

Theme:
European Theology in World Perspective

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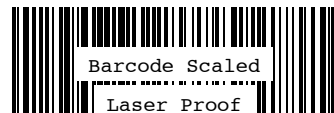
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European Theology in World Perspective

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Editorial

In August 2002, the WEA Theological Commission, publishers of this journal, and the Fellowship of European Evangelical Theologians (FEET) held a joint conference at Woelmersen, Germany, on the theme 'European Theology in World Perspective.' It was an opportunity for dialogue about some of the outcomes of the outstanding work of European missionaries and churches over two centuries in extending the Christian faith to Africa, Asia and Central and South America, areas which are now the centre of gravity of Christianity, rather than the West.

In this issue we are pleased to publish a number of the conference papers. We commence with the keynote address of the Theological Commission chair, Dr Rolf Hille, which provided an overview of the legacy of European theology. This is followed by a fascinating study of the impact of 'European denominational plurality' in the areas to which missionaries and other representatives and members of the churches found themselves, with a special focus on the Caribbean, the homeland of the author, Dr Dieumeme Noelliste.

The nature of European theology and its reception in Latin America is the topic of the next paper. In this, Dr Valdir Steuernagel of Brazil shows how this great intellectual tradition has been contextualised for a very different setting (sometimes with great difficulty); he calls for a 'theology that comes out of the life of the community of faith and 'would take into account the moment in

which we live as well as the history we have experienced, a theology that hears the joys and the screams of our day but is willing to submit to the Word of God.' (A sample of Dr Steuernagel's thinking was published in our last issue).

Dr Vinoth Ramachandra of Sri Lanka, speaking as both scientist and theologian, issues a plea for Christian philosophers and theologians to deal with the urgent question of what it means to be human. He points out that 'the real theological challenges are being faced by our children and by Christians working in secular occupations' and so asks, 'Is it too late to envision a theological fraternity that encompasses such folk and their work?'

Our final paper by Terrance Tieson of Canada does not come from the TC/FEET conference. However, given our theme and the current global socio-political context, it is appropriate that his study of God's work of grace in a multi-religious environment appears here. Careful reflection on the themes covered in this collection of papers should contribute to a far better understanding of the church's life and mission in the world.

This issue is completed with a greater number of pages than normal given to reviews, including one covering the rapidly growing field of computer software.

David Parker, Editor

European Theology in World Perspective

Rolf Hille

Key words: Culture, philosophy, science, St Paul, contextualization, humanism, Christendom, Reformation, democracy, technology, re-evangelising

It is my privilege and honour to welcome you here in Europe, this old continent of many complex traditions, to a first joint conference between the Fellowship of European Evangelical Theologians (FEET) and the Theological Commission (TC) of the World Evangelical Alliance (WEA). We are dealing with the general theme: 'European Theology in World Perspective'. Let me make a few remarks introducing this issue of Europe in the context of a globalized world today.

1. What is Europe actually?

Europe is a crazy continent among the other continents of the world. If

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we take a rough look at a world map, we can easily make out the continents of North and South America, Asia, Africa, and Australia. But, what is Europe? It is just an appendix of the Asia land mass. You cannot say that this is a continent of its own. But, what is meant by Europe? Europe is not a geographical unit which can be separated from other continents in the same way as, for instance, the Americas. But, Europe is an historic place with a very specific tradition of ideas and culture.

2. Europe is built on three hills

But, what does it mean to speak of Europe as a cultural entity? The first president of the Federal Republic of Germany after World War II, Theodor Heuss, once mentioned that Europe was built on three hills. The first is the Acropolis in Athens, which stands for the strong Greek and Hellenistic emphasis on science and philosophy. The Acropolis is the symbol for human reflection about God, the world, and, last but not

least, humankind itself. Ancient Greek tradition is the source of political vision, of scientific experience, and philosophical reflection. The second hill which makes up Europe's origins is the Capitol in Rome. The Roman Empire stood for the idea of the courage in the ancient known world around the Mediterranean, symbolizing political power, judicial structures, and technological advancement. The power question is one of the important origins of Europe's self-understanding and self-esteem. The Capitol, in the so-called 'Eternal Rome', represents the strong will of the European nations to rule and to exercise power in the world horizon. The third hill upon which Europe is built is Calvary, which means the Jewish-Christian tradition, the understanding of the one God who offered his Son to die for our sins.

3. Christ's special foreknowledge and interest concerning Europe

According to my reading of the Scriptures, it is quite significant that the Roman citizen and Jewish scholar Saul of Tarsus became, by God's grace, the most important missionary in church history, an apostle empowered by the Holy Spirit. It was this very Saul, or Paul, who got a special call from Christ himself to leave Asia Minor and turn to Europe. When we read this passage in the New Testament Scriptures, Acts 16, this was a traumatic turn in the course of all of history because, about six hundred years after Christ, the Islamic conquerors overran Asia

Minor, Palestine, Syria, and North Africa, which were already Christianized areas with churches of strong and lengthy traditions. If Paul had concentrated his missionary work, continuing in Asia Minor as was his objective, then churches probably would not have come into existence in Europe. Therefore, Christ called the missionaries from Asia to Europe to begin a very specific history of the church that was of predominant importance up to the 16th century. So, I think that in this Macedonian call to Paul, 'Come over and help us!', was the call of Christ to start a Christian church and tradition beyond the old and primary regions of early apostolic Christianity.

4. European theology represents the first contextualization of the Gospel

When we reflect on this illustration of the three hills on which Europe was erected, the Graeco-Roman traditions on the one hand, and the Jewish-Christian tradition on the other hand, this guides us in our understanding of European church history and the history of theology to two different dimensions. First and foremost, the step from the Semitic background to the Hellenistic world was the first and most important contextualization of the gospel throughout history. The spirit of Greek philosophy deeply shaped theological reflection and made possible this form of theology as we know it. Using the instruments of philosophical terms and notions, the first and elementary Christian dog-

mas were created as the reflected understanding of biblical teaching. Christology and Trinitarian theology were formed by biblical testimony, on the one hand, and by philosophical reflection, on the other hand. These very crucial dogmas are, in substance, the bond of unity between all Christian church traditions. Of course, even Evangelicals relate and refer to these dogmas when they claim for their theology that they just want to obey and continue with the historical Christian faith. What Christian theology and dogma is all about can be seen in this elementary process of theological thinking and in the decisions of the first ecumenical Christian councils. I think the question of whether or not this reflection of the Church Fathers and apologetes was adequate biblical thinking is crucial.¹

5. European theology shaped Christian theologizing generally and formed its identity

Now let us turn to the second dimension. When we refer to the very characteristics of European theology, we have to realize that the foundation of early dogma led to a strong identity of Christianity throughout the centuries. What we call the Christian Occident (Western Christianity) as a development out of the first ecumenical councils, for one millennium from about the 5th to the 16th cen-

tury, is a continuity that makes Europe what is still today—not just a geographical area, but a cultural entity. After the Fall of the Western Roman Empire with the Latin language, there was no longer political unity. But in the fifth century the Frankish king Clodwig conquered the tribes of the Alemans and the Gauls on the western bank of the Rhine River, creating the political and historic centre of Europe. (Woelmersen, the site of our conference, is located in what was the nucleus of Europe's future at that time.) Three hundred years later, there was a one-time event in the history of Europe, when Charlemagne, the powerful Frankish king, after his coronation by the Pope in the year 800, created a European kingdom in modelled succession to the Roman Empire. However, after his death, there were only diadogues and powers that divided up this kingdom.

Therefore, throughout its history, the unity of Europe was not the result of a political power, but the strength of a Christian and moral framework that bound together the different European tribes, kings, dukes, and other leaders. They had a common language, a *lingua franca*, with a Latin tradition, and all scholars in Europe spoke Latin until at least the 18th century. One could transfer from one university to another, for instance, from Italy to France, England, or Germany. There was a good cultural exchange and a cultural coherence in terms of architecture, models of society, and, most important of all, the theological systems that bound the intellectual elite into a

¹ In another paper, 'A Patristic viewpoint on European Christianity in world perspective', Dr Thomas Oden will broaden our cultural view of the Early Church (see our next issue for this paper).

unity. Of course, we have to recognize that this European identity of Christendom was not identical to the Christian understanding of ecclesiology as we find it in the New Testament. It was a unity which was mainly shaped by the Old Testament idea of theocracy, represented by the Pope in Rome. But, on the other hand, this was an historical model of Christian self-consciousness throughout a period of more than one thousand years and, because of this, Europe was regarded as the Christian Occident (Christian West), or, as a Christian continent.

Furthermore, keeping these two dimensions or aspects together, the first contextualization of the gospel into the Greek and Roman Hellenistic world and this continuous identity of the Christian West that claimed to be a Christian world, is the challenge of European theology. How do we evaluate this first and early contextualization and the development of this fundamental Christian identity which arose in Europe? This describes the problem posed to us by European church history until the 16th century.

6. Western (Occidental) Christendom and European extensions since the 16th century

It probably makes sense to distinguish on the one hand the Christian West as a special and fundamental millennium in church history, and on the other hand, what we call Europe. The watershed is the 16th century when this Christian Occident expanded geographically with its

colonies to Latin America, Africa, and Asia. The explorers crossed the oceans and widened the experience of the Europeans into a world perspective. It was the intention of the European Latin Church, not only to conquer and colonize, but also to christianize all peoples, even unto the ends of the earth. Therefore, the difference between the Christian Occident at the end of the Medieval millennium and what has been called Europe even until today is the difference between the very clearly defined cultural unity of the European continent and the cultural expansion of this continent in world perspective. Moreover, throughout the world, even up to today in this global age, we find the deep traces of Europe on all continents, last, not least, in the so-called New World of North America which became, in a very special way, the second and different European model of European history. Thus, we can say that the geographical and cultural expansion of Europe was the first deep change in Europe in the 16th century.

7. The Reformation of the 16th century and secularism as a cultural shift outcome of its political consequences

The other dramatic change or shift was, of course, the Reformation of the 16th century. We as Christians and as Evangelicals strongly believe that the Reformation was an urgent necessity, rediscovering the original gospel of Jesus Christ through a fresh understanding of grace, justification, and the redeeming and atoning work of Christ and its meaning

for the individual. What the Christian church regained in a significant and unique revival movement that provoked and shook Europe as a whole was a gift of God. Yet, in this very event of the Reformation, we have already the origin of the modern secular world, not in terms of Reformation theology, but as the consequences of the political forces at work during this period.

As I mentioned before, it was the Christian West, the political and, most importantly, the cultural influence of the Roman Catholic Church, which was a stronghold of European unity, yet the basis of this unity was the Christian faith as the framework for all forms of European culture and society. However, with the Reformation of the 16th century, this unity was broken. Faith was no longer the bond of unity, but the reason for terrible religious wars. In the Thirty Years' War, nearly one-half of the German population died. It was the same in other European countries. After this war, people were asking themselves if this was the result of religious beliefs, if there was not the need for tolerance, and if there were not another basis and foundation other than religious belief. Emerging from this experience, in the 17th and mainly 18th centuries, the European intellectual elite became more and more sceptical of Christian theological traditions. It was a blend of secularism, rationalism (mainly in France) and empirical research (mainly in England). The result of this development was the conviction that the universal bond of all human beings is not any form of religious faith, but

pure reason as Immanuel Kant put it. If there is any rational approach which seems to be self-evident, also in religion, it is religion according to pure reason, which is no longer the specific biblical understanding of the revelation of the triune God. Therefore, the political results of the Reformation Age had in themselves the power to stimulate modern secularism. This is the tragedy of the European Reformation.

8. Westerners cherish democracy and the benefits of technology

In coming to the question of European secularization and secularism, we meet another deeply-rooted dilemma we have all inherited from European history and culture. Insofar as we are Westerners today, we all cherish on the one hand the fruits of modern secular self-understanding and its dynamics. We all embrace political democracy, which is rooted in the European Enlightenment with its understanding of human rights and the civil liberties of the freedom to assemble, the freedom of the press, religious freedom, and all the other aspects of freedom which we all highly welcome. The development of modern democracy is the outcome of the French and the American revolutions. Therefore, the European tradition continues on, straight ahead from the Capitol in Rome to the Capitol in Washington, DC as the world's superpower in our day. Furthermore, on the other hand, we all cherish modern science as the continuation of early Greek thinking and its results in modern

technology, industry, and all the personal and public benefits we reap from this development.

Therefore the two hills of the Acropolis and the Capitol on which Europe was built are still vivid and embraced, not only by Westerners, but are also highly-regarded and wholeheartedly desired by the peoples of the so-called Third World. This is the triumph of modern European predominance. I reiterate, this is not mainly a political power, but the stronghold of cultural and philosophical ideas. It is the outcome of modern revolution, and since 1989, we know for sure that this is the victory of the Hegelian understanding of historical revolution over the socialist, Marxist ideology. The French Revolution of the bourgeois in 1789, so warmly welcomed by Hegel, has triumphed over the Leninist Revolution of 1917.

9. What are the perspectives for Christianity in Europe?

So, we can say that the two hills of the Acropolis and the Capitol have been highly recognized. But, what about the third hill which was mingled for more than 1000 years with the pagan, Hellenistic and Roman tradition. Has the influence of Calvary been lost in Europe? Has it been overruled by modern secularism? Is there no longer a Christian message and perspective that Europe has to give to the world? The idea of human rights has its origin not in the Enlightenment alone, but it is rooted in the biblical teaching of the *imago dei*. There are no human rights without their foundation in Christian-shaped

metaphysics. Moreover, it is also one outcome of the biblical secularization of the created world by its Creator. The sun, moon, and stars are not gods, but only lamps in the sky to regulate daytime and night. Therefore, you cannot and will not have a Europe built on two hills only—without the Christian one. What will, for Heaven's sake, Europe be without its Christian heritage?²

10. Nominal Christianity and the challenge of re-evangelization

Let me just go one step further in attempting to analyse the current European situation under the conditions I described before. The outcome of European secularism is, to a great extent, nominal Christianity. We are experiencing in Europe today how the Christian churches have lost a lot of their early vital power in culture and society, and that there is only a small remainder of nominal Christianity. The good side of this insight is that it points out the urgent need for re-evangelizing the peoples of Europe. We have experienced Christianization, but we need evangelization. Today, in a free society, there are tremendous chances for evangelistic efforts—last but not least in Europe's mainline churches. But, as Protestants, we should be aware that the impetus for re-evangelizing

² Later in our conference, Dr Vinoth Ramachandra will discuss the question of modern secularism and I will try to outline this issue in my own presentation during this conference, 'The theological profile of the revival movement and its relation to the Enlightenment.' *Editor's note:* See elsewhere in this issue for Dr Ramachandra's paper.

Europe came from Pope John Paul II. There is strong moral and spiritual input from the Roman Catholic Church in western and central Europe. Moreover, there is the mighty impact and dominance of the national Orthodox churches in eastern Europe. Therefore, I have to raise the question whether or not the more liberal Protestant churches will be marginalized in the upcoming European Union, at least, in the long run.

11. Missions on six continents and mutual learning

Therefore, it is very necessary to speak of missions on six continents. In the 19th century when, from so-called Christian Europe and North America, Protestant Evangelical missionaries went mainly to Africa, Asia, and, later on, also to Latin America, we, by God's grace, experienced a strong movement of church growth on these continents. There has been a shift of Christianity from Europe and North America to the so-called Third World, a brand-new development, in terms of the long church history of now about 2000 years. This is the foundation for the very relevant partnership between the old churches and the so-called young churches, and there should be mutual teaching and learning. I think there is a great hope that the European churches will learn from the vitality of many growing, young churches around the world. On the other hand, the countries of Africa, Asia, and Latin America, while reaping the benefits of the idea of universities, intellectual and technological knowledge from Europe

and North America, are also impacted with secularism. The European churches are having now an intense encounter with modern thinking and with the pitfalls of secularism. To some extent, we have experienced and, as a result, reflected on the challenge of secularization and how to overcome it. Perhaps this can be one of the insights that we as Europeans can give to the global church.

12. Exchanges and relationships

So, let me conclude this brief introduction to our main theme: by stating that, confronted by the situation of globalization, we need the awareness of the universal church of Christ, and my prayer is that, during this conference, we will have a very fruitful interchange as evangelical theologians bearing high responsibilities for the evangelical movement worldwide. Let us take steps to do networking in order to share our experiences and spiritual vision to promote the kingdom of God in our time. My objective for this joint conference is twofold: first, *I expect an immediate exchange of theological reflection* and spiritual insights and, probably, as one result, a *stronger relationship* between the two bodies, the Theological Commission (TC) and the FEET, on a structurally-organized level. So, let us pray for this conference that God may guide us, bless us, and make our efforts together fruitful for his people, though we are weak, to build his kingdom by his grace.

The Relevance and Effects of European Academic Theology on Theological Education in the Third World

Valdir Steuernagel

Keywords: Theological education, conversions, cultural context, church growth, evangelism, missions, pragmatism, Liberation Theology, pedagogy, pentecostalism

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The table and the respective sitting arrangements

The table can be round but who sits where is usually well established. At least it works like that in our home where we have a round table and everyone knows who sits where. That should be respected. There is also a table in terms of theological education. But who sits where has been changing. The table has become bigger, that is true. In the past, European and North American academic theology had a fixed and predominant place at the table.

It is not difficult to reach that conclusion and I am talking as a person coming from a historic church. The theological faculties and the seminaries we have in Brazil were built according to the possibilities of a for-

eign budget and even a foreign architecture. The library received foreign books and theology was taught by foreign people in a foreign language or with a strong foreign accent. I remember being a first year theological student, trying hard to take notes of a 'Vorlesung' in the German language. Impossible! There I was waiting for the verb to come in order to start writing the sentence in Portuguese, where the verb comes first. But when the verb came, in German, the sentence was finished; a new one was started and I was lost. Even worse. The lecture was in Systematic Theology. Systematic Theology taught in German and with notes taken in Portuguese do we get the picture?

But I wanted to get a place at the table. In order to do that I had to become familiar with the rules of the game—learn the language and try to read the books; learn how to do adequate research and capture the logic of the theology that was taught; become familiar with the way of thinking and arguing—theology was, after all, a science, and I had to become acquainted with it. I even got a scholarship for my graduate studies at a school abroad.

I think I am proud of my theological education. But I have to recognize that some of the things brought to the table were unusual and even strange. Some of it was good food. It brought nourishment and opened the appetite of my mind and soul. But some of the food was strange. It had a strange taste and produced some side effects in the digestive process. But you already know all of

that. You know how much was produced and what was produced. And you also know what are the effects of exporting theology—be it at the level of theological faculties, denominational seminaries or faith Bible Schools—be it at the level of research—meaning books, or content—meaning local theology, curriculum and syllabus, or teaching qualifications—meaning degrees—or budget arrangements—meaning money.

The situation has changed. There are many books in our local languages today. Some of them were even written by people with a native accent. There are many graduates around here and they are eager to teach. This comes at a time when you in the North do not have the same number of people available any more. And while we do not necessarily have the money to do theological education as you taught us—or as we copied from you, you also don't have the same financial resources for theological education any more.

The theological school I went to does not have any lectures in German any more. And many of the books in their library are in Portuguese and Spanish. But they have been struggling with the model that was inherited. After all, lengthy, full-time theological studies are very expensive. The voices coming from the headquarters of our Lutheran Church are saying that they can no longer continue to pay the total cost of that education. Therefore, the school had to learn how to raise money and the students have also to

pay for their studies or to get outside support for it. The curriculum was adapted in order to make the study program shorter and there is an attempt to make theological study also an evening program in order to allow people to work during the day.

At the Centro de Pastoral e Missão, which is my home, we started a theological program ten years ago. It was to be (urban) mission oriented and have a ministerial outlook. There would be no housing for the students—they would be living in the city. The program would run in the evening and the students were expected to work during the day. The whole program would be built around modules, allowing us to bring people—mostly pastors—for a week of teaching and exposing our students to many different experiences, ministries and approaches. Henceforth, we would be more practical and ministerial. We knew we would be less academic.

We wanted, by deliberate purpose, to offer something different from a 'housing-seminary' model. Frankly speaking, we did not have the money to pursue the classical model. However, we saw students coming, the centre growing and we are happy with our first graduates. However, only the future will tell us about the relevance and the meaningfulness of what we brought to the table.

How to look at what you brought us

We are thankful for what you, from the West, brought to us and shared with us. It was important and it was necessary. You brought to us what

you had and the very nature of the gospel demanded that you should give to us what you too had received. We received it and then tried to copy what you had brought to us without asking many questions and without reflecting much upon it.

In the last decades of the last century some of us were very harsh in analysing the content of what you brought and the way you brought things to us. It was a tense time, I know. And all that produced in you some kind of paralysis. But it was also a rich and helpful time for us and for you. It demanded that you look at what you were bringing to us. It required us to think about what we were receiving and also to ask why and how we were receiving it. I will refer to that a little later. Here I just want to recognize that by using narrow tools of interpretation—some just used the 'oppressor vis-a-vis oppressed' tool—no justice was done, neither to you, nor to ourselves. Some, around here, even embarked in a delusion about what was to come and about what our societies would experience ... a radical, necessary and positive change. As we know now, that change did not come.

To acknowledge the historical mistakes that were done, from here and from there, should push us into a learning path, whereby we could learn about our task and about our journey together. Both of us need that examination in order to understand better our vocation as well as our common journey as disciples of the Lord. Would you agree with me if I try to summarize some of the pre-

suppositions you brought to us when you came down to the South and brought with you your package of theological education? We understood that you were telling us:

- Christian faith had to be understood in Cartesian categories;
- Christian faith is best studied in an academic environment;
- the way it is studied is similar to the scientific methods by which other subjects are studied;
- evidence and consistency are shown through bibliographical research and references;
- it is possible to study theology objectively, without being a personal believer;
- the study of theology and the exercise of ministry should be kept separate;
- in order to become knowledgeable, the academic ladder must be climbed;
- to study theology meant, normally, to become part of the professional clergy.

We came to your table and must recognize that your presuppositions became very much ours too. After all, we wanted to sit at the table. We wanted to look like you. Today, however, we could say that neither of us did a good job of deeply re-examining what we were doing. But this we say today.

In the South, and referring more specifically to Latin America, we experienced a double and contradictory phenomena. On the one hand we saw an explosion taking place in theological programs. The number of seminaries multiplied quickly and

energetically. On the other hand, however, this was an area where very little was achieved in getting our act together and really experimenting with contextual models of theological education. Multiplying seminaries basically meant that we had more of the same. Among us theological education is very much an untouched frontier—an area where we are doing business as usual within the outlines of the old models and the old curriculum. Most of them are out of touch with the life of the church and the challenges of the society.

As you will know, the church in the South has been growing a lot and has been moving into very different and new areas. This church knows how to grow—how to start new churches and have them expand. This church knows how to enter different levels and areas of society in a very creative way. This church knows how to challenge people to respond to the missionary calling and is moving fast into the worldwide missionary community. But this church has not done well in terms of doing theology or shaping theological education. We think, unfortunately, that to do theology and spend a lot of time, energy and resources in establishing theological programs is not very relevant. Therefore, we became pragmatic and repeated the old models which include some of those you taught us quite some time ago. While I recognize and celebrate some of the new attempts made at this area, I am afraid to say that there is no major movement that calls for significant changes. This is a pity because we need it.

Clothes made of paper

This is a hard comment, I know, but for better or for worse, it mirrors well what we saw happening around us. 'Liberation theology', it was said, 'opted for the poor, but the poor opted for the Pentecostal church.' Liberation theology, as we know, was born out of a right and very important concern. The church, it was said, was too much at home in the palaces and mansions of the rich and powerful. Now it was time for a conversion—a conversion to the poor. Quite a movement in that direction took place. The Base Ecclesial Communities movement and Liberation Theology expressed, in theory and in praxis, that the decision was serious and was taken up fully.

But Liberation Theology was also a sign of despair—the kind of despair that comes from experiencing and seeing too much injustice, oppression and poverty. It was a scream of despair that looked around to see if there were any signs of hope written on the walls of history.

Today we know some of the chapters of the rest of the story. The writings of the wall, while offering a good picture of reality, offered an illusory solution. And this was painful. The changes that were dreamed about did not come. The hopes that were supposed to overcome despair vanished from the horizon and we were overcome by a long silence. A sad silence. Liberation Theology went

into some kind of a disarray¹. The Basic Ecclesial Communities, for different reasons, experienced a deep existential crisis and had difficulties in keeping up enough steam to go on. And another long and sad silence took place. Not because all of us believed in the same expected changes, but because there would be no major changes. The structures would continue to be corrupt, injustice would continue to prevail, the poor would continue to be poor and the disparities between the rich and the poor would not diminish.

But the churches would be open and in business. People, in fact, crossed the doors of churches—significantly, evangelical churches, and mostly Pentecostal and Neo-pentecostal churches. Should this not be a sign of hope? An expectation of change?

In terms of theological education, Liberation Theology made some significant advances. In the first place, it questioned the package coming from the North. It said we cannot simply copy what had been sent to

¹ In the context where I come from, within the historic protestant churches, Liberation Theology was very much a discourse in the realm of theological education. It had many difficulties in reaching the level of the communities. Once the Berlin wall was down and the elections in Nicaragua were lost, as happened in 1989, the fervour for revolutionary change vanished and the discourse lost its centre. It is very interesting to see how the original strong political and social emphasis has been moving in two different directions. On the one hand there is a movement toward macro-ecumenism, asking for intra-religious encounters, and into some ecological concerns. There the claim is for a kind of 'alliance for life'. On the other hand, there is an inward movement, that aims at conquering the political power within institutional churches as well as trying to work on a liturgical expression that cannot deny a high liturgical flavour.

us. We needed to develop something different—something that would be consistent with the theological proposal that was contextually elaborated. After all, theology should be done with the eyes fixed on the context and reality. Theology should not be articulated in abstract but in historical terms. Theology should not simply speak the language of philosophy but of social sciences—as expressed in dialectic materialism—because that would offer a more coherent and consistent mediation between the word of the gospel and our environment of poverty, injustice and oppression. Furthermore, we would need a new pedagogy in order better to understand and convey what God was demanding from us today and what we, as the church, should be proposing and how we should be involved in our context. One more step should be taken, according to some liberation theologians. There should be a clear option for a revolutionary utopia and at this point the Marxist proposal enchanted many and represented an attractive alternative model.

Looking back we must say that it was an exciting time. But it was also an ideological time. If someone would not embrace the package he or she would be considered as someone ‘from the other side’. Here we faced not only another way of doing theology but a closed view of reality and of change that needed to be implemented. Once the continental and international scenario changed, that proposal also disappeared. It was a radical change into silence, depression and disarray.

