

**PROCLAIMING CHRIST  
IN A  
PLURALISTIC CONTEXT**

**Ken Gnanakan**

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## INTRODUCTION

About ten years ago, at a time when some sections of the church were beginning to ask questions related to the finality of Jesus Christ, I wrote *Pluralistic Predicament*. It was timely, and even now responds to questions being asked. Is Christianity the only way? What about sincere followers of other religious faiths? How can we continue to proclaim Christ today?

Writing at that time in India, I wrote only as an academic knowing my Hindu neighbour to be tolerant and peace-loving. Little did I expect to be confronting a militant Hindu within the decade! Regardless, I continue to be convinced that the fundamentalist Hindu is only a small minority and the majority of my neighbours are still the kind I can live with in love and respect.

But, religious fundamentalism is on the rise and we cannot deny this. I am not concerned about analysing this uprising; my main intention is to call the Church to a self-examination. Is it our fundamentalist actions that have provoked these fundamentalist reactions? Fundamentalism gives rise to fundamentalism. We are not against fundamentals as we need them to stand upon. But fundamentalism is something we can live without.

I am restructuring "Pluralistic Predicament" in this newer updated form and present it as a study book for students in the Church. I have appropriately renamed it – *Proclaiming Christ in a Pluralistic Context* and respond to a number of questions being asked at present. I hope the book will provoke the reader to think even more carefully than I have, and build a biblical theology that will address the context today.

I am grateful to the Global Research Institute (GRI) in Pasadena, California, for making it possible for me to revise this book and bring it to this shape. The encouragement from Walter Hansen and Keith Cobell, Jr. during the period of this task has been invaluable. The partnership of TBT and GRI could prove to be instrumental in making many more contributions like this to the church worldwide.

**Ken Gnanakan**  
*Bangalore*

## **PREFACE TO REVISED EDITION**

Much has happened on the religious scene since I wrote *Pluralistic Predicament* in 1992, and reshaped it into "Proclaiming Christ in a Pluralistic Context" in 2000. A totally new book is required to cover all the ground. However, the insights that are explored here are still valid and will help in our seeking to respond even to the recent challenges.

The updated material addressing Islamic fundamentalism will be helpful to the student. One cannot keep up with the vast range of writings available almost everyday, and so what is included is limited. Books, articles and editorials are available in plenty for those interested.

Let me say a word to the casual reader. This is not a book that will introduce you to understanding religions. Nor will it give you an analysis of recent manifestations of these religions. I am concerned for a biblical theology of religion and that is what one can expect to find in this treatment.

However, I still confess the inadequacy of this book. There could have been a whole chapter on Fundamentalism, as this is what is the major concern today. Rather than only a chapter, this requires a whole monograph. That is what I will take on as my next challenge.

**Ken Gnanakan**  
*March 2002*

## Chapter I

### **THE CHALLENGE BEFORE US**

*This chapter introduces you to the importance of understanding our religious context today. There are various challenges that the message of the uniqueness of the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ faces. An objective look at the context will enable the reader to make a fair assessment of the context and consider the need for an adequate response.*

#### **INTRODUCTION**

Down through the centuries, Christians have been asking very pertinent questions - Is Christianity truly unique? Is Jesus truly the only way for salvation? The questions have emerged even more intensely with the resurgence of religions over the recent decades. Not only so, Christians all over the world has become more aware of the claims of peoples of other faiths. And hence another question is being asked - Are sincere adherents of other religions also saved? There is an urgent need for us to face the context intelligently, and then to affirm our belief within the climate of plurality that prevails.

Plurality is not new. During the Old Testament period the people of God handled plurality and did it with great zeal. They sought to maintain the purity of their own faith by distancing themselves from people of all other religions. But in doing so they showed a misunderstanding of the privilege they had enjoyed as the people of God. The privilege was taken to be something that made them an exclusive group with no responsibility towards other peoples. This arrogation of the blessings of God made them to refuse interaction with others, even though God had longed for them to. The stubbornness of Jonah

in his reluctance to preach to the Ninevites graphically symbolises this arrogant attitude.

Early Christians faced with a very different context had to work out their attitude to plurality within a world of hostile people. They were forced to live alongside men and women of varying ideologies. Rather than the theocratic society that Israel had lived within, there was the Roman rule, a much more unfriendly environment within which to live out their submission to God. There were also men and women of other religious commitments, even idolatrous and cultic groups. The apostles attempted to relate Jesus Christ to these beliefs and ideologies.

Even Jesus Christ lived and ministered in a world characterised by such plurality. There are numerous encounters where Jesus related positively to the faith of men and women outside the Jewish community. While he confronted them with the claims of the true God, there is very little condemnation. On the other hand, there is a commendation of the faith and commitment of some, even amid all the complexity of various other religious traditions. Interestingly, most of Jesus' condemnation was towards men and women of the Jewish faith.

### **OUR RESPONSE TODAY**

The fact of plurality, therefore, is hardly new. What is new is the challenge that comes to us forcefully today – a challenge not only to recognize the presence of religions around us but also to respond to the need for our relationship to them. We may stand up and proclaim - Jesus is the only way. But then the Muslim stands up for what he too believes is the only truth and in doing so challenges all other truths. The result is a clash of commitments. Rather than aggravating these clashes we will need to spell out our claims amid such plurality as Jesus would have us do in today's context.

Let us clarify our terminology. Plurality refers to the context we live in – a diversity of religions, cultures and ideolo-

gies. This diversity is something we must learn to accept and live within anywhere in the world. Britain and the rest of Europe can no longer claim to be lands of only the white races and the Christian religion. Even the United States of America which started out wanting to be a nation of Christians is today having to face a heterogeneity of peoples, races and their religions. The recent attacks by Islamic fundamentalists have brought everyone face to face with these conflicting claims. Plurality is a glaring fact.

