

SYMPOSIUM ON CHRISTOLOGY

February 2-3, 1991

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[For discussion at the symposium only. This paper will be revised by the author for publication.]

**"No Other Name": A Biblical View of Atonement Within  
Non-Christian Faiths**

I wish to say some things at the outset for the sake of the participants in the symposium; these are not, however, comments which I will include in the paper as it appears for publication.

Our subject is crucial, and I am glad that we are addressing it. I was surprised when some of our Conference leaders commented after the Christology symposium in Normal Illinois that this was not an urgent issue for us as Mennonite Brethren. In my travel and conversations I find that this is an issue which many of our church members think and speak about frequently, but "unofficially"; that is, they do so outside the framework of formal church discussions. Many of them would welcome an opportunity to discuss how to approach this matter in a way that brings a biblical perspective to this issue in the context of the contemporary world.

The way in which the topic has been framed for our symposium puzzles me, and even though this has not affected the way in which I have written this paper, I will identify two issues that I think we need to be clear about for the sake of our larger discussion.

First, I do not understand "religious pluralism" to mean "a lack of commitment to the exclusivity of the atonement." To me "religious pluralism" simply describes a reality in which we live. We live in a world much like the world of the early Church, a world in which many religious options are available. The spectrum of this pluralism in Canada is broader than it was 20 years ago, but we should recall that for many MBs, personal contact and even friendship with Roman Catholics and Pentecostals has represented an experience of religious pluralism, albeit within the Christian tradition.

Second, I do not accept the linking of "theological accomodation" and "weakened Christology" with "fellowship, cooperation and unity". Many people within the evangelical tradition (some of whom are present at this symposium) have worked with great integrity to promote greater fellowship and unity among Christians across denominational lines, and although that has involved some "theological accomodation" (for example, Anabaptists and Calvinists and Pentecostals have learned to speak with and about each other with greater mutual respect in past decades), it has not necessarily involved a "weakened Christology".

NOTE: I have attached a bibliography of recent books on pluralism and Christian faith. There are, of course, many other books and articles which have been written on this subject in past decades.

The purpose of my paper is mostly descriptive. I have been asked to describe how various religions understand atonement, and to outline a biblical perspective on these views. I intend this paper as an aid to discussion at our symposium and expect to restructure it more as a position paper, adding biblical references, after our meeting and prior to publication.

### The "Wrongness of Existence"

The Bible uses various concepts to express a fundamental reality. The reality is this: the original relationship between God and humanity has been broken, but God has provided a means to re-establish the relationship. Atonement is one of the concepts used to describe the means or process which God has provided. Other concepts are redemption, salvation, justification, rebirth, and reconciliation.

I am interpreting the purpose of my paper to be broader than the specific concept of atonement. I am addressing the larger question of the reasons which religions give for the brokenness in human life and the solutions which they recommend.

The basic reality which the Bible describes as the broken relationship between God and people is recognized in other religions. Throughout the world there is a common recognition of the "wrongness of existence". In cultures where people believe in a supreme personal deity, this "wrongness of existence" is understood to mean that the relationship between God and people is not what it could be, not what it was meant to be, nor what it was at one time. There is a lost "Eden" or a "golden age", and the loss came through the folly, or ignorance, or rebellion of humans. Religions differ in the way in which they describe "the golden age", and they vary in how they account for the "fall from favour"; but they agree that people are culpable. Religions differ in what they prescribe as a solution, but they agree that there is one.

For the purpose of this symposium it should be helpful to briefly outline the causes for the "wrongness of existence" and the solutions, as they are articulated in some of the world's major religious traditions. These examples can be a basis for examining a biblical response.

### The Problem and the Solution: Examples from Religions

In most parts of the Buddhist tradition the "wrongness of existence" is actually our inappropriate expectation of what existence can offer us. Reality is essentially material, and therefore transient. Since humans have the capacity to plan and to hope, they expect to get fulfillment from life and to sustain that satisfaction. But they are doomed to discouragement and suffering, for what is transient can never offer permanent satisfaction. The solution is to learn to quench the thirst for gratification, to put an end to desire, and to eventually enter a

state of nirvana, a state in which existence or non-existence, desire or satisfaction are undifferentiated. Although there are realms of existence other than this world, they are no different in essence from this world; thus, longing for a completely gratifying life after death is folly. There is no God who transcends the transient character of reality, so even the gods merely live this existence in an extended or magnified expression of our own situation.

The solution, in some parts of the Buddhist tradition, is found in morality, mental discipline, and meditation. In other parts of the tradition there is an added emphasis on spirits and gods. But even when these other beings and realms are described, even when people pray for favour to gracious gods, it is still understood that these too are transitory. The most they can do is help us to diminish and eventually eliminate our desire for what is transient through mental discipline, moral living, and meditation, and thus to live with equanimity.

The Hindu tradition is tremendously diverse, yet most of its variations are based on some shared assumptions. All of reality is One, and can be characterized only as undifferentiated being, pure consciousness, and bliss. It is beyond our distinctions of personal and impersonal, good and evil, joy and sorrow. Yet it is expressed through various manifestations, and we, along with the rest of the world, are expressions of the One. Our human predicament is caused by our failure to recognize the ultimate unity of all being. Because of this failure we are divisive in the human family, we try to achieve fulfillment by amassing temporal resources, and we are anxious about matters which turn out to be ephemeral.

The Hindu solution follows three different paths. First, one can, through devotion to a god, receive grace and favour. The second path is the path of duty, which involves fulfilling one's obligations in life and living morally. The third path is the way of knowledge. This is the way of mental discipline and purity, and ultimately the path through which one's personal identity is absorbed into cosmic being. All of these paths can result in felicity on earth, the prospect of favourable reincarnations, happiness in heavenly realms, and ultimately, absorption into the bliss of pure being.

In the Muslim tradition the root of the human predicament is human disobedience to the law of God. Through a long line of prophets God has revealed how people should live; yet many people do not believe the prophets and do not obey God.

The solution is simple. People should accept the revelation which has come from the prophets, especially the revelation of the Qur'an through the last and greatest prophet Mohammed, and submit to and obey the law of God. At the end of each person's life their actions will be weighed on a scale. If the good outweighs the evil they will enter paradise. If the evil outweighs the good they will go to hell.

In Judaism the source of the "wrongness of existence" is also disobedience to the authority and revelation of God. But

Judaism also links this to a strong sense of racial/ethnic identity. In the traditional Hebrew tradition this meant that the other nations were outside the favour and law of Yahweh. Their gods were not God. The purpose and promises of God were for his people.

For the Hebrews the solution was to remain faithful to God who had chosen them from among all the people of the earth. If they were faithful God would bless them and save them from their enemies. The destiny of other people or other nations was not a primary concern. Modern Judaism assumes that Jews are accountable to God for the revelation they have received, and God will deal with other people in whatever ways are appropriate for them.

### The Basis for a Relationship With God: Four Possibilities

These four religious traditions illustrate four ways in which people understand what a right relationship with God means.

First, some people are chosen or created by God as a special people. This is true in many tribal traditions and in Shinto in Japan, but we know it mostly through Judaism. It is true that the group may fall out of favour with God at times by offending God through moral sin or failure to worship properly; but even though God may punish them, God does not completely reject them and select someone else in their place. God's identity is linked to these people. The story of God's frustration with Israel and his offer to begin with a new people through Moses (Numbers 14) illustrates this view.

There is not much religious concern for other people, except to scorn their worship and to establish sanctions against having those forms of worship contaminate the national religion. What God has in mind for others is not an important issue; it is assumed that God is not greatly concerned about other people, and that if other people are the enemy of God's people then God is their enemy. God and nation or people are identified closely. Occasionally some outsiders may be initiated into the chosen people and therefore find themselves under the protective favour of God.

The Christian response to this identification of the favour of God and national identity has three dimensions. First, it accepts it insofar as it acknowledges that Israel was chosen to be the vehicle for special revelation from God (Ephesians 2). Second, it challenges this identification by arguing that there is no advantage to circumcision (cultural identity) if a person breaks the law, and that the uncircumcised person who obeys the law is considered a Jew inwardly (Romans 2). Third, the New Testament states that in Christ there are no distinctions of Jew and Greek (Galatians 3). This Christian response means that the "wrongness of existence" has nothing to do with the nation one happened to be born into, and therefore a remedy based on cultural or national identity is irrelevant.

A second view is that God has standards of behaviour which are revealed to people and to which people are held accountable. Two forms of behaviour are primary - proper worship and moral living. The ritual and moral expectations are revealed by God, and these revelations are usually encoded as authoritative scripture. Anyone can receive the favour of God if they meet the standards established by God. Islam is a religion of this sort. It has a very high view of the righteousness of God and a very clear understanding of what God expects of people. Muslims often use the symbol of a scale to describe how, at the end of each of our lives, God will weigh our good deeds on one side of the scale and our evil deeds on the other side. If the good outweigh the evil, we will go to paradise. If the evil outweigh the good we will go to hell. This worldview, at least in Islam, does not place on people the initial disadvantage of the burden of original sin; thus it does not presume that people are more inclined to evil than to good.

The Christian response to this view is both sympathetic and critical, and can be seen most clearly in the biblical discussion of the role of the Jewish law in defining human righteousness. In the Old Testament the expectations of proper worship are very precisely defined and sanctions against ritual impurity are often stringent. Yet the prophets also remind their people that ritual propriety can become offensive to God if it is not accompanied by morality, justice, and compassion. In the New Testament Jesus disregards some of the conventions of ritual purity and suggests, in response to his critics, that these are not the matters by which human righteousness will be judged. Early Christian worship developed certain patterns and forms, but in the biblical record these were not given the status of requirements for righteousness. I think that it is correct to interpret this to mean that no form of worship is the divinely sanctioned form which is guaranteed to gain God's favour; that is, salvation will not to be found by following a specified worship pattern. This may seem to imply that the form of worship which Christians follow is unimportant, but that would be incorrect. Both Old and New Testaments make it clear that worship of "other gods" and worship of "idols" is sure to bring the wrath of God. So while no form of worship guarantees God's favour, some forms of worship assure God's disfavour.

The other part of Jewish law which affects human righteousness is moral law. Whereas in the Old Testament moral and ritual law were interwoven, it seems that in the New Testament they are more distinct. When Paul writes to the Romans about the basis for human righteousness in relation to the law, Christians generally interpret him to be dealing primarily with what we usually refer to as morality or ethics. Paul says two things in his discussion. On the one hand he states that God has given all people some moral law to guide them, whether in their hearts or in a written law, and when people are faithful to this law they receive God's favour. On the other hand Paul echoes the biblical concept that all human righteousness is inadequate, is,

in fact, like filthy rags. To use the Muslim image of the scale, it seems that Paul is saying one or perhaps all of three things. First, no person can have enough good on the scale to outweigh the evil, since we are all inclined more toward evil than toward good. Second, even the smallest iota of evil at all on the counterbalance will cancel out any amount of good, for we are expected to be perfect. Third, the righteousness of following the law is irrelevant in determining God's favour.

