89th birthday.

This paper given four years ago is evidence enough of Bishop Newbigin’s lifelong call to mission service in both India and Europe. I knew him during his years as C.S.I. Bishop of Madras. I always admired him for his commitment to Christ, his discipline in administration and writing and his deep love for his clergy, his church and for common people, irrespective of race, religion or social status. A tribute to him will be included in a later issue of the ERT.

In this address Bishop Newbigin sets the facts of the gospel in context of post-Enlightenment cultures, secular and religious, and calls for mission as a conversational dialogue.

Editor

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<sup>50</sup> op. cit., 359.

<sup>51</sup> It is striking that the theologians who see the other religions as ways of salvation usually refer to the many good and pious people they find among the adherents of these religions. In doing so, they actually introduce the principle of meritorious good works, which is quite foreign to the Bible. In his book *The Open Secret* (1978, 196) Lesslie Newbigin rightly says: ‘It is the “men of good will”, the “sincere” followers of other religions, the “observers of the law” who are informed in advance that their seats in heaven are securely booked. This is the exact opposite of the teaching of the New Testament. Here emphasis is always on surprise. It is the sinners who will be welcomed and those who were confident that their place was secure who will find themselves outside’. Such confidence, of course, is quite contrary to the biblical doctrine of the justification of the ungodly.

The issue before us is witness in a multi-faith society. Obviously we must begin with the gospel itself. It always seems to me that one of the wonderful verses in the New Testament is the last verse of St Luke's gospel which says that after the Ascension the disciples came back to Jerusalem and were continually in the Temple praising God.

### **MISSION AS PRAISE**

The first response to the gospel is praise. The first thing in any kind of missiology must be praise. The gospel begins with an immense explosion of praise; if God has done this amazing thing, then everything else, so to speak, is swept away. There is one thing to do and that is to praise. Mission is surely essentially and primarily an overflow of praise. It seems to me one of the terrible signs of our fallen nature that we somehow so constantly convert it into a task or burden—something laid upon us. We constantly misquote the Great Commission, leaving out the essential first part. We repeat 'Go into all the world and make disciples'. That looks like a command, an order, a burden laid upon us, but we forget the first part, 'All authority in heaven and on earth is given to me and therefore you can go and tell the world.' It is the fact of what God has done which is the starting point of it all and which must overflow in an outburst of praise—a kind of radio-active cloud which spreads into the whole world out of an immense explosion, but a radioactivity which is not lethal, but life-giving.

A further consequence of our distorted thinking is that we put in the centre the whole question of how can I be saved and how can other people be saved. In other words the centre shifts from, how shall this glorious God be glorified to the question, how shall I be saved or how shall somebody else be saved. And this happens, of course, because we have allowed ourselves to be conned by the assumptions of our culture, which regards Christianity as one among a body of things called religions which are about personal opinions and personal experiences and not about public facts.

### **THE GOSPEL AS FACT**

The word 'fact' has come to have a particular meaning in our post- Enlightenment culture.<sup>1</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre says in one of his books that 'fact' has now become a folk concept which has an aristocratic ancestry, the ancestor being Lord Bacon who used the word 'fact' in the sense in which we now use it. But, of course, it is originally simply the Latin *factum*, something which has been done and, having been done, is there and cannot be changed. We may have different ways of understanding and interpreting it but the 'fact' remains, and the heart of all that we are on about in the Christian church is this tremendous 'fact' that God has done this astounding thing—that he has so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that the Word has been made flesh, that this ultimate reality which is beyond all our conceiving and understanding and which no human mind

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<sup>1</sup> 1 This paper was given at a conference on 'Confessing Christ in a Multi-Faith Society', organized by Rutherford House and the Scottish Lausanne Committee, held at Larbet in May 1994. The paper has been transcribed from the spoken address, and is presented virtually as it was orally delivered. After it was given, a member of the audience correctly pointed out to me that my argument about the gospel as 'fact' raised serious epistemological questions which I had not addressed. I realise that these questions need thorough treatment. If I had been addressing a company of people not committed to the Christian faith it would have been necessary to engage in a full discussion of the relation of what we call 'facts' to the interpretive framework which gives them this status. I was addressing Christians, and if one has committed oneself to the truth of the gospel, then one cannot coherently give it any other status than the one which we denote in popular speech by the word 'fact'.

can ever grasp has yet become accessible to us—that which we have seen, that which we have heard, that which we have handled. It is a fact of history which is accessible to us and in which God has so acted to redeem us from our estrangement and bring us into his own.

In our culture, however, the Christian message is not seen as fact, but regarded as a matter of private opinion, whereas a couple of hundred years ago it was taught as a fact in school that ‘man’s chief end is to glorify God and enjoy him forever’. That is not a fact now but a personal opinion, and glorifying God, at least in public worship, is included in the abstract of statistics published by Her Majesty’s Stationery office now, if at all, among ‘leisure pursuits’. Because of this, the attention centres on the question of the person—my experience and my salvation. Hence the position of my old friend John Hick. His theology has become almost orthodox, namely that religion is not a series of truth claims but a series of alternative ways of personal salvation. It is not to be understood as a series of beliefs about what is the case, about the actual realities, but a series of different answers to the question of personal salvation. And if the centre is put there, then of course we have this wonderful exercise of massaging various biblical texts in order to see if they can be slightly adjusted to open up some hope for other people to be saved. But that surely puts the whole emphasis in the wrong place.

The Christian faith, Christianity, which is an ambivalent, changing, questionable phenomenon (some awful things have been done, and still are done in the name of Christianity, as we all know), is the fallible and often horrible attempt that we make to come to terms with this fact of what God has done in Jesus Christ. Surely all our attention has to be fixed there. If it is true that God has done this, then of course it has to be the thing that controls everything else. It cannot be regarded as one of a series of interesting facts which can be slotted away in our encyclopaedias, but has to be that which shapes, determines, evaluates everything. If the fact is what we do celebrate—that God has done this great amazing thing, then the first thing surely that has to be said, the essential thing, is that this overwhelming, amazing generosity of God must be reflected in the life of every congregation. It must be a place where the love of God flows out to everybody and therefore a place where the stranger is loved and embraced and welcomed. God forgive us, for we know that our congregations are very different from that. How introverted they become and how unwilling to embrace the stranger. How often we become a company of people who enjoy one another’s company because we are all like each other. Therefore, the first thrust surely is absolutely right—that the very heart of the gospel must lead us to that loving, warm, welcoming embrace to every human being, whatever their race, whatever their creed, whatever their sins, whatever they be. This surely must be the very first priority.

When we state that we are talking about a fact—not about how am I going to be saved but about what is the case—we are of course first of all in a world where other factual claims are made. Islam, for example, flatly contradicts the central affirmation of the gospel. It is not the case that God died for our sins on Calvary. It is blasphemy to say so. For Hinduism, the alleged historical facts about Jesus may be inspiring and interesting, but they belong to a world which does not touch ultimate reality. They belong to this shifting world of *maya* where you do not find ultimate truth. It may be a good story to tell, illustrating a certain way of understanding ultimate reality, but it is not itself a clue to that ultimate reality. Or we may take the overwhelmingly dominant culture in our society, which is not a Christian culture, but one that derives from the Enlightenment and now participates in the collapse of the Enlightenment vision of eternal, indubitable truths and for which therefore the Christian claim about Jesus can be only a personal opinion. It cannot be public truth. It is in that situation that we have to witness to the gospel. And I would want to suggest several implications of that.