However, the situation that presses us today is not merely to accept plurality, particularly a plurality of religions, but to recognise that our beliefs have to be spelled out amid growing antagonism. The pressure grows as fundamentalist elements provoke large sections of people into religious fanaticism and bigotry. Are we justified in continuing to claim that Christianity is the only true religion, some ask. Some propose that all religions must come together forgetting their differences, believing that a change of thinking is needed. Christians had rightly claimed uniqueness at one time, but today's situation is totally hostile to such claims. What we have learned in recent times about religions and of their own truth claims compels us, we are told, to cast aside any decisive claims that we make about Christ. We must accept all other religions on equal terms. In essence, those who advocate this attitude are not saying anything different to what the true Hindu has said all along – all religions lead to the one God.

The agenda of the pluralists in many ways comes from a Western guilt complex. The Western influenced pluralist is attempting to undo the damage caused by "Colonial" Christianity. Western "Colonial" Christianity carried on for a long time with naively negative attitudes to other religions, making little effort to discover anything of value in them. There was a show of arrogance. To a large extent most missionaries ignored the need to relate the Christian message to the beliefs of other religions. They firmly believed that there was no relation – only

a radical discontinuity. And in quite a few cases, with merely a superficial knowledge of people and their culture, condemnatory judgments were made which resulted in opposition and a distancing of some individuals and communities from the Gospel itself.

Not all missionaries were like this. There were some outstanding examples of those who genuinely attempted to understand and communicate Christ within the context of people who had their own distinctive faith and beliefs. One of these J.N Farquhar, showed Christ as the fulfillment of the search of the Hindu. Later, the eminent Methodist missionary Stanley Jones successfully built links with non-Christians in India through his round table conferences. But these were exceptions. In most cases, the Christian attitude to other faiths displayed a colonial attitude of arrogance amidst an embarrassing ignorance of the deeper beliefs of the adherents of other religions.

We have to spell out our faith in a post-missionary colonial context. Recent events have shaken the world out of any complacency. Christians in the West have been forced to face this reality with millions of staunch followers of other religions right on their doorstep. In Britain there are vast sections of the country populated by devout Hindus and even more zealous Muslims; while in the United States of America along with these major religions, there is the growing influence of numerous smaller cultic followings as well as the subtle impact of the New Age movement. If the Church wants to be effective in its mission, merely continuing to state its claims will not suffice. Mission has to be carried out in an awareness of the present context of the claims of others. It requires an understanding of the beliefs of its neighbours, as well as becoming a more integral part of the world within which it is called to be a witness.

## CULTURE AND COLONISATION

Let us look briefly into the historical background that gave room for any arrogant attitudes. The Enlightenment in Europe was certainly the turning point. Before the Enlightenment the view that prevailed was known as the Classicist view which accepted truth to be fixed and final. This belief extended to culture, giving rise to the belief that there was only one final, normative culture, the classicist culture. Flourishing under the evolutionary theories of Hegel and other "Idealists", European culture was seen to be ultimate and normative. Subsequently, this developed into a belief of the superiority of Christian religion and its associated culture, which promoted a superior attitude towards all other religions and cultures.

All this happened in the age of Colonisation. The colonial spirit was characterised by the driving desire to "commercialise" as well as "civilise" all countries being conquered, and it meant imposing this "superior" Western culture on the "inferior" cultures. Unfortunately, the history of Christianisation (which was so closely linked with the history of Colonisation) did not do much to counteract this attitude. Even if the average missionary, prior to his entry into the mission-field, had not subscribed to the classicist attitude, it was hard to accept cultures and religions that were so alien. And to those who only had paid lip-service to the classicist attitude there was the tendency to reject anything else that would presume to call itself a religion or culture. After all, it was so thoroughly worked out that Christianity and its associated culture was the ultimate and that even the civilization it gave birth to enjoyed this ultimacy.

The insulting references to African primitive religions and the condemnatory attitudes towards Asian religions was deplorable. Rich heritage went unnoticed while deficiencies were exposed. Religion and culture were seen to be inextricably bound together and the Gospel was used as a tool to eliminate primitive and barbaric cultures; and to impose this alien cul-

ture that was considered the ideal. Very soon there was to be a reaction. Hinduism itself with a rich heritage could not be attacked so naively without provoking indignant reactions. Islamic fundamentalists today point to the same attitudes that have provoked their recent reactions.

In Africa and in Asia there emerged a close connection between anti-colonial movements and the revival of traditional religions and indigenous cultures. Some Hindus looked down upon Christianity as the religion of the Colonial West. The names of Raja Ram Mohan Roy and Swami Dayananda Saraswati are most times associated with those who reacted to Christian missionaries in India. Roy was more positive and wanted to take Christ seriously, although not sympathetic to the kind of Christianity he confronted. His own response was in the form of a reformation within Hinduism, later to branch off as the Brahma Samaj. The Serampore missionaries attacked Roy for seeking Christianity only for its stress on monotheism and morality rather than focusing on the person of Jesus Christ. However, Roy's leanings were more towards his own spiritual foundation in Hinduism, rather than on turning fully to accept the Lordship of Jesus Christ. Swami Dayananda Saraswati vehemently attacked Christianity and precipitated a revival of Vedic Hinduism. He founded the well known Arya Samaj, which in recent times has played a major role in the resurgence of modern fundamental Hinduism.

Today there is a fanatic and militant version of this same antipathy. In a very real way the close connection between Colonialism and Christianity provoked both the modern Indian political as well as religious \*consciousness. The "Hindutva" movement is a call to Indianisation and the rejection of what is seen as foreign religions and their associated teachings. To be Indian is to be Hindu, is the claim. In response to the criticism that Hinduism also came from outside, i.e through the Aryans, there is a move to rewrite history to show that it was India that had originally exported Hinduism to

Europe. So strong is the reaction from fundamentalist forces, that they do not stop at merely reviving their religion but advance to attack the Christian community. Islamic attacks on Christianity are an even greater global threat.