In summary, the view of atonement which is based on fulfilling the ritual or moral expectations of God has strong biblical roots. The ritual component continues into the Christian tradition primarily as a warning against the worship of other gods and idols. This accounts for the fact that the Christian tradition has allowed an immense variety of forms of worship to flourish, yet has remained quite consistent in its resistance to idolatry. The moral component seems to both be affirmed and denied within the New Testament. Moral rectitude is expected of the followers of Jesus, but moral propriety alone does not seem to be the basis for the salvation. This ambivalence is reflected in Christian uncertainty about the spiritual status of "righteous pagans", morally exemplary people who have never committed themselves to Jesus as Lord.

A third view is that the gulf between God and humans is greater than people can bridge but that God takes the initiative to bridge the gap and rescue people. The starting point usually is the contrast between human inadequacy and the holiness of God. Humans are expected to acknowledge their inadequacy and commit themselves in devotion and obedience to God.

The acknowledgement of inadequacy is crucial, for it sets in motion the gracious deliverance and acceptance of God. The grace of God cannot be experienced by those who are proud and self-righteous. This form of religion regards humility as one of the most essential human virtues.

Devotion is expressed in many forms. It may be expressed through sacrificial offerings, prayers, pilgrimage, fasting, or acts of service. At its worst devotion can become the clamour of desperate prayers pleading for mercy - urgent, repetitive prayers which can easily deteriorate into magic; prayers which will be successful if prayed long and sincerely and correctly enough (so many prayers, so much piety, so much urgency in the voice, such calloused knees). At its best devotion is expressed as a deeply transforming humble piety.

Obedience is also expressed in many ways, although mostly in acts of compassionate service and a morally exemplary lifestyle. Although it is understood that service and morality do not earn the favour of God, it is also understood that they are consequent expressions of a life that is committed to God.

The Christian faith is one of the major forms of this kind of religion, and so it is by and large supportive of the themes and practices associated with it. When it criticizes or even repudiates this form of religion it does so for Christological

reasons. This is best illustrated in relation to devotional Hinduism, which is the other major religious expression of this perspective. Hinduism offers many personal gods as the antidote for the problems of human existence. Krishna, Siva, Kali, or Rama or many others are possible "saviours". Each have their devotees, their holy places, their scriptures, and their distinctive character. The clash with the Christian faith is over the basic question "Who is Lord?" Is Jesus the Saviour and Lord or is there another?

Sometimes these questions are given sharp and clear answers. A choice must be made between Jesus and, for example, Krishna. This is a fairly simple theological matter for Christians, for such clear choices fit into a well established theological framework. But when the answer to this forced choice is more ambiguous, as for example when people suggest that Jesus and Krishna are really two compatible expressions of one single divine reality, then the issue is not as simple. Evenso, most Christians have not only denied any deity to Krishna, they have also denied Krishna any salvific role.

Although many of the expressions of humility, repentance, devotion, and obedience in this form of religion are compatible with the Christian faith, there is inevitably the central question of who is Lord and Saviour.

The fourth religious view is that the wrongness of existence is apparent and not real, and that when we realize this we will be able to live in peace. This point of view is generally part of a monistic worldview, a worldview which states that humans and the rest of the universe are simply manifestations of one and the same reality which is, in essence, in perfect harmony. When we recognize this truth and live in accordance with it we will not only be at peace ourselves but we shall also promote peace and harmony in the world around us. What has gone wrong in the world is that our thinking about the world has created false distinctions between us and the world in which we live, and so we have begun to live in a false tension with other people and the world of nature. When our thinking is corrected we will recognize the basic unity of all being and will live accordingly. The solution lies within us.

This worldview, traditionally expressed in philosophical Hinduism and more recently in some New Age thought, has been challenged by Christians on the grounds that it eliminates the distinction between the Creator and Creation, and it proposes an unrealistically optimistic view of human nature and perfectability which is in conflict with biblical teaching.

## A Biblical Perspective

1. In the Old Testament religion was understood as an integral part of national and cultural identity. That is why it was natural that Ruth, in following Naomi to her homeland, would choose to identify both with her people and her God. The

separation of the fixed relationship between religion and culture in the New Testament was very radical, and, as we know, was the cause of great struggle within the early Church. It opened the possibility of people from all nations becoming part of one family of God, and also of drawing selectively on the religious insights of various traditions as Paul did in his discussion in Athens (Acts 17).

We tend to speak about religions as though they are inseparable entities, and we pass judgement on them as units, even when we know very little about them. Thus we speak about "Hinduism" even though the adherents of many of the religious traditions which we include in this category do not have even as much common identity as do Jews and Christians. If we intend to deal with this matter in the New Testament way we will have to ask how the Bible deals with specific religious phenomena, rather than trying to determine a biblical response to "Hinduism".

2. If a biblical perspective is not primarily a response to "Hinduism" or to "Islam", how does it help us assess the religious insights and actions within those multifaceted traditions? I have suggested in this paper that it would be helpful for us to focus on the way in which religious traditions understand the process by which the "wrongness of existence" is set right. This takes us to central Christological questions, for Christ is first of all "the way in which God sets things right".

3. The biblical perspective involves a single God who has created people for a relationship with God. People have broken the relationship with God, but God has taken the initiative to restore the relationship through revealing the law, sending the prophets, and ultimately making the self-sacrifice of Jesus Christ. People can return to their intended relationship with God by acknowledging their inadequacy and accepting God's solution.

4. The central issue in the Old Testament is the glory of God. God's glory is demonstrated through the universe, but also through the people of God. This is why there is such a great concern about the purity of God's people, especially the leaders. They should not borrow forms of religion from other people because that would lead them away from the true God who had chosen and rescued them. They should follow the law scrupulously so that they would honour the name of God. The Old Testament does not discuss the fate of other people, except occasionally to predict that someday everyone would acknowledge and give honour to the only true God. If one asks if that means that someday everyone will become part of the chosen people, that everyone will honour God by faithfully keeping the law, one finds no answer. The central issue is not the fate of the people of the world, but the certainty that God will receive honour and glory.



In the New Testament the concern to have people acknowledge the true God is maintained. The first chapter of Romans states that all people can see the character of God in the universe and are expected to honour God. Then, more particularly, the Jews are expected to recognize the glory of God in Jesus. The Greeks are expected to see the wisdom of God in the apparent foolishness of Jesus.

5. In the encounter with other religions, Christian faith is be most sympathetic to those religious insights which emphasize the unity of God, the inadequacy of humans to maintain a relationship with God through their own efforts, the need for humans to acknowledge their inadequacy, the grace of God in providing a way to restore the relationship, and the importance of a life of high moral standards and compassion as a lifestyle which will bring honour to God.

6. The New Testament teaches that Jesus Christ is part of the unity of God, is the means of grace through which God makes possible the restoration of our relationship with God, and is the example of how life should be lived so that God will be honoured. To reject Jesus Christ is to reject the character of God and the means of grace. To accept Jesus Christ is to acknowledge the character of God and to receive the means of grace. This is why the Gospel is good news.

7. Much of the current Christian debate about the implications of religious pluralism focuses on the perplexing question of how much knowledge of Jesus Christ and how explicit an affirmation of Jesus Christ is needed for people to be set right in their relationship with God. The question is posed for two reasons. First, it is obvious that there are many people who have lived in human history without knowing the history of Jesus. Second, there are many people in the world whose religious life is based on principles consistent with central biblical themes - the sovereignty of God, the broken relationship between God and people, human inadequacy, the grace of God, and the need for human life to honour God - but who do not acknowledge Jesus as Saviour and Lord.

One of the ways in which this issue has been raised is to distinguish between Theocentric and Christocentric approaches. It seems clear that such a distinction is not helpful if it in any way implies that there is a difference in the character of God understood Theocentrically and Christocentrically. It is also clear that the New Testament writers were eager to show the identity of God in Christ, and therefore they tend to move toward identification rather than separation of these approaches.

8. Given that the context of this discussion is among us who are leaders of our denomination, I do not think we need to give much attention to the points of view which state a) there is not "wrongness of existence", or b) any definition of this "wrongness" or any remedy for this "wrongness" will suffice, or c) the revelation of God in Christ is irrelevant to this issue. These matters are debated, and there are appropriate contexts for those debates.

But in this context I think we should give priority to two perspectives. The first is the one which says that people must accept not only the need for God's grace but must be aware of and accept the specific form in which God's grace was expressed in Jesus.

The second says that if people acknowledge their need for grace, they will receive it, because God has already made it available through Christ. This understanding can then be applied back across history (pre-Christ) and across all cultures after Christ. This would mean that the means by which God "saves" people has not changed (it is still grace - exodus or the cross), but the revelation of this has been expressed in various ways and most fully in Jesus. It would also mean that the sacrifice of Jesus cuts across history and can be as effective for those who lived before his time as it is for those who lived since his time. The way in which this would be effective for those who lived before Christ might be the same way in which it is effective for those who have lived since Christ but who have lived outside the sound of the message of his life, death, resurrection, and exaltation.

I propose that our discussion of these two perspectives should be the focus of attention, and to facilitate that discussion I am appending the chapter "No Other Name" from Norman Anderson's, Christianity and World Religions, IVP, 1984. If we agree that this material may be helpful to our larger constituency, I can incorporate a summary of it into my published article.

partly in the context of the baffling, and agonizing, problem of evil, and partly in that of the self-disclosure of God which it essentially provides.

### The 'scandal of particularity'

In each of these chapters we described as 'unique' both the historical event from which we started (and, indeed, from which the Christian faith itself arose) and the salvation and disclosure of the Godhead which flow from it. This was not, of course, intended for a moment to suggest that God has revealed himself in no other way and at no other time. Any such idea would be decisively refuted by the self-disclosure of God in the history of Israel and in the Old Testament scriptures – and it will be our duty, *inter alia*, in this present chapter to consider what view we should take of the claim that God has in part revealed himself in many different ways (e.g. in nature and conscience), and that there is some truth in almost all the world's religions. The term 'unique' is intended to signify that the historical event on which Christianity is founded is itself without parallel, as is also – in its fullness and essential nature – the salvation which it offers and the self-disclosure of God which it enshrines.

This can, I think, be summed up by two quotations. As Edwyn Bevan puts it:

the great dividing line is that which marks off all those who hold that the relation of Jesus to God – however they describe or formulate it – is of such a kind that it could not be repeated in any other individual – that to speak, in fact, of its being repeated in one *other* individual is a contradiction in terms, since any individual standing in that relation to God would *be* Jesus, and that Jesus, in virtue of this relation, has the same absolute claim upon all men's worship and loyalty as belongs to God. A persuasion of this sort of uniqueness attaching to Jesus seems to me the essential characteristic of what has actually in the field of human history been Christianity (Bevan, *Hellenism and Christianity*, p.271).

Similarly, E. O. James asserts that

the Godhead attributed to the founder of Christianity, alike in the New Testament and by the Church, renders it unique in the history of religion. Nowhere else had it ever been claimed that a historical founder of any religion was the one and only supreme deity (James, *Christianity*, p.170).