## IMPLICATIONS

The first and probably the obvious is this: if it is factually true that God has done this thing which we affirm in the Christian creeds, then it cannot be one among a number of different points of view. It has to be the point from which everything else is assessed. It has to be the point by which everything else is judged and everything else understood. We do not in the end understand anything in its full depth except when we look at it from the standpoint that is given to us in the fact of Jesus Christ.

The second implication, therefore, is that all human beings, wherever they are, are embraced in that love of God. All human beings are made in the image of God. All are illuminated by the light who is Jesus Christ—the light that lightens every person. There is no human being—I am sure that this is absolutely fundamental—there is no human being in whom there is not evidence of the grace of God, of the mercy of God, of the kindness of God. I do not feel very comfortable with the language of ‘common grace’ and ‘saving grace’. I know it has a long history in the Reformed tradition, but I cannot help feeling that it smacks of the old Catholic idea of grace as a kind of commodity which God may dispense in various strengths. I find that a very unbiblical idea. It seems to me that the witness of the Bible is that God’s tender mercies are over all his works and that the grace of God is not, as it were, a commodity. It is the graciousness of God. It is that tender, gracious, loving care of God which surrounds every human being.

Therefore, that means that in our approach to people of other faiths our first concern, our first delight must be to search out, to acknowledge, to rejoice in all signs of the goodness of God that we find in our fellow human beings, be they secularist, humanist, Buddhist, Marxist, Muslim or whatever. You know that form of evangelism which Bonhoeffer harshly criticizes when he talks about trying to winkle out the hidden sins in people so that we may then present the gospel. If this person is a Muslim or a Hindu or whatever there must be something wrong. There must be a sin somewhere which we can winkle out and then present the gospel. Bonhoeffer calls that Methodism, which I think is not very fair to our Methodist friends. I think that it is tremendously important that we put this first, that we acknowledge, and welcome, and thank God for, and cherish, and admire, and reverence all the signs of the grace of God which we see so movingly among people of other faiths, including secularists and very devoted atheists and the like. All of them at some point will be heard to say ‘God help me’.

The third thing to say is that the coming of Jesus is at the same time the coming of judgement. He was in the world and the world knew him not. He came to his own and his own received him not. The coming of the light which lightens everyone is at the same time the showing up of all that is not the light. And we cannot evade that very, very sharp element of judgement which is present in the New Testament.

## LOVE, JUDGEMENT AND SURPRISE

I always find it astonishing that people talk as if the God of the Old Testament was the God of wrath and the God of the New Testament is the God of love. Some of the most moving expressions of the love of God are to be found in, for example, Hosea, and, on the other hand, there is nothing in the Old Testament to match the terrible severity of some of the words that our Lord speaks about the possibility of being lost. But surely the point to remember about these words is above all that they are primarily addressed to those who think they are saved, who think they are all right. Over and over again, the words of our Lord, these terribly, terribly stern words of our Lord are addressed to those who are

confident that they are inside. It is not the brambles growing round the vine that are to be pulled up and burned but the branches of the vine which do not bear fruit.

The second point to note is the great emphasis in the teaching of our Lord about the last things on the element of surprise—the first will be last and the last will be first. One cannot escape the fact that almost all the words of Jesus about the last things are about the element of surprise. Some people take the parable of the sheep and goats as the final word on the subject of the last judgement and are confident that their good works will see them through. But it is worth pointing out that those on the right hand were astonished to learn that they had done those things. Once again surprise is at the very heart of that parable of the last things. When someone in the crowd asked Jesus, ‘Are there few that be saved?’, remember that Jesus said, ‘You try to get in by the narrow door, for many go down the broad way that leads to destruction’. It is not a question that we ask about other people but one that we ask about ourselves. There are enormously inclusive passages in the New Testament, as we know, for example in [Romans 5](#), or even more strikingly in the great argument of [Romans 9–11](#) which begins with the unbelief of the Jews to whom everything has been given, but which ends with the vision of the time when the fulness of the gentiles will be gathered in and all Israel will be saved.

We are called upon to live, it seems to me, within this tension between the love of God and the wrath of God. The Christian life is not one in which we have everything sewn up but one in which we live in a tension between a godly confidence and a godly fear. The same Paul who said, ‘Nothing can separate us from the love of Christ’ could also write, ‘I buffet my body and keep it under lest having preached to others I shall be a castaway.’ So I think that the concentration on the question ‘Can a Muslim or a Hindu be saved?’ is a mistaken interpretation of Jesus. It is one of the weaknesses of a great deal of contemporary Christianity that we do not speak of the last judgement and of the possibility of being finally lost. That is an element of the gospel which we cannot ignore. But I am sure that the central teaching of our Lord would steer us away from anxious debates about who can or cannot under what circumstances be saved. ‘Strive to enter in by the narrow door’. The real question—to come back again to the beginning, to the point where missiology has so often been skewed—is not how shall I be saved, but how shall God be glorified? That is the response to the gospel. It is praise and glory, and the mission of the church is the spilling over of that tremendous praise.

## **FRIENDSHIP AND REVERENCE**

What would be the practical consequences of that way of looking at the gospel? I want to suggest a few. The first is just ordinary human friendship, the ordinary ways in which we reach out in friendship to other people. Why is it that we make such a song and dance about it when it is somebody of another faith? We do not do so when the person is a secular humanist—which is a totally different faith from the Christian faith and in some ways much more remote from the Christian faith than some of the so-called non-Christian religions. But we do not have a great church conference about having a conversation with a secular humanist who lives in the next-door house. To reach out in ordinary friendship is surely the very first and simplest thing to say. That will of course include the sharing of hospitality. One of the things which we learn when we get to know especially our Asian neighbours is the tremendous warmth of their hospitality, which often puts us to shame. To be able to share hospitality with one another and to enjoy the hospitality of one another is surely an enormously, humanly enriching thing and ought to be at the very heart of our normal life when we are living in this kind of multi-cultural and multi-religious community.

A word must be said also about invitations to others' places of worship, to mosques and temples and so forth. I think that if such an invitation is given it is right to accept it. I am sure we cannot worship there ourselves, but in the words of that great Scottish missionary, sit there quietly with respect and reverence their reverence even though we cannot ourselves be part of the worship that they offer. That is, of course, made very clear when one goes to a mosque. Sometimes it is less clear when one is in a Hindu temple or a Sikh gurdwara.

We should also invite people of other religions to come to our places of worship and to be with us when we worship. It seems to me only right that it should be reciprocal. If we are going to do this (this perhaps is a minor point, but an important one), we ought to make sure that we have available the kind of literature that will help them to understand our faith. I would think it would simply be obligatory for any Christian congregation which is in an area where there are many Muslims or Hindus to have a stock of gospel portions in the relevant language. I hope that they are easily available, perhaps from the Bible Society, in all the relevant Asian languages, and also other material that we can put into the hands of our friends from other religions to help them to understand and enter into and to learn about Jesus.