But something very difficult remained: a pedagogy of conflict that made it quite difficult to work in a democratic environment and according to the democratic rules. That pedagogy did not form people for belonging to an open society, or for building Christian communities. Those who were formed in that context usually only know how to see or create conflict. It was a fabric of antithesis which never reaches a synthesis.

Liberation Theology, among us, disappeared quite quickly from the horizon of theological education. While continuing here and there the excitement was gone and its captivating effect had vanished. There was a time when it would be quite difficult to write a paper without mentioning Liberation Theology. Today it is difficult to know what to do with it—sometimes we do not even know how to refer to it at all. It is hard to capture the adrenaline of the younger generation with it. The bitter taste of injustice and poverty, however, remains, but without the dream that changes were around the corner. Worse than that, nothing was put in its place. Only the sad silence remained. Or should the growth of the evangelical church be a sign of hope?

What about today’s clothes?

It is true that the poor opted for the Pentecostal church. In Brazil this is quite evident. The last official census gave us the following numbers: from 1991 to 2000, the evangelical church grew 70.7%, going from 9.1% to 15.5% of the population

and reaching 26 million people today.² More than 12 million of those 26 million are people belong to only three Pentecostal churches.³ This is the case not only in Brazil, but you can find it in bigger and smaller numbers in many places in Latin America. The pattern is common throughout the continent: the Catholic church is decreasing and the evangelical church is growing. Among the evangelicals, the Pentecostal and the Neo-pentecostal churches are growing the most. Furthermore, the church is obviously not only growing in numbers, but also in influence, in power, in social appearance and in visibility.⁴

I saw the church growing throughout most of my life. In my younger years the evangelical church was small and almost hidden, but today it is big and is almost everywhere. To see that growth and to see it happening at almost every level of soci-

ety was beautiful. Soccer players became Christians and *Atletas de Cristo* (Athletes of Christ) was established. Artists became interested in the gospel and became Christians—a movement started among them. Brazilians like music and a whole world of Christian musical experiences and adventures came about. And I could go on: Christian businessmen, Christian politicians, Christian medical people, Praying women and Spiritual warfare specialists.

In a very Brazilian way you saw a lot of creativity, initiative and dynamism, especially in the rapidly growing urban environment. At the same time you saw a lot of division and separatism. It does not take much to start something new, be it for a good or a bad reason. According to the ISER statistics, every working day you have a new church being registered in Rio de Janeiro.⁵

It should also be noted that this environment of growth is a very open one. We receive ideas, suggestions and theories very easily, especially if they are pragmatic, can be easily tested and produce quick results. We like to experiment and to mix things. We don't like to say 'no' but integrate things in our own way. This is why various expressions of syncretism find such a fertile soil among us. Therefore, the 'prosperity gospel' and the school of spiritual warfare were welcomed and found leaders who were eager to experi-

² *Censo 2000. Especial A 1*. Published by *Folha de São Paulo*, May 9, 2002.

³ The Census has shown some of the following numbers: 8.1 (in millions) belong to the Assembléia de Deus. 2.3 belong to the Congregação Cristã do Brasil and 2.0 to the Universal do Reino de Deus. 3.0 would be Baptist and 1.1 would be Lutherans. Published in *Folha de São Paulo, Cotidiano—C 1m* May 13, 2002

⁴ Some of the available numbers show that clearly. In 1982 evangelical politicians in the National Congress numbered 12. In 1998 there were 51. In 1995 there was only one religious program on the TV while there were 90 in 2001. Two million jobs (directly and indirectly) are offered by the evangelical industry today. There are around 1000 Christian artists and bands. There are 96 recording brands and 5 new CD's are coming out every month. In terms of education there are 934 protestant institutions that receive 734,000 students today. These numbers were published by the national magazine called *Veja* (July, 3, 2002), 88-95.

⁵ Ruben Cesar Fernandes, *Censo Institucional Evangélico 1992* (Rio de Janeiro: Núcleo de Pesquisa, 1992).

ment with those theories and assumptions. Among us they were combined very well together. Today, in fact, it is very hard to separate the growth of the church from the announcement of prosperity and from a quasi-dualist view of reality in terms of God and the demons.⁶

This is not the place to analyse those two 'world view' expressions, but I just want to remark that they are very damaging to us. First, to talk about the mandate of prosperity in an environment of poverty does violence to the gospel as well as to people and their human dignity. Second, to interpret life according to the laws and demands of fighting spirits is very common among us. By falling into the temptation to read and interpret the Christian faith as well as reality, almost exclusively, in that way, you are not changing people or culture, but only becoming another syncretistic expression of the Christian faith and forcing people to continue to live a life of imprisonment.

There are many ways in which this colourful and multifaceted experience can be analysed. However, in spite of these analyses, and in spite of our many mistakes, the fact that people are coming to know the Lord, having their lives changed through the gospel and becoming real human beings is worthy of recognition and celebration. And while we celebrate all of that, we also need to examine carefully what is happening and raise the concerns that we see.

I would like to share with you just four of them:

1. By growing fast, by looking for a productive methodology and being willing to experiment with new theories as long as they work, we are bringing big shadows over the credibility of the gospel and are producing too many victims in the name of the Lord. People who had too many things promised to them while continuing to face the struggles of life tend to become disillusioned with the church and with the gospel. Some early data seem to show that in those same areas where the church has been growing most, the number of people who declare themselves non-believers is also growing. How many of them have passed through our churches?

2. We tend to behave like those people who want to grow as much and as fast as possible without being concerned for the consequences. With that attitude we are not being responsible for the new generation. We need not only a big church, we also need a healthy church and a church for our children.

3. Historically speaking the evangelical churches accumulated a significant capital of credibility. I am afraid we are spending that capital very fast. When pastors are seen as merchants, when Christian leaders are seen as 'smart people' who want to prosper, when well known Christian figures become lavish and materially ostentatious, when well known figures in the society become Christians and are immediately promoted to become interpreters and spokespersons for that faith, when

⁶ I say 'today', because historic Pentecostalism cannot be understood by those categories

evangelical politicians are no different from other politicians and when churches are seen as common businesses and the IRS is running after them with a very suspicious attitude, then that capital of credibility is not likely to last long.

4. When David Stoll wrote his book *Is Latin America Turning Protestant?*⁷ he said that our society would change with time. The values of the gospel would start to permeate society and we would feel the ethical influence of the Christian faith in our traditionally corrupted societies.⁸ However this change is taking a very long time to come. Let me go back to the last official census in Brazil. That census showed that the evangelical church is growing very strongly, as we have already seen. However, the census also showed that the number of poor people is increasing and that the disparity between rich and poor is not diminishing. The level of inequality is the same yesterday and today. But the church is growing and 26 million are saying they are evangelical. That data forces us to ask the question about the gospel we are preaching and the church we are building.

There is homework to be done

All the growth that the church has

experienced has not produced much in terms of the process of doing theology or of theological education. All our creativity and sense of initiative has not been seen at the level of theological education. In fact, much of the growth of the church has not passed the doors of our seminaries.

Classical Pentecostalism did not stress theological education. However when it experienced growth and sophistication and came to develop its theological education, it copied the old and imported models, generally inspired by the North American experience.⁹ The more recent Neopentecostal churches do not stress education either. There the tendency is to practise what works. Marketing and salesmanship are more important than a theological degree and, in some cases, more important than the classical foundations of theology.

Therefore, while the church has done well in terms of growth and has increased its level of social and political influence and even of missionary outreach, it has not done well in producing a theology that would solidify that growth, or in preparing leaders for the church of today and tomorrow. But we need to do it in spite of going against our cultural tendency. As we have already seen, we like to be loose and creative, emotionally responsive and action oriented. We like to be noisy, to party and to be gregarious. To reflect, to study, to look for coherence and consistency and apply a sense of discipline to our

⁷ David Stoll, *Is Latin American Turning Protestant?* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990)

⁸ Antônio Flávio Pierucci, a professor of sociology at the Universidade de São Paulo, argued recently that it would be a mistake to expect from the growth of the Brazilian Protestantism the same consequences, in terms of entrepreneurship, that happened with what he called the puritan Protestantism. Release presented by Marluza Niattos, entitled, 'A debate of the expansion of the evangelical churches'.

⁹ The model that inspired them was mostly the Bible school, and that model, as we know, was born in the fundamentalist era.

thinking and doing is not something we like to do. We also don't like structures very much. Structures are there to be broken and to be replaced. Therefore, we need to stress theological education in spite of ourselves.

All of that just shows us that there is a lot of homework to be done—for the sake of the church, for the sake of the younger generation, for the sake of our own credibility, for the sake of the opportunity God has given to this generation today, and for the sake of the gospel.

I would like to outline some of the shapes and colours of such a theology—a theology that would take into account the moment in which we live as well as the history we have experienced, a theology that hears the joys and the screams of our day but is willing to submit to the Word of God, a theology that comes out of the life of the community of faith, be it the local or the universal one, or be it the community of today or the heritage of the community of yesterday. Therefore, I dream of and search for a theology that can be transformed into theological education and has some of the following marks:

A theology that—

- is built upon and inspired by the Trinity.
- dances around the Word of God.
- likes to hear stories—the stories of yesterday and of today.
- digests well the signs of the times.
- is born out of human relationship—a community and relational theology—a big and warm-hearted theology.
- smiles when life and deed, signs and wonders, knowledge and spirituality walk together.
- asks for bread on the table for everyone and screams when the available bread is not divided well.
- is always in a state of surprise and openness.
- cannot avoid being mission oriented.
- likes to talk about the family and the simple things in life.
- knows that the end is near and that new things are to come, or better, *HE is going to come and to make all things new.*

Learning from Modern European Secularism: A View from the Third World Church

Vinoth Ramachandra

Keywords: Contextualisation, evangelisation, culture, transformation, civilisation, secularisation, missions, discipleship, modernity, rights, ethics, theological formation

‘A jerking pop star was wielding his guitar as the credits rolled, his parodic sexual gyrations so grotesque that it was difficult to see that even the besotted young could find them erotic. Switching off [the TV], Dal-

gliesh looked up at the oil portrait of his maternal grandfather, the Victorian bishop... He had an impulse to say, “This is the music of 1988; these are our heroes; that building on the headland [a nuclear power station] is our architecture and I dare not stop my car to help children home because they’ve been taught with good reason that a strange man might abduct and rape them”¹

This is a scene out of Britain in the 1980s. But it could also describe scores of cities around the world. The inane cult of celebrity is propagated by the global media, and sophisticated hi-tech status symbols are found alongside child abuse and other forms of sexual violence in some of the poorest countries of the world, no less than in the rich. Many

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¹ From P.D. James, *Devices and Desires* (London: Faber and Faber, 1989), pp. 59-60

countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America have experienced social, economic, political and cultural transformations in the past fifty years that took several centuries to unravel in western Europe. While the contours of modernization vary significantly from place to place, there seems to be a long-term convergence of interests and concerns that cuts across cultural and national boundaries.

What has driven this process forward in the first instance is modern science and technology, whose ability to create material wealth and weapons of war is so great that virtually all societies must come to terms with it. The technology of semiconductors or biotechnology is not different for Arabs or Chinese than it is for Westerners, and the need to master it and foster economic growth necessitates the adoption of certain economic and social institutions, like markets and a technocratic bureaucracy. The processes that once defined early modern Europe—the dismantling of traditional sources of authority (especially a professional religious clerisy); the differentiation of state, economy and civil society; the breakup of self-enclosed systems of belief; the creation of knowledge elites; and increasingly volatile patterns of cultural contact under conditions of unequal political and economic power—are now characteristic features of Third World societies.

In the conclusion to his *The Wretched of the Earth* forty years ago, Frantz Fanon thundered, 'Let us decide not to imitate Europe; let us

combine our muscles and our brains in a new direction... Let us not pay tribute to Europe by creating States, institutions, and societies which draw their inspiration from her.'² Ironically, the decolonized, post-communist world is, more than ever, an Europeanized one. Wherever the anti-colonial project has tried to isolate itself completely from European ideas and institutions (as in Cambodia or Burma, to take two examples from recent Asian history), the results have been tragic for its own people. Fanon's Afrocentricity was a mirror-image of the worst forms of colonial Eurocentricity. But 'Europe' is not a simple thing, any more than is 'Africa'; in the last century it has spawned both universalism and relativism, humanism and chauvinist nationalism, tolerance and genocide. There is the Europe of massive cruelty, and also the Europe 'with the capacity to step outside its exclusivity, to question itself, to see itself through the eyes of others'.³ Cultural essentialism is a myth, but it is a myth that dies hard. Which Europe prevails, under current globalising conditions, will have profound consequences for which Africa (and which Asia and which Latin America) emerge in the twenty-first century.

Recovering a Heritage

That postcolonial guilt should have infected large sections of the western European church is understandable.

² Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 1968), pp. 313, 315

³ L. Kolakowski, *Modernity on Endless Trial* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), p. 18

So was the retreat of the older denominational churches in Asia, in the decades immediately following independence from colonial rule, from evangelistic proclamation and a visible socio-political presence in favour of inter-religious collaboration in community-development projects. Many who had become 'Christians' for the sake of entry into mission schools or government jobs in colonial times now reverted to their ancestral faiths. These faiths, in turn, became radically politicised, carriers of the new nationalist sentiment. This is a story that is still unfolding in several Asian states, though the influence of such religious nationalisms is dissipating in the wake of their inability to deliver their early promises.

However, there were also some positive dimensions to Europe's involvement with Asia and Africa—particularly through the Christian missionary movement—that need to be recovered and told to a wider audience. Neither the Church nor the academy can ignore the historical effects and implications of the missionary movement for the post-colonial world. 'It is remarkable,' observes Andrew Walls, 'that the immense Christian presence in Africa is so little a feature of modern African studies, and how much of the scholarly attention devoted to it is concentrated on manifestations that in Western terms seem most exotic.'⁴

⁴ Andrew F. Walls, 'Structural Problems in Mission Studies' in *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark and New York: Orbis, 1996), p. 150

The work of the West African scholar Lamin Sanneh has demonstrated how the Protestant missionary strategy of Bible translation into the vernacular tongues of obscure tribes, based on the belief that God participated in our languages and cultures, served to protect those tribes and languages from suppression by dominant indigenous cultures and to draw them into the mainstream of historical action.⁵ Indeed, contrary to popular anti-Christian propaganda, most missionaries (Roman Catholic and Protestant) have defended and protected native interests against the colonial merchants, mercenaries and administrators. In some of the most significant instances, Sanneh notes, Africans came to their sense of cultural self-awareness through the grammars, dictionaries, and the vernacular literacy of Christian missions. This had momentous social, cultural and political consequences.

Despite its tragically blemished history, time after time the Church has stood out in all cultures as the pioneer in initiatives to provide health care to the poor, bring aid to the imprisoned, the homeless and the dying, and to improve conditions of physical labour. Let us take India, for example. Christians have long been in the forefront of movements for the emancipation of women. From the time of Bartholomew Ziegenbalg (1682-1719) and the early Tranquebar mission onward, European and

⁵ See Lamin Sanneh, *Translating the Message* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1988); *Encountering the West* (London: Marshall Pickering, 1993)

American missionaries gave the lead in education for girls and *dalits* where the colonial government was hesitant to tread for fear of upsetting local sensibilities. Some of the finest medical hospitals and training schools in India owe their existence to Christian missions. In areas such as leprosy, tuberculosis, mental illness and eye diseases, Christian missionary doctors and nurses pioneered new methods of management and surgery. Moreover, the training of women doctors and nurses was first introduced into India by Christian missionaries. For many years the entire nursing profession was filled with Indian Christians, as other communities regarded nursing as menial work and fit only for uneducated girls and widows. It has been estimated that, as late as the beginning of the Second World War, ninety percent of all the nurses in the country, male and female, were Christians, and that about eighty percent of these had been trained in mission hospitals.⁶

The pioneer evangelical missionaries in Asia were often from the lower middle-classes. As the nineteenth century unfolded and early colonialism gave way to the imperial enterprise on the part of the British, they were replaced by university graduates whose identification of Christianity with western civilization and the 'white man's burden' provoked anti-missionary stridency among the national elites. Christian missions in India are routinely dismissed in con-

temporary Indian scholarship as simply an adjunct to colonialism. But, in fact, they were the soil from which both modern Hindu reform movements and Indian nationalism sprang. Most of the Indian intellectual and political leadership of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century emerged from Christian schools and colleges. Gandhi may have claimed to have been nurtured in the spiritual atmosphere of the *Bhagavad Gita*, but it was not from this text that he derived his philosophy of *ahimsa* (non-violence) and *satyagraha* ('truth-force'). One of the deepest intellectual influences on Gandhi was the Sermon on the Mount as mediated through the works of Tolstoy.

There are, of course, several ironies in this story of Christian mission. Firstly, indigenous cultural and religious renewal, the transmission of scientific and secular political ideals from Europe to the rest of the world via Christian schools and universities, and the arrogant posture of cultural superiority conveyed by some of the later European missionaries and administrators—all these served, in the long term, to undermine the plausibility of Christian preaching. For now there were viable alternatives to the Christianity of the West.

Secondly, the Christian attitude to local language and culture (paradoxically denying their intrinsic sacrality while elevating them to vehicles of divine communication) stood in marked contradiction to Muslim and Hindu notions of eternal, divine tongues (Arabic and Sanskrit respectively) and of a religious homeland.

⁶ See C.B. Firth, *An Introduction to Indian Church History* (Madras: CLS, 1961, rev. edn.1976), p. 208

Christian missions in this regard had a powerful *secularizing* thrust. Thirdly, under colonialism the exercise of government was removed from any religious support, something that the citizens of Christendom would not have comprehended. 'Consequently, we could say the Christian missionary movement was the funeral of the great myth of Christendom, because mission took abroad the successful separation of Church and State, of religion and territoriality... The missionary movement proved that religion could be separated from its Western territorial identity and succeed, if not in the hearts of the transmitters, in those of the receivers.'⁷

European Christians are no strangers to such ironies. Indeed, modern secular culture represents the rejection of Christianity on the basis of Christian social and cultural achievements. Henrikus Berkhof noted that 'Secularization is a child of the gospel, but a child who sooner or later rises against his mother'.⁸ The very notion of the 'secular', it has often been pointed out, originated in Christendom. The opposite of 'secular' is not the spiritual or the sacred, but the eternal. It is the temporal order that, while incapable of itself to deliver the kingdom of God, is hallowed by creation and incarnation and called to anticipate God's reign in the ordering of human life. The constellation of social and political ideas that flowered in the fifteenth

and sixteenth centuries, and eventually limited the authority of popes and bishops, were nourished in the womb of Christendom.

Oliver O'Donovan has recently reminded us that the essence of Christendom's legacy to the late-modern world is the legal-constitutional conception of government—namely, of governmental responsibility and accountability to international law. 'The presence of the Spirit in the church shaped the form society took in the West and, especially between the fourteenth and seventeenth centuries, in relation to government. The conception of the church as a mutually responsive organism inspired the conciliar movement in church polity and the parliamentary movement in civil polity.'⁹ Moreover, O'Donovan argues:

The flowering of an idea comes when it assumes a structural role that determines what else may be thought. Its origin is never contemporary with its flowering, nor are its organisational implications apparent to the minds that first conceived it. And so, as historians may point out with perfect justice, the eighteenth century was actually formed far less by the 'Enlightenment' ideas that we associate with it than by the older tradition of religious ideas common to Christendom. Modernity-criticism is less history of ideas than 'genealogy'. It is we who find the Enlightenment ideas particularly important, because it is we who have seen them grow to form a matrix within which everything that is to be thought must be thought.¹⁰

⁷ Sannes, *Encountering the West*, p. 191

⁸ Quoted in Klaas Runia, 'The Challenge of the Modern World to the Church', *European Journal of Theology*, II (1993):2

⁹ Oliver O'Donovan, *The Desire of the Nations: Rediscovering the Roots of Political Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 269

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 272

The genius of Max Weber was to perceive the uniqueness of the modern era and the manner in which it constituted a radical break with the ethos of agrarian societies. The Hegelians (and their Marxist successors) saw the emergence of the modern world as the inherent continuation and culmination of a long and universal development, the manifest destiny of all human societies. However, Weber saw it as a contingent event in the life of a particular religious tradition, which was its necessary (though not sufficient) condition. Weber saw the Puritans—bearers of an inward asceticism and an orderly, symmetrical rationality—as the creators of a radically different kind of culture, one that had generated tremendous cognitive and economic growth but at the cost of the ‘disenchantment of the world’. Weber’s scholarship is the expression of this anguished dilemma: the modern world, spawned by a particular religious tradition, would weave an ‘iron cage’ in which the plausibility of all religious belief would be subverted.

The debate concerning the merits of Weber’s partially religious account of the initially gradual, but eventually dramatic, spread of secular rationality has been vigorous. It will probably never be settled. But Weber’s importance to us lies not in the explanation he offered as much as his highlighting of the distinctiveness of the phenomenon. A new culture emerged from the separation of nature and society into distinctive realms and the systematic application of the Cartesian-Empirical method to both.

In relation to the natural order, the merits of the new cognitive approach (the submission to testing of theories by data which are themselves not under the control of the their own interpretation) have been enormous. Its validity has been pragmatically vindicated by the superiority of the technology based on it. It is universally desired. Science today has no serious rivals anywhere on the globe.

Restoring a Balance

My assigned brief in this essay is not so much to critique (post)modern secularism¹¹ but to explore the positive opportunities it affords for the practice of authentic Christian discipleship and mission, East or West. If Christendom is not exactly our legacy in the Third World (excepting Latin America), nevertheless the ideas of Christendom have nourished the roots of the modern world, not least in its scientific rationality, rule of law and a liberal political order. And that world is the arena in which our obedience to Christ is acted out and our theological reflection pursued.

We should be grateful for the great benefits that modernity brings to our nations, not only in technological progress but also in breaking the stranglehold of traditional religious

¹¹ I have attempted this elsewhere. See Vinoth Ramachandra, *Gods that Fail: Christian Mission and Modern Idolatry* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press and Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press, 1997) and *Faiths in Conflict?: Christian Integrity in a Multicultural World* (Leicester: InterVarsity Press, 1999 and Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press, 2000), ch. 5

and political elites and social hierarchies. The romantic image of close-knit Third-World communities conceals the incestuous relationships and massive oppression, especially against women, that the typical 'traditional' family embodies. Ultimately, 'development' is not about merely economic growth, but the empowerment of all people so that their created gifts and capacities can flourish for the well-being of the whole society. No one, whether Christian or non-Christian, who cares about such human emancipation can rejoice in the 'end of modernity' chorus emanating from certain quarters of the western world. But we also stand in great need of discernment lest we identify the 'spirit of the age' with the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of truth who mediates the reality of the risen Lord in the midst of historical change and uncertainty. If, indeed modernity is the prodigal son of the Christian narrative, then what would the return of the prodigal—the 'recapitulation' (*apokatalassein*, Eph. 1:10) of modern society in Christ—involve?

Non-western theology cannot, then, afford to turn its back on the rich tradition of western Christian grapplings with modernity and the roots of secularism. Charting the genealogy of modern unbelief is a perilous undertaking, but many have embraced the risk. Hans Blumenberg famously defended the rise of modern secularism as an act of human self-assertion against the theological absolutism of the late

medieval world.¹² In his massive work *The Authority of the Bible and the Rise of the Modern World*, Henning Graf Reventlow explored the widespread influence of ancient Greek, and especially Stoic, sources on the thinkers of the early modern period, and the way that the Bible, while still an undisputed authority in political and ethical argument, came increasingly to be read within the framework of an alien rationalist temper. The God of the Bible became the abstract deity of philosophical theism, necessary for the undergirding of a Christianity seen as a system of moral action.¹³ Similarly, the American Jesuit, Michael Buckley, believes that the origin of atheism in the intellectual culture of the West lies 'in the self-alienation of religion itself'.¹⁴ His contention is that the great medieval synthesis of faith and philosophy involved a marginalizing of the work of Christ and the Holy Spirit, so that Christians in seventeenth-century Europe tended to defend Christianity without appealing to anything distinctively Christian.

Lesslie Newbigin and Colin Gunton have also mapped the demise of Christian faith in the West along

¹² Hans Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age* (Eng. Trans. R.M. Wallace, Cambridge, Ma: MIT Press, 1983). For a refutation, see Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Christianity in a Secularized World* (Eng. trans. John Bowden, London: SCM Press, 1988), pp. 6ff

¹³ H.G. Reventlow, *The Bible and the Rise of the Modern World* (Eng. trans. J. Bowden, London: SCM, 1984)

¹⁴ Michael Buckley, *At the Origins of Modern Atheism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), p. 363

largely epistemological lines. Descartes is the usual villain of the piece, initiating a centring of 'indubitable knowledge' in the human self, that led by way of Locke, Deism and the spectacular success of natural science to the cultural dispensability of God.¹⁵ For Gunton, the story reaches back even further to Augustine's deficient trinitarianism and impoverished theology of creation (which had disastrous consequences for the way the West has conceived of plurality) and on to the theological voluntarism of the fourteenth century.¹⁶

There are valuable lessons and insights in all these readings, provided we do not subscribe wholesale to any of them.¹⁷ Mono-causal explanations of the rise of something as complex and momentous as modern secularism are, in any case, bound to be inadequate. I am also sceptical of attempts to over-intellectualize the processes of unbelief. It is more like-

ly that the kind of social and political developments studied by Weber and others (and still little understood today) undermined the authority of religious institutions and made unitary, overarching worldviews less plausible. But, moreover, the Church has always stressed the corruption of the intellect by the rebellious human will; so the idea that simply 'straightening out' our theology will automatically counter the modern malaise is naive. Perhaps professional theologians have a personal stake in this argument. It would be nice to say, for instance, that the Holocaust would not have happened if the Church had got its theology of Israel 'correct'. But who, apart from some western theologians, seriously believes this? And if, as some suggest, there is a strong correlation between our trinitarian formulations and our socio-ethical practice, then how is it that cultures in Eastern Europe dominated by centuries of Orthodox trinitarianism have been among the most racist in recent history?