The New Testament is emphatic, moreover, that God's self-disclosure in Jesus was 'once for all'. Teaching may, indeed, be repeated many times, as may also God's verbal messages to man. But his supreme Message, in a life that was lived and a death that was died, can never be repeated or reproduced.

Inevitably, this is a doctrine which provokes opposition. Paul himself was under no illusions about this; for he tells us that in his day the 'preaching of the cross' was to the Jews a scandal and to the Greeks an absurdity (1 Cor. 1:23). Nor is it only the content of the Christian proclamation which men and women, left to themselves, find unacceptable; still more, perhaps, in this exceedingly tolerant age, it is its exclusiveness and apparent intolerance which stick in men's throats. In many circles today almost any teaching will be accepted as at least a possible contribution to the truth provided only that it does not imply any denial of the validity of other contributions – however mutually incompatible these different contributions may be. As Francis Schaeffer insists, the logic of thesis and antithesis has been abandoned in favour of a comprehensive, but wholly illogical, synthesis (Schaeffer, p.41).

But in this matter synthesis is not a viable option. It is, of course, a common experience for a Christian to learn much from men of other faiths – in devotion, humility, courage and a host of other virtues; and it is perfectly possible for him to learn from his contact and dialogue with non-Christians truths he had not apprehended before. But this is a very different matter from the sort of synthesis which aspires to construct a syncretic religion. In short, the Christian answer, as I see it, must always be: 'Dialogue, yes; syncretism, no.' For if God could have *adequately* revealed

himself in any other way, how can one possibly believe he would have gone to the almost unbelievable length of the incarnation? This was no mere theophany, we must remind ourselves; no mere appearance of God among men, as a Hindu believes to have happened in an *avatār*. It was God actually *becoming* man, with all that this necessarily involved. And if God could have dealt with the problem of evil in any other way whatever, how can one possibly believe that he would, in Christ, himself have taken the sinner's place and borne the sinner's guilt – with all the agony (to say nothing of the mystery) expressed in that cry of dereliction from the cross: 'My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?' (Mk. 15:34).

Inevitably, then, the Christian faith is either itself false or 'casts the shadow of falsehood, or at least of imperfect truth, on every other system. This Christian claim', as Stephen Neill insists,

is naturally offensive to the adherents of every other religious system. It is almost as offensive to modern man, brought up in the atmosphere of relativism, in which tolerance is regarded almost as the highest of the virtues. But we must not suppose that this claim to universal validity is something that can quietly be removed from the Gospel without changing it into something entirely different from what it is. The mission of Jesus was limited to the Jews and did not look immediately beyond them; but his life, his method and his message do not make sense, unless they are interpreted in the light of his own conviction that he was in fact the final and decisive word of God to men... For the human sickness there is one specific remedy, and this is it. There is no other (Neill, pp.16f.).

This seems to me to be the clear import of the teaching of the Bible. There are a number of relevant verses which demand consideration in this context. But some, I think, are more fundamental than others.

### Some sayings of Jesus

One verse which used to be cited in this connection is John 10:8, where Jesus is quoted as having said: 'All who came before me are thieves and robbers; but the sheep did not heed them.' At first sight this would certainly appear to be a singularly sweeping and categorical statement, which might be thought to include in its condemnation all previous religious teachers without exception. But it clearly cannot, in fact, have any such far-ranging import, for it is unthinkable that Jesus should have included Abraham, Moses, David or John the Baptist, for example – to all of whom he bore witness elsewhere as having actually testified of him – in such a denunciation. The words must be governed by the definition of 'a thief and a robber' given just before: namely, 'he who does not enter the sheepfold by the door but climbs in by another way' (Jn. 10:1) – and this *could* in theory, I suppose, refer to all those who had made false Messianic claims or bogus pretensions to being 'saviours'. But this particular discourse can best be understood in the light of the controversy with some of the Pharisees which immediately precedes it. It is almost certain that Jesus must have had the false shepherds of Ezekiel 34 in mind; and there the denunciation is clearly addressed to unfaithful Jewish rulers. As R. H. Lightfoot puts it:

It is a basic tenet of this gospel that the true leaders of Israel, from Abraham and Moses to John the Baptist, looked forward to the coming of the Lord and bore witness to Him; hence there is obviously no reference in this verse to them... Rather, the verse is a very strong expression, in negative form, of the fact that all truth is now present in the incarnate Lord (R. H. Lightfoot, p.210).

It is unlikely, then, that the founders and teachers of other religions were in fact within the meaning and intention of these words. The phrase 'thieves and robbers' clearly implies an intention to take – whether by stealth or force – what belongs to another, so it would scarcely be applicable to one who, in all sincerity, gave teaching which he thought

(however mistakenly) to be true; but it *could* certainly apply to one who claimed to be a saviour when in fact he knew he was not. Yet it is significant that W. Hendriksen considers it unrealistic to think here even of false Messiahs who had arisen before the beginning of Christ's ministry. The context, he asserts,

says nothing about them. Without any question, it would seem to us, Jesus is thinking here of the men who are standing right in front of him as he is speaking, namely, the religious leaders of the people, the members of the Sanhedrin, Sadducees and Pharisees, but especially the latter (see 9:40; 10:19). They were the ones who were trying, by means of intimidation (9:22), to steal the people, and thus to gain honour for themselves in an illegitimate manner. If threats were insufficient, they would use violence. They were, indeed, both thieves and robbers. Moreover, they were already on the scene when Jesus came into the world... Hence, it is easy to understand why Jesus says that they had come *before* him. It is also understandable that Jesus says, '*are* (not *were*) thieves and robbers.' They had not disappeared, but were still present (Hendriksen, pp.108f.).

It is also noteworthy that this verse ends with the explicit assertion that 'the sheep did not heed' these thieves and robbers, which would appear to limit the import of the denunciation to false teachers among the Jews.

Considerably more central to our subject are the words in John 14:6: 'I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but by me.' Here the import of the first half of the verse is clear enough: it constitutes an unequivocal affirmation that in the incarnate Lord, uniquely, men can find the road to God, the truth about God, and the life of God. It is the utterly exclusive claim of the second part of the verse which gives us pause: that there is no other way whatever. And with this we may couple the categorical statement in the synoptic tradition that 'no one knows the Father except the Son and any one to whom the Son chooses to reveal him' (Mt. 11:27), and also the stern warning in 1 John 2:23: 'No one who denies the Son has the Father. He

who confesses the Son has the Father also.' It may well be that J. A. T. Robinson was right when he suggested that 'the primary purpose of John's Gospel was to lead the Jews of the Dispersion to faith in Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God, while that of the Epistles of John was to warn Jews of the Dispersion who had already come to faith in Christ against the tragedy of falling into apostasy (*Twelve New Testament Studies*, pp.107-138). But while this might explain the emphasis on the element of denial in the last of these verses, it can scarcely alter the import of the exclusive claim which is common to them all.

Taken by themselves, the thrust of these verses might conceivably be softened by the argument that what they basically assert is that no-one can come to know God *as Father* except through Christ the Son, rather than that no-one can come to know God at all except through him. In point of fact, however, they do not stand alone, but must be read in conjunction with the apostolic proclamation in Acts 4:12 that 'there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved'. It is, of course, perfectly in order to observe that in the Bible the 'name' of God or Christ is often used as a synonym for his revealed character; but I cannot see that this makes any significant difference in this context. It seems to me that the consistent teaching of these verses as a whole – indeed, their necessary and inescapable import – is that it is *only* through Christ that any man can come to a personal knowledge of (and fellowship with) God, and *only* through his life, death and resurrection that any man can come to an experience of salvation. To quote Stephen Neill once more: 'For the human sickness there is one specific remedy, and this is it. There is no other.'

### The pre-Christian era

But the question immediately arises as to how, precisely, this applies to those who came before Christ – to Abraham, Moses, David and John the Baptist, for instance. And if it is answered that each of these came to know God, and to enjoy his forgiveness and fellowship, through the Christ whose coming they in part discerned and to whom they all bore

testimony, then what of the multitude of repentant and believing Jews who can scarcely be thought to have had any such vivid spiritual perception of what God was going to do in the future? Here, as it seems to me, there can be only one answer: that when an Israelite came to realize that he was a sinner, when he turned to God in repentance and faith, and when he brought his sin offering (where this was required), he was in fact accepted and forgiven – *not* on the basis of the animal sacrifice he had brought, but on the basis of what that sacrifice foreshadowed. The Old Testament sacrifices pointed forward to what God himself did in Christ, the Lamb of God, when he died on the cross for sinful men. That David, for example, did enjoy this forgiveness as a conscious experience Paul clearly teaches (Rom. 4:7f.), and this is palpably apparent in the Psalms he wrote; and animal sacrifices could never take away human sins. Indeed, an essential element in the propitiation Christ made on the cross was, the apostle tells us, that God meant by this 'to demonstrate his justice, because in his forbearance he had overlooked the sins of the past' (Rom. 3:25; cf. Heb. 9:15) – for the moral basis on which forgiveness was always available was the redemption finally effected in Christ.

It seems clear, then, that believing Jews under the Old Testament dispensation enjoyed forgiveness and salvation through that saving work of God in Christ (dated, of course, according to the calendars of men, but timeless and eternal in its divine significance), by which alone a holy God can and does forgive the repentant sinner – little though most of them can have understood this.

What, then, was the difference between the experience of believers in Old Testament times and that of Christians under the New Covenant? It was not that devout Jews were saved by 'works' or by their obedience to the law; for no-one can ever be saved by 'works', and no Jew has ever succeeded in keeping the law (Rom. 3:19; Gal. 3:21f.). Believers under the Old Covenant were saved by grace through faith, just as we are: that is, through the grace of God in Christ. But they (if I may here deliberately, but perhaps excusably, misquote Scripture) saw 'in a mirror dimly' (or, as the NEB puts it, 'puzzling reflections in a mirror'), while we, comparatively speaking, already see

'face to face' (1 Cor. 13:12). Under the Old Covenant they had 'but a shadow, and no true image, of the good things which were to come', and had to offer 'the same sacrifices year after year' which could 'never bring the worshippers to perfection' (Heb. 10:1, NEB), while we rejoice in 'the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all' (Heb. 10:10), and a forgiveness which excludes any further offering for sin and brings assurance to both heart and conscience. Their knowledge was deficient, their assurance often fitful, but their forgiven status identical with ours. But how ashamed we should be when we compare the poverty of our own actual experience of God with that of Enoch, Abraham, David or Daniel.