## **TYPES OF DIALOGUE**

It is also very important and often very relevant that we join with our neighbours of other faiths in common tasks, civic responsibilities, actions for political or social change and so forth. There is an immense area of work where we can share together in common objectives. It is often one of the best ways of opening up relationships. During my career as a missionary in India I was involved in two kinds of what you might call inter-faith dialogue. (I am very allergic to this word dialogue because it seems to me that we use it when we cannot have an ordinary conversation. When we talk with our neighbour over the fence who may or may not be a Christian we do not talk about a dialogue—we have a conversation. The very use of the word dialogue often indicates that in fact ordinary conversation has broken down or not even started.) I used to spend every Wednesday evening in the premises of the Ramakrishna Mission where we sat cross-legged on the floor and we studied the Upanishads and the Gospels. That kind of dialogue for me was very helpful, and certainly on both sides it did a great deal to help us to understand one another's deepest convictions. Certainly it did so for me and I believe for many Hindu participants. But in that sort of dialogue, we are, so to speak, shooting from prepared positions and it goes only so far.

When I was in Madras, where we were trying to face the colossal problems of a big metropolis growing at a fantastic rate, we had meetings of people of many different faiths, including Marxists and Gandhians and others, to talk about how our faith commitments helped us in illuminating and tackling the common problems that we had as citizens of Madras. That in some ways was a more fruitful exercise because there were no prepared positions. There is nothing in the Bible about some of the problems that Madras was facing. It had to be our living faith. It had to be the faith as it is actually operating now that was at work. This kind of sharing in common tasks which concern the whole community is one of the most fruitful things that we can do.

We must also remember, and this has been referred to, the position of our Christian friends from Asia, many of whom have themselves come from a Hindu or Muslim or Sikh background. In my own experience in Birmingham I have found that many have felt very, very bitter because even Christian congregations have shown so little interest in them and in fact have shown more interest in a Hindu than in an Indian Christian. The testimony



that our Christian brothers and sisters who come from a Hindu or Muslim or Sikh background bear is a very important part of all our participation in the mission of the church in Britain.

Let me say one word more about dialogue. Formal inter-faith dialogue is a very valuable exercise. It is a distinct thing. It is not part of evangelism, in my opinion. I know that when I was engaged in those discussions in the Hindu monastery I was not trying to convert those men. They knew that I was constantly preaching in the streets and proclaiming the gospel to the pilgrims coming to the Hindu temple. They knew perfectly well where I stood. But at that moment I was not trying to evangelize, but to achieve mutual understanding as a necessary basis for a true evangelism. So participation in this kind of dialogue has a very limited but a significant place. It needs to be done by people who thoroughly know their own faith. We sell our partners short if we do not present the fulness of the Christian faith in all its integrity—if we try, as it were, to massage it down so that it is a little bit easier to swallow. We are not playing fair.

So we have to recognize that dialogue has only limited possibilities. The Socratic conception of dialogue which involves the mutual criticism of each other's positions so as to lead on to a fuller truth rests upon the assumption that there are fundamental agreements already on the basis of which both parties can argue. But that is not the case in the matter of inter-faith dialogue, because (and here I come back to my first point) if the gospel is true, if Jesus is the *logos*, the Word made flesh, then there is no other basis from which we can work except the recognition of Jesus as Lord. So there are strict limits to the possibilities of dialogue.

## **OTHER AGENDAS FOR SOCIETY**

The last point that I want to make, and it is a very important one, is to recognize that our other partners (Muslims, Sikhs, Hindus) also have their agenda. It is particularly important to say that because Islam has a very definite agenda. I do not know whether any of you have seen the document which was produced by the Islamic Foundation in Leicester about ten years ago called, 'The Islamic Movement and the West'. It is a very substantial document which lays out a total strategy for converting western Europe into an Islamic society. The strategy involves methods of getting into places of power, particularly in the educational system, and securing the ultimate goal, which a faithful Muslim must follow, that society should be totally Islamic, governed by the Shariah law. Our Muslim friends are perfectly clear about that. They have this agenda and they are working very vigorously to secure it. It is worth mentioning that the extreme militant Hisb-ut-Tahrir which is banned in all Arab countries operates freely in this country and is recruiting vigorously in the universities. So we ought not to be naive, nor should we be paranoiac. But we should know that our friends of other faiths also have their own agenda.

In the background of all our thinking we have to ask the question, 'What kind of society do we want Scotland to be?' Since the collapse of Marxism there is no strong contender against the kind of society that we already have, namely a secular society which marginalizes the Christian faith into a leisure activity and which believes that economics govern everything in human life and that the only end worthy of a nation's pursuit is economic growth. That is the ideology which controls our society. Islam has a different vision of human society. In some way we have to be thankful to the Muslims for challenging us at this point because they see very clearly what our society is. They see also an increasing number of members of this society who are attracted to Islam and become Muslims because of the clear, definite spiritual message that Islam brings.

I do not believe that there is any future for the idea of a secular society. It is breaking down everywhere. It is obvious that in all those parts of the world where the agenda of secularization has been pursued the result has been the rise of religious fundamentalism, which has now become one of the major factors in international politics. I believe that what we have to work for is a Christian society. By this I mean a society in which a sufficiently large proportion of the population are believing Christians to ensure that the laws and the public policy of the nation are congruous with the Christian faith. Because the cross stands at the very heart of the Christian faith and because, therefore, unlike Islam, we do not believe that the truth of God can be finally identified with any political order—because the death of Jesus, in flat contradiction to the central teaching of Islam, is at the centre of our faith—we can never think of a kind of Christian society in the Christendom model which persecutes, which coerces belief. It has to be a society in which freedom of faith remains sure. But only a Christian society can achieve that. I do not believe that in the long run a secular society can do so. Throughout this area of inter-religious relationships we have to hold steadily in our mind the ultimate question, ‘What kind of society do we hope to have?’

At this point I think I will come back to the point that I started with. I said we have to avoid both naivety and paranoia. It is easy to become, in certain situations, paranoid about the threat of Islam. I know situations where very tough, strong-arm, militant tactics are being used to get Christian governors off the governing bodies of schools and to try to ensure that the schools become entirely Islamic. One has to be realistic about that, but also not be paranoid. We have to come back to the very heart of the matter. I quote again the Great Commission, ‘All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.’ Jesus is at the right hand of the Father. Jesus does reign over all things and, therefore, we have no need to be frightened or anxious or paranoid. We can be open, confident, generous, embracing all our fellow citizens of whatever faith with the same love with which God has embraced us. I want to come to that starting point. I hope that I am not being simplistic or unfair, but I do think that this concentration on the question can a Hindu be saved or a Muslim be saved is totally wrong. That is God’s business. We are not supposed to be settling those questions.

If we are overwhelmed, as we must be, by the marvel of what God has done for us in Jesus Christ, if it is true that Almighty God has done this for us, then there is a kind of uncalculating generosity at the very heart of God which must be reflected in the life of our churches. Overwhelmingly, it seems to me, with all the sorts of reservations and safeguards and so forth that I have suggested, overwhelmingly the message surely must be that when we give to people of other faiths the impression that they are not welcome we are really contradicting the gospel. Every Christian congregation, and this of course the place where the real thing happens—the local congregation, which believes the faith, which celebrates it, which rejoices in it, which lives by it, which lives it out in the life of the community, is the place where the Holy Spirit is present to give his own witness and to draw people in his own way—often by very strange and mysterious ways—to faith in Christ. When that is present I think we have the answers to the questions with which we are struggling today.