While one can look back and criticise the early missionaries, it will be necessary to sympathise with the situation they confronted. The missionaries had limited knowledge of other religions and cultures. Their zeal and love for others was genuine. There were very commendable attempts made to present their faith. One cannot say that a more positive approach to Hinduism or Islam would have resulted in a greater response to the gospel. Neither can it be said that the early missionaries failed in their mission. They did what they felt was best in their time, and God has blessed their efforts with abundant fruit to affirm God's sovereignty. With the increased knowledge of our neighbours we have today, and a deeper understanding of our context, we will need to demonstrate a greater sensitivity in order to be better witnesses of Christ. In such a climate it is imperative for Christians to take a good look at themselves, their attitudes and the manner in which Christ must be proclaimed.

#### **A NEW ATTITUDE?**

Traditionally, there were two ways in which Christians have responded to other religions. The first was an exclusive commitment to the fact that Christians have access to the one final revelation and that there is therefore no salvation outside of Jesus Christ. This being the case all other religions are false. Further, if there was any spiritual manifestation it was demonic deception. This position is known as "Exclusivism". Exclusivism in its extreme form not only states that there is salvation only in Christ, but goes on to underline the discontinuity between all other religions and Jesus Christ. Most conservative and fundamentalist Christians will hold this position, although with varying degrees of flexibility in their attitudes to other religions.

The second position is a more generous attitude. On the one hand it maintains the stand on Jesus Christ and the uniqueness of his claims, but is willing to accommodate all other beliefs into this framework. This viewpoint looks positively at other religions but only in so far as they all are to be ultimately included within Jesus Christ, the norm for all. This position is referred to as "Inclusivism", implying the inclusion of all religions within the influence of salvation made available by Jesus Christ. Salvation is possible through all religions, the inclusivist will say, but ultimately, this is only on grounds of the salvific work accomplished by Jesus Christ.

We will need to note that these terms – exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism are recent intruders into theological vocabulary. These positions in their various forms may not fit within any such neat categorization, but prove helpful for our discussion. Exclusivists and inclusivists of different shades display a variety of attitudes to the finality of Jesus Christ. With the debate intensifying, one will soon discover that these labels are far from adequate to describe the various attitudes.

Believing that exclusivism is far too restricted and inclusivism did not go far enough, there are calls to consider the position referred to as Pluralism. Rather than claiming any biblical validity for their viewpoint, pluralists plead for an understanding and acceptance of other beliefs despite the diversities. In a world that is threatened to be torn apart by various forces, including that of religious fanaticism, a united stand is being called for. Like exclusivism and inclusivism, there are varied versions of pluralism.

No matter what our label, we are confronted by the challenge. To the writer, with a commitment to the Bible, there is no doubt about the finality of the revelation of God and in salvation made available through Jesus Christ. But the urgent need is for a fresh look at the Bible and our context in order to discover how this stand must be related to the reality of other religions. In other words, the question is not to do with whether

there are other ways to salvation. It is how we relate our belief to a context of conflicting claims without repeating the same mistakes made in the past.

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## FURTHER READINGS

The following brief readings are taken from various sources and will help you see the varied positions taken. Undoubtedly, they were written in times different to those we are in today. You will see varying assumptions based on the church's position in their contexts.

### *The Earth shall see the Salvation of our God*

John R Mott, Chairman of the Edinburgh 1910 and the driving force behind the conference, was a young and enthusiastic leader of the Christian movement in his time. Serving on the committees of the Student Volunteer Movement and the YMCA, he made them into highly evangelistic organisations. Here below is an excerpt from an article written to mobilize young people into mission in 1901. There is a triumphalism which prevailed in what was the heyday of colonial powers.

"As I went up and down densely populated provinces and presidencies and native states, as I conversed with over thirteen hundred missionaries, representing some eighty missionary societies... as I talked with hundreds of civilians and native students and priests, as I visited countless shrines and temples, and holy places, as I witnessed the superstitions, the abominations, the cruelties, the injustices, within the immediate confines of these sacred places, so called, the conviction became ever deeper and stronger that these nations without Christ are without hope. Yes, I believe to the core of my being that Christ some day must have sway over this whole world. He is not going to divide the world with Buddhism and Confucianism and Hinduism and Mohammedanism; he is going to have complete sway. It takes no prophet in our time to see that that church which conquered the Roman Empire which cast the spell of the matchless Christ over the nations of Western and Northern Europe, which has moved with giant strides among the nations and is shaking them today - that that Church will prevail. He shall reign from sea to sea. When He girds on his conquering sword all the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God."

“The Responsibility of the Young People for the Evangelization of the World”. John R Mott

p B-26 Perspectives on the World Christian Movement. A Reader. Revised Edition. Ed Winter, Ralph and Hawthorne, Stephen. William Carey Library. 1981

### ***Religions as harbingers of Peace and Harmony***

Swami Vivekananda at the Parliament of World Religions 1893.

Addressing the World Parliament of Religions in 1893, Swami Vivekananda, a champion of the Hindu religion, echoed an ardent Hindu’s reactions to the attitudes of Christian missionaries during the time of the Western colonial presence. In what was a resounding impact on the delegates, Vivekananda concluded his address with these words.

“Sectarianism, bigotry, and its horrible descendant fanaticism, have long possessed this beautiful earth. They have filled the earth with violence, drenched it often with human blood, destroyed civilizations, and sent whole nations to despair. Had it not been for these horrible demons, human society would be far more advanced than it is now. But their time is come: I fervently hope that the bell that tolled this morning in honor of this convention may be the death knell of all fanaticism, of all persecutions with the sword or with the pen, and of all uncharitable feelings between persons wending their way to the same goal.”

The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda. 8 Vols, Mayavati Memorial Edition (Calcutta. Advaita Ashrama, 1964-71) Vol 1 p 4.