No doubt shallow presentations of the gospel 'turn off' sensitive enquirers and perpetuate theological ignorance. But, perhaps more importantly, shallow gospels produce shallow churches, and the lives of Christians have failed to demonstrate an alternative to the status quo and to embody the freedoms to which sensitive enquirers aspire. For instance, the South African theologian Charles Villa-Vicencio has observed that the 'mention of the Christian God within the South African constitution has probably done more to

¹⁵ See, for example, L. Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (London: SPCK, 1989), pp. 28ff; 'Truth and Authority in Modernity' in P. Sampson, V. Samuel & C. Sugden (eds) *Faith and Modernity* (Oxford: Regnum Lynx, 1994), pp. 61-2

¹⁶ See, for example, C. Gunton, 'The History, Augustine, the Trinity and the Theological Crisis of the West' in *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1991); *The One, the Three, and the Many: God, Creation and the Culture of Modernity* (Cambridge University Press, 1993)

¹⁷ For a critique of Newbigin, Gunton and other purely epistemological approaches to understanding post-Enlightenment culture, see Stephen N. Williams, *Revelation and Reconciliation: A Window on Modernity* (Cambridge University Press, 1995). A critique of Newbigin's analysis is also found in my *The Recovery of Mission* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1996), ch.5; for a critique of Buckley's reading of Aquinas, see Nicholas Lash, 'When did the Theologians Lose Interest in Theology?' in *The Beginning and the End of 'Religion'* (Cambridge University Press, 1996)

alienate black people from the church than any secular or atheist state philosophy could ever have accomplished'.¹⁸

This raises the question of *obedience* which must lie at the heart of all theological reflection, East or West. The theologian's task is to enable the church to respond *Christianly* to the world it indwells. This includes the faithful and relevant articulation of the gospel, but it surely goes beyond right articulation to right action. The most valuable lesson that the liberation theologians of Latin America have taught us—a lesson plainly writ in the gospel narratives themselves and the practice of the early church, but obscured by centuries of doctrinal controversy—is that obedience to the God of Scripture is the hermeneutical key to the right understanding of that Scripture. We may fault them for often narrowing that obedience to political action on behalf of the poor, for often stressing one side of the dialectic of praxis at the expense of the other,¹⁹ for sacrificing the church as a distinct community, or of being too enamoured with obsolete dependency theories in their analysis of poverty and oppression. But their recovery of the

ancient faith in Yahweh as the God of history who champions the cause of the weak and the oppressed, with the emphasis that all theological study must arise out of radical obedience to the gospel's demands, is a legacy that the church worldwide cannot surrender without damaging its own integrity.

It is at this point that fruitful links are opened up between Third World Christians and those twentieth-century European theologians who struggle with the question of obedience to Christ (not merely proclamation of Christ) in their post-Christian societies. Of these, perhaps the best known is Dietrich Bonhoeffer, whose impact on Christians concerned to be faithful to Christ in the political arena has been considerable,²⁰ and to whom we now turn.

Beyond Religious Apologetics

Some of Bonhoeffer's most fruitful and profound reflections on Christian discipleship emerge from his days in Tegel prison. Just as Gustavo Gutierrez wrestled with the question, 'How do we speak of God from among the poor?', Bonhoeffer in his prison cell agonized over what it meant to be a Christian in the face of the collapse of Christian civilization in Europe. In a famous letter written on 30 April 1944 to his friend Eberhard Bethge, he says: 'The thing that keeps coming back to me is, what is

¹⁸ Charles Villa-Vicencio, *A Theology of Reconstruction: Nation-Building and Human Rights* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 265

¹⁹ But note Gutierrez: 'The ultimate criteria come from revealed truth, which we accept in faith, and not from praxis itself. It is meaningless—it would, among other things, be a tautology—to say that praxis is to be criticised "in the light of praxis". Moreover, to take such an approach would in any case be to cease doing properly theological work,' from *The Truth Shall Make You Free*, tr. Matthew J. O'Connell (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1990), p. 101

²⁰ See the review article by John de Gruchy, 'The Reception of Bonhoeffer's Legacy' in *The Cambridge Companion to Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, ed. John W. De Gruchy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999)

Christianity, and indeed what is Christ, for us today?... The time when men could be told everything by means of words, whether theological or simply pious, is over....'²¹

Bonhoeffer has no illusions about the pervasiveness of a secularist mentality. He notes that human beings can now cope with all questions of importance without recourse to 'God' as a working hypothesis. As in the scientific field, so in human affairs generally, what we call 'God' is more and more edged out of life, so that everyone and everything gets along without 'God' and just as well as before. But a Christian apologetic that ridicules or assaults this secular autonomy is pointless, ignoble and unChristian. Bonhoeffer is indeed vexed with the question of how the gospel can reclaim such a world for Christ. But he warns that this will not be by traditional 'religious' means.

For religious people normally speak of God where human knowledge is at an end, or human resources fail. They invoke the 'god of the gaps', the *Deus ex machina*. Such a deity exists for solving insoluble human problems or as a support for human frailty. Conventional Christian apologetics defends such a 'God' by looking to areas of human weakness, epistemological or moral, in which to stake out the gospel's

claims. So it is usually in the 'border-line' experiences of *angst* or death that the 'relevance' of the gospel is proclaimed. But, says Bonhoeffer, 'I should like to speak of God not on the borders of life but at its centre, not in weakness but in strength, not, therefore, in man's suffering and death but in his life and prosperity. On the borders it seems to me better to hold our peace and leave the problem unsolved.' He adds, 'The Church stands not where human powers give out, on the borders, but in the centre of the village.'²²

Bonhoeffer is here simply reclaiming the doctrine of creation. The God who creates and sustains the world is active in every square inch of it, in the ordinary, day-to-day events as well as the mysterious and esoteric. God is not found in some supernatural realm that from time to time impinges on the natural. We stand before God every moment of our lives, and this God is not the solution to our problems, the answer to our questions, the one who always intervenes to put things right the way we want. No, 'The God who makes us live in this world without using him as a working hypothesis is the God before whom we are ever standing. Before God and with him we live without God. *God allows himself to be edged out of this world and on to the cross.*'²³

Bonhoeffer in prison has not turned his back on traditional 'religious' activities. He is, after all, reading his Bible, praying for his fellow-

²¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* (ET, London: SCM Press, 1953) Letter of 30 April 1944. I shall by-pass the scholarly debate over how far Bonhoeffer's ruminations after 30 April 1944 represent a departure from his earlier theological views. This is not relevant to the present discussion. However, the essays by John de Gruchy and Andreas Pangritz in the *Cambridge Companion*, op. cit., survey the debate.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ Letter of 16 July 1944

prisoners and singing the hymns of his Lutheran tradition. But he is conscious that 'To be a Christian does not mean to be religious in a particular way, to cultivate some particular form of asceticism (as a sinner, a penitent or a saint), but to be a man. *It is not some religious act which makes a Christian what he is, but participation in the suffering of God in the life of the world.*'²⁴

Three days later, on 21 July 1944, the day he learned of the failure of the plot to assassinate Hitler, he declared, 'it is only by living completely in this world that one learns to believe'. Furthermore, 'The Christian is not a *homo religiosus*, but a man, pure and simple, just as Jesus was a man, compared with John the Baptist anyhow. I don't mean the shallow this-worldliness of the enlightened, of the busy, the comfortable, or the lascivious. It is something much more profound than that, something in which the knowledge of death and resurrection is ever present. I believe Luther lived a this-worldly life in this sense.' In that same letter he elaborates on this 'worldliness'—it is 'taking life in one's stride, with all its duties and problems, its successes and failures, its experiences and helplessness. It is in such a life that we throw ourselves utterly into the arms of God and participate in his sufferings in the world and watch with Christ in Gethsemane. That is faith, that is *metanoia*, and that is what makes a man and what a Christian.'

Note, then, the double dialectic

running through these meditations. First, the God who acts and speaks into the centre of life does so from the margins to which he has been banished; and, secondly, God is present even in the places where he seems to be most absent.

All the stories of salvation in the worlds of religion (including the dominant schools of Hindu, Buddhist and New Age philosophies) offer us liberation—a liberation that is understood as freedom from the shackles/limitations of our humanness. The way to ultimate transcendence lies in breaking free from our individuality, our physical embodiment, and from our entanglements in this meaningless world of historical existence, the ordinary, everyday world of work and home. Our humanness is what gets in the way of transcendence or of union with the divine.

But the cross speaks of a God who is entangled with our world, who immerses himself in our tragic history, who embraces our humanity with all its vulnerability, pain and confusion, including our evil and our death. Here is a God who comes to us not as master but as a servant, who stoops to wash the feet of his disciples and to suffer brutalization and dehumanization at the hands of his creatures. This has momentous consequences for the world. It moves us beyond private religious experience. And, we may add, in raising Jesus from death, the Creator was affirming our humanity, that this historical, embodied existence has a future. In identifying with us in our waywardness, he draws the human into his own divine life. Biblical sal-

²⁴ Letter of 18 July 1944 (my emphasis)

vation thus embraces the transformation of this world. The gospel vision is unique.

The 'this-worldliness' of Christian hope aligns itself with all those men and women who pursue truth, justice and freedom for their fellow creatures. Does this mean that we downplay salvation by grace, neglecting to summon all men and women to faith and reconciliation with God through Christ? By no means. It is rather to disclose what we are reconciled for. The salvation-history that finds its centre in the cross and resurrection of Jesus enables us to discern signs of God's new order, inaugurated in Jesus, in all human struggles against fear, greed, violence, sickness, oppression and injustice. And it is *this* story, alone among all others, which gives human beings the firm assurance, rooted in historical event, that their struggles are not ultimately futile. Why? Because death, sin and evil have been overcome. And we have also seen that it is *this* story which, more than any other, has historically motivated and guided such struggles in the East as well as in the West.

Surely there is something perverse of attempts by some evangelicals to belittle non-Christian goodness and to question its motives as if this were necessary for the presentation of the Gospel. But rather it is this natural goodness (whether understood theologically in terms of the divine image in humanity or of common grace) that provides the backdrop to the horror of human sin and wickedness. An emphasis on human sinfulness may have been necessary in the

times of theological liberalism, but an affirmation of human dignity, goodness and beauty may be what Christian witness calls for in other contexts (without, of course, going overboard in the other direction!).

Indeed, in a powerful chapter in his unfinished *Ethics*, written during the inter-war years when the Nazi storm clouds loomed all over Europe, Bonhoeffer observed that while many churchgoers and even theologians blessed the Nazi tyranny and turned a blind-eye to its atrocities, there were many unchurched people who courageously resisted the tyranny. They upheld the values and principles that the Church has nurtured. 'Reason, culture, humanity, tolerance and self-determination, all these concepts which until very recently had served as battle slogans against the Church, against Christianity, against Jesus Christ Himself, had now, suddenly and surprisingly, come very near indeed to the Christian standpoint.'²⁵

Bonhoeffer calls the above concepts 'the children of the Church'. They had wandered away, their appearance and their language had altered a great deal, and yet at the time of crisis and ultimate peril the mother and the children recognized one another. 'Reason, justice, culture, humanity and all the kindred concepts sought and found a new purpose and new power in their origin. This origin is Jesus Christ'²⁶

Bonhoeffer brings into creative

²⁵ *Ethics* (ET, London: SCM, 1955; Simon & Schuster Touchstone edition, 1995) p. 57

²⁶ *Ibid.* p. 58

tension the two sayings of Jesus: 'he who is not with me is against me' and 'he who is not against us is for us'. It is with the Christ who is persecuted and who was cast out from the world, the Christ of the crib and of the cross, that justice, truth, reason and freedom now seek sanctuary. 'The more exclusively we acknowledge and confess Christ as Lord, the more fully the wide range of his dominion will be disclosed to us'²⁷ And he adds, 'It is not Christ who must justify Himself before the world by the acknowledgement of the values of justice, truth and freedom, but it is these values which have come to need justification, and their justification can only be Jesus Christ.'²⁸

There are rich missiological themes here to be explored—the integrity of faith and life, the universality and exclusiveness of Christ, the 'worldly' witness of Christians in partnership with others who care for the preservation of the created order, the 'wordless' witness of the Church in times when her voice is suppressed and her authority unrecognized, the re-location of concepts of justice, truth and freedom in the narrative of the Christ-event so that they now derive 'a new purpose and new power in their origin', and so on. I shall briefly highlight two areas of relevance in our world of late modernity, of relevance not only to the churches of the Third World but also to those of Europe. And here I must

move beyond Bonhoeffer.²⁹

The Marriage of Word and Action

On the 30th April 1999 at the height of the NATO bombing of Serbia, Václav Havel, the philosopher-president of the Czech republic addressed both houses of the Canadian Parliament. Havel shared his conviction that the greatest political challenge of the 21st century would be to secure the recognition by all nation-states of the limits to their sovereignty. All states must submit to the rule of international law, based on universal human rights. At the conclusion of his speech he observed:

I have often asked myself why human beings have any rights at all. I always come to the conclusion that human rights, human freedoms, and human dignity have their deepest roots somewhere outside the perceptible world. These values... make sense only in the perspective of the infinite and the eternal... Allow me to conclude my remarks on the state and its probable role in the future with the assertion that, while the state is a human creation, human beings are the creation of God.³⁰

Whatever Havel's personal philos-

²⁹ My own arguments do not entail accepting *in toto* either Bonhoeffer's doctrine of the autonomy of the spheres (their 'godlessness') or that Christ helps us *only* in his suffering. The next section militates against any absolutist reading of autonomy. But I believe that Bonhoeffer's statements in *Letters* need to be qualified by the sections in *Ethics* dealing with the 'four mandates' (Part I, ch.5 and Part II, chs.2 & 3). Even his cryptic comments about 'reason, justice, culture...finding a new purpose and new power in their origin [Jesus Christ]' is a denial of final autonomy. Nevertheless, how to relate *Letters* to his earlier works is a muddy area into which I hesitate to wander.

³⁰ Václav Havel, 'Kosovo and the End of the Nation-State', *New York Review of Books*, June 10 1999

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 60

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 61

ophy, his approach is instructive. He has raised—from within the heart of a secular public discourse—questions that every Christian should be raising in their secular callings. But such questions, to carry credibility and conviction, can be raised only by those who are known to be deeply engaged in pursuing justice and dignity for all. To champion human rights in global and local contexts, and to argue that such respect for human dignity makes sense only within a biblical worldview is to bring political action and evangelical proclamation into a powerful harmony.

It is the biblical concept of *imago Dei* which, more than any other, has provided the ontological grounding of human rights which purely secular accounts lack. For the idea of human rights consists of two parts. According to the first part, each and every human being is ‘inviolable’, has ‘inherent dignity and worth’, is ‘an end in himself’, or the like. According to the second part of the idea, *because* of every human being’s intrinsic worth and inviolability certain things ought not to be done to any human being and certain other things ought to be done for every human being.

‘The ideal of equality,’ notes Duncan Forrester, ‘haunts any culture that has been shaped or influenced by Christianity.’³¹ Modern secular political theory takes equality for granted, however hypocritical has

been its practice. Inequality is always a problem, an anomaly, something that calls for explanation and probably for remedy. Enlightenment documents, such as the American Declaration of Independence, are couched in language that is universal and theological. They are parasitic on the very Christian worldview that they are anxious to marginalise.

Human beings are entitled to be treated with respect because they are of equal worth, independently of their ability, contribution, success, work or desert. That is the bottom line, the essential affirmation if we are to have an adequate justification and motive for generous and respectful treatment of people with severe disabilities, of the senile, and of the unemployable. But it is difficult to see how this core affirmation can be justified without theological reference.³²

Similarly, Michael Perry, an American law professor, has argued cogently that there is, finally, no intelligible secular version of the idea of human rights, that the conviction that human beings are sacred is inescapably religious. This is not to deny that many who do take human rights very seriously are agnostics and atheists where religious convictions are concerned. But it does raise serious doubts whether a vision of human rights can be argued for coherently and sustained effectively in societies which lack an appropriate theological understanding of the human person.

If we have no reason to believe that the world has a normative order that is transgressed by violations of human rights... and if we nonetheless coerce others, and perhaps even, at the limit, kill

³¹ Duncan B. Forrester, *On Human Worth: A Christian Vindication of Equality* (London: SCM Press, 2001), p. 109

³² *Ibid.*, pp. 30-1

others, in the name of prosecuting human rights, then are we coercing and killing in the name of nothing but our sentiments, our preferences, our 'inclination of the heart'?³³

However, it is not enough to speak of a vaguely 'religious' view of persons in an abstract sense as if there was some universal genus called 'religion'; but, rather, we are dealing with a specific view, namely a biblical understanding of human personhood. The dominant schools of Hindu philosophy, for example, do not recognize the fundamental equality of human beings. Those outside the caste-system, the *dalits*, have no moral claim at all on the higher castes. My caste duties are also different from those who belong to other castes.

In the case of the pre-Christian West, scholars such as John Rist have shown that the view that such rights as 'the right to life, to have enough to eat, to live without fear of torture or degrading punishments, the right to work or to withhold one's labour' or that any other rights 'are the universal property of men as such as virtually unknown in classical antiquity'.³⁴ Inequality was deemed a natural feature of life in the classical world and it did not cause surprise or regret.

Medical historians have pointed out, for instance, that the *care* of defective newborns simply was not a medical concern in classical antiquity. The morality of the killing of sick-

ly or deformed newborns appears not to have been questioned until the birth of the Christian church. No pagan writer—whether Greek, Roman, Indian or Chinese—appears to have raised the question whether human beings have inherent value ontologically, irrespective of social value, legal status, age, sex, and so forth. 'The first espousal of an idea of inherent human value in Western civilization depended on a belief that every human being was formed in the image of God.'³⁵ It is doubtful whether respect for all human beings can flourish in societies untouched by the biblical vision.

That God, out of his special love for humanity, bestows on us certain inviolable *rights*, is a politically radical concept, not only in the Third World but in Europe and north America. It is God's love for all human beings that authorizes the poor and oppressed to stand up and claim their rights to sustenance and freedom. Injustice is a violation of God's own being. Both the Bible and Christian tradition have taught that the poor and oppressed have legitimate claims on us, so that striving for economic, social and political arrangements that help them secure their rights is a matter of doing justice, not merely engaging in acts of compassion. Moreover, while we reject the secular notion of autonomy (understood as self-determina-

³³ Michael J. Perry, *The Idea of Human Rights: Four Inquiries* (Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 39

³⁴ J.M. Rist, *Human Value: A Study in Ancient Philosophical Ethics* (Leiden, Netherlands: E.J. Brill, 1982), p. 9

³⁵ Darrel W. Amundsen, 'Medicine and the Birth of Defective Children: Approaches of the Ancient World' in Richard C. McMillan, H. Tristram Engelhardt, Jr., & Stuart F. Spicker (eds.) *Euthanasia and the Newborn* (Holland: D. Reidel Publishing Company, 1987), p. 15

tion) as the basis of human rights, nevertheless we must recognize that God's love empowers his creatures to free themselves from narratives and practices that demean their humanity and to stake their claim in the world as the icons of God.

Thus the church is called to bring before the public gaze the 'forgotten' people in our societies—the poor, the disabled, the elderly, the outcast—both in its public proclamation of a different understanding of humanness and its demonstration of it in the church's own social practices. If ethics is the Achilles Heel of late modern secular culture, then the ethical becomes the site of gospel proclamation. The world must see the *beauty* of the Christian message, as well as its *power* in a transformed community, if it is to receive it as universal *truth*.

Sadly, Bonhoeffer's own experience of the passivity of most Christian leaders in the face of monstrous evil is repeated in many of our contemporary situations. For instance, how many theologians in the United States or Britain who teach theories of Just War have publicly proclaimed the Gulf War as unjust? (Although the motive in going to war was justified, in my opinion, the prosecution of the war violated massively the principles of proportionality and discrimination). Where are the western Christians who have defended the rights of Iraqi children with the same fervour they do aborted fetuses in the West? The most persistent challenge to American and British hypocrisy and double standards in the rhetoric of human rights and

democracy has come, not from theologians or church leaders, but from secular journalists, social activists and a handful of left-wing academics.

In advocating secular political/social ethics as perhaps the most important locus of gospel proclamation today, am I simply promoting a pragmatic approach to evangelism, another technique in our technique-obsessed world? Far from it. It is simply what the public confession of 'Jesus Christ is Lord' demands. The Mennonite historian Alan Kreider reminds us that prior to Christendom 'conversion' involved a comprehensive change in a person's behaviour, belonging and beliefs—and *in that order*. It might be (and often was) accompanied by a powerful experience, though this was not considered as significant as the baptismal candidate's proven change of behaviour and willingness to identify with a community in which he associated with people drawn from all walks of life, including his personal, tribal and 'national' enemies. Kreider observes, 'the early Christian catechists were attempting not so much to impart concepts as to nurture communities whose values would be different from those of conventional society. Christian leaders assumed that people did not think their way into a new kind of life; *they lived their way into a new kind of thinking*.'³⁶ Might this be the reason that early Christian conversions produced a truly counter-cultural move-

³⁶ Alan Kreider, *The Change of Conversion and the Origin of Christendom* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1999), p. 23 (my emphasis)

ment, whereas evangelistic programmes in our time leave people 'converted' but unchanged?

Theological Formation

The integration of faith and life, of the theological and the secular, raises profound challenges to church leadership as currently conceived and the spiritual formation of local congregations. Secularism enables the priesthood of all believers, as bishops and clergy are stripped of their political power and direct social influence. But, even in those Third World societies where bishops and clergy have never enjoyed high social status, inherited models of clergy-centred leadership prevail. What, broadly speaking, unites the older denominations with the newer churches (especially the mega-churches influenced by American or Korean fundamentalism) is the self-perception of clergy/pastors as dispensers of religious services to the faithful, rather than as trainers and facilitators of the whole people of God that they may bear witness to the reign of God in the world.

The sad story of church history is that it is only in times of severe crisis that the church will change. While the irrelevance of the church to the struggles of the poor have been slowly rectified in many congregations (worldwide) influenced by liberation theologies since the 1960s, it is only very recently that concerns are being raised about the irrelevance of the church to its own middle-class professional members. And this because of declining participation, not a renewed attention to Scripture. As I

wrote a few years ago, 'Young professionals, whether in Bangkok or London, whether in medicine or accountancy, testify to being "driven" by the pressures to conform to the values of a profit-obsessed work environment and to finding the life and teaching of their local churches increasingly irrelevant to their concerns.'³⁷

There is, of course, a cheap relevance that appears as 'trendiness', a jumping on the latest bandwagons (though the bandwagons the church leaps on are usually a decade out-of-date). It is true that the church in its worship defines and indwells an alternative (eschatological) reality to our every-day world, but that reality incorporates the rich texture of human experience with all its triumphs and tragedies that is embodied in the congregation. The gathering of Christians provides the opportunity for the ordinary experiences of life to be shared (unemployment, shopping, surfing the Internet, street violence, etc), and for these experiences to be brought to the Bible for illumination and bathed in prayer for enlightened action.

The commitment of Christians is not assessed by the frequency of their attendance at church programmes, but their faithfulness in living out the demands of God's kingdom in their workplaces and neighbourhoods. Even when it comes to evangelism, it is the laity who are at the cutting-edge; yet clergy/pastors still draw up evangelistic packages which, instead of addressing the con-

³⁷ *Gods That Fail*, op. cit., p. 20

cerns and questions of secularized people and those of other faiths, expect such folk to come and listen to the 'religious' questions the church feels competent to answer. And such packages are exported to Third World churches for consumption.

What kind of theologians does the church need? Most theological writing is 'in-house', written for fellow theologians. Yet two public areas cry out for attention. We need theologians who can help artists, economists, entrepreneurs, doctors and other professionals to think through in Christian perspective their 'secular' callings, the taken-for-granted culture of late global capitalism or the ethical issues thrown up by new scientific technologies. We also need some professional theologians who can directly speak theological wisdom into the secular philosophical challenges to faith today. This is especially true in the West, for philosophies and political theories find their way into Third World universities and influence local intellectuals. As the political philosopher Jeremy Waldron points out, 'in a number of ways the Christian conceptions out of which modern liberalism originated remain richer and deeper than their secular offspring'. The responsible theologian who recognizes this must seek to offer this tradition in public debate. Waldron presents a vigorous challenge both to secular political theory and to contemporary theology: 'We might reasonably expect to find further clues to a rich and adequate conception of persons, equality, justice, and rights

in what is currently being made of the Christ-centred tradition by those who remain centred in Christ.'³⁸

Alas, theological institutions, by and large, seem ill-equipped to meet the challenges of living in a secularized and globalized world. The academic curriculum rarely reflects the changing nature of the world in which we live. In the West, the study of other cultures and world religions is a marginal concern, despite the growth of Asian and African religions in the cities of Europe and America. The only situation in which the typical theology student is likely to learn about other cultures, histories and religions is if he were to follow a course on 'missiology'. In the more academic faculties these courses do not exist. However where chairs of mission or missiology have been established, these studies have become isolated from other parts of the theological task. They became what David Bosch calls 'the theological institution's "department of foreign affairs", dealing with the exotic but at the same time the peripheral'.³⁹

In seminaries in the South, the same parochialism is to be found. But it takes two forms: the first type is where the curriculum is drawn up by teachers educated in a particular western institution and is simply a carbon-copy of that institution's theological and cultural biases. But the other form of parochialism is more subtle. It comes in the form of advice

³⁸ Quoted in Forrester, op. cit., p. 73

³⁹ David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1991), p. 492

(also from teachers trained in western seminaries) that the only preoccupation worthy of any, say, Asian theologian must be with what are called 'Asian issues' or 'indigenous cultures'. Similarly, an authentic African theology must address 'African issues', and so on for other continents and societies. It is largely a reaction to an earlier type of theological instruction that simply reproduced western curricula and methods in non-western seminaries.

Now I welcome the emphasis on context. The problem arises when I enquire further as to what comprises the 'Asian issues' that Asian Christians need to engage. Quite apart from the sheer complexity and vastness of the continent, who defines what is 'indigenous' or 'contextual' in societies where traditions and customs have interacted over the course of centuries with traditions and customs from elsewhere? Moreover, the global is implicated more and more in the local. Most doctoral theses I have come across of Indian theology students focus on sociological and historical studies of either some relatively obscure Christian mission to a tribal group or of some Hindu/Muslim sectarian practice. Without belittling the value of these studies, I still wait to hear of a missiologist/theologian in India who discusses nuclear power, venture capitalism, biotechnology or the Internet with his or her students. Yet these will probably influence Indian society in the next century to a degree far greater than any Hindu/Muslim sect. Are they not also 'Asian issues' which call for a missionary engagement?