## **Books Reviewed**

Reviewed by Roger Kemp  
Elizabeth Isichei

[A History of Christianity in Africa](#)

Reviewed by Ramesh Khattry  
Vishal Mangalwadi

[In Search of Self: Beyond the New Age](#)

Reviewed by R. Craig Woodring  
Bruce Bradshaw

[Bridging the Gap: Evangelism, Development and Shalom](#)

Reviewed by Peter Cook

Kenneth Hyslon Smith

[Evangelicals in the Church of England 1734-1984](#)

Reviewed by Erich Geldbach

Gregory Baum

[The Church for Others: Protestant Theology in Communist East Germany](#)

Reviewed by John Valentine

John Sanders

[No Other Name: Can only Christians be Saved?](#)

Reviewed by Stephen Raison

Kenneth A. Mathews

[Genesis 1-11:26. An Evangelical and Theological Exposition of Holy Scripture](#)

Reviewed by David Parker

Vinson Synan

[The Holiness-Pentecostal Tradition: Charismatic Movements in the Twentieth Century](#)

John Stott (ed.)

[Making Christ Known: Historic Mission Documents from the Lausanne Movement, 1974-1989](#)

## Book Reviews

ERT (1998) 22:3, 274 0144-8153

A HISTORY OF CHRISTIANITY IN AFRICA

by Elizabeth Isichei

(Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1995)

*Reviewed by Roger Kemp*

This readable book gives a broad coverage of the development of Christianity in Africa from its earliest beginnings. Indeed the sub-title gives the expanse: 'From Antiquity to the

Present'. It allows a student of African Christianity to put events in perspective. It also balances missionary activity with indigenous African development and understanding. The reader begins to appreciate the thought and work of Africans in their relationship to political and religious developments in their respective countries. This is done in such a way that one could use Isichei's interpretation as a basis for missiological study and practice. From that point of view the book is more than simply 'history'—it is a resource which could be used to test the readers's own views of the past and the present.

I believe the book would be most useful for those who have already studied some history of Africa because although the book is relatively long there are details which to some extent have had to be assumed. Isichei has been interested in Christianity in Africa for most of her life. She spent sixteen years in Africa and has kept informed of developments since moving to the University of Otago in New Zealand where she holds the Chair in Religious Studies. One of the refreshing aspects of her book is the frankness with which Isichei comes to such a vast topic. She recognizes that her views on the subject have changed since her initial interest and this book is an attempt to explain her latest opinions. That alone will delight many readers, particularly if they have a similar interest in Africa.

ERT (1998) 22:3, 275–276 0144–8153

## IN SEARCH OF SELF: BEYOND THE NEW AGE

by Vishal Mangalwadi

London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1992, ISBN 0–340–552271 xii 287, pp. £7.99 in U.K.; paper

*Reviewed by Ramesh Khattri, Ph.D., Director, Nepal Bible Ashram, Kathmandu, in Dharma Deepika Vol 2 No. 2.*

The very name is a misnomer because 'New Age' has taken over old, eastern ideas. The New Age, begun in California and now spread world-wide, is here to stay and perhaps fade (as the title of the same work published in USA, *When the New Age Grows Old*, suggests). While it stays, New Age has become a challenge to a Christian view point, ethics, life-style, and philosophy. New Age borrows 'monism' from the Hindu *advaita* philosophy, accepts the doctrines of *maya* and *karma*, both incompatible with the Christian understanding of the reality of the present world and the forgiveness of sins once and for all in Jesus Christ. The basic assumption behind New Age is that man himself is god, not a sinner. So Utopia is within human grasp. Although New Age is making Hinduism popular and relevant, the Christian faith has not been correctly interpreted by it. Mangalwadi aims to show how biblical Christianity quenches the thirst New Agers seek in vain to satisfy. In nine well-researched chapters, Mangalwadi deals with the background to the New Age movement, astrology, UFOs, tantric sex, ecology, vegetarianism, reincarnation, and miracles.

*Astrology.* New Age eagerly looks forward to the future Age of Aquarius which will usher in 'harmony, peace . . .' Mangalwadi turns to Genesis. Stars, the sun and the moon are created things to serve man, not to govern him.

*Spiritism,* New Agers have their own spirits that guide them. True! However, human beings should be properly guided only by the Holy Spirit, who cannot be manipulated as the New Agers might wish.

*UFOs,* New Agers rely on extra-terrestrials, whose existence is not yet confirmed, to sort out problems! New Agers should explore the Bible's teaching about the visitation of angels and the second coming of Christ.

*Tantric Sex.* This appeals to New Agers as a means of 'self enlightenment', but condemns the partners to frustration.

*Ecology.* New Agers elevate ecology to the level of god by deifying Mother-Earth. Mangalwadi notes that goddess worship in India has not given Indian women the dignity they deserve. There is no guarantee that regarding the earth as a goddess will inspire people to better ecology.

*Vegetarianism.* Mangalwadi notes that although India has practised this more than other nations, India has yet to benefit from it.

*Reincarnation.* Mangalwadi argues that the reincarnation so advocated by New Agers could simply be a case of demon possession.

*Miracles.* Miracles do not occur because the New Ager successfully thinks that sickness is mere illusion. Miracles happen because God intervenes.

The epilogue concludes that the New Ager will err as long as he or she tries to understand life without reference to God. An appendix studies how recent physics seems to support the monism of philosophical Hinduism.

Mangalwadi writes as a Christian. So his appeal to the Bible as the infallible standard is obvious. Advocates of other religious traditions may find Mangalwadi's approach simplistic or dogmatic. This reviewer, also a Christian, found himself agreeing with the author one hundred percent.

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## BRIDGING THE GAP: EVANGELISM, DEVELOPMENT AND SHALOM

by Bruce Bradshaw

Monrovia, MARC, 1993, pp. 183

Reviewed by R. Craig Woodring, Colorado Springs, USA

The book **Bridging the Gap: Evangelism, Development and Shalom**, by Bruce Bradshaw, examines how western world views clash with the primal world view of the developing world. The author presents a very good understanding of the issues and broadly applies his thesis to a variety of development arenas. While this reviewer believes this to be a valuable first level analysis of the problem, and an excellent thesis for approaching the problem, there is still much work that could be done both in the thesis and in the synthesis as well as discussion on the application side. Overall, the book is an excellent starting point on the subject of making development work for those it is supposed to help. I highly recommend it for those development professionals, social works specialists, and church workers seeking to see positive change occur through development.

The author first presents the weaknesses of development as it is widely practised today, by western and western educated individuals in non-profit organizations who perceive the problem facing a community to be either physical or social in nature and needing technical solutions. The receiving community or individual often refuses, rejects, or minimally accesses the solution technology because their ownership and understanding of it is minimal. Sometimes the receiver becomes dependent on the donor to continue to provide the inputs and management for the development technologies, long after management transfer should have occurred. Rarely does the solution become widely accepted and take root in the new host cultural setting. Bradshaw defines the real underlying problem to be that the primal world views of the developing arena are inadequately addressed by the western scientific world view. The spiritual perspective of the developing world's poor and illiterate masses, the target group, does not mesh with the scientific perspective of the development professional and agency. The development practitioner often assumes that there is a limited spiritual world which is divorced from the natural world where the problems exist and where solutions are needed. Bradshaw

shows that this duality concept is incorrect and in no way addresses the holistic nature of primal cultures.