This reminds us that the knowledge of God and the experience of his grace were never limited to Israel under the covenant of Sinai. God had called Abram, and subsequently made a covenant with him, hundreds of years before that of Sinai (Gal. 3:17); and under this covenant of 'grace through faith' not only Isaac, Jacob and Joseph lived, but also, for example, Abraham's servant (Gn. 24:52). It is significant that among those 'commended for their faith' in Hebrews 11 we find the names of Abel, Enoch, Noah and Rahab. As Tasker puts it: 'Faith is a practical response to the divine initiative.' So, 'in order to show that it is universally applicable and allows of no exceptions', James 'cites the case of one who was a Gentile, a woman, and a prostitute' (Tasker, pp.70f.). The mysterious Melchizedek, moreover, was both King of Salem (probably Jerusalem) and priest of 'God Most High', in whose name he blessed Abram; and the Massoretic text, by adding 'Yahweh' before 'God Most High' in the oath that Abram then swore to the king of Sodom (Gn. 14:22), emphasizes 'that the two names denote one and the same God' (Bruce, *IBD*, p.977).

### Those today who have never heard the gospel

So far, then, the teaching of the Bible seems clear enough. But there remain a number of difficult problems with which we must attempt to grapple. And the first and most perplexing, which must inevitably occur to each of us at this point, is simply this: if the only way to God is through



Christ, and the only basis of forgiveness and acceptance is the atonement effected at the cross, then what about all those countless millions of people in the world today – to say nothing of the millions who have already lived and died – who, to our shame, have never heard of the only Mediator and only Saviour? Are they utterly without hope, as many of our missionary forebears firmly believed? That would be an agonizing thought – which did, to be sure, spur them on to much sacrificial witness, as it still does many today.

Others insist that those who have never heard the gospel will be judged, and may in some cases be justified, by reference to the 'light' that was in fact available to them. It is true, no doubt, that it is by this standard that the quality of their lives will be judged; for we have Paul's authority for the premise that, whereas the Jew will be judged on the basis of the Law revealed on Sinai, non-Jews will be judged according to the criterion of the requirements of the law 'written on their hearts' (Rom. 2:14ff.). The most elementary principles of justice would, indeed, seem to demand this; but I cannot see that it provides any sort of solution to our problem. For the fact remains that, just as no Jew has ever succeeded in keeping the Mosaic Law or the injunctions of the prophets, so no non-Jew has ever succeeded in living up to the standard of the moral and ethical principles according to which he knows that he ought to regulate his conduct. We only need to turn from the second to the third chapter of the Epistle to the Romans to read that 'no human being can be justified in the sight of God' on the basis of law, whatever that law may be, for 'law brings only the consciousness of sin' (Rom. 3:20, NEB). To this there can be no exception. The verdict of God is explicit and unequivocal: 'all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God' (Rom. 3:23).

So our problem comes down to this: is there any basis on which the efficacy of the one atonement can avail those who have never heard about it? It is not enough to say, with Wilfred Cantwell Smith, that 'a Buddhist who is saved, or a Hindu or Muslim or whoever, is saved, and is saved only, because God is the kind of God whom Jesus Christ has revealed Him to be' (*The Faith of Other Men*, p. 126). This is clearly true, so far as it goes – for the character and nature of the God with whom we have to do is fundamental. But his

character, as revealed in the Bible (and, indeed, in Christ himself), does not solely and only consist in a profound and universal benevolence. God is 'light' as well as 'love', 'justice' as well as 'mercy', and to concentrate on the one quality alone is not only to distort his character but to caricature the essence of his love. As we have seen, God's hatred of sin is, in reality, the inevitable concomitant of his love for the sinner: the reverse side of the very same coin. Inevitably, sin separates from God. It is gloriously true that God 'desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth' (1 Tim. 2:4), but this can be only through the Saviour who is himself 'the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world' (1 Jn. 2:2).

So again we come back to the same question: how can this come about if they have never heard of the only Saviour? But we must, at this point, take to heart Lesslie Newbigin's pungent response to Hans Küng's criticism<sup>2</sup> of Protestant theologians' escape into agnosticism on this subject:

I find it astonishing that a theologian should think he has the authority to inform us in advance who is going to be 'saved' on the last day. It is not accidental that these ecclesiastical announcements are always moralistic in tone: it is the 'men of good will,' the 'sincere' followers of other religions, the 'observers of the law' who are informed in advance that their seats in heaven are securely booked. This is the exact opposite of the teaching of the New Testament. Here emphasis is always on surprise. It is the sinners who will be welcomed and those who were confident that their place was secure who will find themselves outside. God will shock the righteous by his limitless generosity and by his tremendous severity. The ragged beggars from the lanes and ditches will be in the festal hall, and the man who thought his own clothes were good enough will find himself thrown out (Matt. 22:1–14). The honest, hard-working lad will be out in the dark while the young scoundrel is having a party in his father's house (Luke 15). The branch that was part of the

<sup>2</sup>Cf. *On Being a Christian*, p. 99.

vine will be cut off and burned (John 15). There will be astonishment both among the saved and among the lost (Matt. 25:31-46). And so we are warned to judge nothing before the time (1 Cor. 4:1-5). To refuse to answer the question which our Lord himself refused to answer (Luke 13:23-30) is not 'supercilious'; it is simply honest (*The Open Secret*, p.196).

Many Protestant theologians, indeed, believe that we must leave at this point the question of the eternal destiny of all those who have never heard the gospel, since the Bible does not seem to provide any explicit solution to this problem. Others, I know, insist that various references in the New Testament to saving faith seem to confine this to explicit faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. This is no doubt true; but we are concerned not only with faith but also with grace (e.g. the problem of those who die in infancy). So in the next few pages I shall venture to suggest an approach to this whole problem which has increasingly commended itself to me in recent years as one which is compatible with our biblical data – although I realize, of course, that many scholarly and devout people will not agree. I shall then return to the rather different question which, as Newbigin rightly says, 'our Lord refused to answer'.

My suggestion is that we can, perhaps, find a ray of light by going back to what we have already said about those multitudes of Jews who, in Old Testament times, turned to God in repentance, brought the prescribed sacrifice (where such was provided) and threw themselves on his mercy. It was not that they *earned* that mercy by their repentance or obedience, or that an animal sacrifice could ever avail to atone for human sin. It was that their repentance and faith (themselves, of course, the result of God's work in their hearts) opened the gate, as it were, to the grace, mercy and forgiveness which he always longed to extend to them, and which was to be made for ever available at the cross on which Christ 'gave himself a ransom for all, to be testified in due time' (1 Tim.2:6, AV). It is true that they had a special divine revelation in which to put their trust. But might it not be true of the follower of some other religion that the God of all mercy had worked in his heart by his Spirit,

bringing him in some measure to realize his sin and need for forgiveness, and enabling him, in the twilight as it were, to throw himself on God's mercy?

# Romans 10:12-18

One of the most explicit passages in the New Testament on this subject is Romans 10:12-18. Here Paul makes the unequivocal statement that 'there is no difference between Jew and Gentile – the same Lord is Lord of all and richly blesses all who call on him, for, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved."' On this Calvin comments:

If the One who is the Creator and Maker of the whole world is the God of all mankind, He will display His kindness to all by whom He has been invoked. . . . Since His mercy is infinite, it must necessarily extend to all who have sought it. . . . It follows that the grace of God penetrates to the very abyss of death, if only men seek it from there, so that it is by no means to be withheld from the Gentiles (*Romans*, p.229).

Then, in verses 14 and 15, the apostle insists that the gospel must be proclaimed to the whole world by those whom God sends as his heralds. This was, indeed, the conviction which inspired and sustained Paul's own insistent evangelism, and should sustain ours. But it is important to note that 'To understand this rhetorical climax', as Calvin puts it, 'we must first bear in mind that there was a mutual connexion between the calling of the Gentiles and the ministry which Paul exercised among them, so that the esteem in which the one was held depended on the approbation accorded to the other' (*Romans*, p.229). He also insists that

it is the preached Word alone which Paul has here described, for this is the normal mode which the Lord has appointed for imparting His Word. If it is contended from this that God can instil a knowledge of Himself among men only by means of preaching, we shall deny that this was the meaning of the apostle. Paul was refer-



ring only to the ordinary dispensation of God, and had no desire to prescribe a law to His grace (*Romans*, p.231).

Calvin does not specify in what ways (other than preaching the gospel) God may sometimes, in his grace, 'instil a knowledge of Himself'; and I certainly do not claim his authority for my own suggestions. We cannot doubt, however, that God can – and sometimes does – communicate directly with individuals. The Old Testament records many occasions when God 'moved' men's hearts (e.g. Cyrus) or spoke to them – whether for their own good or that of others – through dreams (e.g. Abimelech, Joseph and Nebuchadnezzar), miracles (e.g. Naaman), visions (e.g. Belshazzar) or in some unspecified way (e.g. Balaam).<sup>3</sup> On occasion he spoke, or revealed himself, through a theophany (e.g. Jacob and Joshua) or through angels (e.g. Hagar and Lot);<sup>4</sup> and both Abram the Aramaean and Saul the Pharisee were the recipients of a number of different revelations, by speech (audible or inaudible), visions and dreams.<sup>5</sup> He has also always made himself known – whether for condemnation or salvation – through the phenomena of nature (cf. *Rom.* 1:19f.; 10:18f.).

It is in this context, to quote Calvin once more, that the apostle

asks the question whether God had ever before directed His Voice to the Gentiles, and performed the office of Teacher to the whole world. For the purpose of showing that the school into which God might gather scholars to Himself from every part of the world is open to all, he also cites the testimony of the psalmist from Ps. 19:4... The argument is this – from the very beginning of the world God has displayed His divinity to the Gentiles by the testimony of His creation, if not by the preaching of men. Although the Gospel was not heard at that time among the Gentiles, yet the whole workmanship of heaven and earth spoke and proclaimed its Author by its preaching. It is, therefore, clear that, even during the

<sup>3</sup>Ezr. 1:1; Gn. 20:3; 37:5; Dn. 2:1, 29ff.; 2 Ki. 5:17; Dn. 5:5; Nu. 22:9.

<sup>4</sup>Gn. 32:24–30; Jos. 5:13f.; Gn. 16:7–9; 19:1f.; cf. Acts 10:30f.

<sup>5</sup>Gn. 12:1–25:8; Acts 9:5ff.; Gal. 1:11f.; Acts 16:9ff.; 27:23f.

time in which the Lord confined the favour of His covenant to Israel, He did not withdraw the knowledge of Himself from the Gentiles, without continually inflaming some spark of it among them (*Romans*, pp.233f.).

Left to themselves, this cosmic revelation would have engendered in men a knowledge of God's 'eternal power and divine nature' which, instead of leading them on to worship and thanksgiving, would have been swallowed up in the darkness of humanistic philosophy, idolatry and even gross immorality (*Rom.* 1:18–32). But did the God who is 'the Creator and Maker of the whole world' go on 'continually inflaming some spark [of his grace] among them' *only* that they might all be 'without excuse', and without any possibility of salvation? May it not be compatible, both with Scripture and experience, to suggest that God sometimes so works in men's hearts by his grace that, instead of them 'holding down the truth', he opens their hearts to it and enables them to embrace such of it as has been revealed to them?