Moreover, the primary area where secularism influences the theological agenda is in the so-called 'scientific' study of the Bible. Yet the intrinsic humility of the natural sciences, namely their subjecting of all our cherished theories to a wide range of 'worldly' experience that is not itself determined by the theories under scrutiny, is something from which all theology could profitably learn. Faithfulness to Scripture is not the only test of good theology. It is also: does it faithfully reflect and honour the experience of men and women today? The world outside the seminary, rather than the library, now becomes the testing ground for all our theologies. A crucial test of authenticity is then: does this particular theology empower the people of God to be obedient to the word of God today?

A healthy dose of scientific scepticism is also necessary in countering the irrationalist tendencies of much Third-World Christianity. (I have in mind here the superstitious practices of folk Catholicism and Pentecostalism, the often exaggerated claims made for divine healing and the 'miraculous', and the pervasive cult of authoritarian, *empresario* leaders in the newer churches). Many churches and Christian organizations can also learn from secular institutions the biblical values of continuous self-criticism, tolerance, transparency and accountability in their financial dealings and decision-making procedures. I am often shocked at the lack of respect for employee's rights, the insensitive corporate management styles and

poor financial provision for retired staff in Christian denominations and organizations (in Europe no less than in the Third World) that are quick to condemn exploitation and abuse elsewhere. Secular corporations and institutions have a lot to teach us about biblical ways of work.

Concluding Remarks

We have taken our cue from a trajectory in Bonhoeffer's mature writings, namely a turning away from seeing the knowledge of God primarily as a 'religious' relationship to a Supreme Being and instead as our participation in the self-forgetful, self-giving being of God in the world. The omnipotence of God is re-defined by the cross and resurrection of Jesus. It is not the absolute power of coercion, but the infinite persuasion of self-sacrificial love, a being-for-others. This is also the way of Christian discipleship in our secular world.

Wherever we live, the shadow of Christendom falls across the church's missionary path. The experience of the West and of Latin America indicates that a unitary Christian society cannot be built without compulsion. Africa has seen a greater involvement by church leaders in political life compared to Asia, but they have usually lacked a clearly Christian social agenda. Indeed, some of the most terrible atrocities in Africa in recent times have been committed in nations (such as Liberia and Rwanda) where the fusion of church and state has been as complete as any in medieval Europe.

No doubt the Christendom idea, at its best, sprang from a powerful missionary incentive: namely, the conversion of the Roman empire. Political power was not an end in itself, but a means for preaching the gospel, and curbing the violence and cruelty of the state. 'The story-tellers of Christendom do not celebrate coercion; they celebrate the power of God to humble the haughty ones of the earth and to harness them to the purposes of peace.'⁴⁰

Nevertheless, coercion (religious persecution, we would call it today) is central to that legacy, not least against Christian churches that refused to follow the establishment. The death of the Christendom ideal should lead not to nostalgia, but to celebration at the new hermeneutical as well as evangelistic possibilities the situation offers. We are now in a position to rediscover what is authentically Christian, and to engage with secularity and new religious movements with integrity, humility and courage. In the words of the historian Herbert Butterfield:

After a period of fifteen hundred years or so we can just about begin to say that at last no man is now a Christian because of government compulsion, or because it is the way to procure favour at court, or because it is necessary to qualify for public office, or because public opinion demands conformity, or because he would lose customers if he did not go to church, or even because habit and intellectual indolence keep the mind in the appointed groove. This fact makes the present day the most important and the most exhilarating period in the history of Christianity for fifteen hundred years; and

⁴⁰ O'Donovan, op. cit., p. 223

the removal of so many kinds of inducement and compulsion makes nonsense of any argument based on the decline in the number of professing Christians in the twentieth century. We are back for the first time in something like the earliest centuries of Christianity, and those early centuries afford some relevant clues to the kind of attitude to adopt.⁴¹

Moral and ideological pluralisms are facts of life this side of the eschaton, and the relationship of church and state has to be framed in terms of the eschatological reign of Christ, not of the empirical church or Christianity. What form this relationship assumes will depend on historical and cultural context. A secularism that rejects the Christendom ideal need not fall prey to the equally mythical notion of an ideologically neutral state. Indian Christians, for instance, have unanimously supported the Indian conception of secularism that is not a replication of the American or the French model, worked out under her own conditions of modernity. One can envisage a spectrum of *contextual secularisms*, each justified pragmatically.⁴²

This essay has been a plea. For the first time in generations, questions such as ‘What does it mean to be

human?’ are being discussed and debated in the global media. The question is fundamental for theology in every part of the world. Yet where are the theologians and Christian philosophers in this debate? In our technology- and market-driven environment, the real theological challenges are being faced by our children and by Christians working in secular occupations. Christians who are at the cutting edge of scientific and medical research, or who are engaging with new artistic media thrown up by the communications revolution, or who are caught up in the complex arenas of economic modelling and social policy, are asking questions of a profound theological character that professional theologians need to address. It is they who should be setting the agenda for our theological schools. Is it too late to envision a theological fraternity in every nation, indeed every city, that encompasses such folk and their work? If the church is to be true to its calling, theology needs to be taken out of our seminary classrooms, even our church buildings, and into the boardrooms, urban council meetings, research laboratories and national newspapers.

⁴¹ Herbert Butterfield, *Christianity and History* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1949), p. 135

⁴² For some further thoughts along this line, see ch.5 of my *Faiths in Conflict?*, op. cit. The Indian state’s secular posture was necessitated by two overriding circumstances: (a) Nation-building. If India, with its diversity of languages, social groups, and religions was to be forged into one nation, a public morality of tolerance was necessary. (b) The trauma of partition. This left a large Muslim minority within India’s national borders. It was necessary to provide structural accommodation for Muslims if sectarian violence was to be contained.

European Denominational Plurality and Christianity

Dieumeme Noelliste

Keywords: Church, mission, colonialism, slavery, denominationalism, non-conformist, state church, evangelism, contextualisation, unity

Introduction

It may sound incongruent but it is true; although Christian faith lays great stress on the value of unity, there seldom is perfect harmony among its adherents. As Kevin Giles has pointed out, disputes, divisions and schism have been part and parcel of the Christian story.¹ This applies to every epoch of the church's history including the often idealized apostolic period and the era of the Constantinian arrangement when church and state shared a sym-

biotic relationship that laid stress on the interdependence of the spiritual and temporal domain. Indeed, it will be recalled that it was during the latter period that the rift between the Western and Eastern branches of the church occurred due to irreconcilable differences on the *Filioque* issue.

But although discord among Christians is as old as Christianity itself, the implications of this reality for the institutional integrity of the church would not be fully grasped until the sixteenth century. Until then the church was very successful in neutralizing dissent and silencing objections. In fact, an event as significant as the East—West split was expected to be overcome.² But as it turned out, the church's success in withstanding attacks generated an overconfidence which gave rise to an intransigence, leading in the end to its disintegration. For as is well

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¹ Kevin Giles, *What On Earth is the Church* (Downers Grove, Ill.: Inter Varsity Press, 1995), pp. 198-199.

² Justo Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity*, Vol 1 (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1984), pp. 33-361.

known, it was precisely the church's unyielding stance vis-à-vis the call for internal reform that provided the impetus for the sixteenth century Reformation which laid the basis for the subsequent atomization of western Christendom. Although it would be anachronistic to speak of a full-fledged denominationalism in the Reformation era,³ it can be argued that the ecclesiastical break up which occurred then was the immediate precursor of the modern day denominational phenomenon.

Given Europe's hegemonic position on the world scene and her unsatiable appetite for colonial expansion from the sixteenth century onward, it was inevitable that the religious shake up that took place there would make its way sooner or later to the rest of the world. The vast networks of colonies that the European powers developed throughout the world provided ready-made channels for the exportation, propagation, and implantation of the various versions of Christianity that emerged there. With the passage of time, these expressions of the Christian faith became entrenched in their new environments. This was to be expected. As Latourette observes, in these new frontiers, 'Europe's political and ecclesiastical subjects accepted passively the forms in which the faith had been given them'.⁴ Although, in recent times, with the

end of colonialism and the subsequent elevation of former colonies to the status of independent states, there has been a push for a more indigenous Christianity in many instances, the foreign legacy still dominates.

The persistence and the strength of that exogenous influence seems to give credence to the view that in many ways the Christianity that exists outside of Europe continues to be an extension of what can be called the incipient denominationalism that developed there between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries.

But what configuration did that incipient denominationalism take and how has it impacted the development of Christianity in the places to which it was exported? The balance of this paper will seek to address these questions. With respect to the latter query the focus will be on the Caribbean region, the battlefield for the European powers during the period extending from sixteenth to the nineteenth century. However, when deemed appropriate references will be made to other parts of the world, where the Caribbean experience finds resonance.

Europe's Incipient Denominationalism

By the mid-1500s it became apparent that European Christianity could no longer continue to exist as a monolithic and uniformed body. Rome's unyielding response to the call for theological and moral reforms hardened the resolve of its critics and led to an outright revolt.

³ Kevin Giles, op. cit., p. 200.

⁴ Kenneth Latourette, *A History of the Expansion of Christianity, Vol 3: Three Centuries of Advance 1500 to 1800 AD* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1970), p. 428.

That development resulted in a general schism which brought into being two separate and competing versions of the western Christian faith: Roman Catholicism and Protestantism. With the Protestant Revolution Roman Catholicism lost for the first time its monopolistic hold on western Christian Europe.⁵ To be sure, it would continue to be the faith of the majority, but from that moment on, it ceased to be the universally accepted faith.

This initial bifurcation brought about by the Reformation storm would not be the end of the story. From the very outset, the Reformation movement served notice that homogeneity would not be one of its hallmarks. Having been motivated by differing concerns and divergent agendas, it was bound to opt for heterogeneity instead.

The Reformation started out by forming a cluster of churches around the teachings of Martin Luther and Jean Calvin and their acolytes. Owing to the recognition by these men and the newly established churches of the right of secular authorities to interfere in matters religious, the movement that they led became known as Magisterial Reformation or Mainstream Reformation.⁶ Anglicanism—the *via media* between Calvinism and Roman Catholicism—which later on adopted a similar stance has come to share that appellation as well. But as is well known, from the very outset, the the-

ological and social thoughts of Luther and Calvin and their colleagues led to the establishment of two separate ecclesiastical bodies: Lutheranism and Calvinism.

These bodies have different theological emphases. Advocating a theology of the cross which views the crucifixion as the privileged locus of God's gratuitous self-disclosure, Lutheranism, which gained ground in the countries of Northern Europe, eschewed a theology of glory with its search for the divine Being in transient reality and made the *sola fidei* its theological bedrock. As for Calvinism, at its heart is the notion of divine sovereignty which not only makes much of God's freedom, but places the secular order under God's rule and therefore subject to God's transforming action through the church. The groups which adopted Calvinism as the basis for their religious beliefs and practices have come to constitute the Reformed branch of the Church. In the English-speaking world of the seventeenth century, Puritanism emerged as a dominant form of Reformed Christianity.

Early on, Calvinism gave birth to Arminianism which in time became its staunchest theological rival.⁷ With respect to the relationship of church and state, the Magisterial Reformation did not differ appreciably from Roman Catholicism from which it separated. Mainstream Protestant Christianity continued to view the *Corpus Christianum* as an accept-

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 439.

⁶ Alistair McGrath, *Historical Theology* (London: Blackwell, 1998), pp. 158, 159.

⁷ Justo Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity Vol 2* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1984), pp. 179 ff.

able *modus vivendi* between the religious and the secular domain. As David Bosch explains:

In each European country the church was 'established' as state church—Anglican in England, Presbyterian in Scotland, Reformed in the Netherlands, Lutheran in Scandinavia and German territories. Roman Catholic in most Southern Europe. It was difficult to differentiate between political, cultural and religious elements since they merged into one.⁸

But this area of agreement between Roman Catholicism and Protestantism was to become a leading cause for the further splintering of Christianity into yet another sector: Anabaptism. Also referred to as the Radical Reformation, Anabaptism made ecclesiology its primary focus. Very early, it distanced itself from the church state association position, insisting that Christianity is not a national entity to which a community automatically belongs by virtue of historical accidents, but a faith into which people enter 'one by one through personal dedication and experience of salvation.'⁹ A non-established movement within state-supported Protestantism, Anabaptism existed in the form of persecuted fringe groups in many countries of western Europe, stressing moral living, church state separation, and thoroughgoing commitment to the Christian ideal as exemplified in the lives of the early Christians.¹⁰ If the

mainline reformers sought to *reform* the church, the Anabaptist's concern was its *restoration*.

Though severely mistreated by state and official religion alike, Anabaptism lived on. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the Anabaptist spirit could be clearly seen in (and indeed provided the inspiration for) the emergence from within mainstream Protestantism of several religious groups which adopted a non-conformist stance vis-à-vis church and state. From the bosom of Lutheranism sprang Pietism and Moravianism with their emphasis on religious fervour, and evangelistic and missionary zeal. Anglicanism was the seedbed upon which Puritanism and Wesleyan-Methodism, and several other independent groups such as Congregationalists and Baptists grew.¹¹ What began to emerge was a religious *pot-pourri*, or a denominational plurality that would take greater dimension when transported to the Thirteen British Colonies of North America and subsequently to the rest of the world.

The Impact of European Denominational Plurality on Christianity

Kevin Giles has contended that, strictly speaking, denominationalism found its real beginning in colonial America where differing religious bodies bereft of the privilege of the support of officialdom were forced to tolerate each other.¹² He is basically

⁸ David Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Mary Knoll New York: Orbis 1991), p. 275.

⁹ Latourette, op. cit., p. 437.

¹⁰ Roland Bainton, *The Reformation of the Sixteenth Century* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1952), pp. 95-109.

¹¹ Gonzalez, op. cit., pp. 149-151.

¹² Giles, op. cit., p. 200.

right. But I would like to suggest that the religious plurality that developed in Europe in the aftermath of the Reformation provided the basis without which modern-day denominationalism would probably not have arisen. And since, as was mentioned before, that religious melting pot was not confined to the place of its birth, but was exported to the rest of the world, what impact did it have on the Christianity that developed there? To this exploration we now turn, using the Caribbean as our main point of reference, but glancing at other parts of the world as necessary. We will argue that the impact of Europe's denominational plurality on non-European Christianity is mixed. We will see that in significant ways it has been an asset to extra-European Christianity, while in other ways it has been an impediment to its credibility and development. We will do so by focusing on five areas relating to the expansion, renewal, religious freedom, prophetic witness and the maturity of Christianity.

Expansion of Protestantism

A significant impact of European Christian plurality on the development of Christianity concerns the expansion of the faith amongst persons of non-European stock. It is doubtful that Protestant Christianity would have known the kind of global expansion that it has enjoyed if the Reformation had given rise to a monolithic Protestantism. For a variety of reasons, among them an erroneous view of missions which confirmed the execution of the Great Commission to the apostolic era, and

a misguided soteriology which questioned the theological significance of non-Europeans, the groups which emerged out of the Magisterial Reformation, unlike Roman Catholicism, did not make missionary outreach one of their major concerns.¹³ In the Caribbean, for instance, where Anglicanism and the Reformed Church—both in its Dutch and Scottish versions—came early and formed part of the colonial quest of their countries of origin, the Black slaves were initially deemed unworthy of christianisation. For a long time, both denominations directed their religious activities almost exclusively to the white plantocracy and made no effort to evangelize the slave population until the 1800s. Even then, Black evangelism was conducted under the objection of many in the established churches and by persons who had been touched by the evangelical revival that swept England in the eighteenth century.

But while the established churches were wondering whether or not non-Europeans fell within the purview of God's saving purpose, the non-conformists were hard at work winning Black slaves and the autochthonous peoples to Christian faith. Early in the eighteenth century, the Moravians led the way followed by the Methodists, the Baptists, the Quakers and the Congregationalists. Convinced that God's grace was freely

¹³ Johannes Verkuyl, *Contemporary Missiology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmanns, 1978), pp. 18, 19 ; Dale Bisnauth, *History of Religions in the Caribbean* (Kingston: Kingston Publishing Co, 1989), pp. 104, 105; David Bosch, *Transforming Missions* (Mary Knoll: Orbis, 1991), pp. 243-248.

offered to all, these groups travelled the length and breadth of the region proclaiming the gospel to the disenfranchised and establishing congregations among them much to the displeasure of plantocracy and clergy alike. When the official church finally joined the evangelization effort, it did so with the assurance that christianisation would not be subversive of the slavery system, hence not harmful to the plantocracy. By that time, however, the evangelization of the Blacks, was well-advanced, thanks to the non-conformists.

The evangelistic impact of the non-conformist groups was by no means limited to the Caribbean. During the first half of the 19th Century, Black Baptist Jamaican Christians made a bold and valiant effort to spread their newly found faith to portions of West Africa.¹⁴ In England, Anglican-turned-Baptist William Carey provided the spark for the modern missionary movement which took Protestantism around the globe.¹⁵

The Renewal of Christianity

The significance of the work of the non-conformist denominations does not lie solely in the evangelization of ethnic groups considered undeserving of such favour by the religious establishment. It is to be found also

in the introduction of a different kind of Christianity into the environment. Both in its Roman Catholic and Protestant versions, the official Christianity that existed in the Caribbean during the colonial era was superficial and barren. Given the state of religious life in the region at the time, it could not be otherwise. Roman Catholicism engaged in the practice of mass conversion.¹⁶ As for mainstream Protestantism, as a national religion, it not only assumed the conversion of all citizens, but the religious instruction and pastoral care that it offered were sorely inadequate.¹⁷ This situation produced a Christian nominalism which was content to exist side by side with blatant syncretism and questionable ethical behaviour—even on the part of the clergy.¹⁸

By contrast, the Christianity propagated by the non-conformists emphasized the presentation and an understanding of the basic elements of the gospel, the need for a personal response, instruction in the faith and commitment to ethical living. They presented their faith with a fervour and passion which resonated with their audiences. Speaking of the Moravian missionary effort, Caribbean church historian Dale Bis-

¹⁴ Las Newman, 'The Caribbean Response to the Great Commission: History and Models of Response'; *Caribbean Journal of Evangelical Theology* 1:1 (June 1997) : 20. Also Lamin Sanneh, *West African Christianity: The Religious Impact* (Mary Knoll: Orbis, 1983), pp. 107-108

¹⁵ J. Herbert Kane, *A Global View of Missions* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1977), pp. 84-89.

¹⁶ Charles Poisset Romain, *La Protestantisme Dans la Société* (Port-au-Prince: Henri Deschamps, 1985) pp. 87, 100. Also Bisnauth op. cit., pp. 104-105

¹⁷ Winston A Lawson, *Religion and Race: African and European Roots in Conflict: A Jamaican Testament* (New York: Peter Lang, 1998) pp. 59-64. Also Romain, op. cit., p. 87.

¹⁸ Armando Lampe ed, *Christianity in the Caribbean* (Kingston: University of the West Indies Press, 2001), p. 47.

nauth asserts that 'it was responsible for entrenching at the very beginning a pious sentimentalism in the Christianity inculcated in the blacks of the Caribbean'.¹⁹

Bisnauth's comment could easily be made of all the non-conformist groups. This is evident from the manner in which the plantocracy and the official clergy characterized the activities of these groups. In their views, the non-conformists were 'illiterate or ignorant enthusiasts'²⁰ whose preaching produced a fanatic Christianity which, when 'working on the uninstructed and ardent temperament of the Negro, produced the most pernicious consequences',²¹ and thus was dangerous to the community.

The sentimental and pious religion that the non-conformists introduced continues to be a significant part of Caribbean Christianity. There is no doubt that the introduction of that more exuberant form of the Christian religion into the environment was salutary. It exerted a renewing impact on a sterile and decadent Christendom that perhaps would not have happened otherwise. This is another positive effective of denominational plurality that needs to be recognized.

Historically, the emergence of new groups from within the church—groups which later developed into separate bodies—seems to be one of the means used by God to bring renewal to the church when it

becomes lethargic and moribund.

For instance, despite Rome's negative response to the Reformers' calls, it did take advantage of their agitation to introduce changes into the church.²² In fact, some scholars do not hesitate to label these efforts, the 'Catholic Reformation'.²³ In an article which provides a broad historical overview of worship in Britain, Peter Lewis illustrates this point. According to Lewis, soon after the Reformation arrived in the United Kingdom, resulting in the establishment of the Anglican Church, and the Church of Scotland, what later became known as Puritanism emerged from within Anglicanism seeking to reform it.²⁴ Stressing simplicity of worship, biblical preaching and godly living, Puritan religion led to the establishment of congregational churches which became a 'powerful and attractive force in the land'.²⁵ However, as the 17th Century drew to a close, the Puritan fervour began to wane under the impact of religious intellectualism and formalism. 'The breaking fetters of petrified Puritanism'²⁶ would necessitate the emergence in the 18th Century of new forces of renewal.

These came in the form of Methodism which emerged from the bosom of Anglicanism and the Great Awakening which, in America, arose

¹⁹ Bisnauth, op. cit., p. 109; Romain, op. cit. pp. 138-39.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 128.

²¹ Ibid., p. 136.

²² McGrath, op. cit., p. 163.

²³ For example, Latourette and McGrath himself.

²⁴ Peter Lewis, 'Free Church Worship in Britain' in Donald Carlson ed, *Worship: Adoration and Action* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993) p. 149.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 149.

²⁶ Bosch, p. cit., p. 277.

from Puritan Circles. These movements had profound effects on the historic denominations and the general culture. But during the 19th century, partly due to the pressure of the Enlightenment's critique of biblical faith and partly due to Non-conformity's own successes, there occurred a relapse into sterile formalism and a departure from religious simplicity and theological soundness.²⁷ In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, respectively, two movements emerged that helped combat that religious lethargy: the Plymouth Brethren Movement and the Pentecostal/Charismatic movement. With roots in Anglicanism and Wesleyan Methodism respectively, these movements which advocate a return to the simplicity and fervour of biblical religion have profoundly impacted contemporary Christianity.²⁸ This is particularly true of the Pentecostal/Charismatic movement. Now the most dominant form of Protestantism, it has impacted all denominations and enjoyed a worldwide reach.²⁹ Even after the deficiencies and excesses of these movements which eventually developed into denominations have been acknowledged and critiqued, few would curse the day of their birth.

Fragmented but Free

The break up that occurred in western Europe in the aftermath of the Reformation was not only religious; it was also territorial. Applying the

rule *cuius regio eius religio*, the dominant Christian groups that emerged from the great schism divided the continent among themselves and became the established faiths in their respective geographical domain. Adherence to that principle meant intolerance of religious dissent, as the experience of the Anabaptists and the French Huguenots painfully shows.³⁰

But the fierce religious rivalry that existed amongst Europe's contending powers was not kept there as a family squabble but was exported to their overseas colonies. Even after the signing of the Peace of Augsburg in 1555, it was understood that the fight would continue west of the Azores. The Caribbean which lies west of that line of demarcation became a battlefield. It was carved out and divided up into separate politico-religious spheres. Generally, wherever France and Spain went, Roman Catholicism prevailed. By contrast, in territories occupied by Great Britain, the Netherlands and Denmark, Protestantism in its various forms had the upper hand. As was the case in Europe, so it was in the Caribbean: where a faith was not officially recognized, it was opposed, resisted, persecuted and sometimes forced out. Hence, during the 17th century, non-Catholics were virtually proscribed in French and Spanish occupied territories. Catholics who attempted to spread their faith in territories controlled by Britain and Holland were returned the same compli-

²⁷ Lewis op. cit., p. 151.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 152.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 150.

³⁰ Roland Bainton, op. cit., pp. 95-108, 16 ff.

ments.³¹

In South America, where Roman Catholicism prevailed due to the influence of Spain and Portugal, anti-Protestant sentiments continued throughout the 19th Century, and in some countries, well into the first half of the 20th Century.³² African missiologist, Lamin Sanneh, in his study of West African Christianity, also cites examples of Catholic-Protestant rivalry. However, he warns against sweeping generalizations from these instances.³³

Neither was religious antagonism limited to the Catholic-Protestant duel. Protestants, too, got in the fray, fighting among themselves, often over theological minutiae which in retrospect do not seem to be worth the fuss. Commenting on the era of Protestant Orthodoxy which followed on the heel of the Reformation David Bosch states:

When the Reformation shattered the ancient unity of the Western Church, each of the fragments into which it was now divided was obliged to define itself over against all other fragments... Each confession understood the church in terms of what it believed its own adherents possessed and the others lacked....

The Protestant's pre-occupation with right doctrine soon meant that every group which ceded from the main body had to validate its action by maintaining that it alone, and none of the others, adhered strictly to the 'right preaching of the gospel'. The Reformational descriptions of the Church thus ended up accentuating differences rather than similarities.

Christians were taught to look divisively

at other Christians. Eventually Lutherans divided from Lutherans, Reformed separated from Reformed...³⁴

The fragmentation which started in Europe was to make its way very early to the rest of the world principally via the Thirteen Colonies where it underwent a serious metamorphosis through the process of religious dis-establishment.

From the 17th Century onward, the Thirteen British Colonies in North America provided a fertile ground for the growth of the various forms of Protestantism transported there through the wave of migration that originated from all over western Europe. In that new environment where the opposite of the *cuius regio eius religio* principle was to become law,³⁵ there developed early legal equality not only between the various forms of established faiths, but also amongst all religious expressions, including the heretofore disadvantaged non-conforming groups. A real *potpourri* emerged which provided the impetus for the further splintering of Protestantism. Later on, this splintered Protestantism, now thoroughly imbibed with the freedom of conscience ideology and separatism³⁶ made its way to the rest of the world through the missionary movement of the 19th century. In many parts of the world that fragmented Protestantism experienced

³¹ Lampe, op. cit., p. 133, Bisnauth, op. cit. pp. 65, 66.

³² Lloyd Meacham, *Church and State in Latin America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press 1966), pp. 135, 158, 207, 263.

³³ Sannah, op. cit., p. 110.

³⁴ Bosch, op. cit., pp. 248-9.

³⁵ I am referring here to the Constitutional Amendment barring the establishment of religion of any sort by Congress, but entrenching the free exercise of any religion.

³⁶ See Martin Mary, *Protestantism* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1972), pp. 212-218.

further splintering. Hence in the Caribbean, for instance, where two centuries ago, only two or three versions of Christianity were considered licit, there are now hundreds of legally recognized Christian bodies, many of them home grown. This is a victory for freedom of conscience which has been recognized as an inalienable right and a prized value in most parts of the world. As will be seen below, fragmentation does have its downside. But insofar as it led to religious freedom, it must be deemed good in spite of its attendant pitfalls.