Bradshaw's solution is based on the ancient Hebrew concept of *Shalom*. He investigates the roots and definition of this concept, which involves both spiritual and material components. Sadly, his discussion here could use more development models. His explanation of *Shalom* seems incomplete, leaving this reader to try to piece together a solid definition with the breadth the author is calling for.

After the introduction of *Shalom*, and a good discussion of contextualization, the author then applies the concept to several development arenas. Some of these discussions are better than others though all have merit. The discussion of *Shalom* in management, education, and medicine is very thought provoking. To Bradshaw's credit he does deal with the subjects of the environment and economics, though both need much more synthesis and effort. The environmental issues seem to degenerate into an economic problem and the economics discussion could use much more thought. For example, this reviewer was surprised that there was no discussion of the Greek concept of stewardship, *Oikonomos*. There is much more work that could be brought out in this area. The discussions on addressing the powers was very thought provoking but more clarity would have been helpful. Lastly the author attempts to bring in two additional points on holism and transformation. These topics would have been better placed earlier in the work as they provide good fundamental understanding for concept application.

The concluding thoughts deserve a final chapter of their own. After 170 odd pages of working on developing understanding of *Shalom* and applications, a concluding and final synthesis would be appropriate.

In conclusion, this book is important and brings up many interesting thoughts. It should provide ample material for further development and discussion by a variety of authors. Hopefully, it will also challenge us readers to seek the concept of *Shalom* in our efforts at development.

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## EVANGELICALS IN THE CHURCH OF ENGLAND 1734-1984

by Kenneth Hylson Smith

T&T Clark, Edinburgh, 1988, ISBN 0-567-39161-8 424pp., £16.95

*Reviewed by Peter Cook, StAndrew's Church, Cheadle Hulme, UK in Scottish Journal of Evangelical Theology*

This is a scholarly, extremely well-documented yet easily readable account of the progress of Anglican Evangelicalism in the post-Wesley era almost to the present day. It can justifiably be regarded both as a textbook to introduce the student new to this particular aspect of church history and, on account of an abundance of footnotes together with its bibliography and indices, as a helpful guide for those who wish to research more deeply into the period. Or it may be treated simply as an informative and fascinatingly interesting book for those who want to know what goes on in the evangelical world, especially in the Church of England.

So many facets of Evangelicalism are examined that it is quite impossible to give any adequate account of the book in a short review. Hylson Smith pursues a track very well-worn by readers of G. R. Balleine's classic published in 1908, *A History of the Evangelical Party in the Church of England*, which hitherto has been a 'must' for evangelical ordinands, but the assessments which this more modern account offers have all the benefits of an abundance of recent research. It provides us, moreover, with a further seventy years of

evangelical history. The epilogue predicting ‘the other side of 1984’ clearly needs revision in the light of what has actually happened in this last decade.

Hylson Smith retells the story of the continuous struggle over nearly three centuries of Evangelicalism—reborn through Wesley’s revival and initially to be found in a few scattered parishes, albeit experiencing quite remarkable ministries—to expand into the wider Anglican church. Despite almost as many setbacks as advances, it has become one of the most powerful forces affecting the course of the present-day Church of England. We see divine providence at work, when Evangelicalism manages to break out of the parishes and gain access to the episcopal bench, very much because of Palmerston’s ignorance of ecclesiastical affairs, which forced him to rely on the advice of Lord Shaftesbury!

We witness the birth of the great evangelical societies influencing the church at home and abroad for over a century and a half, among them the Church Pastoral Aid Society and the Church Missionary Society. We learn that Shaftesbury the social reformer was a high Tory afraid of power falling into the hands of the working classes. We discover that J. C. Ryle, the darling of so many modern conservative Evangelicals, was both unsympathetic towards the Keswick Movement and regarded as a non-Evangelical in his day. We witness the struggle between Evangelicalism and ritualism in the last century and liberalism in this. The contributions of John Stott and J. I. Packer are evaluated, especially for the parts they played in the post-War controversies, over *Honest to God*, *The Myth of God Incarnate*, and fundamentalism. Prayer book revision, the charismatic movement and the revolution in church music are given due consideration.

Hylson Smith commands our attention as he bears us through the years, mixing anecdotes with statistics, mini-biographies with theological adjudication. He surely is a worthy successor to Belleine, not only in assessing familiarly trodden ground, but in filling the gap left by the absence of any similar work covering the progress of Anglican Evangelicalism during the greater part of the twentieth century.

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## THE CHURCH FOR OTHERS. PROTESTANT THEOLOGY IN COMMUNIST EAST GERMANY

by Gregory Baum

William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1996, 156 p.

*Reviewed by Dr. Erich Geldbach, professor of ecumenics, Evangelisch-Theologische Fakultät, Ruhr-University Bochum, Germany*

It is an astonishing fact that the first book to introduce an English-speaking readership to the struggle of the East German Lutheran and Reformed churches is by a renowned Roman Catholic theologian from Canada. The book is written with great admiration for the radicalness of the theological discourse and the boldness for the chosen path by the church. It tries to answer the question of what the formula ‘church in socialism’ meant. The author is quite right in asserting that it did not mean ‘for’ socialism, nor did it mean ‘beside’ or ‘against’ socialism. ‘Besides’ would have meant that the church withdrew to its own salvation (*Heil*); ‘against’ would have been a tremendous burden on all church people. The ‘church in socialism’ was an attempt to accept its location within a socialist society which was thought of as improvable. Therefore, the church practised a critical solidarity with the society (a phrase that, incidentally, has likewise been used by the West German established Protestant church) to achieve both salvation and well-being (*Heil und Wohl der Gessellschaft*). This inevitably meant that the church had to walk the tight rope between refusal ‘beside’ and ‘against’) and accommodation (‘for’). The state as well as the

church accepted the unbridgable gulf between the Marxist-Leninist approach to society and the Christian way.

Baum presents first a short historical introduction before focusing on the theology of the *Kirchenbund* (the federation of the territorial churches), its pastoral ministry and its most important ideas and motives. The Barmen Declaration of 1934 (Christ's universal relevance), Bonhoeffer's understanding of faith as praxis of discipleship, the *missio Dei* concept of the International Missionary Council and World Council of Churches are pointed out as major contributing factors for the *Kirchenbund* to find its unique location to minister and witness in a socialist environment.