Is not this, perhaps, the meaning of Peter's words in the house of Cornelius: 'I now realise how true it is that God does not show favouritism but accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right' (*Acts* 10:34f.)? This cannot mean that the man who tries to be religious and strives to be moral will earn salvation, for the whole Bible denies this possibility. But may it not mean that the man who realizes something of his sin and need, and who throws himself on the mercy of God with a sincerity which shows itself in his life (which would always, of course, be a sure sign of the inward prompting of God's Spirit), would find that mercy – although without understanding it – at the cross on which Christ 'died for all' (*2 Cor.* 5:14)?

'The Apostle', writes G. Campbell Morgan commenting on this passage, 'did not mean to say that man is received upon the basis of his morality', for he can be saved only by what God did in Christ at the cross. 'But no man is to be saved because he understands the doctrine of the Atonement. He is saved, not by understanding it, but because he fears God and works righteousness' – and he goes on to describe 'the glad and glorious surprise' with which, at the

Last Day, we shall find that there are those who have responded to what they knew of divine grace and were 'justified' (acquitted and accepted) 'not because of their morality, but by the infinite merit of the Cross' (Acts, p.220).

### Romans 3:10-18

In this passage Paul quotes a series of Old Testament verses which provide cumulative evidence that there is no-one on earth who has earned salvation, or could possibly do so, by his own righteousness, understanding, kindness, reverence or search for God. This is basic to the gospel. But it is, perhaps, relevant to observe that the passage is addressed primarily to the Jews (cf. v. 19), although verse 9 makes it clear that it is also applicable to the Gentiles. The Bible is explicit in recording the fact that, while all men are sinners and need to be saved by grace, there are some who are *relatively* 'righteous' (e.g. Job and Nathanael), and who serve God with what the Old Testament terms 'a perfect heart' – although they fall far short of any objective perfection. So I believe that the statement that 'no one seeks for God' (like the statements that 'their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness' and 'their feet are swift to shed blood') must also be taken in a relative sense:<sup>6</sup> that there is no-one who seeks God perfectly. Is there any convincing reason why the very numerous references and promises in the Scriptures to those who 'seek God' should apply exclusively to those Jews in Old Testament times who responded to God's grace in terms of the Old Covenant, or those who have heard and responded to the gospel? It is true that the asceticism, pilgrimages, prayer and meditation that different religions enjoin, all too often, like Jewish zeal for the Mosaic law, represent man's attempt to earn salvation. But my study of Islam, for example, convinces me 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 I do 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

<sup>6</sup>Like Rom. 1:24-32 and 2 Tim. 3:2-8, this passage depicts human nature in the raw, when not restrained or prompted by either 'common' or 'special' grace.

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?

It is at this point that we can, perhaps, see a similarity as well as a difference between those who today have never really heard the gospel and believing Jews under the Old Covenant. What is certain is that no man can earn salvation through his religion, whatever that may be – including, of course, Judaism and Christianity. The difference between the Israelite of old and the 'unevangelized' today is clear: that the former could put his trust in a revelation of God which, though partial and incomplete, was uniquely authoritative. But may there not be a real similarity as well? The believing Jew was accepted and blessed not because of the prescribed animal sacrifices he offered, nor even his repentance and abandonment of himself to God's mercy, but because of what God himself was going to do in his only Son at the cross of Calvary. Of this the Old Testament Israelite had never heard; but this alone could and would provide the moral basis on which God in his forbearance first 'overlooked' his sins (Rom. 3:25) and would finally set him wholly free from them (Heb. 9:15). Somewhat similarly, then, the 'unevangelized' today are (like all mankind) 'prisoners to disobedience' and wholly dependent on whether the 'God of all grace' may so work in their hearts – convicting them of sin and need, awakening a love of the truth, and quickening their faith in whatever he has shown them of his 'purpose of mercy' – that they may be included in the efficacy of the atoning sacrifice, made by a Saviour about whom they have never heard, which was offered, in some sense at least, 'for the sins of the whole world' (1 Jn. 2:2). We can never dogmatize on such a subject, but must rest on the 'depth of wealth, wisdom, and knowledge in God. . . . Source, Guide, and Goal of all that is – to him be glory for ever!' (Rom. 11:33, 36, NEB).

If a man of whom this is true subsequently hears and understands the gospel, then I believe that he would be among the company of those, whom one does sometimes meet on the mission field, who welcome and accept it as soon as they hear it, saying (in effect): 'This is what I have

been waiting for all these years. Why didn't you come and tell me before?' We must, of course, emphasize the wonderful way in which such people often *have* been brought the message they longed for (e.g. Cornelius); but I myself cannot doubt that there may be those who, while never hearing the gospel here on earth, will wake up, as it were, on the other side of the grave to worship the One in whom, without understanding it at the time, they found the mercy of God.

I have recently discussed this point with a well-known writer on comparative religion who emphasizes, just as I do, that salvation can be through Christ alone. He too has struggled with this same problem of whether – and if so how – that salvation can be available to those who, through no fault of their own, have never heard of him; but he takes a more subjective view of the atonement than I do, and insists that the answer must lie in an after-death experience of the transforming power of Christ's love. He observes, reasonably enough, that this cannot properly be termed a 'Second Chance'; for it would represent – at least from one point of view – their first and only chance. But for such a 'chance', whatever one may call it, I can find no warrant in Scripture. Nor do I myself follow his argument; for I dare to believe that if in this world a man has really, as a result of the prompting and enabling of the Holy Spirit, thrown himself on the mercy of God (like the tax-collector in the Temple who cried out 'God be merciful to me, a sinner'), that mercy will already have reached him – on the basis of the propitiation which has been made 'once for all' – and he will have been 'justified'. With much less knowledge he has taken up the same position as the tax-collector who 'did not deserve forgiveness on account of his submissive prayer, but through his self-despising confession of guilt was in a condition to receive the forgiveness granted by God to the penitent. For...the publican the general rule held good that...he who really humbles himself (with sincere confession of guilt) will be exalted' (Geldenhuis, p.451). What will happen to him beyond the grave can best be described, as I see it, as an adoring recognition of his Saviour and a comprehension of what he owes him.

Nor *should* this view, if it be correct, lead to any

diminution of missionary urgency. First, we are under orders, explicit and unequivocal, to go to all the world with the good news. Second, a man such as we have discussed may indeed have found God's mercy, but desperately needs teaching, heart assurance, and a message he can communicate to others. This may, perhaps, be the meaning of the Lord's special message to Paul in Corinth: 'Do not be afraid, but speak...for I have many people in this city' (Acts 18:9f.). On this Campbell Morgan comments that God 'knew the heartache and the agony of many in Corinth... the longing of many, inarticulate, not understood, for exactly that which he [the apostle] had to minister and to give'. The words were not spoken of those who were already Christians, but of 'those whom his Lord numbered among His own' (Acts, pp.334f.). Third, if we consider what enabled us ourselves to give up attempting to earn salvation and put our entire trust in the mercy of God, would we not – almost invariably – say that it was hearing the good news of what Christ had done, the very message which the apostle was commanded to preach in Corinth? So it is vitally important that we, too, should go and tell others this same message. Fourth, can we deny others the present experience of joy, peace and power which a conscious knowledge of Christ, and communion with him, alone can bring? As for our own spiritual responsibility *vis-à-vis* the gospel, this is crystal clear, for we *have* heard of the only Saviour, so 'how shall we escape if we neglect such a great salvation?' (Heb. 2:3).

### The Jews since the advent of Christ

For some pages now we have been considering the position before God of both believing Israelites under the Old Covenant and those followers of other religions today who have never really heard the gospel. Clearly enough, it behoves Christians to treat all the religions that mean so much to vast numbers of their fellow men with proper respect, and to do their best to understand them. But the question inevitably arises whether Judaism, even today, represents a special case. In one respect at least this is obviously true, for the Christian does not doubt that Israel

was the recipient of divine revelations which were both authentic and authoritative, if incomplete and, in some respects, temporary. Nor can he fail to realize that the church will be greatly impoverished if it fails to study the Old Testament. But the question remains: how far does the Jew today represent a special case?

This problem has recently been discussed by the Bishop of Birmingham in a lecture entitled 'The Church and the Jews' (24 February 1983), a printed copy of which he has kindly sent me. Himself a convert from Judaism, Hugh Montefiore is rightly horrified not only by the Nazi Holocaust, as an unparalleled example of cold-blooded genocide, but also by the long centuries of obloquy and persecution which his compatriots have suffered in Christendom in general, and at the hand (or under the influence) of the church in particular. And for this obloquy and persecution, he justly observes, no official body, and no ecumenical Council, has confessed the church's responsibility, shame and penitence.

In evidence of this responsibility he refers both to certain features in the New Testament and a number of positively appalling statements made by Church Fathers – especially Cyprian, Eusebius, Chrysostom and Ambrose. No doubt Judaism was for many years the most implacable opponent of the infant church; but there can be nothing but shame for the venom of these utterly sub-Christian pronouncements. Montefiore is much less convincing, however, when he identifies the genesis of these sentiments in the New Testament, and particularly in Matthew's and John's Gospels and some of Paul's letters.

The denunciations of the 'scribes and Pharisees' in Matthew 23, for example, should never be regarded as all-inclusive in their scope, but as addressed to that predominant group of religious leaders whose obsessive zeal for the minutiae of their legal tradition, and instinctive fear for their own position, made them such inveterate critics of the revolutionary teaching of this upstart reformer — even to the point of plotting his death. That Matthew's record of Jesus' outspoken rebukes betrays 'an atmosphere of hatred' seems to me decisively rebutted by the heart-broken lament over Jerusalem with which this very chapter

ends. It seems equally impossible to construe John's references to the fierce opposition Jesus encountered from 'the Jews' as a blanket indictment of the race from which the writer himself almost certainly sprang, into which Jesus was born, and to which he devoted nearly all his ministry. As for Paul, he certainly spoke sharply about the Jewish legalizers who were trying to seduce his converts from the gospel of pure grace, yet he could and did solemnly declare that he could even wish himself to be 'cut off from Christ' for the sake of his fellow Israelites (Rom. 9:3).

There can be no doubt, however, that the Christian church bears the heavy guilt of making it vastly more difficult for a Jew who is proud of his heritage to join the community that has treated his people so shamefully. I well remember a Jewish colleague telling me that Israel was almost unique as a country in which a Jew could embrace Christianity without any suspicion of an ulterior motive. After living for fourteen years in the Middle East, moreover, I know something of the trauma involved in a religious conversion which is regarded as a complete repudiation of one's family, community and culture. This is why Kenneth Cragg has tentatively suggested that in some cases converts from Islam might temporarily forgo individual baptism into the church in order to join a fellowship of 'Lovers of Jesus' in which they could more effectively reach their families and friends (*The Call of the Minaret*, p.349). So we should warmly welcome the fact that today, in parts of America, Jews who accept Jesus as Saviour and Lord think of themselves, and are regarded by their Christian friends, as 'Completed Jews' — thus signifying that, far from repudiating their heritage, they had accepted the Messiah to whom both the Law and the Prophets had pointed.