### ***Christianity, the vehicle of the Gospel***

Kenneth Scott Latourette was a wellknown historian who documented the history of Christianity in some monumental works. Here below is his assessment of the rise of Christianity. Although there is a note of triumphalism in this excerpt, reflecting the era in which he wrote, there is sobering assessment in his entire writings.

“Of all... religions Christianity is the only one which continues to expand in any major way. Of all of them it has suffered least from stagnation, decay, and loss of ground. It may well be that the reason is to be found in the unique nature of Christianity. What we call Christianity is the vehicle of the Gospel. It is not identical with the Gospel, but is the chief means by which the Gospel is mediated to men. ... in contrast with the other religions, Christianity has continued to gain in the total human scene. That may well find its reason in the fact that the Gospel is the gift of God and as such meets the basic and continuing needs of men as does none of its rivals. These others with their imperfect insights and their errors do not have the answer to

man’s hunger or contain the healing for his sickness. It is only through the Gospel that these are met and that man’s true goal is to be found.”

Kenneth Scott Latourette, *The Prospect for Christianity*.

(The Religious Book Club. London p 23)

### ***Southern Baptist Prayer Book***

Similar attitude prevail today! This newspaper item is from Washington Post Oct 21, 1999, which first exposed contents of the Southern Baptist Prayer Book.

*Southern Baptists, Expanding Effort, Target Hindus for Conversion*

Hanna Rosin, Washington Post, Oct. 21, 1999

The Southern Baptists expanded an aggressive new proselytizing campaign this week, publishing a short prayer book aimed at converting Hindus to Christianity. The prayer book is the second published by the Southern Baptists’ International Mission Board this year, and has again provoked charges of arrogance and religious insensitivity. Last month, leaders of the nation’s second-largest denomination offended Jewish leaders by distributing a book urging its members to evangelize Jews during their 10 holy days.

Like the previous pamphlet, the latest one asks Southern Baptists to pray for the conversion of Hindus during their holiest week, Divali, a festival of lights commemorating the god Rama’s return from exile. The board plans to distribute the guide to its 40,000 churches beginning Friday, in time for the celebrations in late October. Compared with the Jewish guide, this one uses far less tactful tones to describe Hindus, beginning with its very first sentence: “More than 900 million people are lost in the hopeless darkness of Hinduism.”

“Pray that Hindus who celebrate the festival of lights would become aware of the darkness in their hearts that no lamp can dispel,” the guide continues.

Hindu leaders reacted angrily to these depictions, describing them as relics of an ugly colonial age.

“Darkness! This is really offensive,” said Suresh Gupta, president of the Durga Temple in Fairfax. “Why should they try to change us? We have a value system people crave in this country. We teach respect for others, for marriage vows, for elders. It’s what every religion should teach.”

The book is a kind of cultural anthropology written from a missionary perspective. Each page shows a snapshot of life in India described through a Christian lens:

“Mumbai is a city of spiritual darkness. Eight out of every 10 people are Hindu, slaves bound by fear and tradition to false gods,” it reads. Or: “Satan has retained his hold on Calcutta through Kali and other gods and goddesses of Hinduism. It’s time for Christ’s salvation to come to Calcutta.”

Southern Baptists defended the proselytizing campaign. “If I had a Hindu sitting right here at my desk I would apologize if I had been offensive,” said Randy Sprinkle, who oversaw the book’s publication. “Certainly God’s love is not meant to be offensive.”

“Some people accused us of being arrogant when we were praying for the Jews of the world,” he continues. “I would acknowledge that there is an element of arrogance. But it’s the arrogance of truth.”

Gupta was unmoved. “If I had you sitting here, I would not want to convert you to be a Hindu,” he responded. “I would want you to live a good life.”

The following statement was issued by Ajay Shah, Convenor, American Hindus against Defamation (AHAD) on October 25, 1999.

American Hindus Against Defamation (AHAD), an coalition representing several major Hindu organizations in North America expresses its dismay at the call issued by the Southern Baptist Convention, the largest Protestant denomination in USA to “pray for Hindus lost in darkness”

Ironically, the booklet demeaning Hindus and calling them “lost”, and having no “concept of sin or personal responsibility” comes at a time when Hindus around the world are getting ready for the festival of Diwali -the festival of light. The Hindus around the world will pray to God that everyone, regardless of their religious belief be “led from ignorance to truth” and “darkness to light” The Hindus in USA seek to propagate the ideals of Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam (entire universe is one family) and Ekam Sat Vipraha Bahudha Vadanti (The Truth is One, Sages call it by different names) during Diwali. This Diwali, as with all the previous ones, Hindus bring to the US, the rich cultural diversity. By denouncing and denigrating the Hindu Dharma, Hindu philosophy, Hindu way of worship and the Gods and Goddesses Hindus hold dear, the Southern Baptist Convention has sought to prejudice the vast majority of American population from accepting this rich philosophical and religious tradition. The attack on Hindu faith, we believe, is nothing short of blow to multiculturalism in USA.

It is the booklet such as this, and the contention that Hindus have “no sense of sin or personal responsibility” that generally leads to hatred amongst the follower towards those who are condemned, in this case the Hindus. It would not be surprising if this booklet leads to attacks, verbal and physical on Hindus. When one seeks to convert a person to another faith, it is im-

PLICIT that those who seek to convert do not consider all religious paths to be leading to the same God. It is the religio-cultural superiority complex that leads to all attempts of conversion. Hindus do not seek to convert others, but Hindus are continually subjected to such attempts. The upcoming visit of Pope to India is also to be looked at from the same perspective as the booklet from the Southern Baptist convention.

While the press has been quick to brand Hindus and their organizations who oppose religious conversions as fanatics and fundamentalists, it is pertinent to note that no responsible Hindu leader or Hindu organization has ever condemned Christianity or Jesus Christ.

American Hindus Against Defamation urges Southern Baptists to meet with Hindus and conduct an inter-religious dialog, to see how two great religions, Hindu Dharma and Christianity can make a positive difference in the American society and how we, as people of faith, can join together to address issues such as crime, violence, drugs amongst youth and others.