Despite the admirably clear presentation, there seem to be some points which Baum did not touch. Three deserve special notice:

- (1) Even after reading Baum's introduction, it seems that a North American or Australian readership will find it very difficult to understand what the concept of *Volkskirche* and *Landeskirche* implies. Why would a Lutheran confession end at the border of a given territory and why would a united confession begin there? Why would people who move from a Lutheran territory to a united one become automatically united and vice versa? The *Kirchenbund* tried to minimize these traditional factors, but never abandoned the concept of 'territoriality', thereby maintaining a church bureaucracy along territorial lines with all its traditional titles that reflect the once all-powerful church in its (most often unholy) alignment with the state (e.g. Konsistorialpräsident, a position held by Manfred Stolpe, now Minister President of the state of Brandenburg, who is mentioned only once without his positions then and now; Oberkonsistorialrat, Oberkirchenrat). These and other elements of tradition which hindered rather than freed the church could be upheld only by outside help. The territorial churches as well as the *Kirchenbund* were never self-supportive, but depended throughout their history to a very large degree for their operational budgets (including the trips of their delegates to WCC and other ecumenical meetings) on the West German *Landeskirchen*, Baum failed to point out the irony of the situation. The church 'in' socialism, including its ministers and the church leaders who talked about the possibility of reforming socialism, were never dependent upon the system for their livelihood.
- (2) Baum concentrates for his presentation of Protestant theology in East Germany on three church leaders: Werner Krusche, Albrecht Schönherr and Heino Falcke. Never is there any inkling in the book that in the traditional East German Universities the theological faculties had remained intact. In addition the churches organized two schools of theology and a few centres where catechists were trained. In all these places serious theological work was carried out, and one must add that in the Universities this was done under much stress and strain in all schools; e.g., a professor of Marxism was assigned to the theological faculties, and each student was required to sign up for courses in that field. In Baum's book only two professors are mentioned in passing: Emil Fuchs (not listed in the index) and Heinrich Fink, the latter because he rightly criticized the East German government for its anti-Israel policy; but the reader never learns that Fink was the last 'Rector' of East Berlin's Humboldt University. The achievements of the three church leaders are unquestionably outstanding, but they do not represent the whole range of 'Protestant Theology' in East Germany, as the subtitle suggests.
- (3) Only in the last chapter on the 'conciliar process' on Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation (JPIC) are other churches mentioned, and here only incorrectly in half a sentence. It should have been pointed out, however, that the political situation in East Germany was conducive to ecumenical growth between the territorial



churches and the freechurches, partly because the state showed no preference to any church, but treated all as 'equal' and partly because ecumenical fellowship was considered a necessity under the prevailing conditions. Thus, the 'Working Fellowship of Christian Churches' (*Arbeitsgemeinschaft Christlicher Kirchen*) was an important theological agency. Baum is probably less concerned with this aspect as the Roman Catholic church stayed aloof from these efforts until the political changes were coming. Leaders of the free churches were unanimous in their assessment that after 1989 with the territorial churches and the Catholic church claiming to be a quasi-*Volkskirche* again (although statistically far from it), the relationship cooled off considerably. When the common enemy was gone, old rivalries came to the fore again.

Baum missed a few other points which space does not permit to mention. This, however, in no way diminishes the worth of the book. The story of the East German *Kirchenbund* raises the fundamental question of how far a church can contextualize without giving up its Christian identity. The adverse political situation left the church little space to manoeuvre; in fact, over the past 40 years it lost the vast majority of its membership. In some major cities like Leipzig and Halle, not to mention East Berlin, the total church membership is as low as 8% of the population. How many people does it take for a church to be in 'critical solidarity' with the society in which it ministers? Obviously, the 'mission' (*Sammlung und Sendung*) of the church was not in proportion to the vast and oftentimes dramatic intellectual efforts of the church leaders to whom Gregory Baum refers throughout his book.

When the 'Protestant Revolution' did take place in 1989, the agonizing question that remained was not so much the church's entanglement with the ruling party (via the *Stasi*, [the secret police with its kilometers of files on people]), but why it occurred so late. The rulers, all ageing men with very limited intellectual capacities, were swept away; the real question that comes out of these changes (and that any church anywhere needs to address) is the issue of power and legitimate or illegitimate governments, and how churches, church leaders and church people alike, ought to act if confronted by an illegitimate government. This issue was never taken up by any of the GDR churches, and it has never been truthfully faced by the ecumenical community either.

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## NO OTHER NAME. CAN ONLY CHRISTIANS BE SAVED?

by John Sanders

SPCK, 1994, ISBN0-281-04744-8 xx + 315pp, £12.99

*Reviewed by John Valentine, Norwich in Anvil Vol. 12, No 3, 1995)*

This is a brave and lucid book on the state of the unevangelized. John Sanders writes as an Evangelical, but argues for a position with which I suspect the majority of western Evangelicals would disagree. He does so with clarity and warmth, and with every effort to square up to the lessons from Scripture and from history.

Sanders is methodical in his approach. The book is in three parts. The first is a brief but passionate statement of the quandary—how can we square the love of God with the fact that only a minority of the world's population down the centuries and into our own have heard and responded to the gospel? The second is a consideration of what Sanders calls 'the two extremes': on the one hand those who maintain that it is essential to hear and consciously respond to the gospel to be saved, and on the other that all will in due time come to a saving knowledge of the love of God. The third section is an advancement

of Sanders' own position, that salvation is universally accessible to all who turn to God in repentance and trust, without the necessity of any cognitive knowledge of the means of that salvation. Each section is broken down in the same way. Sanders examines the key biblical texts for each position, then considers the major theological issues raised, then looks at three of the leading proponents of the position, before evaluating it.

The book has many strengths. It is admirably clear. Each position is carefully and fairly explained. Sanders writes in a way which is easy to follow. He is logical without being desiccated. The structure of the book is such that I felt that I really got a handle on each position.

It is also a passionate book. Sanders is writing about this because it matters; it is a vital issue, concerning the character of God and the destiny of millions of 'real people and not statistics' (12). He writes as an Evangelical, fully committed to the authority of the Scriptures, the finality and particularity of Christ, and the importance of the gospel; these 'control beliefs' (*passim*) are what stoke his passion and anchor it in discussion.

It is also, as Michael Green writes in his excellent foreword, a courageous book. Sanders is really setting himself up to be knocked down by both sides—both the universalist and the traditional Evangelical alike will be unhappy with his conclusions—but this does not stop him arguing his points with clarity, warmth and vigour. Sanders' awareness of 'control beliefs' is a strength of his discussion.

More critically, the book is an argued case, and as such occasionally lacks objectivity. One is in no doubt as to the conclusion from page one! Sometimes, Sanders' vocabulary and debating style is loaded (he calls the traditional evangelical position 'restrictivist' through-out, for instance). I felt that he overplayed the place of historical Christian thought as opposed to Scripture, although I found his desire to get away from 'proof-texting' to biblical interpretation refreshing. There was a strong element of duplication, too, between the sections on theological considerations and their historical proponents, which served to underline this imbalance (if such it be).

Overall, though, this is an outstanding and valuable book, which stirred me as much to pray as to think, and even to evangelize.

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## **GENESIS 1–11:26: AN EXEGETICAL AND THEOLOGICAL EXPOSITION OF HOLY SCRIPTURE, NIV TEXT**

(THE NEW AMERICAN COMMENTARY, VOL 1A)

by Kenneth A. Mathews

Hardback; 528 pp, including subject, person and Scripture indices, five excurses and occasional charts. There is no bibliography. ISBN 0–8054-0101–6

*Reviewed by Stephen Raison, Lecturer in Old Testament at the Bible College of South Australia*

The contents of the text proper consists of two sections: *Introduction* (90 pp.) and *commentary* (387 pp). The *Introduction* has seven parts: *Commencing on Genesis* (3 pp.) *Literary Genesis* (16 pp.), *Genesis and Canon* (13 pp.), *Theology of Genesis* (10 pp.), *Interpreting Genesis* (23 pp.), [Gen. 1–11](#) and *Ancient Literature* (15 pp.) and *Creation and Contemporary Interpretation* (11 pp.).