Ambiguous Prophetic Witness

When pluriform Christianity left the shores of Europe, slavery was in its heyday. Engaged in this commerce in human beings were European powers who went about conquering and colonizing territories beyond their borders and utilizing slave labour for their cultivation.

The response of the Christian conscience to what has later been seen as one of the most heinous evils ever perpetrated by humanity against humanity, was ambiguous. At one end of the spectrum was established Christianity which was clear in its pro-slavery stance. Indeed, if the established church opposed slave evangelism, it was precisely on the ground that such activity would be prejudicial to the slavery system, since it was thought that a Christian could not be a slave. At the other end of the spectrum were elements of Non-conformity such as the Quakers who from the outset adopted a firm anti-slavery stance.

The third response which contin-

ues to baffle us to this day came from some non-conformist missionaries who, though staunch advocates of slave evangelism, astonishingly took an accommodationist stance vis-à-vis the slavery system. They argued *ad nauseam* that Christianity is not anti-slavery. They admitted that Christianity teaches liberty. But the freedom it promises, they clarified, applies to the realm of the spiritual not the social. Indeed, the argument continues, christianisation will turn the slave into a better slave—one who will not agitate for a change of status. In Jamaica, the Baptist missionaries have been rightly credited for their role in the emancipation struggle.

However, at times, even they wavered. When for instance, William Knibb, a prominent Baptist missionary who was suspected of participating in a slave revolt, was interrogated about whether he had ever preached on the text 'the truth shall make you free', his answer was a categorical 'no'. He explained that this does not mean that he never spoke on the subject of freedom. But he clarified that whenever he did, he took care to explain that 'it referred to the soul, not the body'.³⁷

Two further pieces rendered the position of these non-conformists totally puzzling. First, it went against the anti-slavery movement that was gaining strength in Europe, where powerful voices opposed slavery on

³⁷ Cited in Bisnauth, op. cit., p. 134.

³⁸ See Gordon Lewis' excellent summary of the literature describing the anti-slavery activism by free thinkers in England and France, *Main Currents in Caribbean Thought* (Kingston: Heinemann Educational Books, 1983), pp. 205-216.

humanitarian ground.³⁸ Indeed, it contradicted the position of some of their parent bodies on the Continent. There, the agitation for abolition and emancipation was being led primarily by persons belonging to the non-established sects. Second, the instructions for the pro-slavery stance on the colonies came from the parent bodies themselves!³⁹ This ambiguity created a credibility crisis for the non-conformist church which became suspected in the eyes of the establishment and the slaves population alike.

What was going on? What are we to make of this? Did these non-conformist missionaries really believe in the preaching of a truncated gospel? If so, do we have here the seed of Christianity that focuses on the otherworldly and advocates socio-political disengagement? Was it a strategy, following the line of the apostle Paul, necessitated by the prevalence of an oppressive regime which, if frontally confronted, would even take away the opportunity of sowing seeds that would undermine the system and eventually lead to its overthrow? Or is it that the missionaries' understanding of their calling in that particular situation was to exercise a ministry of support vis-à-vis the oppressed with a view to preserving them for eventual liberation which would be wrought by those who are specially called for that task?⁴⁰

A thorough analysis of these conjectures and many others which

could be mentioned would be instructive, but this would take us far afield. The point that is germane to our purpose here is that in the face of a sinful situation, the prophetic voice was dissonant and the prophetic stance weak.

Infantile Christianity

At a recent send off service for a Caribbean missionary, I heard a speaker use the imagery of the boy and the flying kite to explain the church-missionary relationship. The missionary is the kite and the church the kite flying boy. It does not matter how high the kite flies, the preacher explained, it needs to remain connected to the string-holding boy. The preacher's purpose in using that vivid imagery was to impress upon the congregation the fact that although the missionary will go to a far away country, she will remain dependent upon the church.

That illustration is an apt description of the relationship that obtained for a long time between European Christianity and the Christianity that developed outside of Europe. With the exception of the Thirteen British Colonies in North America, where the kite managed to fly on its own fairly early, the Christianity that Europe transplanted to other parts of the world from the 17th century onward remained closely attached to its European counterpart. The fact that European Christianity was plural further fostered the dependent status of the nascent faith and delayed its growth into adulthood.

In Bosch's comment on Protestant orthodoxy's theological dispute

³⁹ Lawson, *op. cit.*, pp. 70-82.

⁴⁰ I am indebted to my friend Gordon Mullings for this suggestion.

referred to earlier, he not only underscores the trend toward fragmentation, but also touches on the attendant Protestant tendency to theological exclusivism. Each disputant, he noted, claimed that his position was the only true representation of genuine Christian faith. This exclusivist virus did not take long to migrate to other latitudes. Already, in the eighteenth century it showed up in the Caribbean where Anglicanism, which took pride in its conciliatory and irenic character, was nonetheless being presented as the only acceptable religion to the discredit and prohibition of other Protestant groups, including Methodism to which it gave birth. Although the sectarian spirit was less boisterous in the other Protestant denominations, it was nonetheless present. Dale Bisnauth laments: 'Although the Evangelical Protestants shared many beliefs with their reformed countrymen, they shared as well something of the bitterness which years of theological controversy had bred between Evangelical and Reformed Churches in Europe.'⁴¹

But how has denominational plurality assisted in prolonging the infancy of non-European Christianity? Theologians and missiologists from both the First and the Two Thirds-World have pointed to several things. J. Verkuyl has drawn attention to the fact that where denominational plurality encourages the myopic focus on one group, it discourages interconfessional interaction and fellowship and thereby

undermines corporate ecclesial strength and witness.⁴² For his part, Gerry Seale of Barbados laments the reluctance of the Caribbean Church to assume its financial responsibility due to a long history of reliance on support from abroad which has resulted in a dependency mentality.⁴³ In addition, attention has been drawn to the theological poverty of the Two Thirds World Church produced in part by an over-dependence on confession specific theologies. Besides discouraging home-grown contextual reflection, the situation fosters a theological parochialism which robs the corporate ecclesial community of the kind of theological enrichment which often results from inter-confessional interaction and dialogue.

Related to all of this is the issue of the lack of rootedness of Christian faith in the cultures into which it has been transplanted. Again and again, reference has been made to the fact that the Christianity which was sent abroad was not only wrapped up in the cultures of the various countries of origin, but also in those of the cultures of the sending 'mother' denominations. The result was that, culturally, the churches which came to be established in these places took on the shape and the structure of their European counterparts.⁴⁴ Their lack of rootedness in the receiving culture has produced what Ashley Smith of

⁴² Johannes Verkuyl, *Contemporary Missiology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), p. 174.

⁴³ Gerry Seale, 'Recruiting and Sending Caribbean Missionaries', *Caribbean Journal of Evangelical Theology* Vol 1:1 (June 1997), p. 63.

⁴⁴ Romain, op. cit., p. 85.

⁴¹ Bisnauth, op. cit., p. 43.

Jamaica calls 'Potted Plant Christianity'⁴⁵ or what Jules Casseus of Haiti refers to as 'an Angelic Church'.⁴⁶ Speaking from the African context, Mercy Amba Oduyoye is categorical in the view that unless Christian faith in Africa interacts meaningfully with African culture, African Christianity is bound to remain 'a fossilized form of nineteenth-Century European Christianity'.⁴⁷

Conclusion

A pluriform and fragmented Christianity is a far cry from the ideal of a united congregation at worship before the Throne, on the basis of a shared experience of salvific cleansing wrought by the Lamb of God (Rev. 7:9-17). And insofar as the diversity which now prevails, overwhelms and weakens the redemptive tie that binds all those who genuinely name the Name of the Crucified and Risen Lord, it is a negation of his

wish for his church and a hindrance to effective Christian witness (John 17). But to fall short of the ideal does not mean to be necessarily bad. Good often comes out of an imperfect thing.

The denominational plurality that originated from Europe has over the years produced a mixed effect on the church outside of the European world. In some ways its impact was positive, in other ways it was negative. But on balance, it is doubtful whether the non-occurrence of the post Reformation ecclesiastical break-up would have produced better results than its occurrence.

Having said this, however, I must stress that what is incumbent upon us is to find ways to minimize the negative effects of the reality of denominational plurality so that the church may increasingly approximate to the ideal that is set before it and thus become more true to its nature, more effective in its witness and more pleasing to her Lord.

⁴⁵ See Ashley Smith, *Real Roots and Potted Plants* (Williamsfield: Mandeville, 1984).

⁴⁶ Jules Casseus, *Pour Une Eglise Authentiquement Haïtienne* (Port-au-Prince, 1989).

⁴⁷ Mercy Amba Oduyoye, 'The value of African Religious Beliefs and Practices For Christian Theology' in *African Theology en Route* Kofi Appiah-Kubi and Sergio Torres, eds. (Maryknoll: New York, 1981), p. 110.

God's Work of Grace in the Context of the Religions

Terrance Tiessen

Keywords: Providence, salvation, religions, grace, culture, unevangelised, revelation, secularisation, conversion, conscience, sin

I. Introduction

In spite of the secularization that continues in western societies, an interest in spirituality is on the increase and the religions of the world become more rather than less prominent in our awareness. Agencies of the Christian Church carry on vigorous missionary activity, yet large segments of the world remain dominantly non-Christian. Christian attitudes toward mission and opinions about the status of the adherents

of other religions are far from unified. We are all familiar with the range of attitudes, which is now commonly categorized under the headings of exclusivist, inclusivist or pluralist. Those divisions are frequently protested, particularly by those of us who are dubbed 'exclusivist,' but the language is hard to escape and is still widely understandable.¹

In recent decades, evangelicals have paid much attention to the question of the salvation of the unevangelized. Less attention has been given to the religions of the world and to those who worship within those religions. I have written

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¹ See, for instance, Tim S. Perry's excellent discussion of nomenclature in chapter 2, 'Typological Issues,' of *Radical Difference: A Defence of Hendrik Kraemer's Theology of Religions*. Editions SR, no. 27. Edited by H. Martin Rumscheidt and Theodore S de Bruyn (Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2001), pp. 9-28; and also Harold Netland, *Encountering Religious Pluralism: The Challenge to Faith and Mission* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2001), p. 46.

on the former subject² and now want to address the latter.³ Of course, the two issues cannot be completely separated. How one understands the saving activity of God in the world will affect significantly how one conceptualizes the place of the religions of the world within the providential and redemptive programs of God, that is, in terms of both common and special grace.

I approach the subject as a theologian who works within the Reformed or Calvinist tradition.⁴ Thus, I look at the situation of the world's religions from the perspective of one who believes in God's meticulous providence and in his sovereign grace in salvation. This is sometimes spoken of as a 'monergist' perspective, because it begins with the assumption that God is completely in control in the world. Everything that happens is part of God's comprehensive

purpose from all eternity, including the identity of the saved and the rise and fall of nations or religions. From this perspective, the continuing existence of the religions raises a question which Arminians or synergists do not face: 'How do the religions fit into God's overall purpose?' Synergists, by contrast, are able to assert that some phenomena in the world exist quite apart from God's purposes, so that the religions need not be viewed as necessarily within God's program in the world.

II. Religions as Ambiguous Responses to Divine Revelation

Christian theologians have taken widely divergent approaches to the world's religions. On the one hand are those who assume that non-Christian religions are largely the product of demonic deception, or at best the product of human effort. At the other end of the spectrum one finds relativistic pluralists who believe that all the religions are God's work and are leading people toward the same God, with varying effectiveness, in spite of the very different conceptions about God which are found in these religions. I have concluded that religions arise from the essentially religious character of humanity and that they are ambiguous responses to divine revelation. It is from that perspective that I evaluate their possible role in God's providential program.

A. *The Ambiguity in all Religions*
Religions are fundamentally the consequence of the fact that God has not

² *Irenaeus on the Salvation of the Unevangelized*, ATLA Monograph Series, No. 31 (Metuchen, N. J.: Scarecrow Press, 1993); 'Divine Justice and Universal Grace: A Calvinistic Proposal', *Evangelical Review of Theology* 21/1 (Jan 1997), pp. 63-83; 'Can the Unevangelized Be Saved?: A Review Article', *Didaskalia* 4/2 (Fall 1993), pp. 77-91; 'The Universal Salvific Work of the Holy Spirit: Reducing the Scandal of Calvinism', a paper read at the Evangelical Theological Society, Jackson, Mississippi, Nov. 22, 1996; 'The Salvation of the Unevangelized: A Position Paper', distributed to members of the International Council of SEND International, January, 1996; 'Irenaeus on the Salvation of the Unevangelized', a paper read at the annual meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society, Washington, D.C., November 19, 1993.

³ I will speak to both issues together in a forthcoming book currently titled *Providence, Salvation and Religions* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press).

⁴ My understanding of divine providence is spelled out in *Providence and Prayer: How Does God Work in the World?* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 2000), chapter 13.

left himself without witness in the world. As J. H. Bavinck observes, 'Buddha would never have meditated on the way of salvation if God had not touched him. Mohammed would never have uttered his prophetic witness if God had not concerned Himself with him. Every religion contains, somehow, the silent work of God.'⁵ But, 'from a biblical perspective, religions are multidimensional,' as Calvin Shenk notes.⁶ 'They reflect God's activity in the world, the human search for God, and the human attempt to flee from God. They seek to reverence the God or gods they know, and they try to manipulate God or gods. They are cries for help and efforts at self-justification.'⁷

We must 'distinguish between profound spiritual impulses which are the moving of God and the local clothing in which such impulses appear. The light is reflected with varying degrees of brightness as the moon is reflected differently in a mud puddle, the sea, or a clear mountain lake.'⁸ 'Cosmic religions are founded on the revelation of God in creatures; ethical religions attest that an absolute will makes itself felt in the conscience of men; salvific religions are founded on the fact of fall and

salvation.'⁹ The consciousness of God, which is an aspect of the universal revelation of God imprinted on the being of humans created in his image, makes people naturally religious, but sin inclines their religious expressions toward idolatry.

The account of Cain and Abel's attempts to worship God concludes with the statement 'At that time [the birth of Adam and Eve's grandson Enosh, the son of Seth] people began to invoke the name of the Lord' (Gen. 4:26).¹⁰ They have been doing so ever since, but it was done in an idolatrous fashion at Babel and has been worked out in a great diversity of languages and cultures ever since.¹¹ Speaking of the message concerning the religions which is derived from Genesis 1-11, John Goldingay and Christopher Wright comment:

On the one hand the religions reflect humanity's being made in God's image and being in a form of covenant relationship with God. Books such as Proverbs, too, point us towards an attitude to other cultures—of which their religions are part—which looks at them as sources of insight and not merely as expressions of lostness. On the other hand, Genesis 1-11 suggests that the religions, like all human activity, belong in the context of a world which needs restoration to the destiny and the relationship with God which were intended for them, which God purposed to bring about through the covenant with

⁵ J. H. Bavinck, *The Church Between Temple and Mosque: A Study of the Relationship Between the Christian Faith and Other Religions* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, n. d.), p. 200.

⁶ Calvin E. Shenk, *Who Do You Say that I Am?: Christians Encounter Other Religions* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1997), p. 75.

⁷ Shenk, *Who Do You Say*, p. 75.

⁸ Shenk, *Who Do You Say*, p. 99.

⁹ Mariasuai Dhavamony, *Christian Theology of Religions: A Systematic Reflection on the Christian Understand of World Religions*. Studies in the Intercultural History of Christianity, Vol. 108 (New York: Peter Lang, 1998), p. 31.

¹⁰ Scripture citations are from the *New Revised Standard Version* unless otherwise indicated.

¹¹ Daniel Clendenin, *Many Gods, Many Lords* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1995), p. 126.

Israel which culminated in the mission and accomplishment of Jesus. Similarly, books such as Proverbs, Job, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Songs recognize the limitations of what can be said on the basis of human experience outside of Yahweh's special involvement with Israel.¹²

Religion can, therefore, be an expression of our rebellion as well as of our response to God. Of course, this was 'as true for Israelite religion (as the prophets pointed out) and for Christianity as "religious observance" as for any other faith'.¹³

There are certainly good and positive things that have resulted from the religions, but we must also recall the evils of temple prostitution, human sacrifice, caste systems, satanic worship, cannibalism and other such departures from God's norms, including the Christian justification of slavery and racism at times in history.¹⁴ All of this has been done in the name of religion, as have been the hateful speeches of Louis Farrakhan, the mind-control of the cults, and the corrupt practices of some

¹² John E. Goldingay and Christopher J. H. Wright, 'Yahweh Our God Yahweh One': The Oneness of God in the Old Testament.' In *One God, One Lord: Christianity in a World of Religious Pluralism*, edited by Andrew D. Clarke and Bruce Winter. 2nd ed.(Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1992), p. 46.

¹³ Goldingay and Wright, 'Yahweh Our God Yahweh One' p. 46.

¹⁴ I am grateful to Kenneth Stewart for comments upon an earlier version of this paper. At that time, I had mentioned the inquisitions and the crusades as examples of evils done in the name of Christianity. Ken noted that Christians are still debating the merits and demerits of these two items so that I might do better to mention something 'now universally looked upon as hideous,' such as the justification of slavery. I follow his astute historian's judgment, but I remain convinced, personally, that both the Inquisition and the Crusades are a blot on the Church's record.

Christian TV preachers.¹⁵ In assessing religions, therefore, we must begin with an awareness of the profound ambiguity in all religious experience. Just because something is religious is no guarantee that it is good for humans or aids them in relationship to God. Christian realism recognizes that human religiosity 'sometimes contains elements of truth, goodness, and beauty, but also elements of error, evil, and ugliness'.¹⁶ Sadly, Christianity is no exception. It is included in our general assessment that religion 'often results merely in self-righteousness instead of an encounter with God in his holiness and majesty'.¹⁷

Properly recognizing the ambiguity of all religions helps us to avoid 'both the undue negativism of atheism and the romantic optimism of pluralism about human religiosity'.¹⁸ As J. H. Bavinck suggests, 'If we could acquire a complete oversight of the history of religion among all peoples,' we would 'see the process of continuous degeneration and decay caused by man's rebellion against God, by his flight from God, and his anxiety in God's presence. We would also see clear proof that God had not abandoned man, has not left himself without a witness, but is unceasingly concerned and active

¹⁵ Clendenin, *Many Gods, Many Lords*, p. 54.

¹⁶ Clendenin, *Many Gods, Many Lords*, p. 51.

¹⁷ R. W. F. Wootton, *Christianity and Other Faiths: An Evangelical Contribution to Our Multi-Faith Society* (Exeter: Paternoster Press, 1983), p. 23.

¹⁸ Clendenin, *Many Gods, Many Lords*, p. 51.

with man.¹⁹ John V. Taylor observes how both the response of disobedience and the response of obedience 'gets built into the tradition and passed on to later generations. And they, in their turn, may respond more readily to the unceasing calls and disclosures of the Spirit, and so be moved to reform some part of the tradition.'²⁰ Thus, Gordon Smith warns us not to be too quick to condemn as rebellion the religious activity of 'the honest seeker after God whose only avenue of expression is the religious environment in which he lives.... It may be rebellion, but it could also be viewed positively as an authentic and sincere quest that is distorted by human fallenness.'²¹

It is serious folly to assume that all religions are leading people toward God, by their own paths, as universalists propose. Scripture condemns all other religions as such as darkness (Eph. 4:18); ignorance (Acts 17:30; Rom. 1:18ff; 1 Pet. 1:14) and foolishness (1 Cor. 1:18ff). The heathen gods are not gods (Is. 41:29; 42:17; Jer. 2:28; Acts 14:15; 19:26; Gal. 4:8) and heathen religions even demonstrate

demoniacal power (Deut. 32:17; 1 Cor. 10:20 ff.; Rev. 9:20). Although idols are not real gods, they are perceived as such by those who worship them, and behind such worship is the activity of demons (1 Cor. 10:20)

Thus, Don Howell, a missionary in Japan, writes: 'The elaborate systems of idol worship centred in temple activities are not neutral social events the believer may freely dabble in. There are dark spiritual forces ultimately at work behind the most frivolous of ceremonies, capturing the allegiance of people and leading to spiritual ruin. This explains Paul's consistent stance in his letters that the worship of the true God and the worship of idols are mutually exclusive (1 Cor. 10:14-22; 2 Cor. 6:15-18; 1 Thes. 1:9).'²² The religions are one instrument which Satan, the 'father of lies' uses to keep people from the only Saviour.²³ Sadly, the demons can also be at work within biblical covenantal religion as is evident in Christ's warnings to the churches in Smyrna, Pergamum and Thyatira! (Rev. 2:8-25).

Magic and the occult are condemned, as in Paul's strong words to Bar-Jesus (Elymas), a magician and a false prophet whom Paul denounced as 'son of the devil ... enemy of all righteousness, full of all deceit and villainy' who was 'making crooked the straight paths of the Lord' (Acts

¹⁹ J. H. Bavinck, *An Introduction to the Science of Missions*, trans. David Hugh Freeman (Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1954; reprint Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1960), p. 236.

²⁰ John V. Taylor, 'The Theological Basis of Interfaith Dialogue'. In *Faith Meets Faith*, Mission Trends No. 5, eds. Gerald H. Anderson and Thomas F. Stransky (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), pp. 97-98

²¹ Gordon T. Smith, 'Religions and the Bible: An Agenda for Evangelicals,' in *Christianity and the Religions: A Biblical Theology of World Religions*, Evangelical Missiological Society Series, no. 2, eds. Edward Rommen and Harold Netland (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 1995), p. 18.

²² Don N. Howell, Jr., 'The Apostle Paul and First Century Religious Pluralism,' in *Christianity and the Religions*, ed. Rommen and Netland, p. 104.

²³ Norman Anderson, *Christianity and World Religions: The Challenge of Pluralism* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1984), p. 172.

13:10). The confrontation with magic led to the destruction of magic paraphernalia in Ephesus (Acts 19:11-20). Accordingly, Lesslie Newbigin notes that 'the sphere of the religions is the battlefield *par excellence* of the demonic. New converts often surprise missionaries by the horror and fear with which they reject the forms of their old religion—forms that to the secularized Westerner are interesting pieces of folklore and that to the third-generation successors of the first converts may come to be prized as part of national culture.'²⁴ Any religion, including Christianity, may become 'the sphere in which evil exhibits a power against which human reason and conscience are powerless'.²⁵ Newbigin notes soberingly that 'it was the guardians of God's revelation who crucified the Son of God. It is the noblest among the Hindus who most emphatically reject the gospel. It is those who say, "We see," who seek to blot out the light (John 9:41)'.²⁶

Arthur Glasser reminds us that 'the empirical church is no less than, and no more than humankind's response to God's self-disclosure in Jesus Christ. Being human, it is a historically shaped religious movement, a product of culture, and thus limited,

as is any human institution.'²⁷ The Old Testament clearly attests that some institutionalized and well-intentioned religious practices, in spite of the fact that they had been specifically commanded by God were not only self-serving but were an outright abomination to God (1 Sam. 15:22-23; Is. 1:10-15; Amos 5:21-27; Mic. 6:6-8).²⁸ There was a Jewish zeal for the Mosaic law that sometimes represented a human attempt to earn salvation (Mt. 23:1-37; Lk. 11:37-52) and the same is true of many of the ascetic practices, pilgrimages, prayer and meditation that different religions enjoy upon their followers.

Inevitably, we must face the question of Christianity's place among the religions and it should now be apparent that I see institutional Christianity as no different from any other religion in its character as a humanly constructed institution. Some of its expressions are a response to the divine initiative in revelation and illumination which is elicited by, and is pleasing to, the Spirit of God. But in other expressions it represses God's truth and evidences deception which is both self-incurred and influenced by the demonic adversary. Like other religions, it is both a movement toward and a flight from God. Nevertheless, Christianity is intrinsically superior

²⁴ Lesslie Newbigin, *The Open Secret: An Introduction to the Theology of Mission*. Revised ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), p. 170.

²⁵ Newbigin, *The Open Secret*, p. 170.

²⁶ Newbigin, *The Open Secret*, p. 170.

²⁷ Arthur F. Glasser, 'Response to Stanley J. Samartha's "The Lordship of Jesus Christ and Religious Pluralism"', in *Christ's Lordship and Religious Pluralism*, eds. Gerald Anderson and Thomas F. Stransky (New York: Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1981), p. 38.

²⁸ Clendenin, *Many Gods, Many Lords*, p. 55.

because of its being the institutional response to the *ultimate* revelation of God in Christ, even though it is also ambiguous as a sinful human response to that revelation. It is not superior by virtue of being the fulfilment of the other religions, as though it were the best genus of a species called 'religion'²⁹ Tragically, thousands of people are being kept from Christ by Christian churches. Wonderfully, even in those churches where the official teaching is counter-productive, God is drawing people to himself through the special revelation that is never totally suppressed in the religious forms that have been constructed.

Paul's statement that 'there is no one who seeks God' (Rom. 3:11) has been cited by those who have a very negative view of all non-Christian religions. But others observe that Paul's point is that no one seeks God 'naturally'. Consequently, those who posit a work of the Spirit of God in the other religions are more hopeful that God may be at work even in the midst of the religious devotional practices of non-Christians. Norman Anderson, for instance, says that his study of Islam convinces him 'that one cannot deny that some of the great Muslim mystics have sought the face of God with a whole-heartedness that cannot be questioned'. And he does not doubt that 'in some cases it was God himself whom they

were seeking, not self-justification or a mystical experience *per se*. Like everyone else, they could be "saved" by grace alone; but may they not have been responding to some initiative of that grace which was *uniquely* operative in the cross and resurrection of One whose story they had never really heard?'³⁰

Similarly, Lesslie Newbigin, after nearly forty years of missionary work in India, writes: 'Anyone who has had intimate friendship with a devout Hindu or Muslim would find it impossible to believe that the experience of God of which his friend speaks is simply illusion or fraud.'³¹ Newbigin notes that

the contemporary debate about Christianity and the world's religions is generally conducted with the unspoken assumption that 'religion' is the primary medium of human contact with the divine. But this assumption has to be questioned. When the New Testament affirms that God has nowhere left himself without witness, there is no suggestion that this witness is necessarily to be found in the sphere of what we call religion. The parables of Jesus are notable for the fact that they speak of secular experiences. When the Fourth Gospel affirms that the light of the Logos who came into the world in Jesus shines on every human being, there is no suggestion that this light is identified with human religion. The text goes on to say that this light shines in the darkness, and the ensuing story constantly suggests that it is religion which is the primary area of darkness, while the common people, unlearned in religious matters, are the ones who respond to the light. And it is significant that Justin Martyr, one of the earliest apologists to use this Johannine

²⁹ Cf. Kraemer's critique of that fulfilment perspective, which was proposed by J. N. Farquhar (1971), Friedrich Schleiermacher, and Karl Rahner (1966), as this is reviewed by Perry, *Radical Difference*, p. 88.