American Hindus against Defamation (AHAD), the largest Hindu advocacy group in USA is convened by World Hindu Council, America is a coalition of several prominent Hindu organizations in US. AHAD has successfully taken up issues dealing with Hindu defamation in major media including misrepresentation of Hindu deities and scriptures by SONY Corporation (Aerosmith album cover), Universal Studios (TV show Xena), and Warner Brothers (Eyes Wide Shut).

### QUESTIONS FOR STUDY

1. Write a few lines on evangelism. Describe how this will apply to your own context.
2. Briefly define and evaluate the three positions we have discussed above - Exclusivism, Inclusivism and Pluralism. Which position do you accept? List some reasons.
3. Describe enternism, fundamentalism and religions fanaticism. Do you see the seeds of such position from within the Christian community? Why? How?

## Chapter II

### EXCLUSIVISM

*This chapter introduces you to some basic foundation of exclusivism. We will evaluate the position from various perspectives in order to take an objective stand. Reference will be made to some prominent theologians as we critique their positions and evaluate our own.*

#### UNDERSTANDING EXCLUSIVISM

Exclusivism starts with the premise that Jesus Christ has been revealed to us as the *only* way of salvation. In the words of the Apostle Peter as recorded in the book of Acts “Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved.” (Acts 4.12)

Exclusivism maintains a clear emphasis on Jesus Christ as the full and final revelation of God. There is no other means of salvation, and hence salvation cannot be experienced outside of Christ. There is the denial of the possibility of salvation being available through any other “saviors” or ways to salvation as claimed by other religions.

Stated in another way, this position would declare: Since we possess what we claim to be the ultimate truth, there cannot be any other truth apart from this. It is based on the Aristotelian premise that truth is one and not many. Therefore, since the Christian revelation is seen to be final and universally valid, all other claims are set aside as false and invalid.

Evangelicals vary in their understanding of exclusivism. Some will totally dismiss any revelation outside of God's revelation in Jesus Christ, while others display an openness. To some, there is an acceptance of a general revelation in nature through which all men and women have a limited knowledge of God. However, they will underline, this revelation is insufficient for salvation. Such a position is held with varying interpretations by different sections of Evangelicals, including Pentecostals.

Historically, most of the traditional Church has stood by an exclusive position, as it takes the Bible seriously. The New Testament is interpreted in its clear call to an acceptance of Jesus Christ as the ultimate revelation of God in history. For many centuries the exclusive claim went unchallenged within the Church. The Church proclaimed salvation in Jesus and denied truth in other religions. Until the 19th Century most Protestant and Roman Catholic churches would have accepted that they were 'exclusivists' believing this to be the historical tradition of the early church as recorded in the Bible.

The New Testament was not written in an environment that was ignorant of the existence of and claims of other religions. These religions may not have had the stature of Hinduism or Islam but their presence demanded a response. It was within the pressure from other beliefs that the Church's claims were sharpened. The Jewish-Christian attitude of the early Church, in keeping with its Judaistic background, was undoubtedly exclusive. While certainly aware of the existence of other faiths, perhaps even accepting the truth of God's activity outside their own community, their own claim was that they had exclusive access to the final revelation of God in and through Jesus Christ.

Exclusivism had its own implication for the early Church. The first disciples were Jews and hence it was to be expected that some of them initially tended to make Jesus Christ available exclusively for the Jewish community. Peter's struggle as recorded in the book of Acts, and Paul's attack on Peter's

exclusivistic attitude as recorded in his letter to the Galatians, exposes this Jewish bias. God continued to deal with the disciples, as with the Apostle Peter, and widened their horizons to accept that salvation was available for the whole world, regardless of race or nation.

## **KARL BARTH AND EXCLUSIVISM**

Arguably, the most influential theologian to elaborate the exclusivistic position was Karl Barth. His significance lay in the fact that he emphasised the absoluteness of the revelation of Jesus Christ at a time when relativism was on the rise. Christian liberal scholarship had all but stifled such a claim. Writing during the time when the Bible and claims to the historicity of God's revelation in Jesus Christ were being skeptically scorned, Barth boldly emphasised the ultimacy of revelation in Jesus Christ.

Barth's understanding of the revelation of God is so thoroughly exclusive that it relegates everything to do with religions to utter insignificance. Religion has no relation whatsoever to this revelation – there is a total discontinuity. Barth emphasised this attitude even towards Christianity in its historical manifestation. Read his concern below:

Revelation singles out the Church as the locus of true religion. But this does not mean that the Christian religion as such is the fulfilled nature of human religion. It does not mean that the Christian religion is the true religion, fundamentally superior to all other religions. We can never stress too much the connection between the truth of the Christian religion and the grace of revelation. We have to give particular emphasis to the fact that through grace the Church lives by grace, and to that extent it is the locus of true religion.<sup>1</sup>

Karl Barth was making his claims from the standpoint of revelation as attested in the Bible. There are two elements underlined. First, 'Revelation is God's self-offering and self-manifestation. Revelation encounters man on the presupposition

and in confirmation of the fact that man's attempts to know God from his own standpoint are wholly and entirely futile.

In revelation God tells man that He is God, as such He is His Lord. In telling him this, revelation tells him something utterly new, something which apart from revelation he does not know and cannot tell himself or others.<sup>2</sup>

Barth was responding to the challenges against the claim of God's activity in history at a time when Biblical scholarship had been totally subjected to scientific and positivistic understandings of history. There remained no room for the supernatural activity of God within the natural realm. While some theologians rejected claims to historicity, others chose to speak of "salvation history" in order to justify God's revelation. Salvation history was something other than, even higher than *real* history. Rather than subjecting himself to the pressures of historicity, Barth retreated into the understanding of God's history as being on a different plane. This discontinuity with actual history is clearly the flaw in his teaching. However, one must appreciate the attempts to emphatically underline the ultimacy of God's revelation in Jesus Christ.