It is salutary in this context to remember Saul of Tarsus. It was his zeal for what he passionately believed to be the revelation given by God to Moses that prompted him to persecute the infant church, although he must have been deeply impressed by the Christians he hounded, and especially by Stephen's dying prayer for his persecutors. Saul was, indeed, 'kicking against the goads' (Acts 26:14). But he must have said to himself, again and again, 'Jesus cannot have been the Messiah, for he was crucified; and the

Law states explicitly that "a hanged man is accursed by God" – that is, that to hang on a gibbet was the fate of one who had come under the 'curse' of breaking God's law) (cf. Gal. 3:10, 15). It was only the voice and vision of the risen Lord on the road to Damascus which proved to him beyond doubt that Jesus had been glorified, rather than accursed; and only during his sojourn in Arabia, we may surmise, that the Holy Spirit taught him that the explanation was that Jesus, himself sinless, had been 'made a curse for us'. But if it was only a vision from heaven that brought Saul to whole-hearted surrender, in spite of the Christlike witness of Stephen and others, how much harder it must have been for a convinced Jew during the long centuries when the official church, and countless individuals who professed to be Christians, displayed to Jews only a grotesque misrepresentation of the compassionate Saviour they claimed to follow.

Do the Jews, then, represent a special case? James Parkes went so far as to suggest that the Old Covenant remains valid for Jews, while the New Covenant extends the promises of God to Gentiles.<sup>7</sup> But he seems to have ignored the fact that the New Covenant was specifically addressed to 'Israel and Judah' (Je. 31:31). In any case, Montefiore firmly rejects this suggestion, because 'theologically speaking there cannot be one set of truths for Jews and another set of truths for Christians', and because 'the concept that the New Covenant is only for Gentiles seems to me to suggest that I, as a Jew, have no place within Christianity – a view to which, perhaps not surprisingly, I take exception'. Equally, he rejects the stance of those who maintain that 'all religions are culturally conditioned and all of them in their different ways point the same way to God', for he cannot accept this 'extreme relativism'. 'All the great religions are to be treated with respect', he says. 'But religions do say different things theologically, and they cannot all be equally true; nor can I accept that there is no such thing as theological truth.'

He also mentions, and courteously rejects, one further theory – that of Rosemary Reuther, who finds the solution to this problem in an outright denial of the eschatological

<sup>7</sup>James Parkes, *Conflict of the Church and Synagogue*.

significance of the historical Jesus. It is, of course, true that the 'present' salvation that Jesus personified and proclaimed is only a foretaste of the eschatological 'Banquet of the Last Days' (cf. Rom. 8:8–15; Eph. 1:9f., 13f.; Rom. 11:25f., 32). But to deny that the Messianic Age has even begun in Jesus – so that 'room remains in history for other ways of grace, for many religions, and in particular for the other biblical faith, Judaism' – necessarily involves 'a watered down Christ' which, as Montefiore rightly states, 'a Christian will not tolerate'.

He himself, he says, finds help 'in the doctrine of the Logos, the Word of God, who was incarnate in Jesus Christ, but who also "at sundry times and in divers manners spake in times past unto the fathers by the prophets", and indeed who still speaks today'. This is certainly true; for it was, we are told, 'the Spirit of Christ' who spoke in the Old Testament prophets (1 Pet. 1:11), and whose work it is today to 'convince the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment' (Jn. 16:8). It may be true, too, that in some sense 'Jesus is the visible embodiment of a divine principle operative in a hidden way in the entire history of men' and that this 'logos theology enables Christians to be open to God's grace operative today in other religions and in secular human history'. But Jesus was infinitely more than the embodiment of a principle, as Montefiore would certainly agree; and we must, I believe, be very careful not to take this 'logos theology' too far. The light of God's truth and the darkness of Satan's deception (and man's consequent fall) are both at work in human history and in 'other religions', as we shall see in the next section of this chapter. In our present context, however, we are not concerned with other religions in general or with Judaism in particular, but with individual Jews whose impressions of Christianity have been grossly distorted by the shameful treatment their nation received from the Christian church during the long centuries since it came to political power under Constantine.

We have already seen that we have no warrant in Scripture to dogmatize about the eternal destiny of individuals in other religions, which must be left to a 'faithful Creator' in the day when 'the secrets of [all hearts] will be laid bare' (1 Pet. 4:19; 1 Cor. 14:25). (Cf. p.148,

above.) But I have ventured to make certain tentative suggestions about some of those who have never really heard about the salvation that there is in Christ Jesus. So our problem is how this may apply to individual Jews since the coming of Christ. And here, it seems to me, Montefiore's somewhat facile conclusion will not stand, and such Jews could, perhaps, be said to fall into four possible categories.

First, while the vast majority of such Jews must have heard the name of Jesus, a considerable number of them may not have heard it in any meaningful way, or may have heard about him in such a distorted form (partly because of their own traditional teaching, and partly because of the impact of the persecution to which they have been subjected), that their position must be much the same as that of people who have not heard at all. Such Jews can scarcely be said realistically to have *rejected* Christ, and their position may perhaps be somewhat similar to that of those who lived under the Old Covenant. This means that they could never earn salvation 'by observing the law, because by observing the law no-one will be justified' (Gal. 2:16); but any who, by the effective prompting of the Holy Spirit, are enabled to respond in repentance and faith to God's promises of grace in the Old Testament would presumably be saved, like their believing ancestors, not by the pristine symbols of atonement, which were ineffective and had to be repeated year by year, but by the final atonement made once for all by Christ (Heb. 9:15). On this Calvin comments: 'If anyone asks whether the sins of the fathers were remitted under the Law, we must hold . . . that they were remitted, but remitted by the mercy of Christ' (Calvin, *Hebrews*, *ad loc.*).

Second, there are no doubt some Jews who, in spite of their deep alienation from the Christian church as such, come to see Jesus as their promised Messiah, and accept him in their hearts as Saviour and Lord, but feel they cannot commit themselves to the institutional church. Such people choose a lonely path that inevitably means spiritual deprivation — an experience well known, for example, in many Muslim countries to women whose confession of Christ is severely restricted, but not silenced, by their husbands or fathers.

Third, there are all those (whether Jews, nominal Christians or others) who either ignore the challenge of Christ or who face up to it, understand it, and deliberately reject it — whether sadly, because they consider the cost too great, or defiantly, because they prefer to go their own way. About such it still remains written: 'whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son. This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil' (Jn. 3:18f.). Tragically, such have chosen their destiny.

Happily, however, there is a fourth alternative. There is today an increasing number of Jews who, far from rejecting Christ (or from becoming absorbed in the non-Jewish secular community), accept Jesus as their Messiah, Saviour and Lord and come, as 'Completed' or 'Messianic' Jews, to join some Christian fellowship, and be accepted by it, as those who have in no sense repudiated their Jewish heritage but have followed it to its divinely predicted fulfilment.

An important point should be added. In Romans 11 Paul summarizes, as a matter of divine revelation (v.25), the broad scope of the history of salvation. First, a number of Jews (the 'remnant' of v.5) would come to faith and salvation — both initially, in the apostolic church, and all down the succeeding centuries — while the nation as a whole was 'hardened' in unbelief (vv.7f. and 25), and salvation was proclaimed to all mankind until 'the full number of the Gentiles has come in' (v.25). When this has happened (v.26, *NEB*) 'all Israel' — that is, 'Israel as a whole', not necessarily every individual Israelite — 'will be saved'. And the quotation that follows in verse 27 (which may well be composite, based on Is. 59:20; Ps. 14:7; Is. 27:9 and Je. 31:33) seems to suggest that this national salvation will be brought about by the appearance (from the heavenly Zion?) of the Deliverer, or Redeemer, in his Parousia (*cf. Romans*, by Cranfield, Matthew Black and Bruce, respectively, *ad loc.*).

## Are only a few people going to be saved?

It would, I think, be relevant at this point to return briefly to the question which Jesus 'refused to answer' (to which reference has been made on p.148, above). This question, which represents the sub-title of this section, was not, in point of fact, precisely the same as the question which Newbigin was tackling in that admirable quotation, or which I have been discussing subsequently. The disciples were asking about the *number* of the redeemed, while we have been concerned with their *identity*. But there is no reason to think that Jesus would have given any substantially different answer if the disciples had phrased their question in somewhat different terms; for when Peter asked him a question about John's future ministry, we read that Jesus, in effect, replied: 'That is no business of yours. Your task is to follow me yourself' (cf. Jn. 21:20-22). And the two questions are, to be sure, in some sense inter-related.

We have seen that an essential element in God's purpose in the creation of the world was to bring 'many sons to glory' (Heb. 2:10), and that the book of Revelation pictures these sons as 'a great multitude that no-one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language', all ascribing their salvation 'to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb' (Rev. 7:9f.). But, however great their *absolute* number may be, the redeemed are commonly thought of as *relatively* few – snatched, as it were, from a perishing world. But is this in fact the clear and unequivocal teaching of Scripture? There are certainly many passages which give us this impression, but it is by no means certain that these passages represent the full picture.

The primary reason for this widespread impression is probably the distinctly indirect answer that Jesus did give, in Luke 13:24f., to his disciples' question. 'Make every effort to enter the narrow door,' he said, 'because many, I tell you, will try to enter and will not be able to.' And he is recorded in Matthew 7:13f. as giving almost exactly the same exhortation in rather more detail: 'Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a

few find it.' It seems clear, therefore, that in declining to answer their question in any direct or theoretical way, his purpose was deliberately to turn their minds from abstract speculation about the ultimate ratio between the number of the redeemed and that of the reprobate to the practical question of their own duty to 'press toward the mark' (as Paul subsequently put it) by choosing a 'gate' that would inevitably mean renunciation and self-denial and a 'road' that would at times prove both arduous and lonely.

This it appears, was certainly the major thrust of his exhortation and warning, the essence of which was to discourage any superficial discipleship or light-hearted drifting with the crowd. But B. B. Warfield has pertinently remarked, in an essay on this very subject,<sup>8</sup> that the parable of the Ten Bridesmaids can scarcely be pressed to the point of suggesting that the number of those who will ultimately be welcomed into the Wedding Feast will be exactly equal to that of those who will be shut out; or that the parable of the Wheat and Weeds must be taken to imply any particular ratio between the wheat itself and the weeds that must first be gathered up out of the 'field' which represents the world before the wheat can be finally garnered.

At the time when Jesus spoke these words the number of his disciples was certainly very small. And there have, indeed, been long periods of time, and vast areas of the world, in which Christian witness, all down the ages, has been exceedingly sparse, and visible results negligible. But there have also been times of revival and blessing; and who can tell how some of God's promises are still going to be fulfilled?

How often have missionaries in Egypt, for example, stayed their souls on the prophetic word 'Blessed be Egypt my people' (Is. 19:25; cf. vv. 18-25), or those called to witness to Muslims on the promises about Ishmael (Gn. 17:18-21. Cf. Kidner, p. 130)? Who would have believed, even a few years ago, that the number of Christians (and, still more, of new converts) in South America and Africa would today greatly outnumber those in Europe and North America? When one realizes the positively astronomical increase in world population in recent years, and its predicted con-

<sup>8</sup> 'Are They Few That Be Saved?'



tinuance, comparative statistics become almost meaningless. And if the 'rejection' of Israel meant 'the reconciliation of the world', then 'what will their acceptance be but life from the dead?' (Rom. 11:15). But this glorious prospect must, of course, be balanced by reference to those prophecies which predict a time of increasing evil and apostasy before the end, and to our Lord's question: 'When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?' (Lk. 18:8).