³⁰ Anderson, *Christianity and World Religions*, pp. 152-53.

³¹ Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), p. 174.

teaching in making contact with the unbelieving world, affirms that the true light did indeed shine on the great philosophers like Socrates, but that the contemporary religion was the work of devils. Our thought must therefore be directed not just to the religions so called; we must ask about the relation of the gospel to all who live by other commitments, whether they are called religious or secular.³²

B. The Forms of Revelation to Which the Religions Are Responding

Religions are ambiguous human constructs, in response to divine revelation, but not all of them are responding to the same forms of revelation and that makes a significant difference in the outcome. Commonly, we distinguish between general and special revelation to indicate the difference between the knowledge that God gives of himself to all people everywhere and the knowledge which he gives more particularly on special occasions. Admittedly, as Hendrik Kraemer noted, 'every kind of revelation is a "special" revelation',³³ but who can deny that God reveals himself to all people in certain ways, while other acts of his revelation are addressed more limitedly to particular individuals or groups? Kraemer preferred to call this 'original revelation' or 'fundamental revelation'.³⁴

1. Universal or general revelation

It is commonly observed that God

has made himself known to everyone by at least three means:

1) God's creative work in the physical world (Ps. 19:1-6; 104; 148; Job 36:24-37:24; 38:1-39:30; Rom. 1:18-21). Psalm 19:4, in particular, says that the voice of God in the cosmos 'goes out through *all* the earth, and their words to the *end* of the world' (emphasis added) which 'seems to speak of God's revelation going to those who have not heard the Lord of Israel—not just to Israelites, as Barth had suggested'.³⁵ Thus Donald Macleod observes that Christianity has no difficulty assimilating the fact of 'overlap between Christianity and world religions.' Christianity 'believes that no man knows the Father except through the Son (Mt. 11:27), but it also believes that the Old Testament is revelatory precisely because the Spirit of Christ spoke in the prophets (1 Pet. 1:11); and that creation is revelatory precisely because the aeons were made through the divine Son (Heb. 1:2)'.³⁶

2) The moral conscience of every individual (Rom. 2:14-15) and the innate consciousness of the existence of God which is the root cause of the intrinsic religiousness of humankind (Acts 17:22-31) who are created in God's own image (Gen. 1:26, 27). It is possible that John 1:4, 9 offers further testimony to a universal illumination of human intel-

³² Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, pp. 172-73.

³³ *Religion and the Christian Faith* (London: Lutterworth, 1956), p. 353; cited by Perry, *Radical Difference*, p. 80

³⁴ Perry, *Radical Difference*, p. 80.

³⁵ Gerald R. McDermott, Gerald R., *Can Evangelicals Learn from World Religions? Jesus, Revelation and Religious Traditions* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2000), p. 54.

³⁶ Donald Macleod, *The Person of Christ. Contours of Christian Theology* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1998), p. 239.

lectual and moral faculties by the Logos. Donald Macleod observes that 'many theologians of unobjectionable orthodoxy have taken this to refer to a work of Christ, the eternal *Logos*, in the heart of Everyman'³⁷ and he cites Calvin's statement that

from this *light* the rays are diffused over all mankind.... For we know that men have this particular excellence which raises them above other animals, that they are endued with reason and intelligence, and that they carry the distinction between right and wrong engraven on their conscience. There is no man, therefore, whom some perception of eternal *light* does not reach.³⁸

To Macleod's mind, 'the presence of this *light* gives a perfectly coherent explanation, from the standpoint of Christian exclusivism, for all that is true and valuable in the religions of the world'.³⁹ More cautiously, D. A. Carson states that 'it might be better and simpler to say that John 1:9 insists that the Word of God, the incarnate Jesus, enlightens everyone without distinction' than to speak of him as enlightening every human person.⁴⁰

On the other hand, given that creation is revelatory of God through the mediating activity of the Logos, so that the Word does make God known to every person, it would not be surprising if the Word was also active in enlightening the creatures

who bear God's image. Though illumination is usually referred to the Spirit, within the divine economy, the close relationship which Christ draws between his own work and that of the Spirit whom he will send from the Father, prevents us from drawing too hard a line between the work of Son and Spirit (John 15:26; 16:7-15).

3) God's providential work, which includes his upholding of all that he has created (Col. 1:17), his kindness in providential care for all his creatures (Acts 14:17; Mt. 5:45), and his ordering of the affairs of nations which is specifically done in hope that people will reach out for God (Acts 17:26-27; cf God's working through the Assyrians [Is. 10:5-6] and the Chaldeans [Hab. 1:5-6]).

It is this general revelation of God to all people that helps us to account for the fact that many of the adherents of religions which are officially non-theistic nevertheless pray as they would to gods. Ajith Fernando notes:

Mahayana Buddhists [the majority within Buddhism] worship the Buddha and the *Bodhisattvas* and address their prayers to them as they would to gods. Hinayana Buddhism is practiced [sic] in countries such as Sri Lanka, Burma, Thailand, and Cambodia. It prides itself in being closer to the teachings of the Buddha and the early Buddhist (Pali) scriptures. Yet Buddhists belonging to this branch have also included the divine factor into the practice of their religion. Many Buddhists of Sri Lanka have literally deified the Buddha, a practice he would have opposed. These Buddhists often talk about the gods who protect them.⁴¹

³⁷ Macleod, *The Person of Christ*, p. 239

³⁸ Macleod, *The Person of Christ*, p. 240, citing *Commentary on the Gospel of John*, vol. 1 (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1847), p. 38.

³⁹ Macleod, *Person of Christ*, p. 240.

⁴⁰ D. A. Carson, *The Gaging of God: Christianity Confronts Pluralism* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1996), p. 303.

⁴¹ Ajith Fernando, *The Christian's Attitude Toward World Religions* (Wheaton: Tyndale House, 1987), pp. 106-07.

J. H. Bavinck claims that 'each person, no matter how deeply fallen and how far departed, still is within the reach of God's common grace. God has not left himself without a witness.'⁴² Bavinck then cites Romans 1:19 and comments:

While in the midst of their error, they have at times anxiously asked whether they were on a false path. God has had a great deal to do with them before their contact with the missionary. A missionary who worked for years in the prison of Pretoria among the Bantu natives who were condemned to death, says in one of his writings, 'When a person moves every day in a terrain where only the fundamental things remain, wherever he tries to serve as an instrument in God's hands, he discovers with moving surprise that God has already been at work in this soul. No matter how strange this may sound, 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.'⁴³

2. Specific revelation to particular individuals

Through the centuries of God's gracious working in the world, he revealed himself to particular individuals in order to establish a covenant relationship with a chosen people and finally gave the most complete revelation of himself in the incarnation of the eternal Son. In addition to God's normal means of making him-

self known through prophetic spokespersons and through the written and preached Scriptures, there are instances of other fascinating forms of communication, including people outside of the covenant community. We cannot look at these in detail but I mention the following: Abimelech (Gen. 20:1-3), Balaam (Num. 22:9; 23:11; 24:2-9), King Hiram of Tyre (2 Chr. 2:11-12), Pharaoh Neco of Egypt (2 Chr. 35:20), Cyrus, the king of Persia (2 Chr. 36:23; cf. Ezra 1:2-3, 7), Nebuchadnezzar (Ezek. 21:18-23; Dan. 2:1, 29ff, 47; 3:28-29; 4:34, 37), Belshazzar (Dan. 5:5), Darius (Dan. 6:26-28), the Magi from the East who were led by God to worship young king Jesus through their practice of astrology which took them to Herod.

In more recent years, we find numerous testimonies by people to whom God made himself known in a dream or a vision.⁴⁴ All of the experiences about which we know are, of course, experiences of people who later had contact with the gospel through human messengers but can we assume that this is always so? From the history of cross-cultural missionary work, we have numerous stories of God sending messages to individuals. For instance, the stories about a 'lost book' which have people waiting expectantly to hear from God, as among the Myan Mar;⁴⁵ the

⁴⁴ See, for example, Phillip H. Wiebe, *Visions of Jesus: Direct Encounters From the New Testament to Today* (New York: Oxford, University Press, 1997).

⁴⁵ Don Richardson, *Eternity in Their Hearts*. Revised ed. (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1984), Chapter 2.

⁴² J. H. Bavinck, *An Introduction*, p. 227.

⁴³ H. Ph. Junod, *Condamnation à mort et message de vie* (Lausanne, 1950), pp. 35ff; cited by Bavinck, *Introduction*, p. 227.

experience of the Santal people of northeast India, who had an ancient oral tradition concerning Thakur Jiu, the 'Genuine God' whom 19th century Scandinavian missionaries identified as the God who made reconciliation with himself possible through Jesus Christ;⁴⁶ the story of Warrasa Wanga, among the Gedeo people, who approached the high God Magano and asked him to reveal himself to the Gedeo people and was given vivid visions of white men and was told: 'These men will bring you a message from Magano, the God you seek. Wait for them';⁴⁷ and the particularly fascinating story of the Mbaka people in the Central African Republic, who told Baptist missionaries wanting to understand their remarkable responsiveness to the gospel:

Koro, the Creator, sent word to our forefathers long ages ago that He has already sent His Son into the world to accomplish something wonderful for all mankind. Later, however, our forefathers turned away from the truth about Koro's Son. In time they even forgot what it was that He accomplished for mankind. Since the time of 'the forgetting,' successive generations of our people have longed to discover the truth about Koro's Son. But all we could learn was that messengers would eventually come to restore that forgotten knowledge to us.... In any case, we resolved that whenever Koro's messengers arrived we would all welcome them and believe their message!⁴⁸

Many are inclined to interpret these as divine means of preparation for the gospel and to assume that no

one was actually saved until the gospel arrived. We need to be cautious about making such assumptions, on two accounts: 1) precisely because we are, by definition, ignorant of what God is doing among these peoples; and 2) because we are not in a position to judge at what point God accepts, as justifying, a faith which is wrought in the heart of a sinner by the gracious act of the Spirit of God.

With regard to the great religions we encounter today, a particularly significant question is whether God has given special revelation of a saving kind to people outside the covenant communities. Might Mohammed and Gautama and others have had particular disclosures from God, beyond general revelation but apart from the special revelation given in connection with the covenant program of God with Israel and the church? I think no better answer to this question has been offered from a Reformed perspective than the one so clearly enunciated by J. H. Bavinck, who believed that God did reveal himself to these leaders of other religions:

In the night of the *bodhi* when Buddha received his great, new insight concerning the world and life, God was touching him and struggling with him. God revealed Himself in that moment. Buddha responded to this revelation, and his answer to this day reveals God's hand and the result of human repression. In the 'night of power' of which the ninety-seventh sura of the Koran speaks, the night when 'the angels descended' and the Koran descended from Allah's throne, God dealt with Mohammed and touched him. God wrestled with him in that night, and God's hand is still noticeable in the answer of the prophet, but it is also the

⁴⁶ Richardson, *Eternity*, pp. 41-47.

⁴⁷ Richardson, *Eternity*, p. 56.

⁴⁸ As relayed to Don Richardson, *Eternity*, p. 57.

result of human repression. The great moments in the history of religion are the moments when God wrestled with man in a very particular way.⁴⁹

Tragically, because of the characteristic repression of divine revelation, of which Paul wrote in Romans 1, the God whom these devout people sought is different from the true God and the religions that follow from their encounter with God, while bearing the marks of divine revelation, represent primarily the human rejection of God. Yet, the work of the Spirit is evident at times when God, 'as it were, stop[s] the noiseless engines of repression and exchange and overwhelm[s] man to such an extent that he is powerless for the moment'.⁵⁰ Bavinck cites Cyrus as such a case, in which God anointed him with his Spirit and empowered him for the task to which God called him, even though Cyrus did not know God. Thus, says Bavinck:

We meet figures in the history of the non-Christian religions of whom we feel that God wrestled with them in a very particular way. We still notice traces of that process of suppression and substitution in the way they responded, but occasionally we observe a far greater influence of God there than in many other human religions. The history of religion is not always and everywhere the same; it does not present a monotonous picture of only folly and degeneration. There are culminating points in it, not because certain human beings are much better than others, but because every now and then divine compassion interferes, compassion which keeps man from suppressing and substituting the truth completely.⁵¹

III. Salvation of Individuals May be *Within* but is not *Through* the Religions

As I have indicated in earlier writing, I find no indication anywhere in Scripture that God's saving work in the world is restricted to knowledge of the special revelation God gave to his covenant people, both in the Old and the New Testament periods. In other words, I believe that the unevangelized can be saved, if God graciously chooses to give them the faith which is appropriate to the means of revelation with which they have been blessed. But, although I grant that adherents of other religions may be saved by God's grace, I do not believe that their religions are God's ordained means of salvation for them. As Christopher Wright says, 'Religion does not save anybody—God does;' other religions 'are not salvific because they do not tell the story of what God has done to save people.'⁵²

The unique thing about Christianity as a religion is that it tells the story of God's saving work in Jesus, and God uses that telling as a means of salvation. I take this to be the point of the denial stated in Article 5 of the 1999 declaration of 'The Gospel of Jesus Christ': 'We deny that anyone is saved in any other way than by Jesus Christ and his Gospel. The Bible offers no hope that sincere worshipers of other religions will be

49 J. H. Bavinck, *The Church*, p. 125.

50 J. H. Bavinck, *The Church*, p. 125.

51 J. H. Bavinck, *The Church*, p. 126.

52 Christopher Wright, 'What Difference Does Jesus Make?', in *Practicing Truth: Confident Witness in Our Pluralistic World*, eds. David W. Shenk and Linford Stutzman (Scottsdale PA: Herald Press, 1999), p. 247.

saved without personal faith in Jesus Christ.⁵³ I understand this to mean that the religions are not saving instruments of God, as though sincere fulfilment of the requirement of those religions would itself serve as a means of salvation. I firmly believe that salvation comes only through a Spirit illumined faith response to the self-revelation of God and that all who are finally saved will have joyfully received Christ at some point in their life, even if it is not until the moment when they left this world and met Jesus, at death.

It is one thing to say that God can be known savingly by those who are outside of Christianity, it is quite another to say that people can know God savingly *through* other religions. If people are saved in other religions, it is in spite of, rather than because of, those religions as such. It could be only because God, in his great grace, has drawn them to faith through those aspects of their experience and knowledge which are true to God's self-revelation and which have come to them as a part of that self-revelation, either directly or through a transmission of special revelation made in the past. It is important that we not leap from the recognition that there is truth in other religions, even truth which owes its origin to divine revelation, to the assumption that the religions themselves are salvific.

IV. The Religions and God's Providential Program for Humanity

Given my monergist assumption that God is working out his eternal purpose in and for the world by means of the meticulous providence through which he exercises his general sovereignty, we are now ready to ponder God's intention and providential action in the rise and development of the religions of the world. Approaches which have commonly been identified as 'inclusivist,' often suggest that non-Christian religious traditions 'may be regarded as legitimate vehicles of salvation, included in God's great plan of redemption, to the extent that they serve positively to bring persons into a right relationship with God and neighbor'.⁵⁴ The inclusivist claim is not that every religion is in fact, a vehicle of salvation, but that any religion *may* be so. What are we to make of this? Did God raise up the many religions to serve his saving purposes in the world?

A. Religions: Stepping-Stones to Christ?

Gerald McDermott notes that Christian thinkers have 'argued that foreign systems of thought—both philosophical and religious—can be stepping-stones or schoolmasters to lead the heathen to Christ' and suggests:

Perhaps the religions will serve this function: as providential preparations for

⁵³The Gospel of Jesus Christ: An Evangelical Celebration', *Christianity Today*, June 14, 1999, p. 54.

⁵⁴ Don A. Pittman, Ruben L. F. Habito, and Terry C. Muck, eds., *Ministry and Theology in Global Perspective: Contemporary Challenges for the Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), p. 58.

future peoples to receive the full revelation of God in Christ. This does not mean that there is direct continuity from the religions to Christ, but it does mean that the religions may be used by Jesus to prepare their devotees to understand and receive himself—just as the practice of animal sacrifice instituted by the Triune God (and copied by nearly every world religion thereafter) prepared the Jews to be able to understand and receive Christ as the Lamb of God who takes away their sins.⁵⁵

A Reformed doctrine of divine providence affirms God's complete control of all things in his creation, so that everything that occurs is part of the outworking of God's eternal purpose (sometimes spoken of as God's 'decree'). An important distinction is made, however, between the things that God wills to *effect*, or to bring about by his own initiative, and the things that God wills to *permit*. The latter are incorporated by God into the larger program whereby he achieves his purposes and brings good, even out of evil, while not being morally accountable for the evil that his creatures do freely.

On the assumption that everything in human history is ordered by God's providential governing of his creation, the question here is, then, 'Which kind of divine purpose is at work in regard to the religions?' Is God actively at working bringing the religions into being because he has redemptive purposes for them, as 'fulfilment' theories would suggest,

or are these ambiguous *human* constructions, such as I have described above, in and through which God nevertheless works for good? I am inclined to see the latter, but I hear a stronger sense of divine positive intention in McDermott's description, though I would not want to put words in his mouth. Nevertheless, given my recognition that there is a work of illumination by God's Spirit going on at significant moments in the religious experience of individuals, which experiences occasionally contribute to developments in the life and thought of religions, the work of God within the development of religions should not be ignored. But, we are unable to affirm positively the final result, because of the additional negative contribution of human suppression of the truth and of demonic deception. This point is made nicely by Amos Yong⁵⁶ who rightly suggests that we 'see religious traditions as serving divine purposes in greater or lesser degrees at each stage of their evolution' and to include Christianity in this assessment.⁵⁷

Christopher Wright and John Goldingay posit that 'Deuteronomy suggests that worship of other deities offered by non-Israelites is ordained by God (see Deut. 4:19; cf 32:8-9 RSV, NIV mg following the Qumran ms and LXX).'⁵⁸ But, taking note of the ambiguity in regard to God's

⁵⁵ Gerald R. McDermott, 'What If Paul Had Been From China?: Reflections on the Possibility of Revelation in Non-Christian Religions', in *No Other Gods Before Me?: Evangelicals and the Challenge of World Religions*, ed. John G. Stackhouse Jr. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001), p. 32.

⁵⁶ Amos Yong, *Discerning the Spirit(s): A Pentecostal-Charismatic Contribution to Christian Theology of Religions* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), pp. 48-49.

⁵⁷ Yong, *Discerning the Spirit(s)*, p. 50.

⁵⁸ Goldingay and Wright, 'Yahweh Our God Yahweh One', p. 51.

providence which I have identified above, they suggest that 'this may be an example of the way the Hebrew Bible attributes to Yahweh as sole cause phenomena which we tend to attribute to secondary human volition'. This is done, 'for example, in some cases of human lying, or disobedience, or hardening of the heart. If Israelites observed that other nations worshipped their own deities, and if Yahweh was sovereign high God over all, then he must in some way be responsible for the fact.' Wisely, however, they see this as only an 'interim acceptance', given that such religion is shown to be inadequate by the later fuller awareness.⁵⁹ D. A. Carson puts the matter well:

Even if one decides that what is meant is that God apportions the worship of the heavenly array to the pagan nations, this may mean, within the context of the storyline (not least in Deuteronomy), no more than that God's sovereign sway extends even over the pagan nations and their false gods, but that is no reason for the covenant community who truly know God to follow in their path. In other words, the verse provides no optimism for the view that the worship of idols is an acceptable alternative approach to the one living and true God.⁶⁰

Earlier, I cited Gerald McDermott's suggestion that the religions may have a providential role, preparing their adherents to receive 'the full revelation of God in Christ', although there is not a direct continuity between the religions and Christ. I am willing to grant this, if we

think of God's providential work as inclusive of the things that he permits with good intentions. However, I would not be comfortable affirming 'providential preparation' if that is taken to mean that God was intentionally developing these religious systems in preparation for the gospel, as a parallel to his work with Israel. If that is not McDermott's intention, I think I am prepared to affirm his statement. I see an ambiguity in his language, however, because the animal sacrifices were 'instituted' by Yahweh and that makes it sound as though some of the other religious constructs were also 'instituted' by God.

In this vein, McDermott cites Jonathan Edwards as believing 'that God has planted types [in the sense of Old Testament types, pointing forward to Christ] of true religion even in religious systems that were finally false. God outwitted the devil, he suggested, by using diabolically deceptive religion to teach what is true. For example, the practice of human sacrifice was the result of the devil's mimicry of the animal sacrifice that God had instituted after the Fall.'⁶¹ Animal sacrifice was the main type of Christ in the Old Testament but it was also revealed to all the Gentiles. Satan distorted this and led the Gentiles to sacrifice human beings, even their own sons. In doing this,

Satan believed he had 'promote[d] his own interests,' outsmarting God; but God outflanked the devil. He permitted this diabolical deception because through it

⁵⁹ Goldingay and Wright, 'Yahweh Our God Yahweh One', p. 51.

⁶⁰ Carson, *Gagging*, p. 296, fn. 76.

⁶¹ McDermott, *Can Evangelicals Learn*, p. 106.

'the devil prepared the Gentile world for receiving ... this human sacrifice, Jesus Christ.' Similarly, the devil induced human beings to worship idols and think that the Gentile deities were united to their images. But God used this deception as well for his own purposes, to prepare the Gentile mind for the concept of incarnation, perfectly realized in Christ: 'And so indeed was [the] heathenish doctrines of deities' being united to images and the heathenish fables of heroes being begotten [by] gods, a preparation for their receiving the doctrine of the incarnation, of the Deity's dwelling in a human [body], and the Son of God's being conceived in the womb of a virgin by the power of the Spirit of [God].'⁶²

These 'pagan practices thus pictured divine realities in distorted (and sometimes horrific) fashion'. They were 'not merely human insights but developments (albeit twisted and broken) of original perceptions granted by God himself'.⁶³

This is the sort of divine providential work that I would want to affirm. Edwards' proposal puts an interesting twist on the 'no agreement' approach to other religions which views them as simply the product of demonic deception. It grants this to be the case but then puts Satan's work under subjection to God who is able to use it for his own good purposes. Thus, we do not have to conceive of the religions as designed or intended by God but we can still see his providential work *within* them, bringing good and gracious effects out of what is intrinsically evil. However, when McDermott speaks of

this as indication that 'God sometimes plants within the religions types of His fuller Christian realities',⁶⁴ he discerns a divine intentionality in the situation which I do not think is necessitated by his own description of Edwards' concept.

As other examples of 'revealed types' such as Edwards found in other religions, McDermott would add 'the idea that human beings are accepted by the divine on the basis of divine love rather than human effort', taught by Mahayana Buddhists and Hindu *bhaktas*.⁶⁵ It is not 'general revelation' but it is also not 'special revelation' because it does not reveal salvation through Jesus Christ. McDermott is quick to note that 'the grace taught by these communities is not the same as the grace shown by the God of Jesus Christ. Humans are sometimes expected to do something to merit this grace, and the Hindu and Buddhist deities do not manifest the holiness of the God of Israel. Hence the grace is not as costly as for the Christian Trinity. Nevertheless, the basic idea of divine love overruling legal demands is present.'⁶⁶

Don Richardson's account of the concept of the peace child among the fierce, cannibalistic Asmat people of New Guinea, would appear to be an instance of this typology present in other religious structures. Richardson calls them 'redemptive

⁶² McDermott, *Can Evangelicals Learn*, p. 107, citing Jonathan Edwards, *Miscellanies*, entry 307.

⁶³ McDermott, *Can Evangelicals Learn*, p. 114.

⁶⁴ McDermott, *Can Evangelicals Learn*, p. 108.

⁶⁵ McDermott, *Can Evangelicals Learn*, p. 113.

⁶⁶ McDermott, *Can Evangelicals Learn*, p. 113, n. 38.

analogies'.⁶⁷ Again, McDermott is careful to note, as I would do, that 'this is not to equate the Christian Scriptures, which contain types, with other scriptures that may contain types. The Bible is in a different category of revelation from that of the religions since it alone mediates the reality of the triune God as incarnate in Jesus of Nazareth.'⁶⁸ But, 'among the religions are scattered promises of God in Christ' and 'these promises are revealed types planted there by the triune God'.⁶⁹ Once more, provided this is not taken to imply that the religions *per se* are an intentional divine development, I concur with McDermott.

B. Religions as Analogous to Governments

Stanley Grenz proposes another way in which the religions may have a providential role in the work of God in history:

The biblical visionaries anticipate the establishment of the eternal community of a reconciled humankind dwelling within the renewed creation and enjoying the presence of the redeeming God. Although the fullness of community comes only as God's gift at the culmination of history, the biblical writers also assert that foretastes of the future reality can be found in the present. The providential place of human religious traditions, therefore, may lie in their role of fostering community.⁷⁰

⁶⁷ Don Richardson, *Peace Child* (Glendale, CA: Regal Books, 1974).

⁶⁸ McDermott, *Can Evangelicals Learn*, p. 114.

⁶⁹ McDermott, *Can Evangelicals Learn*, p. 114.

⁷⁰ Stanley J. Grenz, 'The Universality of the "Jesus-Story" and the "Incredulity Toward Metanarratives"', in *No Other Gods before Me?: Evangelicals and the Challenge of World Religions*, ed. John J. Stackhouse (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001), p. 104.

Grenz suggests that 'whatever their ultimate vision of reality may be, all religious traditions contribute to identity formation and social cohesion. Their immediate goal is to assist their adherents in the task of gaining a sense of identity as persons standing in relationship to something 'larger' than the individual, however that encompassing reality may be understood. In this sense, religions fulfil a divinely sanctioned function. Because God's ultimate purpose is the establishment of community, evangelicals ought to affirm each religious tradition in its intent to promote social cohesion among human beings, for in this manner each contributes to the present experience of community.'⁷¹

Here, I see evidence of God's work of (common) grace, one of those aspects of a religious construct which we can affirm as good, and for which we can give praise to God, but I would not suggest that God had intentionally raised up the religion to accomplish this purpose. It is a case in which the ambiguity of all religions is evident and in which a sign of the grace of God is to be welcomed without thereby endorsing the whole religious construct as God's work.

Grenz suggests a parallel with 'Paul's affirmation of government as God's agent in promoting good and punishing evil (Rom. 13.1-6)',⁷² I understand human government to be an institution set up by God to function as an instrument of common grace in the world, providing

⁷¹ Grenz, 'The Universality', pp. 105-06.