### **BARTH'S EXCLUSIVISM CHALLENGED**

Barth's proposition had its weakness. Any theology written without reference to the earthly context of human experience will suffer the consequence of being unreal and irrelevant. Barth was distanced from the reality of other people – their cultures and religions. The result was an attitude that undoubtedly attempted to take the Bible seriously but lacked the grounding of the church within the increasing pressure of religious pluralism. His *a priori* conclusions were not cemented in reality and thereby contradicted the very essence of the incarnation of Jesus Christ.

Barth's attitude to religion is problematic, particularly as we respond to our present contexts. Many will have no problems in accepting that religion will not lead a human being to God; but to say that there is no good whatsoever in human

religions is to deny biblical as well as contextual facts. To say that there is no good in people displays a deficient understanding of the image of God in humankind - that inherent capacity within every creature to know God, even if it be only the desire to know Him. It is this aspect of a human being's relationship to God that makes religion an integral part of the world. Accepting Barthian exclusivism demands an utter rejection of all religions.

Paul Knitter, an ardent proponent of pluralism, links Evangelical exclusivism with Barthian theology, and points out three problems. The first has to do with methodology. It is triggered by Barth and the Evangelical's insistence on 'the absolute authority of the Word of God contained in the Bible'. Knitter refers to the finality of the revelation in Christ and the belief that it has no relation to ongoing human experience. This is the problem with Barth, something like saying 'My mind's made up. Don't confuse me with the facts.'<sup>3</sup>

Knitter has a valid reminder. Barth may be right in saying there is no salvation outside of Jesus Christ. That is biblically true and must be clearly stated. But is it Biblical (or are we being Barthian) in saying there is nothing good in religions. Is there nothing in another religion that will cause an adherent to draw a little nearer to experiencing salvation in Jesus Christ? Purely *a priori* conclusions even if they claim to be biblical will not provide us with theological penetration into the present predicament. Too much of our theology is written from an academic standpoint. Such theology deserves full marks for scholarship, but miserably fails to provide a basis for a meaningful encounter with people of other faiths. We seem to have carried our claims for the authority of the Bible into an authoritarian condemnation of all other beliefs. The urgent need is for a truly Biblical theology of religions; a theology that could be tested out in real life interactions and which could appropriately meet the challenge of pluralism.

Knitter, a confirmed pluralist, questions New Testament language which speaks of 'only in Christ Jesus', 'no other name', even 'only begotten son' asking whether these statements are part of the essential message of the New Testament or if they belong to the medium used to put the message across?<sup>4</sup> The problem with such questions is that we do not know where to draw a line. Would we end up with a vague picture of a certain man called Jesus who lived and preached a certain message which claimed to bring salvation. Some form of certainty will be required and the exclusivist position offers this.

Barth's insistence on the fact of God's revelation only through Jesus Christ is biblical and needs to be underlined in the current debate. The question for the exclusivist is whether there are any penultimate signs of God's revelation in other religions. Barth's closed mind bypasses even biblical insights that could serve valuably to present a positive attitude to God's activity outside of our Christian framework. It is from these Biblical insights that we can begin to understand the validity of other religions and give to the exclusivist position a greater acceptance in today's context.

### **HENDRIK KRAMER'S BIBLICAL REALISM**

A Dutch missionary, Hendrik Kraemer came into prominence with his presentation at the conference convened by the International Missionary Council (IMC) in Tambaram, near Madras, in 1938.<sup>5</sup> Kraemer's task was to restore an accent on the uniqueness of Jesus Christ at a time when various forces challenged such claims. Earlier, the gathering of missionaries under the leadership of John R Mott in Edinburgh in 1910 was the climax of a missionary era characterising the triumphalism of the Nineteenth century. The dominant position for the church was an exclusive claim. However, by the time a similar conference was convened in Jerusalem in 1928 there were calls for much more interaction with other religions. The doors had opened up for syncretism and a host of allied

attitudes to major religions of the world. Barth was critical of the focus in Jerusalem – too much time spent in looking at the values of other religions rather than the missionary challenge of telling the world about God's revelation. The Jerusalem conference was followed by a period of uncertainty and compromise and Kraemer's influence was timely.

Just like Barth, Kraemer had a strong emphasis on the revelation of God based on the biblical record. But Kraemer showed more sympathy for adherents of other religions than Barth as he had worked for many years in Indonesia amongst Muslims. Utilising the term "Biblical Realism", he stressed the need to go back to the truth which is revealed in the Bible, the ideal, rather than that which is demonstrated by the Church today. Kraemer's reminder was that the uniqueness of Christ ought to be the central message of the Church which brought with it the obligation to proclaim this message. There was the affirmation of the utter inadequacy of religions. Tambaram was to deal a critical blow on all syncretistic efforts.<sup>6</sup>

Kraemer acknowledged 'outstanding examples of faith' referring to the deep reverence and 'extraordinary degree of devotion' seen amongst Muslims in Indonesia, yet held fast to the distinction between what this faith represented and the faith in Jesus that brings salvation. Kraemer's experience of Islam allowed him a bit more openness than Barth to commend the non-Christian, but he held fast to the Barthian discontinuity. Kraemer like Barth wanted to preserve the distinction between 'faith that is typically Christian and faith that is still apart from Christ'. There definitely ought to be a distinction, we accept. However, this distinction is not to do with the quantity and quality of the faith. It is purely a matter of the object of the faith. Whereas faith placed outside of Christ is rather nebulous, once a person enters into a relationship with Jesus Christ there is a certainty to faith.