There are also quite a number of passages in the Bible that have a distinctly 'universalist' tinge. These are so heavily outweighed by other statements which cannot possibly, as I understand them, be interpreted in any fully universalist sense that we are apt to ignore them. On the face of it, however, the parable of the Yeast teaches that ultimately this 'worked all through the dough' (Mt. 13:33), and that of the Mustard Seed that it would grow to immense proportions (Mt. 13:31f.). In other words, we find in the Bible what seems at first sight a double line of teaching which must either be resolved in some convincing way or else held together in tension. Further passages which demand consideration in this context include John 3:17-21, which at one and the same time asserts that 'God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him', and yet makes it clear that those who 'prefer' darkness to the light of Christ 'stand condemned already'; and 1 John 2:2 where, after the reference in the previous verse to our Advocate, 'Jesus Christ, the Righteous One', the writer continues: 'He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins' and then adds, 'and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world'.

About this verse Howard Marshall comments: 'The universal provision implies that all men have need of it. There is no way to fellowship with God except as our sins are forgiven by virtue of the sacrifice of Jesus. At the same time John rules out the thought that the death of Jesus is of limited efficacy; the possibility of forgiveness is cosmic and universal' (Marshall, p. 119). There are, of course, those who make a clear-cut distinction here between Christ's propitiation, which concerns 'the whole world', and his advocacy, which exclusively concerns 'those who believe'—

with the implication that it is only his advocacy which makes the propitiation effective. But this really will not do, for 'The efficacy of the advocacy rests on that of the propitiation, not the efficacy of the propitiation on that of the advocacy. It was in the propitiatory death of Christ that John finds Christ's saving work: the advocacy is only its continuation—its unceasing presentation in heaven... And this saving work is common to Christians and "the whole world".' So, if we 'do not attempt the impossible feat of emptying the conception of "propitiation" of its content, this means that in some sense what is called a "universal atonement" is taught in this passage. The expiatory efficacy of Christ's blood extends to the entire race of mankind' (Warfield, 'Jesus Christ the Propitiation for the Whole World', pp. 173f., 171).

But other passages in the Bible (e.g. Jn. 3:18f. quoted above) teach explicitly that those who prefer darkness to the light will not benefit from Christ's propitiatory death, and that those who reject his claims will 'die in their sins' (Jn. 8:24)—and verses of substantially identical import could be multiplied. In other words, 1 John 2:2 represents 'universal atonement' only 'in some sense'. So the question is: in what sense? To this question Abraham Kuyper, the great Dutch theologian, replies that

From this difficulty there is no escape, until special Revelation is no longer viewed as directed soteriologically to individual man. Revelation goes out to *humanity* taken as a whole.... By this we do not deny the soteriological aim of special Revelation, but merely assert that salvation of the individual soul is not its rule. Its standard is and will be theological; its first aim is *theodicy*. Surely whoever believes on Christ shall be saved; this is possible first and only because God sent his Son; but the aim, and therefore also end, of all this is, to make us see how God has loved *His* world, and that therefore the creation of this cosmos, even in the face of sin, has been no *failure*.... The subject of [God's] action is not the individual person, but the general Ego of believing humanity—a limitation in which the additional term of 'believing' is no contradiction, if only it is understood



how wrong it is to suppose that the real stem of humanity shall be lost, and merely an aggregate of elect individuals shall be saved. On the contrary, it should be confessed that in hell there is only an aggregate of lost individuals, who were cut off from the stem of humanity, while humanity as an *organic whole* is saved . . . . By 'believing humanity', therefore, we understand the human race as an organic whole, so far as it *lives*, i.e. so far as unbelief has turned again to faith or shall turn (Kuyper, pp.281–284).

In his Essay on 'Are They Few That Be Saved?' Warfield makes a very passing reference to part of this quotation and then translates from the Dutch a passage in another of Kuyper's books in which he 'finely says':

Ask whether God has deserted since the fall this, His splendid creation, this human race with all its treasure of His image, – in a word, *this His world*, in order that, casting it aside, He may create *an entirely new somewhat* out of and for the elect. And the answer of the Scriptures is a decided negative . . . . If we liken mankind, thus, as it has grown up out of Adam, to a tree, then the elect are not leaves which have been plucked off from the tree that there may be braided from them a wreath for God's glory, while the tree itself is to be felled, rooted up, and cast into the fire; but precisely the contrary, the lost are the branches, twigs, and leaves which have fallen away from the stem of mankind, while the elect alone remain attached to it. Not the stem itself goes to destruction, leaving only a few golden leaflets strewn on the field of eternal light, but, on the contrary, the stem, the tree, the race abides, and what is lost is broken from the stem and loses its organic connection.

As I understand these quotations – and Kuyper's writings, for all his massive intellect, acute perception, 'Reformed' orthodoxy and periodical eloquence, are not easy reading – Kuyper is not concerned with the ratio between the redeemed and the reprobate (indeed, he sees himself bound to explain, Warfield observes, 'that the tree

of humanity which abides may be, and in point of fact is, less in actual mass than the branches which are broken off'), but with the basic postulate that it is humanity as an organic entity which is redeemed, and that it is 'all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven', that God did in principle 'reconcile to himself by making peace through [Christ's] blood, shed on the cross' (Col. 1:20).

Curiously enough, Robert J. Breckinridge, an American Reformed theologian of a slightly earlier vintage – writing from what Warfield describes as 'an apparently opposite standpoint (verbally at least)' – disagrees with Kuyper on two points. He asserts that

The human race is not a restored race, out of which a certain number are lost; but it is a fallen race out of which a certain number are saved. It is logically immaterial what the proportions of the lost and saved to the whole race, and to each other, may be; but the question as to the mode is vital as regards the possibility of any salvation at all . . . . The race is lost, with a portion of it – far the greater portion it may be – saved through the free, sovereign, efficacious, special grace of God (Breckinridge, p.513).

But we are not concerned here with numbers; and I doubt if Kuyper and Breckinridge are as flatly opposed to each other as it might appear in regard to the basic question of the mode of salvation. In any case it seems to me that Kuyper's way of putting the matter, in relation both to humanity as a race and the world as a whole, has strong biblical support in the verses I have already quoted. Human beings are certainly fallen creatures; and the 'world' as we know it is still, largely, 'under the control of the evil one' (1 Jn. 5:19). But God has already, in principle, reconciled 'all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven' (significantly with no mention here of 'things under the earth') to himself by the atoning sacrifice and victory of the cross (cf. Col. 1:20; 2:15), where 'Jesus Christ, the Righteous One' (1 Jn. 2:1) took away 'the sin of the world' (cf. Jn. 1:29). Yet it is only when he comes again that the 'sheep' will be separated from the 'goats', and that we shall see 'everything made subject' to the One who 'tasted death for everyone'

(Heb. 2:8f.). In other words, God has declared his gracious amnesty, and now calls on all men to respond, to avail themselves of this amnesty, and to come out of their rebellion into glad allegiance.

It is, of course, only by the prevenient grace of God that even those who hear about this 'amnesty' can respond. But what about infants? Warfield states that most 'Reformed thinking' – and, indeed, 'the thinking of the Christian world' – seems to be 'converging' to the view that 'All that die in infancy will be saved', adding that this could only be 'through the almighty operation of the Holy Spirit who worketh when and where and how he pleaseth' (*Studies in Theology*, p.444) – on the basis, no doubt, of 'the atoning sacrifice' of the Lord Jesus Christ 'for the sins of the whole world' (1 Jn. 2:2). So what of more mature persons who have sinned consciously, but have never heard (and are therefore in no position to accept with explicit faith) the gospel of God's matchless love for the whole world? May it not be that 'God our Saviour, who wants all men to be saved' (1 Tim. 2:4), and does not want 'anyone to perish' (2 Pet. 3:9), quickens in some men by his Spirit a consciousness of sin and need, and enables them, in the twilight, to cast themselves on his mercy? If so, then they, too, would be saved by the grace of God in Christ alone.

Only yesterday I read the story of a missionary who, stopping by the roadside to drink some coffee, was confronted by an illiterate herdsman who asked her: 'Are you a sent one, by the Great God, to tell me of a thing called Jesus?' His brother, it appeared, had heard a visiting speaker, at the school at which he was a teacher, tell the children that he had been sent to them by a great God to tell them about 'something called Jesus'. Not interested himself, he had gone out for a drink; but 'every day since', his illiterate brother said, 'I've repeated the phrase: "A sent one from a great God to tell them about something called Jesus": and each time I said the word "Jesus", it was sweet in my heart. So I began to want to know more' (Roseveare, pp.101f.).

By the providence of God the missionary had stopped, and was able to lead him (like Cornelius) into the knowledge and assurance of salvation. But supposing she had not

responded in this way to her need to ward off drowsiness – which was, no doubt, the unrecognized prompting of the Holy Spirit – would that 'seeker' have been eternally lost? And supposing the special speaker had never visited the school, would that herdsman have been a seeker at all?

But 'supposing' things like this is a fool's game. As in Jesus' reply to Peter's question about John, that is not our business. Our duty is to obey and be his witnesses; our commission is to 'go and make disciples of all nations' (Mt. 28:19); and our message is a call to radical repentance and the good news of God's free forgiveness in Christ. We are called to action, not speculation.

### Non-Christian religions as such

Turning from individuals to other religions as such, what view should the Christian take of non-Christian religions – other than Old Testament Judaism – as systems which profess to mediate salvation? Many different answers have been given to this question; but, broadly speaking, three main views have been – and still are – held by Christians.

First, there are those who, impressed by the element of truth that can be found in most, if not all, other religions, and by the devotion and virtue of some of their adherents, regard them as a sort of *praeparatio evangelica* – as, indeed, all Christians would say of Old Testament Judaism. Christ, therefore, comes 'not to destroy but to fulfil'; and the convert ought to feel that 'he has lost nothing but has gained much, and that in particular all that was true in his old allegiance has been preserved' – and, indeed, enhanced – 'in the new' (Allen, *Christianity among the Religions*, p.123).

Some who take this view would, as we have seen, explain the elements of truth in other religions in terms of an original revelation which has never been wholly lost or forgotten. Others, again, would discern in them the work of Christ himself, as the eternal Logos and the 'light that enlightens every man'. It is he, they would say, who 'bears witness to, makes manifest, the eternal truth which is written on the heart of man as such' (Allen, p.35). As

William Temple put it: 'By the word of God – that is to say by Jesus Christ – Isaiah and Plato, Zoroaster, Buddha, and Confucius uttered and wrote such truths as they declared. There is only one Divine Light, and every man in his own measure is enlightened by it' (Temple, vol. I, p.10).