⁷² Grenz, 'The Universality', p. 106, n. 54.

order and justice in a society where sin inevitably works toward disorder and injustice. To parallel religions to governments is to recognize a divine intention in their existence as institutions, but it need not suggest that any particular religion is therefore serving completely as God wishes it to do. Grenz himself is quick to note that 'religion readily becomes an expression of human fallenness, even falling prey to the demonic' and, thus a parallel to government is further demonstrated. Governments too, though ordained by God to do good, can be perverted and can work against the moral purposes of God for humanity instead of promoting them.

C. Religions as Analogous to Cultures

Personally, I am more inclined to parallel religion and culture (as Harold Netland does⁷³), while recognizing that in non-secular cultures, it is often difficult to distinguish between the two. Particular cultures need not be viewed as developed by specific divine providential intention but they have come about through both God's good creative activity and human activity, which is a mixture of good and evil. Once this parallel is drawn, much can be gained by applying the insights offered by Richard Mouw on culture and common grace to the aspect of religion. Here, as well, we can see the grace of God at work, bearing fruit which gives God pleasure and in which we too can delight, without affirming the

entire religious system. Where other religions serve to restrain the expression of sin within their community, and to foster works of civic good, we can be thankful and we should attribute these relative goods to the grace of God.

Richard Mouw has suggested that 'one legitimate way to think positively about the fact of multiple Christian denominations may be to see different denominational groups as having different vocations—different assignments from the Lord to work out different virtues and to cultivate different spiritual sensitivities'.⁷⁴ I do not wish to extend the language of denominations within Christianity to the various religions of the world, which would give the impression that the divine assignments given to Lutheranism and Presbyterianism are analogous to different assignments given to Christianity and Buddhism. That would be the road of thoroughgoing pluralism, down which a biblically informed theology cannot walk. But, granting the more general analogy between culture and religion, without suggesting that the religions *as such* are divinely ordered, we can see how the common grace purposes of God for a fallen world may be providentially served by the religions. We can see how God might bless particular communities through the ways in which sin is restrained, the needy are cared for, those who do good to others are encouraged and assisted, and human

⁷³ Netland, *Encountering*, p. 328.

⁷⁴ Richard J. Mouw, *He Shines in All That's Fair: Culture and Common Grace* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), pp. 79-80.

well-being in general, is fostered, even when the agencies bringing this good are religious.

By keeping clearly in view the differences between God's common and his special (saving) grace, we can see, in the religious systems we encounter, cause for gratitude to God and his grace as well as opportunity to proclaim and to model the much greater blessings that God communicates through union with Christ. Ironically, evangelism seems easiest where God's common grace has least been experienced, because the restraint of sin and its consequences that comes about through God's gracious working in a community makes it more difficult to convince people of their need of saving grace. As Jesus himself observed, it is to sinners who are aware of their own sinfulness and the desperation of their situation that the liberating message of the gospel is most evident as good news.

Nevertheless, as Mouw helpfully demonstrates, Christians should seek to be agents of common grace, doing 'common grace ministries'.⁷⁵ These have an intrinsic legitimacy and value, even though we must not be satisfied to stop with them, knowing that we are also called to be agents of special grace. It is as agents of special grace that the religions which are not based upon the revelation of God in Christ fail disastrously but, as agents of common grace, they may sometimes exceed some Christian communities. Recognizing this to be true should keep

us from triumphalism in our relationship with the other religions of the world and should enable us to be positively appreciative of ways in which God is at work in and through them. The fact that the grace of God which we observe in those religions is not saving grace should not prevent us from valuing the evidences of common grace that we observe. Indeed, we need to be cautious about claiming that we can accurately define the line between common and special grace, as Mouw warns us, when he observes that for all he or 'any of us can know—much of what we now think of as common grace may in the end time be revealed to be saving grace'.⁷⁶

To the Lystrans (Acts 14:15-17) and the Athenians (Acts 17:24-28), the apostle Paul appealed to God's general revelation and common grace to lead them on to the higher knowledge of God as he had revealed himself in Christ. So, we may start by affirming the good features which we observe in the lives of other religious communities and seek to open their eyes to the Giver of all these goods in human experience. We can show them how their own life experience is illumined by the biblical narrative and how the longings of their souls, that are unsatisfied by even the best features of their religious system, can be satisfied by Christ.

Jeremiah's instructions to the exiles in Babylon between the first deportation and the destruction of

⁷⁵ Mouw, *He Shines*, pp. 80-82.

⁷⁶ Mouw, *He Shines*, p. 100.

Jerusalem merit our consideration in the context of religions. He urged them to 'build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce.... But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare (Jer. 29:5, 7).' 'The very practice of prayers for the foreign city and its rulers acknowledges the reign of God',⁷⁷ but it is inconceivable that similar instructions could be given to Christians living in the midst of a community which predominantly practised a different religion, *with specific reference to that religious context*.

Christians should seek and pray for the welfare of their nation and of their culture, but they can hardly do the same for the religion. Becoming Christians did not change their political status, except that they now recognize that their government is itself in subjection to God. This might necessitate disobedience at some time, if the two authorities come into conflict. But, with regard to the religion from which they have converted, their new commitment to serve God's purposes of bringing everyone into his kingdom through the spread of Christ's Lordship, immediately puts them in conflict with their former religion. They cannot pray for its welfare, except in a very limited sense, namely, that it might at least serve God's purposes of common grace. In those areas, they may even

work together with adherents of other religions. But, the survival of the religion as such is clearly threatened by the Christian mandate to evangelism which Christ uses to build his church.

It is precisely this distinction between the respective roles of governments and religions within the providence of God that puts Christians in such a difficult situation, in non-secular societies. Where a religion makes no distinction between itself and the state, it is inevitable that the leaders of such a religion will view Christians as a political threat. It is extremely difficult for Christians to convince their neighbours, in such a context, that they are loyal citizens of their nation and society but, effectively, opponents of the religion with which the state is inextricably allied. This includes a wide range of contexts, including states in which the head is considered to be divine, those in which religious law (such as Islamic *sharia*) is constituted the law of the state, or even traditional African contexts in which the Christian aversion to ancestor veneration (when viewed as 'worship') imperils the status of the chief whose power and authority derives from his relationship to those ancestors. This also puts most forms of Christianity in the catch 22 of being perceived as dangerous proponents of secularism, precisely because they insist that the government should not be preferentially related to any religious institution but should foster religious freedom.

⁷⁷ Allen Verhey, *Christian Community, Scripture, and the Moral Life* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), p. 378.

VI. Conclusion

To sum up, I understand religions to

be ambiguous responses to various forms of divine revelation, both general and special. As beings created for fellowship with God, humans are naturally religious but the religions we construct are all the result of both appropriation and suppression of divine truth. God may graciously save individuals within the context of their religions but this is not because the religions themselves are salvific. Nevertheless, we can assert that all of the religions have a role in God's providential program in human history. They have not been intentionally developed by God as stepping

stones to Christ, but within them are aspects of truth which God may graciously use in his work of drawing individuals to himself savingly. Like human governments, religions may serve the purposes of God's common grace in society but they can also fall prey to the demonic. They are rather like human cultures. In both cultures and religions we can observe and appreciate signs of the work of God's grace, but both are human constructs which must be continually critiqued and reformed by the gospel of Christ.

NEW FROM PATERNOSTER

Ecumenism and History: Studies in Honour of John H.Y Briggs

Ed. Anthony R. Cross

This collection of essays revolves around the two fields in which Professor John Briggs has contributed so much: history – particularly Baptist and Nonconformist – and the ecumenical movement, and many of the contributions examine the inter-relationship between them. With contributions from colleagues and former research students from Britain, Europe and North America, *Ecumenism and History* provides wide-ranging studies in important aspects of Christian history, theology and ecumenical studies.

Anthony R. Cross is a church theologian who has lectured at the University of Surrey Roehampton, and also tutors correspondence courses for the University of Gloucestershire and London Bible College. He is author of *Baptism and Baptists* and has edited with Stanley E. Porter, *Baptism, the New Testament and the Church*.

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Encyclopedia of Evangelicalism

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Stanley J. Grenz
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ERT (2003) 27:3, 268-270

0144-8153

The Letter of James

by Douglas J. Moo

Pillar New Testament Commentary
Grand Rapids/Cambridge:

Eerdmans, 2000

ISBN 0-8028-3730-1

Leicester: Apollos ISBN 0-85111-977-8

Indices 288 pp

Reviewed by Rev Prof. Norman T. Barker, Emmanuel College, University of Queensland

Having already immersed himself in the rich Pauline theology of Romans (NICNT 1996), Moo turns his attention again to the Letter of James, with more scope in the Pillar series than he had in the Tyndale series (1987).

The aim of the Pillar series is a scholarly but reverent approach to the Scripture text, marked by 'a certain fear, a holy joy, a questing obedience', expressed in 'rigorous exegesis and exposition, with an eye alert to biblical theology, and the

contemporary relevance of the Bible'. Moo upholds this splendid aim.

Since Peter Davids lamented the comparative neglect of James in his 1982 commentary, it has attracted attention from several evangelical scholars, Davids himself (NIGTC) and R.P. Martin (WBC 1988).

Against Luther's well-known view of James as 'a right strawy epistle', and even Calvin's more judicious judgment that James seemed 'rather more reluctant to preach the grace of Christ than an apostle ought to be', the letter, Moo says, 'provides an important counterweight to a potential imbalance from reading Paul'. Against comparative dismissal by scholars stands the fact that the letter is rated among two or three most popular books with people. As a practical pastor, James' teaching about God, temptation, prayer, the law, wisdom and eschatology is vital to the church's practical theology.

A succinct introduction treats authorship (James the Lord's brother), date (40s) and key aspects of theology. Moo is impressed by James' creative use of Hellenistic Jewish traditions. It stands foursquare in the tradition of Jesus' teaching, and echoes key features of OT and intertestamental literature (Ben Sirach and Philo in particular). There are frequent echoes of Lev. 19, in verses surrounding the 'royal law' (Lev. 19.18).

Although James appears to lack clear organisation, it is neither as disjointed nor as closely structured as some have suggested. Key themes permeate the letter: trials, wisdom

(essentially practical as in Wisdom literature), rich and poor, the perils of speech (again following Proverbs and Sirach), and prayer, particularly for healing. Behind everything is what Moo calls the 'central concern' of James, which is wholeness, 'a consistent and undivided commitment to God in Christ' (p. 52). James could have coined his key word *di-psychos* (double-minded).

Moo analyses the letter around this central concern. Trials present a particular opportunity in the pursuit of spiritual wholeness (1:1-18); the evidence of spiritual wholeness is found in obedience to the word (1:19-2:26); teaching on speech and peace reflects the community dimensions of spiritual wholeness (3:1-4:12); understanding time and eternity is an important aspect of the worldview of spiritual wholeness (4:13-5:11).

2:14-26 is 'the most theologically significant and the most controversial' section. He notes the distinctively Pauline vocabulary of 2:24, which suggests 'the teaching of the apostle to the Gentiles is lurking in the background.' Moo holds that James counteracts 'a misunderstood' or 'perverted' form of Paul's teaching. This is his key to the date of the letter—before the Jerusalem Council when James would have received clarification from Paul himself. 'Had James know what Paul truly preached...he would have put things differently than he did' (p. 26).

James and Paul faced different situations: Paul faced Judaizers, James professing Christians who were dismissing the importance of obedience in the Christian life. 'Paul strikes at

legalism; James at quietism.' Luther and Wesley are parallel—Luther facing medieval theology, Wesley a church indifferent to moral imperatives. So in our day Christians need to pay attention to the James' warning that true faith is tested by its works and that only a faith that issues in works is genuinely saving faith. 'God's gracious acceptance of us does not end our obligation to obey him; it sets it on a new footing' (p.117).

For Paul 'justify' is God's initial declaration of innocence; for James it means 'vindication in the judgment'. When James says that Abraham's works 'complete' his faith, Moo refers to 1 John 4:12 which does not mean that love is improved, but 'comes to expression, reaches its intended goal'. So Abraham's faith found its ultimate significance and meaning in a life of obedience.

Moo rejects a narrowly socio-economic interpretation of rich vs. poor. Wealth and poverty are theological as well as economic, although reflecting the trials they were undergoing; Moo associates with the famine of AD 46 (Acts 11:28).

Vital to James' faith is the new birth (1:18) and acceptance of the 'implanted word' (1:22), a reflection of Jer. 31:31-34. The wisdom that Christians are to exercise involves a 'basic, God-given orientation that has profound effects on the way a person lives' (p.174). It is a 'wisdom from above' (3:17), and similar to Paul's 'fruit of the Spirit' (Gal. 5:22,23).

Moo is familiar, but cautious, with current literary approaches to the

Bible. He deftly draws attention to riches in the original Greek often hidden in translation. He notes the word-play in 2:20, 'Faith without works (*erga*) is useless (*argos*), but NIV hides the word-play in 2:22, 'Faith working with (*synergei*) his works (*ergois*)', where he refers us to NASB. He describes the metaphors in 1:14, 'dragged away' and 'enticed' as 'dead', that is, having lost its original connection. He refers to the striking rhetorical feature of 3:5 where 'great' and 'small' translate the same Greek word.

The Church needs the Letter of James—and Moo helps to open its riches.

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0144-8153

Paul in the Roman World: the Conflict at Corinth

by Robert M. Grant

Louisville/London/Leiden:

Westminster John Knox, 2001

ISBN 0-664-22452-0

viii + 181 pp. Paper

Reviewed by H. H. Drake

Williams, III, Biblical Theological Seminary, Hatfield Pa

In this volume, Robert Grant, the Carl Darling Buck Professor Emeritus of Humanities and of New Testament and Early Christianity at the University of Chicago and Divinity School, examines 1 Corinthians in relation to the Roman world in which Paul was operating. Grant chooses to analyse the relationship between this particular epistle and Paul since

'it is the only letter from Paul that provides significant evidence of the history of the Christian church' (p. vii). By examining the Roman culture of Corinth, he provides parallels between Roman culture and Paul's letter to Corinth.

Grant starts by providing two chapters of background information on Paul's journey to Corinth and information about the city of Corinth. He describes the transition that Paul made in his missionary journeys from preaching to the Thessalonians and their Jewish background, to Athens where Hellenistic Judaism and Greek philosophy were the dominant ideas, to Corinth where there was little Jewish influence. He believes that this probably affected his approach to each city and the content of these epistles.

He then points out various features of the city of Corinth. He notes the great wealth of the city, the Roman colonists who were placed in the city after its destruction, and the importance of the city since it rests on the isthmus between the Aegean and Adriatic Seas. He notes that Corinth is a city influenced by a great deal of Roman ideology. The Greco-Roman influence within Corinth provides the basis for the remainder of Grant's study.

Following this, Grant compares contemporary Roman ideas with parallel ideas in 1 Corinthians. He finds many parallels between the contents of 1 Corinthians and Roman ideas regarding business, politics, religion, ritual, and sexuality. His chapters are filled with comparisons between 1 Corinthians and

Greco-Roman literature such as Isocrates, Seneca, and Strabo. He also cites early Christian literature such as the *Didache*, *1 Clement*, and Justin's *Apology* and *Dialogue with Trypho*. These comparisons and citations are helpful in drawing comparisons between Paul and the Roman world.

At the conclusion of his work, Grant states that a Greco-Roman critic would have found 1 Corinthians dealing only obliquely with problems of working officials such as businessmen, craftsmen, traders, and salesmen but instead focusing on personal and group relations. Grant finds a wall of Scripture, rhetoric, philosophy, and theology built around the Christian community separating Christians in Corinth from everyday life. He also finds Paul replacing and assimilating this Roman culture in his conflicts among the Corinthians at the time of the writing of 1 Corinthians.

While Grant has provided many parallels for the reader to consider, there are a number of noticeable concerns with Grant's study that put his conclusions on shaky ground. Firstly, Grant sees Paul's opponents as Cynic-Stoics and Gnostics. This is a minority opinion for Paul's opponents that he is addressing in 1 Corinthians. There are other scholars who have held such viewpoints in the past who are now not holding this viewpoint any longer (e.g., Ulrich Wilckens).

He has also neglected the work of other scholars who have argued convincingly for Paul's opponents being Greco-Roman. He does not refer to

the recent works on Corinthian backgrounds by Duane Litfin, *St. Paul's Theology of Proclamation: 1 Corinthians 1-4 and Greco-Roman Rhetoric* (SNTSMS 79; Cambridge: CUP, 1994), Andrew Clarke, *Secular and Christian Leadership in Corinth: A Socio-Historical & Exegetical Study of I Corinthians 1-6* (AGJU 18; Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1993), Ben Witherington, *Conflict and Community in Corinth: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on I and II Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), and Bruce Winter, *Paul and Philo amongst the Sophists: A Hellenistic-Jewish and a Christian Response* (SNTSMS 96; Cambridge: CUP, 1996). These works portray Paul much more in conflict with Greco-Roman society than Grant suggests. They also imply that Paul is contradicting current Greco-Roman ideas rather than assimilating them.

Grant also minimizes the Jewish background that others have considered assimilated in his gospel message. While he does acknowledge the Jewish background behind idolatry, he does not recognize Jewish parallels that influenced his work which scholars are recognizing. Most notably, there is no reference to the work of B. S. Rosner, *Paul, Scripture, and Ethics: A Study of I Corinthians 5-7* (AGAJU 22. Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1994). Rosner's work claims that Paul's Jewish background from Old Testament Scripture and early Jewish literature can account for his injunctions regarding marriage and sexuality. Some interaction with Rosner's work would

make Grant's claims more convincing.

Grant's work will be of interest to those considering 1 Corinthians and New Testament backgrounds. His references to Roman and early Christian literature would be particularly helpful for scholars seeking comparisons between these bodies of literature and Paul. Further, interaction with other Corinthians scholars will be necessary to make Grant's viewpoints convincing.

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0144-8153

Logos Bible Software Series X 'Scholar's Library'

Logos Research Systems, Inc.
Bellingham, WA, USA

*Reviewed by David Parker, Editor,
Evangelical Review of Theology*

Logos Research Systems have set an impressive standard in the competitive Bible software market with their 'new generation' Series X for Windows-based computers. There are five packages available, targeted at different user groups ranging in price from US\$150 to \$600. The top of the line 'Scholar's Library' includes powerful search engines with 230 different book titles accessible on purchase, and almost 450 more on disk which can be unlocked by making additional payments.

The multi-CD system installs reasonably easily (depending on hardware), with the help of the (brief) instruction sheet. There is a security code system to register the program,

and adequate on-line support and information about upgrades and additional books is available from the manufacturer (www.logos.com).

The instructions recommend that books selected for use be transferred to the hard disk for quicker access. However, while still learning the program, it is easy to load books inadvertently, but there is no way within the program to delete unwanted books from the hard drive, even though they can be grouped in collections and de-activated. The listing of the same book under different titles (e.g., full, abbreviated and initial letters) and the lack of identification of the files are confusing features.

Basic operation for Bible study is as easy as claimed in the advertising, once the general idea is grasped. The main page opens with a window to insert a Bible reference or topic. Depending on options selected, pressing 'OK' will then open up selected Bible version(s), together with commentaries, lexicons and other reference books (including maps); clicking on the resource will open it at the appropriate point, displaying relevant data. The focus can be on comparison of translations, commentaries, word studies, or links to topics addressed in the passage. The 'Exegetical Guide' consists of the parsing of the original language words and links to lexicons or similar reference works. A handy feature is listing words according to frequency so that, for example, well known words occurring, say, more than 40 times in the NT, need not be displayed.

Searching for Bible passages or

themes and topics in the installed books is another basic function available directly from the menu. The Bible search feature allows for a focus on particular books or sections of the Bible as well as particular words or related words. In certain original language texts, parsing appears when the cursor hovers over the words. A further powerful feature is the Greek or Hebrew morphological search (Gramcord and Westminster) which supports searches for nominated words in various specified forms in the resources selected (a particular version of OT, LXX, NT etc). A graphical interface is planned for future updates which is expected to make the advanced features of this function much more user friendly. Currently there is no help with groups of words (like genitive absolutes), disputed morphology or syntax. Texts with critical apparatus are planned for later modules.

Hovering the cursor over highlighted text such as a biblical reference, abbreviation, technical term or other hotlink will helpfully display the relevant material (such the text of the biblical reference), but this is sometimes excessive (for example, when the cursor is casually or accidentally placed on a hotlink) especially on a slower computer which takes time to find the resource. Using advanced configuration techniques, this feature can be switched off. As is often the case, the specifications for hardware recommended by the manufacturer are at the low end of the usable range, especially since it is easy to institute long searches inadvertently due to the large number of resources

in the package and some lack of clarity in the instructions.

Much is made in the promotional material of the many features of the package, but, as there is no printed manual, and the help system is primitive by normal Windows standards, mastering all but the basic functions and features is likely to be a slow process. The supplied 'video introduction' CD is mainly promotional and a tutorial CD is paced so fast and contains so many instructions, it is practically necessary to view it on a second computer. A summary card highlighting the features and operation would be a great advantage.

Many of the features cleverly exploit what computers are good at doing – finding, comparing and displaying specific data. Some of this is of help to a student, such as parallel displays of the Bible translations or locating Biblical references and words in literally hundreds of books. This speeds up the study process and reduces the tedium of flipping pages and checking indexes. However some of the functions in the software are trivial for a 'Scholar's Library' – such as summarising the content of an article in a purely mechanistic manner to a specified percentage of the original length, a prayer list manager, or computing a personal Bible reading plan according to the number of verses per day, the number of chapters to be read, and days to complete the reading. Other features, including a note book, bookmarking, and saving the work-space for the future use, would be useful to some users. As expected, data can be printed and transferred to other

applications easily; formatting of bibliographical data according to various citation standards is a useful timesaver.

The value of the electronic library for searching, data transfer and portability is already well recognized, but the test of a particular product includes the number, quality, cost and relevance of books available, whether or not it is intuitive to use, contains features which are appropriate for its intended users and can be expanded, and the quality and accessibility of technical support.

Scholar's Library provides a wide range of books in a convenient form. It is strongest in biblical languages with good original texts, lexicons and the like (including TDNT), but the unlocked commentaries and dictionaries are generally rather more elementary, as are the theology books, while the devotional, sermonic and educational titles are likely to be of limited value. Apart from some interesting exceptions (an archaeological encyclopaedia, Philo and Josephus are available but not the church fathers), the remainder of the unlocked books are not likely to be particularly attractive to scholars. Several are old (e.g., Easton's Bible Dictionary dated 1897!), insignificant, or of specialised interest, while others are in the public domain and widely available elsewhere. Many additional titles are coming on the market continuously, but buyers need to check out their own needs and the comparative costs involved before purchase.

For the features it contains, Scholar's Library is easy to use in the

default installation, but needs patience in more advanced areas of set-up, configuration and functions. The absence of a back key in some functions means that in repetitive searches, for example, it is necessary to start the operation all over again each time instead of simply returning to the search window.

The prime value of software such as Scholar's Library is the speed and accuracy of searches for data (including morphology, Biblical and other references). However, it is necessarily limited to finding exact matches of words (the topical searches are rather mechanistic, but all variants of a word are searched by default), and is oriented to the target books in an encyclopaedic way, rather than surveying and analysing concepts, trends and movements or the work of a particular author as a scholar (or even a serious Bible student) would. Many of the supplied resources would be informative for general use, but whether a computer screen is the best way to access them is another matter.

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0144-8153

**The Nature of Hell
A Report by the Evangelical
Alliance's Commission on
Unity and Truth among
Evangelicals (ACUTE)**

Carlisle: Paternoster/ACUTE:
2000

ISBN 0-9532-9922-8

Pb 148pp Bibliography

*Reviewed by David Parker, Editor,
Evangelical Review of Theology*

This book is a full length report on whether 'Conditionalism' is acceptable as an evangelical belief in the light of the traditional view that, after the general resurrection and judgement, the unsaved are conscious and subject to never ending physical and spiritual torment in hell. Conditionalism (as defined in this report) is the view that, after facing judgement, the unrighteous will instead be destroyed or annihilated. This topic has become a controversial one in recent years with a number of influential evangelicals expressing their dissatisfaction (to a greater or lesser extent) with the traditional view.

The main part of the report begins by identifying key biblical texts relating to the subject, and then outlines the way traditionalism and conditionalism have been treated in the history of the church. It then defines the main positions held by evangelicals today, backed up by discussion of the exegetical and the theological factors involved in such positions. An important introductory chapter sets the doctrine within the broader theological framework of salvation and

The Painter

*God's canvas is the human
heart,
Painting love-scapes without
horizon or shadow.
Unique creations, with subtle
composition;
Each masterpiece reflects
artistic genius.*

Garry Harris – South Australia
(used with permission)

atonement, while a later chapter, recognizing the sensitive nature of the topic, deals with pastoral aspects involved in counselling of individuals and family members and conduct of funerals and in evangelism.

The main objective of the report is to discuss the impact of the topic on evangelical unity, which explains why there is a chapter on this issue, and why it is specifically treated in the 'conclusions and recommendations'. There is emphasis placed on the fact that all leading contenders take biblical authority seriously, as would be expected of evangelicals), and that there is no sign of compromise on basic questions of Christology or atonement, the urgent need for evangelism or the seriousness of divine judgement and one's eternal destiny.

Within this context, it is noteworthy that the report decides universalism (the belief that all will be saved) is not a controversial matter for evangelicals even though it has been 'the greatest challenge' to the traditional doctrine in former times; post-mortem salvation is also not considered as a matter of controversy among evangelicals.

The key finding in the 22-paragraph conclusion is that conditionalism (as defined, and in the biblical, theological and pastoral context assumed in this report) is an acceptable minority view for evangelicals because it does not contravene any basic Christological or soteriological doctrine. Furthermore, it does not undermine the 'crucial principle that judgment is on the basis of sins committed in this life, and that when

judgment is to hell, it cannot be repealed'. On the other hand, it is claimed that there is room for difference of opinion because 'the meaning of "death" in Scripture [God's ultimate punishment for sin] is not confined merely to the cessation of earthly life, [but] ... is often used to convey long-term spiritual estrangement from God'. This conclusion means that 'the traditionalist-conditionalist debate on hell should be regarded as a secondary rather than a primary issue for evangelical theology' and neither option should be 'finally definitive of what it means to be an evangelical Christian'.