The commentary proper is divided into six sections, each (excepting the first) treating a portion of biblical text headed by the *toledoth*-formula. Each section commences with an outline of the contents of the biblical text, a discussion of literary features and a consideration of pertinent ANE material. The sub-units of each section also commence

with an overview of contents plus a description of the continuity of thought from the preceding sub-unit.

The NIV text is printed in bold face before the pertinent commentary. All verses are discussed.

## COMMENTS

In general, the material in this commentary is well organized and Mathews' writing style is easy to read even when complex topics are under discussion.

Mathews freely interacts with contemporary scholarship in the course of his comments though he keeps the discussion uncluttered with names and fine-pointed details. He provides sufficient detail for the reader to tentatively make decisions independent of those offered in the commentary while providing references to relevant scholarly writings which enable further investigation.

At some points, there is a tension in Mathews' discussion which is not clarified. This tension arises from his conclusion that the material in Genesis is essentially historical (p. 111) while also arguing that influence was exerted upon the text's composition by the circumstances of the original readers. For instance, the snake of Eden appears to be treated as though literal ('it is more than a literal snake', p. 234) but the comments imply that the choice of a 'snake' for the Eden narrative was in part motivated by the original readers' dislike of snakes ('The snake was reviled . . . as a source of uncleanness and a remembered menace', p. 235). Now the problem is not that there is tension in Mathews' position—it does not invalidate his view—it is rather that Mathews does not alert the reader to the outworking of this tension in his comments.

Hebrew words are transliterated and are correlated with specific words or expressions in the NIV text. This feature is of benefit to both Hebrew and non-Hebrew readers.

This commentary is a model for students of how to utilize the text in an exegesis. At the level of sentences, Mathews consistently draws attention to the wording of the text as the means of drawing out the sense of the verses. At the level of units of discourse, he makes observations of literary and rhetorical features which assist the reader to identify the thrust of a passage. For instance, of [7:17–20](#) he notes, 'The brief description in v. [12](#) is protracted in vv. [17–20](#) by means of structural overlay and numerous repetitions so as to give the literary effect of increasingly rising waters.' This is then illustrated with examples.

In keeping with the series' intent of enabling 'the reader to see the parts as well as the whole of Scripture' (p. 8), this commentary is explicitly theological in orientation. Mathews endeavours to indicate the Christian theological significance of the Genesis material by reference to the New Testament throughout the commentary. This is a refreshing feature of the commentary and is sure to assist Christian readers to appreciate the importance of [Genesis 1–11](#) for understanding the gospel. The strategy of threading these connections throughout the comments avoids the impression that they are incidental afterthoughts. On the other hand, I must admit that on occasion I found this approach disruptive of the exegesis and also dissatisfying because it seemed piecemeal.

On occasion, Mathews notes the relevance of passages for contemporary issues. For instance, he discusses the relative roles of man and woman in connection with his comments on [2:18–23](#). Regardless of one's own conclusions on the matters raised by Mathews, we can be grateful for a commentary in which contemporary matters are raised.

This is a valuable commentary. It is aimed at the English reader, seeks to elucidate the Christian theological significance of the biblical text, is sensitive to literary features of the text and incorporates recent scholarly developments in its discussion. Finally, the

commentary is a model for students of how to write exegesis. Mathews' work should find a home on the library shelf of pastors, theological students and laypeople desirous of a close study of [Genesis 1-11](#).

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## THE HOLINESS-PENTECOSTAL TRADITION: CHARISMATIC MOVEMENTS IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

by Vinson Synan

Grand Rapids/Cambridge: Wm B. Eerdmans, 1997, ISBN 1-8029-4103-1 Pb 340pp  
index bibliog.

*Reviewed by David Parker*

In this revised and enlarged version of his 1971 classic, Synan has brought his narrative and interpretation of one of the important contemporary church movements or 'traditions' up to date. He has thereby made a significant contribution to the understanding of the progress of the Christian church, which his readers, who are deeply indebted to him, will quickly recognize.

Synan maintains from the earlier edition his key theme that Pentecostalism is 'basically a modified "second blessing" Methodist spirituality that was pioneered by John Wesley and passed down to his followers in the holiness movement, out of which came the modern Pentecostal movement'. What was distinctive about the Pentecostals was that 'charismata, especially the gift of tongues, was the sign of receiving the subsequent "second blessing".' However, Synan does not believe that this was totally innovative because 'what Pentecostals call the "baptism of the Holy Spirit" was part of the public liturgy of the churches for at least eight centuries after the day of Pentecost'. He links this two-stage process with the emergence of the rite of confirmation; this rite, which involved 'a very practical and sacramental "second blessing" that conferred the Holy Spirit' at the hand of the bishop, was 'an attempt to make practicing, committed, adult Christians out of children who had been baptized as infants several years earlier'.

Synan does not draw out the historical links between the early rite of confirmation and the holiness-pentecostal movement, opting instead to begin with Wesley's background in Catholic and Anglican mysticism. Neither does he attempt to test the theological validity of this two-stage 'second-blessing' position, or investigate very fully the doctrinal issues involved when those with a non-Wesleyan doctrinal background began to take an interest in and receive the 'second blessing'. He does, however, point out how these people, who took an approach to sanctification which excluded the concept of a 'double cure' created a new tradition within the movement which was often the source of considerable misunderstanding and tension.

The story of the emergence of the exceedingly large number of Holiness and Pentecostal churches which occupies the major part of the book is extremely detailed at times, and focuses too much on the North American situation to be appropriate for the broader title that he has given the new volume (rather than 'The Holiness-Pentecostal Movement in the Untied States'). However, an additional chapter has been provided on the missionary outreach of the pentecostal movement with accounts of key developments in some overseas countries; much more attention to these developments would be welcome in any further work in this area that the author intends to undertake.

However, Synan has provided a clear outline of the trends which have dominated the movement since the publication of the last edition by adding four additional chapters at the end. This new material covers the Neo-Pentecostal Movement, the Catholic

Charismatic Renewal (and the significant pre-cursors of this otherwise unexpected 1967 development), and the Charismatic Explosion; this material brings the history up to the Toronto Blessing, the Pensacola Revival and the transfer of leading charismatic Michael Harper into the Orthodox church.

A final chapter summarises the remarkable growth of the movement (463 million or 23.9% of the total number of Christians in 1995) and offers a taxonomy of the movement, in terms of the following types: Pre-Pentecostals; Classical Pentecostals; Non-white indigenous Quasi-Pentecostals; Black and other Non- White Indigenous Pentecostals; Protestant Charismatics; Catholic Charismatics; Third Wavers, and Crypto-Charismatics. The author considers that in view of the information and developments outlined in his book, it is no longer enough to refer to this part of the Christian church as a 'movement' but as one of the strongly-established 'traditions' alongside the Catholic-Orthodox and Protestant; this together with the theological factors mentioned earlier accounts for the change of title for this edition.