This view was held by Justin Martyr and the Christian philosophers of Alexandria in the second and third centuries (cf. Dewick, p.120) and has been adopted by many others down the years. In E. L. Allen's summary of Schelling's thought, Christ 'was present in every age to every race, but he was not known as such. Heathenism is related to Christianity as law to gospel, reason to faith, nature to grace. The heathen is like a blind man, feeling the sun's warmth but not seeing the sun itself. Christ was within heathenism as natural potency but not yet as a personal principle' (Allen, p.70). It was only when the Word was made flesh, however, that he could be known as a personal Saviour and Lord.

This approach to the subject was widely held in Protestant missionary circles in the early years of this century and is amply documented in the volume of the Edinburgh Conference of 1910 on *The Missionary Message*. Thus other religions can be seen as a preparation for the gospel either as the 'revelation of deep wants of the human spirit' which the gospel alone can fully satisfy, or as 'partial insights which are corrected and completed by the gospel'. The main objection to this view is that, in R. Otto's phrase, 'the different religions turn on different axes. They simply do not ask or answer the same questions' (cf. Newbigin, *The Open Secret*, pp.193f.).

A variant but related approach to the same matter, dominant at the Jerusalem Conference of 1928, was to seek and acknowledge specific 'values' in the different religions, and to claim that it is in Christianity alone that all these values 'are found in their proper balance and relationship'. And yet, as the statement itself says: 'Christ is not merely the continuation of human traditions: coming to him involves the surrender of the most precious traditions. The "values" of the religions do not together add up to him who alone is the truth' (Newbigin, *op. cit.*, p.194).

The second view which has been taken by Christians

about other religions is the diametrical opposite of this: namely, that they do not emanate in any sense from God, but from the devil. Prominence is given, therefore, to the darker side of their ethical teaching and the least acceptable elements in their theological concepts; and those rays of truth which they indubitably contain are explained in terms of the fact that even Satan himself can and does sometimes appear as an angel of light (2 Cor. 11:14). A primary emphasis is put on the basic fact that they inevitably deny – whether by explicit statement, as in Islam, or by implicit teaching, as in the great pre-Christian religions – the unique claims of the 'Word made flesh', and that they hold themselves out, as it were, as substitutes for and alternatives to the only gospel that can save and satisfy. And if this view strikes many of us as much too extreme, it is well to take heed to two observations made in this context by Lesslie Newbigin. First, he remarks that there is at least an element of truth here: 'the sphere of 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 which to the secularized Westerner are interesting pieces of folklore and which to the third-generation successors of the first converts may come to be prized as part of national culture.'

Secondly, he insists that this 'strange idea' points to another important truth. For 'it is precisely at points of highest ethical and spiritual achievement that the religions find themselves threatened by, and therefore ranged against, the gospel. 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)' (Newbigin, *op. cit.*, pp.192f.).

The third view sees these religions as not so much divine revelation, nor yet Satanic deception, but as human aspiration – as man's attempts (whether more or less enlightened) to solve the mysteries of life. Among those who take this view there are two possible attitudes with regard to Christianity itself. Some would regard it as no more than the nearest approximation to ultimate truth, man's highest attainment in the age-long evolution of religion. Others

would go much further than this, and believe it to be the one and only divine self-disclosure (with Judaism, of course, as a forerunner), in which God himself came down from heaven, as it were, to reveal himself to man, while all the other religions represent human attempts to climb up to heaven to discover God.

I cannot, myself, opt for any one of these three views *simpliciter*, for there is, I believe, some truth in each. The non-Christian religions seem to me to resemble a patchwork quilt, with brighter and darker components in differing proportions. There are elements of truth which must come from God himself, whether through the memory of an original revelation, through some process of cross-fertilization with some other religion, or through that measure of self-disclosure which, I cannot doubt, God still vouchsafes to those who truly seek him (*cf.* pp.145–155, above). But there are also elements which are definitely false, and which I, for one, believe come from 'the father of lies' – whose primary purpose is not so much to entice men into sensual sin as to keep them back, by any means in his power, from the only Saviour. Yet again, there is much that could best be described as human aspirations after the truth, rather than either divine revelation or Satanic deception.

But is there, as some would assert, any 'saving structure' in these other religions? To this question the papal encyclical *Ecclesiam Suam* (1964) seems to give no sort of answer, for it simply envisages humanity as ranged in concentric circles with the Roman Catholic Church at the centre and with other Christians, Jews, Muslims, other theists, other religionists, and then atheists at progressively greater distances. But recent Roman Catholic writings, such as those of Karl Rahner and Hans Küng, go much farther than this (*cf.* pp.24f., 32f., above), with their doctrines of 'relative validity' and 'anonymous Christians'. To put the point more sharply, can we say, with Raymond Panikkar, that the 'good and bona fide Hindu is saved by Christ and not by Hinduism, but it is through the sacraments of Hinduism, through the message of morality and the good life, through the mysterion that comes down to him through Hinduism, that Christ saves the Hindu normally' (Panikkar, p.54. *Cf.* pp.35, 147f., above)? For myself, I could not

go nearly so far as this<sup>9</sup>, and think there is much more truth in a dictum of W. Cantwell Smith that 'If there is any truth in the Buddhist tradition, then its truth is not "in Buddhism", it is in the nature of things' (*The Faith of Other Men*, p.81) – for we are all one in our basic human need. I have heard of more than one Muslim whose study of the Qur'ān made him seek after Christ<sup>10</sup>; but I think we must ascribe this to the Spirit of God meeting him in his need, rather than attribute it to the Qur'ān as such. Yet there are certainly elements in non-Christian religions – and, indeed, in the heart of man – that testify in some measure to the righteousness and judgment of God, to the sin and guilt of man, and to the need of men and women everywhere for expiation and forgiveness, through all of which God can speak.

In other words, God has never left himself wholly without witness in his self-disclosures to mankind (James, *Christianity*, p.154. *Cf.* Acts 14:17). This is true even of those who stifle or 'suppress' the truth, as Paul insists (Rom. 1:18). It is true of the Muslim, who believes passionately in one true God, however much we may regard his concept of that God as in many ways a caricature of the 'God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ' – for I have never met a Muslim convert who regards the God he previously sought to worship as a wholly false God. Instead, he is filled with wonder and gratitude that he has now been brought to know that God as he really is, in Jesus Christ our Lord. And this is still more evident, as we have seen, in converts from Judaism who, like Paul before Felix, testify (in one phrase or another) that according to the 'Way', which other Jews called a sect, they now worship the God of their fathers (Acts 24:14), uniquely and finally revealed in Christ. 'This element of continuity', as Lesslie Newbigin writes, 'is confirmed in the experience of many who have become converts to Christianity from other religions. Even though this conversion involves a radical discontinuity, yet there is often the strong conviction afterwards that it was the living and true God who was dealing with them in

<sup>9</sup>*Cf.*, in particular, Newbigin's words quoted on pp.147f., above.

<sup>10</sup>E.g. a certain Mallam Ibrahim, who was crucified in the market place in Kano nearly a century ago.

the days of their pre-Christian wrestlings' (*The Finality of Christ*, p.59).

But now, in Christ, the one eternal God has actually become man. He has not merely visited humanity, he has taken our very nature. Now there is only one teacher, one Lord, one shepherd, one mediator (cf. Hooft, p.96). He has a name which is above every name. 'In no one else can salvation be found. For in all the world no other name has been given to men but this, and it is by this name that we must be saved!' (Acts 4:12, Phillips). So the attitude of the Christian to men of other religions can only be the attitude of the 'witness who points to the one Lord Jesus Christ as the Lord of all men... The Church does not apologise for the fact that it wants all men to know Jesus Christ and to follow him. Its very calling is to proclaim the Gospel to the ends of the earth. It cannot make any restrictions in this respect. Whether people have a high, a low or a primitive religion, whether they have sublime ideals or a defective morality makes no fundamental difference in this respect. All must hear the Gospel' (Hooft, p.116).

And this is a call for radical repentance and conversion. 'When the people heard the first Christian preaching they were cut to the heart and said to Peter: "What shall we do?" Peter said, "Repent, be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins and you shall receive the Holy Spirit. The promise is to you and your children and to all that are afar off, every one whom the Lord calls." That does not mean, however, that the promise does not need to be accepted. There is an RSVP on this card. "And those who received the word were baptized ... and they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of the bread and the prayers"' (Newbigin, *The Finality of Christ*, p.99).

#### Addendum

Since writing the manuscript of this book, I have read (just today) a sincere and sensitive book (entitled *God, That's Not Fair!*) by Dick Dowsett, of the Overseas Missionary Fellowship, in which he takes a distinctly different view from mine in regard to part of this chapter. Again and

again, however, I find myself in deep agreement with him. We are, indeed, involved in a world in which millions are living and dying without any knowledge of the salvation that there is in Christ alone. In this life most people think they can get by without him; but one day all will come to the awful realization that they were wrong. The issue is as stark as it could be: eternal life or eternal death – and it is our duty to make this known, and to point people to him. I very much wish I had myself done this more effectively, and been more faithful in prayer.

It is true that I should not always express myself in precisely Dick Dowsett's terms, but there is only one major point on which I feel bound to differ from him: namely, that I cannot believe that *all* those who have never heard the gospel are *inevitably* lost. What about all those who have died, and still die, in infancy (cf. p.168, above)? As for the more mature, I have no doubt whatever that the presentation of the gospel, by voice or writing, is the normal way by which people are reached and won; but I do not believe that we have any biblical warrant to assert that this is the *only* way. On the contrary, I believe there is much, in the Bible and experience, to point to the fact that God *can*, and sometimes does, work directly in men's hearts to convict them of sin and prompt them to throw themselves on his mercy.

Needless to say, my views (although shared, I know, by many others) are my responsibility alone. And I very much hope that many people will read Dick Dowsett's book – to confirm the many points on which we agree, to ponder the few points on which we differ, and (above all) to take to heart his resounding challenge.

# Christian Mission and Religious Pluralism: A Selected Bibliography of 175 Books in English, 1970-1990

Gerald H. Anderson

There has been an avalanche of literature in recent years, both in books and periodicals, on the subject of religious pluralism. Out of the vast literature this bibliography is selected and limited on the following basis: it has the interests and concerns of Christian mission in mind, and it is limited to 175 titles, in English, published in the period 1970-1990.

For purposes of this study, we have expanded our scope to include the worldviews of Marxism and secularism. Multi-volume works are counted as a single entry. Due to space limitations, information on multiple publishers and annotations of the literature are not included.

Another bibliography of special interest and value is by Kenneth Cracknell, "Interfaith Dialogue and the Theology of Religion: A Selective Bibliography for Ministerial Formation," *Current Dialogue* (Geneva: World Council of Churches), 17 (December 1989): 32-43.

Unfortunately, there is no book in any language that provides a comprehensive study of Christian attitudes and approaches to people of other faiths throughout the history of Christianity. Such a study would be immensely valuable in light of the increasing interest and importance of studies in the theology of religions.

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