## AN EVALUATION OF EXCLUSIVISM

The strength of the exclusivistic position is affirmed by its tenacity and growth over the centuries. Despite attacks, it has millions of adherents – definitely the major portion of the world wide Church. Any significant growth in the church is within circles that hold to an exclusivistic position in some form. Men and women want some certainty in life. Within the relativistic changes of modern materialistic life, human existence is constantly threatened by transience. The assurance of the claims of Jesus Christ is the antidote for the meaninglessness and emptiness that has become an integral part of existence itself. The exclusive claims of the finality of the revelation of God in Jesus Christ, when biblically based, come with a certainty that is needed within the continuing flux of today.

The exclusivistic position is truly and tightly argued leaving little room for criticism as far as the integrity of the records of the Bible is concerned. Even confirmed pluralists commend this. It is not surprising that most of the arguments raised against this position are based on questions raised over the the texts and their claims to being the words of Jesus Christ. There are other arguments drawing our attention to the context rather than to the claims of the Bible. For instance, the pluralist challenges the exclusivist to understand claims to exclusiveness in the context of growing religious tensions. Within such a context, we are challenged to reshape our claims whether they are true or not!

Alan Race, a British pluralist, who is no sympathiser of the exclusivistic position, commends exclusivism as the one that “has come to represent the most clear cut of all theories in this field. It involves no complicated theory of the nature of religious experience; it appeals to what for many is a self-evident biblical witness; it gives a central function to the person of Christ; the internal logic of the argument appears consistent and coherent; and finally, it is a position which corresponds most closely to what has generally been held to be orthodox Christianity through the centuries.”<sup>7</sup>

The missionary movement in the past, based on an exclusivistic biblical position has been caricatured for its insensitivity to alien cultures and arrogant attitudes towards peoples of other nations, even accused of humiliating and exploiting these people. But not much is said by critics of their dedication and sacrifice, which was of the highest degree. This definitely came from a strong commitment to the exclusive claims to Jesus Christ. The exclusivistic commitment to the Bible is its strength rather than its weakness. When one is strongly convinced of the finality of any ideology or religion there is a zeal with which the task is undertaken.

However, there are some questions and issues the exclusivist must address. First, in asserting the absolute claims of the Bible there is sometimes an absolutist and judgmental position that the individual takes in relation to others. The main problem has to do with the concept of the ‘Absoluteness’ of God. The question is : How does our acceptance of God’s absoluteness differ from the philosophical concept of the Absolute, or even the Hindu concept of an inanimate ultimate, totally remote from the reality of this world? The unreachable and unknowable concept of God is not the same as the personal Yahweh of the Old Testament or the incarnate Lord Jesus Christ. While maintaining the concept of the absolute, we need to see how we reconcile this aspect of God with the particular and personal revelation described in the New Testament. The term “absolute” is not a biblical one. It is Hegelian. Hegel and his idealism had portrayed the concept of the evolution of religions - the finality of Christianity as the Absolute religion in the sense of being valid for all.

Second, the term ‘exclusivism’ does not fully project the biblical Christlike attitude. The word exclusive itself is problematic as it implies a bigotry. In fact, Jesus severely attacked this attitude which was so characteristic of the Jew in his time. The exclusive attitude is more in keeping with the Old Testament Jewish arrogance so graphically portrayed in Jonah’s at-

titude to others. This was carried over into the New Testament times and Jesus was demanding the opposite from his disciples. Was this not the conflict of the disciples as they struggled to shed their Jewish background? Peter had to be rebuked quite sternly by Paul. He was challenged to repent of his exclusive closed-ness, and to accommodate a more inclusive attitude towards salvation now available to the Gentiles.

Third, exclusivism must address its idea of discontinuity between Christianity and other religions. Barth and Kraemer wanted to show the absoluteness of God in revelation in Jesus Christ. This prerogative meant that religion which was purely a human phenomenon had no relation to revelation. If the exclusivist continues to stress discontinuity as the essence of exclusivism, then he will be disregarding the fundamental framework of God's relationship to his created order. We develop this later as we consider the framework of God's creation. The concern is that if we believe God created humanity, then there is something that binds them all together, despite their religious differences. This is not to imply that all religions are the same. We only speak of a religious essence that is fundamental to people of all races and cultures and this is what ought to be underlined.

Fourth, the exclusivist position will need to consider that totality of Biblical teaching of salvation through Jesus Christ. The Bible clearly asserts that there is no other name through which we can be saved. But those holding to the exclusivist position cannot continue to state this without realizing the sensitivity of our present religious, social and political situation. If we truly believe in the universality of the revelation of God through Jesus Christ, then we will need to allow for this revelation to manifest itself in the fullest way possible. There ought to be some way in which God is at work outside of our exclusive parameters for his outworking. Basically it is the restrictions imposed by the concept of discontinuity that has made the exclusive position a closed one. The Bible does not support

such a closed attitude to the world. There are questions that urgently need to be explored. Why did Jesus commend the 'faith' of the Gentiles if that faith did not matter at all? Why did Paul show a continuity from the worship of the 'unknown God' to Jesus Christ when he preached to the people in Athens? These will need to be answered with reference to the totality of the revelation of God through Jesus Christ.

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#### **FOR FURTHER STUDY**

Undoubtedly the exclusivistic position motivated men like William Carey, David Hudson Taylor, David Livingstone and others who went out with a zeal to reach the unreached. In some of the following readings, note their love for the unreached and their willingness to sacrifice everything for Christ. Further below, we read of a German philosopher Ernst Troeltsch and his struggles with the exclusivistic position.

#### ***Love for Fellow-creatures***

William Carey, the Baptist missionary and one who was responsible for spearheading modern mission wrote a powerful defense for the revival of the commission given to the disciples to preach Christ to the whole world.

"It was no objection to the apostles and their successors, who went among the barbarous Germans and Gauls, and still more barbarous Britons! They did not wait for the ancient inhabitants of these countries to be civilized before they could be Christianized, but went simply with the message of the cross... It was no objection to an Elliot, or a Brainerd in later times. They went forth and, and encountered every difficulty of the kind, and found that a cordial reception of the Gospel produced those happy effects which the longest intercourse with Europeans without it could never accomplish. It is no objection to commercial men. It only requires that we should have as much love to the souls of our fellow-creatures, and fellow-sinners, as they have for profits..."