The Charismatic movement being one of the 'three streams' making up the 'one river' of the Christian faith, Synan thinks that the various elements are at different stages in their pilgrimage (e.g., Catholic charismatics are still 'pilgrims carving out a home' for themselves), but the major problem the movement faces is to 'maintain the revolutionary fervor of the latter rain until it could be said that the churches had truly been renewed'. However, he believes that the next stage, 'transforming society' is a task that 'few Charismatics have confronted', even though with their distinctive message, large numbers, energetic leadership and deep commitment, they are well placed to tackle it. Nevertheless, he believes that in the future 25% of Christians will be classical Pentecostals mainly from the Third World; 25% charismatics from mainline Protestant and Catholic churches in North America and Europe; 25% will be non-charismatics including evangelicals and a smaller liberal element; the other 25% will be nominal or cultural Christians in the West.

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## **MAKING CHRIST KNOWN: HISTORIC MISSION DOCUMENTS FROM THE LAUSANNE MOVEMENT, 1974-1989**

by John Stott, editor

Grand Rapids/Cambridge: Wm B. Eerdmans and Carlisle: PaternosterPress, 1997

ISBN 1-8028-4315-8 Pb 264pp indexes

*Reviewed by David Parker*

The Lausanne Movement documents, some of them highly influential, are well known and widely accessible in their separately published forms. But bringing twelve of them together under the editorship of Dr John Stott, with a Foreword by Dr Billy Graham, two of the key figures for the establishment of the movement, will ensure wider circulation and much greater usefulness. A select bibliography provides useful references for further study.

The documents included in this collection are the 1974 Lausanne Covenant (with its original exposition and commentary), the Pasadena Statement on the Homogeneous Unit Principle (1977), the Willowbank Report on Gospel and Culture (1978), the Glen Eyrie Report on Muslim Evangelization, the 1980 Evangelical Commitment to Simple Lifestyle, the 1982 Grand Rapids Report on Evangelism and Social Responsibility, and the Manila Manifesto 1989. In addition there is the Thailand Statement of 1980 with a list of mini-consultation reports and the documents of four consultations held 1984-1988; these

include the International Prayer Assembly for World Evangelization (Seoul Korea), Consultation on the Work of the Holy Spirit and Evangelization (Oslo Norway), a conference of young leaders held in Singapore and the Consultation on Conversion and World Evangelization (Hong Kong).

The book covers, therefore, the 15 years from Lausanne I to Lausanne II, but to indicate that the movement is still active, there is an appendix containing the document from the Consultation on Faith and Modernity which took place in Uppsala, Sweden in 1993.

The documents are presented without any comment or modification, but there is a 13 page introduction by the editor which summarises the main trends of the various conferences and sets them in their historical and theological context; there is also some extra background material that helps in their interpretation. As the editor points out, the conferences chosen for mention in this volume were limited to those that were officially sponsored by the Movement and which also produced authorised reports. This means that many regional conferences are not covered, nor are several important gatherings which involved many who were signatories to the Lausanne Covenant.

The introduction also discusses the complementary relationship between the Lausanne Movement and the AD 2000 and Beyond Movement, and details some of the activities of the latter, including the Global Conference on World Evangelization, Seoul Korea, July 1995. By mentioning these developments, and an important meeting of the Lausanne Movement in Stuttgart, Germany in February 1994, where its future work was reviewed, Stott emphasizes its on-going role. This meeting, which adopted a smaller, more flexible structure accountable to national, regional and special interest committees concluded that it was a case of 'Same mission. New structure. New leaders. An international funding base. Strategic alliances. All of this adds up to a new beginning.'

This collection of documents should provide a valuable source of study as the movement moves on. As Billy Graham notes in his Foreword, when the first Lausanne Congress was held, 'none of us could have predicted its full impact. However, not only did it prove to be an immediate catalyst for evangelism throughout the world, but God has continued to bless and expand its vision in a variety of ways. I pray that the study of these statements will lift our vision and lead each of us to a new commitment to the task of world evangelization.'

Kierkegaard  
by Peter Vardy  
and

## **KEIRKEGAARD AND THE CRISIS OF FAITH**

by George Pattison  
SPCK, 1997, 145 pages, paperback

reviewed by Dr Greg Restall Department of Philosophy, Macquarie University, NSW

Soren Kierkegaard is an intriguing figure in the history of philosophy. Like Nietzsche, people have taken up his cause in the modern era in a new way, after a period of comparative obscurity. In his time he was primarily a **critic** and not a theorist developing a systematic philosophy or theology. For this reason, he, like Nietzsche, is believed to have something important to say to us in our pluralist, technocratic, postmodern society. That this is so is demonstrated in two different ways in two very different books on Kierkegaard.

Peter Vardy's *Kierkegaard*, is another helpful addition to the series, Fount Christian Thinkers (Fount, 1996, 101 pages, paperback £4.99). Vardy's book gives a short, clear

introduction to the major lines of Kierkegaard's thought and its development. He skilfully guides the reader through the major lines of Kierkegaard's thought by explaining Kierkegaard's account of the 'stages on life's way' – the Aesthetic Stage, the Ethical Stage, and the Religious Stage. These stages describe not only Kierkegaard's own life, from searching for Beauty, then for Goodness, and finally a relationship of faith with God; but also, at least according to Kierkegaard, this path describes the journey of every 'knight of faith'. It is the path of any who would have faith in God in this world in which faith is alien. Vardy sensitively covers this matter and gives a helpful account of how this story is to be found in Kierkegaard's works. (This is not a simple matter, as some of Kierkegaard's writings are pseudonymous, and it is by no means clear whether Kierkegaard himself intended everything written under these names to equally stand for his own commitments.)

George Pattison's book *Kierkegaard and the Crisis of Faith* (SPCK, 1997, 145 pages, paperback £9.99) is a very different book from Vardy's. Pattison approaches Kierkegaard's works by topic. The book covers his work not by historical development, but by examining the things Kierkegaard has to say about different facets of our world. The guiding idea is expounded in the first chapter, which bears the name of the book 'Kierkegaard and the Crisis of Faith'. For Pattison, Kierkegaard speaks volumes to us in the modern age, where faith is in question, where true Christianity is not widely known or seen, and in which the life of the Christian is truly characterized by crisis. For Kierkegaard, to be a Christian involves a crisis, a clash with the world and within the self. In Kierkegaard's time, this clash involves the dominant school of thought of the state Church in Denmark – Hegelian philosophy. For Pattison, the clash is different. It involves secularism, and the untenability of a naive realism in faith. The truly faithful must sail alone, holding to a faith in God, not construed in a naive realist way, but in a post-realist, post-secular, 'independent' way.

The rest of the book covers different aspects of Kierkegaard's thought in such a way as to make clear the applications to our age and our condition. Pattison skilfully covers issues in politics and society, philosophy, science and art.

These books complement one another nicely. Vardy's book does not spend much time examining the implications of Kierkegaard's thought for the modern world. For that, you must use Pattison's book. But equally, Pattison's book does not give a succinct overview of Kierkegaard's thought in its own context. For that, Vardy's book is helpful. Together, these books give the reader a balanced overview of Kierkegaard's thought and its application to the modern world.