So the book is not so much about the nature of hell itself, but about evangelical views of the destiny of the unsaved, and how varying views on this topic affect relationships among evangelicals in UK. In the process it not only surveys the doctrines and biblical texts in an expert manner but also gives an up to date guide to some of the most important and detailed literature on the topic. More than that, it provides a model of the way the evangelical community can go about handling a potentially divisive topic with integrity. This is especially so in the final paragraph of the report which urges evangelicals to avoid 'merely acquiescing in their disagreement' but instead to 'pursue agreement' and 'to maintain constructive dialogue.'

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Encyclopedia of Evangelicalism

by Randall Balmer

Louisville and London: Westminster

John Knox Press, 2002.

ISBN 0-664-22409-1

Hb viii + 655 pp.

*Reviewed by Richard V. Pierard,
Gordon College, Wenham, MA
01984 U.S.A.*

What do Gerald Anderson, Reinhard Bonnke, Thomas Chalmers, Orlando Costas, J. D. Douglas, Alexander Duff, Walter Elwell, Frank Gaebelain, Stanley Grenz, Robert Gundry, D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, Alistair McGrath, David Moberg, Harold Myra, J. Edwin Orr, Christabel Pankhurst, Kenneth Pike, Paul Rees, Merv Rosell, Lamin Sanneh, James Sire, Timothy Smith, Andrew Walls, Robert Webber, and Edwin Yamauchi have in common? All are well-known evangelical preachers, writers, or scholars who are not included in what the publisher's blurb on the dust jacket labels 'the most comprehensive resource about evangelicalism available'.

The above situation reflects the underlying problems of this idiosyncratic volume about evangelicalism. I have long said that we needed an inclusive encyclopaedic work about evangelicalism and its personalities and institutions, and I was delighted to see that such a knowledgeable person as Randy Balmer had undertaken the task. I must say, he has produced an intriguing and very readable book, one which I found hard to put down, if for no reason

other than the anecdotal and even 'gossipy' treatment of many of his subjects. It is a remarkable accumulation of insights into the highways and byways of modern evangelicalism, and one which can be read with profit. Thanks to his extraordinary experience with the media, Balmer is not snowed by the hype that comes out of so many evangelical quarters, and time and again he provides trenchant criticisms of individuals and groups who have an over-inflated sense of their own importance.

The book has several strengths. Its most interesting and useful entries are concepts in the evangelical subculture, such as: born-again, conversion, saved, backsliding, rededication, revival, sawdust trail, second blessing, the rapture, separatism, inerrancy, faith principles, fellowship, testimony, secondary virginity, overhead projector, Gnostic Hebrew Monikers, sword drill, home-schooling, secular humanism, seeker churches, Bible Belt, the word 'just,' and reparative therapy. Balmer has a remarkable understanding of the folk culture side of American evangelicalism, and readers unfamiliar with the evangelical argot will find this aspect of the book particularly helpful. Also quite valuable are the entries dealing with Pentecostalism and charismatic renewal and the various personalities and movements identified with them, topics which are generally overlooked or given short shrift in general encyclopaedic works on church history.

Further, he provides descriptions of almost all denominations and institutions of higher education in

North America that can be identified in some way as evangelical in their orientation. Another plus is his inclusion of many popular Christian music composers, vocalists, and performing groups, and some of the high-profile Christian athletes. Unfortunately, the publisher chose not to include an index, and this makes the book much less user friendly for those seeking information about obscure bodies and individuals.

The author declares up front that he makes no pretence at being definitive. Since it is a single author work, this is a reasonable statement to make. However, he provides no coherent indication of what his selection criteria are, something that is of crucial importance in an encyclopaedia, other than to say that the book is weighted heavily toward North America. It is obvious that he draws on his own scholarly training and published writings, his experiences in putting together television programs on various aspects of American evangelicalism, suggestions from his friends, and some important books.

Nevertheless, I would argue that he needed to seek still more assistance. Take, for example, the field of the Christian right, which I have studied for many years. He successfully covers the topic of British-Israelism and the personalities there by drawing on material from Michael Barkun's excellent *Religion and the Racist Right*, although the evangelical or fundamentalist credentials of some people he has taken from this source are highly suspect. He thoroughly

covers the religious right, as he had done a PBS series on this, but like his television program, the treatment of the 1950s Christian right is sketchy. He overlooks some of the most important figures of that era, including George Benson of Harding College and his National Education Program, Dr. Fred Schwarz's Christian Anti-Communism Crusade, which for a time was as important as Billy James Hargis's operation, and the Christian Economics endeavour of Howard Kershner and H. Edward Rowe.

He completely misses the topic of civil religion, something which received considerable support in the Christian right, and since 11 September 2001 has undergone a virtual Renaissance in the U.S.

In his discussion of evangelicals involved in racial reconciliation Balmer overlooks the important work of Southern Baptists Brooks Hays and Foy Valentine, and he does not include Fred and John Alexander and *The Other Side*, which, launched in 1965, was one of the first efforts to appeal to conservative Northern evangelicals on behalf of racial justice. One also wonders why he mentioned the Baptists' New Hampshire Confession of Faith (1833) while not saying anything about the much more significant Baptist Faith and Message in the 20th century.

Even more questionable are his choices of scholars and academic groups to include in the book. Balmer devotes two articles to the Society of Christian Philosophers (the body and its journal), which has

achieved much in helping to redirect this small and declining discipline in North America, unlike the Evangelical Theological Society, whose impact in the field of theology is far less significant. But he says nothing about discipline organizations like the American Scientific Affiliation, Conference on Faith and History, Conference on Christianity and Literature, Christian Association of Psychological Studies, the various Christian societies in the fields of economics, sociology, mathematics, and several other academic disciplines, and of course, the Christian Medical and Dental Association. I can see no reason for ignoring such individuals as V. Elving Anderson, Howard Van Till, Owen Gingerich, Richard Bube, and D. Gareth Jones, all of whom have made distinctive contributions in various fields of the natural sciences and have spoken and written openly about their evangelical faith, but yet the 'creationists' are given space in the volume.

My main reservation about the book is its unabashedly American bias. Readers of the *Evangelical Review of Theology* will be interested to learn that evangelicalism 'is a quintessentially North American phenomenon, deriving as it did from the confluence of Pietism, Presbyterianism, and the vestiges of Puritanism' (pp. vii-viii). Thus Balmer can refer to its European roots with entries on Pietism, Zinzendorf, the Wesleys, Whitefield, Carey, Wilberforce, et. al., but then connect them to the American experience. As a result, major evangelical trends in 19th century Europe—the *Reveil*,

the German *Erweckung*, evangelicalism in Britain—go largely unnoticed, as well as the later developments in Russia, the 20th century German *Evangelikale*, and movements in the non-Western world. We learn that the leading evangelical historians are North Americans Mark Noll, Nathan Hatch, George Marsden, George Rawlyk, and John Woodbridge, but nothing is said about their equally significant counterparts in Britain, David Bebbington, John Briggs, Brian Stanley, and John Wolffe.

Although several prominent British evangelical figures are treated, especially if they have some relation to North America, nothing is said about those living elsewhere. Readers in the Antipodes will certainly wonder why such major personalities as Samuel Marsden, Leon Morris, Marcus Loane, Stuart Barton Babbage, Howard Mowll, and E. M. Blaiklock are left out of the volume. The only Australians identified belong to a musical group called the 'Newsboys,' and they are unknown in their native land. Few African, Asian, and Latin American evangelicals are mentioned even though the movement is growing so quickly there that its adherents probably outnumber those in the West. In short, this useful book contributes to our understanding of evangelicalism, but the kind of encyclopaedic study that we need still remains to be done.

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A History of the Church in Africa

by Bengt Sundkler and Christopher Steed

Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2000.

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xix + 1232 pp. Hb

*Reviewed by Ernst Wendland,
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'A bitter pill which the majority of writers on Christianity and missionary activities in Africa should swallow is that they have not been writing African Church History ... [they write] as if the Christian Church were in Africa, but not of Africa.' This incisive critique by two notable Nigerian historians is used by Bengt Sundkler to preface his massive and magisterial effort to set the record straight. Bengt Sundkler (1909-1995) of Sweden was formerly a missionary in South Africa and Tanzania, and later professor in Church History at the University of Uppsala. Owing to his death in 1995, the project had to be completed and prepared for publication by Christopher Steed, his former research assistant and now instructor at Uppsala. Sundkler develops some prominent themes of his earlier works (most notably, *The Christian Ministry in Africa*, 1960; *Bantu Prophets in South Africa*,

2nd ed 1961; *Zulu Zion*, 1976) in stressing the indigenous African initiative during the progressive Christian evangelisation of this great continent. In fact, it is 'a fundamental thesis of this book ... [that] the Western missionary arriving at any place in Africa always found that he had been preceded by some group of African Christians'. (p. 299)

The well-known and documented missionary enterprise is certainly not ignored, but Sundkler and Steed (hereafter, S&S) take pains to point out that this is only a small part of the full story. It is crucial to view the whole picture and hence also the vital, creative role that Africans themselves—kings and catechists, merchants and migrants, refugees and returnees, itinerant prophets and independent religious movements—played in this dynamic process of Christianisation. It is this particular local perspective, one that 'focuses not on Western partners but on African actors,' which makes the book such a worthwhile, indeed indispensable, study. S&S present a detailed, well-researched historical overview and evaluation that has some important contemporary theological and missiological implications, not only for the church in Africa but also for Christianity worldwide.

In his personal introduction, Sundkler calls attention to several other principal concerns of his research. One is to demonstrate the close connection between the established mission-related churches and the so-called 'African Independent Churches', which form such a distinctive,

locally 'charismatic' element of current Christianity south of the Sahara. Another interest was to present an ecumenical perspective by 'highlighting Catholic, Orthodox, Protestant and Independent work ... [so that] both Catholics and non-Catholics might find an interpretation of the essential intentions and achievements of their respective churches'. This is a worthwhile goal in view of the fact that, until recent times at least, there has not been a great deal of interaction or cooperation among these different macro-groups, as indeed was (and often still is) the case also among the different denominations of Protestantism.

A major problem that S&S faced in their treatment of African history is the 'wide chronological discrepancy' among the different regions of African—North, West, East, Central, and South—in terms of religious proselytisation and development. In some parts of Africa, notably the northeast, Christian Church history goes back nearly 2000 years; elsewhere, especially in the inland areas, development has been limited to much more recent times. This led the authors to adopt what I felt was a helpful historical description on a more restricted, region-by-region basis but within some very broad time frames, namely: Part I—the first 1400 years, Part II—the 'middle ages' (1415-1787), Part III—the long 19th century (1787-1919), Part IV—the Colonial years (1920-1959), and Part V—the age of 'independent Africa' (1960-1992). Despite the great period of history and large area covered, the treat-

ment is very complete and relatively balanced too, which might not be expected of a study this size. Ironically, however, it is the most recent period that appears to be the most thinly discussed (given the publication date of 2000), with adequate coverage petering out rapidly during the final decade of the last century. This is reflected also in the otherwise extensive Bibliography of 48 pages.

In addition to their special focus upon the significant indigenous African contribution to 'mission work' in Africa, S&S point out most, if not all, of the other important factors that have led to the relatively rapid growth of the Christian Church throughout the continent (except for the northern region, which due to the influence of Islam is a special case). In most instances, these topics are discussed diachronically as they happen to occur in the historical overview, not synchronically in extended sections. I would consider the following to be the most important of these strategic influences (in parentheses noting a particularly important exemplifying reference): use of the vernacular in popular communication in preference to a Western language (517-518); translation of the Bible, whether the whole or selected portions (157); a Scripture-based gospel message (309); effective preaching/sermonizing (665-673); persistent and widespread lay witness (36-37), including that carried out by women (712) and the youth (392-393); travel to new areas via the rivers of Africa (303) and newly built railroads (865); the development of distinctive Chris-

tian hymnody and liturgy (916-917) as well as literature programs (743); increased training and use of national pastors (509) and 'evangelists' or catechists (310); the widespread promotion of literacy (573) and education, including that for girls and young women (249-250); agricultural (363) and medical missions (307); the establishment of mission stations (312-313) and Christian communities (377). A study of some of these constructive influences within their historical setting could be of benefit to African churches today as they plan for the future in view of the significant changes that have taken place in the meantime.

Side by side with such positive promotional forces for numerical growth in Africa was a diversity of factors that definitely limited, hindered, or even prevented the church's advance in different areas and at different periods of history. S&S deal with these honestly and often with keen insight as to their original cause or subsequent exacerbation. Among the more serious of such obstacles to progress were: ecclesiastical rivalries and denominationalism; enforced or ritualistic sacramentalism and sacerdotalism; doctrinal disputes and consequent factionalism; association (whether real or supposed) of the church with slavery, colonialism, and/or apartheid; varied legalistic, paternalistic, or even prejudicial attitudes and practices on the part of Westerners; the imposition of western cultural ideals and customs at the expense of African equivalents; debilitating tropical diseases and a high death rate

among missionaries; inter-ethnic tensions and tribal conflicts; and the continual advance of Islam from the north and east. These factors are all well known of course, but a consideration of them in concrete historical contexts is always a salutary exercise. May we better learn to learn from history!

Along with the preceding, relatively straightforward positive and negative considerations are a number of others that are not so clear as to their ultimate impact and effect on the growth of the *African Christian Church*—or should one rather say, the *Christian Church in Africa*? This matter of designation is important and concerns the principal issue of controversy, which in one way or another involves the relative influence, past and present, of traditional religious beliefs and practices on various Christian churches. These would include specific instances such as: the use of indigenous symbolism and arts (painting, singing, instrumentation, dancing, dress, bodily decoration, etc.) in church buildings and during worship services; the communicative importance attached to dreams, visions, and possibly even divination; an appeal to rites aimed at combating sorcery and witchcraft; the continuation of certain 'beneficial' protective and promotional magical practices; ancestral veneration through prayers, sacrifices, offerings, life-cycle and agriculture-related ceremonies.

Such influences have been and continue to be debatable, even divisive—that is, depending on a group's theological persuasion and beliefs

with respect to what they regard to be a *biblically-based* Christianity. At times, through their lack of comment, S&S seem to be overly tolerant or uncritical of *syncretism* involving an accommodation with ancient ancestral rites and ceremonies, such as: the royal ancestral cult (61), sacrifices in times of calamity (181), 'rain-making' rituals (474), dreams of divination (504), funerary libations (811), and miracle working 'prophets' (814). On the other hand, they might be congratulated for their 'objective' record of the various sources that they utilize, leaving it up to readers to make their own valuation of such accounts. Furthermore, on occasion S&S do also gently warn against a Christianity of 'adhesion' (96), which is simply 'a thin veneer over a groundwork of solid traditional religion' (55).

This is not some long, dry, fact-saturated historical report. On the contrary, S&S quickly engage the reader by their generally clear, interesting, and informative manner of writing. Theirs is an easy style that is lightened by periodic, subtly humorous and ironic comments, but one that is also punctuated by many important insights and penetrating observations. Space limitations will not permit more than minimal illustration of this feature, but the few quotes following should be sufficient to whet the reader's appetite. For example, concerning the existential significance of Christianity for the African believer, S&S state:

An observation in all parts of Africa would seem to be the view of Christianity as not only the way of New Life but also of the New Death. In a *milieu* where death was

an ever present threat, the 'New Death'—i.e., the new way of facing the threat and fact of Death—was recognized throughout the continent as something distinctly different (95-96).

Commenting on the irony that sometimes confused Christian principles and practice, they observe:

The attitudes of these young [missionary] men were not unique in the Protestant world of Africa prior to 1914. There were other zealots ... who desired to pull up the young [African] shoots from the soil in order to check whether they had begun to grow aright. Western actors in the drama insisted on the dictates of the Spirit, but overlooked the fact that a Church, on whatever foundation it starts, and however it develops, lives in a tension between 'Institution' and 'Spirit'. Even the most 'spiritual' organization necessarily develops its institutional frame, even though organization must be, to some extent, informed by the Spirit through the Word and Sacraments administered there (246).

Despite their focus on the African initiative and honest portrayal of the obvious errors that were made by the Western message-bringers, S&S do not degenerate into 'missionary-bashing,' but regularly call attention to their considerable accomplishments, for example:

Western missions were often portrayed at the time as having destroyed the cultural values of indigenous peoples, particularly in Africa. The [1925 Rome] Exhibition eloquently demonstrated that some of the missionaries, not least in Africa, had other designs (630).

Then there is this accurate description of the power of African Bible-based preaching:

The village sermon must be appreciated against the background of a live, pulsating *milieu* with its tensions and afflictions, its witches and spirits, its fears and hopes and expectations, its sighs and tears, laughter

and jubilation, and the Gospel text bringing the Holy Land with its demons and Beelzebub and its healing miracles close to the African village, and in the midst of all, the Christ, Son of God and Savior of the world (667).

Finally, I cannot resist the following keen insight into the nature and practice of past efforts at Bible translating, an enterprise that is especially close to my own heart:

One looks with admiration at the efforts of protestant missionaries who spent their lifetime at the task of Bible translation. There were sure to be linguistic limitations in the work, but a historian is bound to look at this work in terms of history. It is too easy to condemn by the standards of today's linguistics what had been done previously in this field. *The team aspect of Bible translation needs to be underlined.* ... There was formed almost invariably a deep Christian fellowship between the foreigner and their African co-workers, the former always aware of his foreignness in this most central of missionary tasks and therefore aware of his constant dependence on his local co-workers, the real experts (1030, my emphasis).

The composition of Bible translation teams may have changed nowadays—being much more African in character—but importance of close cooperation and mutual dependence surely remains.

There are several other excellent features of this history that are worth calling attention to. In addition to its lucid style, the text's overall organization is enhanced by a helpful division into major and minor sections, all of which are provided with summary titles. Principal sections are normally prefaced by an introduction that is accompanied by a map of the particular area of Africa to be covered. A very detailed Name Index and Subject Index enables the reader

to quickly locate persons and topics of special interest. Several succinct topical studies of important subjects are provided from time to time, for example, on: African religions, missionary societies, David Livingstone, Church strategies, Islam, preaching, healing practices, African church music, and Independent churches.

S&S also make pertinent suggestions along the way about areas that could use further study as well as current puzzles that require additional research, for example: reasons for the surprisingly rapid conversion of the Igbo people in Nigeria (253), differing preaching styles among various denominations (668), the relationship 'between Christianization in Africa ... and recruitment for jobs of discipline and order' (706), refugee peoples in relation to the society into which they move (796), a sociological study of those who were caught up in the East African Revival in the 1930s (864), and the varied evangelistic methods that were adopted on the coastal plantations of the Indian Ocean (872).

With so much positive to say about this book, could I have any criticisms? Indeed, there are a few, but they are relatively unimportant in relation to the whole: The inadequate treatment of the last decade has already been noted; hence the current AIDS pandemic in relation to medical missions is not mentioned (e.g., 674). The present three-page Epilogue could easily have been expanded to provide a summary at least of some more recent developments in the Christian history of Africa. The footnotes, though very

many in number, are largely bibliographical in nature. They do indicate the extensive documentation that underlies this study, but little additional information beyond that supplied in the text is given. Nor is any sort of evaluation made of the relative reliability of the sources that are cited—that is, in possibly questionable or doubtful cases (e.g., the information from mission archives).

There are very few spelling mistakes in the text, which is rather amazing for a book this size that contains so many proper names of various kinds. There are also a handful of quotations that are left unattributed (e.g., 1025). I noted several errors of fact—for example, credit for the entire New Testament in Chichewa given to just one person, when a whole team was involved throughout (979). And I would disagree with several interpretations of the historical record, for example, that it was mere 'fortuitous chance, almost fate' that led certain missions to begin work among particular African societies (311-312). Surely the Holy Spirit deserves a little more credit than that. All in all, however, there is precious little to complain about in this magnificent study.

On the opening publisher's description of this book, it is claimed that it 'will become the standard reference text on African Christian Churches'. I would heartily endorse that assessment of this exemplar of the historical genre. It is one of those essential books for the new millennium that needs to be displayed in every theological library worldwide. Having said that, I would also

encourage the publishers to make a much more affordable (paperback?) edition available so that scholars, pastors, and teachers on the African continent can also have immediate personal access to a text that so completely and competently surveys their deep-seated Christian roots.

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**The Matrix of Christian
Theology, vol. 1
The Social God and the
Relational Self: A Trinitarian
Theology of the Imago Dei**

by Stanley J. Grenz

Louisville, London and Leiden:
Westminster John Knox Press,
2001,

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Cloth, xii + 345 pp, Indexes

*Reviewed by Amos Yong,
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This theological anthropology launches Grenz's *The Matrix of Christian Theology* series. Given that we are led to expect equally substantive treatments of theology proper, christology, pneumatology, ecclesiology and eschatology, it will, when, completed, not only be Grenz's magnum opus, but also serve as a model for doing theology well into the next generation. More importantly, it promises to chart a middle road or 'centrist' perspective for those who are either too 'evangelical' for Pannenberg's three-vol-

umed *Systematic Theology*, too 'mainline' for John Feinberg, et al.'s projected *The Foundations of Evangelical Theology*, or even too 'conservative' for Bloesch's multi-volumed *Christian Foundations*. Now while Grenz's explicit objective with *The Matrix* is to offer a 'set of contributions to theology', what emerges will need to be taken seriously by all those thinking about what might be called a 'systematic postmodern theology.'

Now some might insist that such a project is oxymoronic, given postmodernity's rejection of metanarratives. Perhaps, if we buy uncritically into Lyotard's definition of postmodernity as not allowing any 'big pictures' of the way things are or should be. Grenz certainly recognizes that among the many features of what we might call postmodernity is not only the fact of the conflict of narratives (which has always existed), but our increasing awareness of that conflict. As such, one of the clear objectives of *The Matrix of Christian Theology* is to engage the diversity of narratives in the theological task.

Here, Grenz builds on previous work: *Revisioning Evangelical Theology: A Fresh Agenda for the 21st Century* (1993), *Theology for the Community of God* (1994), *Renewing the Center: Evangelical Theology in a Post-Theological Era* (2000), and, especially, *Beyond Foundationalism: Shaping Theology in a Postmodern Context* (2001, co-authored with John R. Franke). *Beyond Foundationalism* (see this author's review of this book in ERT

26:2 [2002]: 181-84) takes up the question of theological method and argues that a postmodern approach needs to take seriously the scriptural, traditional, and cultural sources of theology, even as it is informed structurally by the trinitarian theological vision central to Christian faith, is embedded communally in the life and practice of the Christian tradition, and is oriented eschatologically toward the full revelation of the coming God. It is heartening to see that Grenz has taken his own advice regarding method seriously in the volume under review.

The Social God and the Relational Self consists of three parts. The first overviews the traditional and cultural sources for a contemporary theological anthropology, including the developments in trinitarian theology on personhood and relationality (ch. 1); an 'archeology of the self' from Augustine's turn toward interiority to modern psychotherapy (ch. 2); and the process of 'undermining of the self' that has occurred in our modern/postmodern times (ch. 3). Part Two takes up the scriptural sources for a theology of the *imago Dei*, beginning with the history of exegesis of this biblical motif and showing the swinging of the pendulum between structured, relational, and eschatological interpretations of the image of God (ch. 4); proceeding toward an exegesis of the relevant biblical texts wherein anthropology is read in christocentric and eschatological perspective (ch. 5); and transitioning with an eschatological rendition of the *imago Dei* derived from an in depth

engagement with 1 Corinthians 15:49 and Romans 8:29 (ch. 6).

The final part applies a reverse hermeneutic, from new creation to original creation, in order to elaborate on a trinitarian ontology of human relationality specifically through the lens of human sexuality (ch. 7), and concludes with a discussion of the reconstructed self-in-community anticipating the eschatological community of the triune God and prefigured in the present ecclesial community (ch. 8). Throughout, Grenz shows an impressive mastery of the traditions of biblical scholarship, erudition in his handling of the Christian tradition, and familiarity with the literature in social psychology, thus going a long way toward the goal of developing a viable theological anthropology for our postmodern times.

This is an impressive start for *The Matrix*. Let me quickly raise three sets of questions not in order to diminish Grenz's accomplishments here, but in order to encourage him in certain directions in the remainder of this series, directions which I think important for a 'set of contributions to theology' in our postmodern situation.

First, I missed any sustained engagement with pneumatology in this theological anthropology. Now of course, Grenz is devoting a future volume to pneumatology. However, he is devoting one to christology as well, and yet adopts a christocentric hermeneutic in this volume. Now, is not a christocentric approach to theological anthropology deficient without a corresponding pneumatologi-

cal perspective? There is some mention of the Spirit in the discussion of 'Deification and the Ecclesial Self' (pp. 325-28), but the impression one gets is that pneumatology remains, as in much Protestant theology, an appendix (even if a major one to be treated in a future volume) to theology rather than intrinsically and hermeneutically informative for the entirety of the theological loci.

Second, I like Grenz's turn toward relationality as it represents a serious alternative for reconfiguring theology in a postmodern age. But I missed any sustained discussion with relational theologies in the contemporary landscape. Evangelical readers of *The Matrix* will probably demand at some point in the series that Grenz clarify his own relational vision vis-à-vis that of process theology, for example. I presume that the volume on theology proper will engage Whitehead, Hartshorne, and Cobb. Yet Grenz also has allies closer to home in Wesleyan, evangelical-feminist, and evangelical-environmentalist thinkers who are working within a relational paradigm. The question is how a centrist theology can retain its evangelical integrity even while negotiating its way through the various relational theologies offered within the postmodern matrix.

Finally, the question of theological publics raises itself. The test cases for a truly postmodern theology include not only the question of the relationship between religion (and theology) and the sciences—one which Grenz handles wonderfully in this volume's discussion of the psychological sciences—but also the question of

Christianity and the other faiths. What does Christian theology do in the face of and alongside with the other traditions? A truly public and postmodern theology needs to take the discourses of other faiths into account, and not just apologetically, but also constructively (as Grenz does here with the psychological sciences), in order to enter into conversation with all those who are interested in things ultimate.

For example, a relational anthropology provides multiple entryways for engaging the Buddhist doctrine of *anatta*. More specifically, at one place, Grenz's discussion of George

Herbert Mead's social self (pp. 305-11) provided what I thought to be a wonderful opportunity to dialogue with Buddhist traditions of the social self (see, e.g., Steve Odin, *The Social Self in Zen and American Pragmatism*, SUNY Press, 1995). I hope that Grenz takes the doctrines of other religious traditions more seriously as his work on *The Matrix* progresses. Only by so doing can his 'set of contributions to theology' come close to engaging the plurality of views, voices and convictions reflected present in the postmodern conversation.

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Kristin Aune is completing a Ph.D. on gender and evangelicalism. She lectures and writes on gender and sexuality.

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