William Carey, "An Enquiry into the Obligation of Christians to Use Means for the Conversion of the Heathens," B-94 Perspectives. Winter and Hawthorne

## **No Sacrifice... A Privilege**

David Livingstone, the Scottish pioneer who went to Africa, the "Dark Continent" is a powerful example of the zeal and commitment of the early missionaries. Lest we dismiss the missionary movement as one with colonial arrogance and unpardonable mistakes, we will do well to see the sincerity with which they went far and wide.

"For my own part, I have never ceased to rejoice that God has appointed me to such an office. People talk about sacrifice I have made in spending so much of my life in Africa. Can that be called a sacrifice which is simply paid back as a small part of a great debt owing to our God, which we can never repay? Is that a sacrifice which brings its own blest reward in healthy activity, the consciousness of doing good, peace of mind, and a bright hope of a glorious destiny hereafter? Away with the word in such a view, and with such a thought! It is emphatically no sacrifice. Say rather it is a privilege. Anxiety, sickness, suffering, or danger, now and then, with a foregoing of the common conveniences and charities of this life, may make a pause, and cause the spirit to waver, and the soul to sink, but let this be for a moment. All these are nothing when compared to the glory which shall hereafter be revealed in and for us. I never made a sacrifice."

William Garden Blaikie, *Personal Life of David Livingstone* (New York. Harper & Bros ) pp 243.

## **Affirming Exclusivism**

A clear statement of the exclusivistic position was issued when the impressive representation from some 150 countries met in Lausanne, Switzerland in 1974. Significantly influenced by leading Evangelical theologian and Bible expositor John Stott, the delegates overwhelmingly affirmed the uniqueness and universality of Jesus Christ in the following words:

"We affirm that there is only one Saviour and only one gospel although there is a wide diversity of evangelistic approaches. We recognize that all men have some knowledge of God through his general revelation in nature. But we deny that this can save, for men suppress the truth by their unrighteousness. We also reject as derogatory to Christ, and the gospel every kind of syncretism and dialogue which implies that Christ speaks equally through all religions and ideologies. Jesus Christ being himself the only Godman, who gave himself as the only ransom for sinners, is the only mediator between God and man. There is no other name by which we must be saved. All men are perishing because of sin, but God loves all men, not wishing that any should perish but that all should repent. Yet those who reject Christ repudiate the joy of salvation and condemn themselves to eternal separation from God. To proclaim Jesus as "the Saviour of the world" is not to affirm that all religions offer salvation in Christ. Rather it is to pro-

claim God's love for a world of sinners and to invite all men to respond to him as Saviour and Lord in the wholehearted personal commitment of repentance and faith. Jesus Christ has been exalted above every other name; we long for the day when every knee shall bow to him and every tongue shall confess him Lord. (Gal. 1:6-9; Rom. 1:18-32; 1 Tim. 2:5,6; Acts 4:12; John3:16-19; II Pet. 3:9; II Thess. 1:7-9; John 4:42; Matt. 11:28; Eph. 1:20,21; Phil. 2:9-11)."<sup>8</sup>

(*Lausanne Covenant, 1974*, from *Roots of the Great Debate in Missions*, July 1974.)

## **Ernst Troeltsch : From Absolutism to Relativity**

Read the following to note the shift from the exclusivist position as being the position of the mainline protestant church to a more inclusivist position. The underlying influence is a change from an absolutist to a relativist position. (Troeltsch, Ernst, *The Absoluteness of Christianity*, London)

Following the euphoria of Edinburgh in 1910, there were undercurrents of skepticism that were soon to surface. Christianity had for a long time flourished under the notion of "Classicist Consciousness," the attitude that considered the world and all of reality as fixed and unchanging. This attitude had been unquestioned until the Enlightenment and the beginnings of modern science in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The idealism of Europe and its related attitudes to history, culture and religion were soon to be subjected to relativistic thinking. We have seen that "classicists" saw their culture to be the one universal and normative culture. This norm was seen to be the one that would civilize the whole world. It is thus that some European missions openly carried the burden of civilization, even 'culturisation'. Theology was to be influenced too. Theological formulations had tended to be absolutist and as a result came into a real conflict with relativism and its demands.

Within the church, quite a significant impression was being made by German philosopher and theologian - Ernst Troeltsch, who challenged by the impact of relativism was advocating a shift in the whole basis of theological thinking. His book "The Absolute Validity of Christianity." (1901) recently reissued as "The Absoluteness of Christianity," had sought to establish the ultimate validity of the Christian revelation even amid historical relativity. However, by the time of his death and his posthumously delivered Oxford lecture his position had changed. In this lecture he traced his own growth having opened his mind to the historical realities that were manifested all over the world. Troeltsch now questioned his own earlier commitment to the miracles in Christianity that he had thought made it unique, and then the Hegelian position he took to accept Christianity as being absolute. This he concluded was untenable:

“It is rather an immeasurable, incomparable profusion of always-new, unique, and hence individual tendencies, welling up from undiscovered depths, and coming to light in each case in unsuspected places and under different circumstances. Each process works itself out in its own way, bringing ever-new series of unique transformations in its train, until its powers are exhausted, or until it enters a component material into some new combination. Thus the universal law of history consists precisely in this, that the Divine Reason, or the Divine Life, within history, constantly manifests itself in always-new and always-peculiar individualizations — and hence that its tendency is not towards unity cannot be regarded as or universality at all, but rather towards the fulfilment of the highest potentialities of each separate department of life. It is this law which, beyond all else, makes it quite impossible to characterize Christianity as the reconciliation and goal of all the forces of history, or indeed to regard it as anything else than a historical individuality.”<sup>9</sup>

Troeltsch, changed his position accordingly - “The point at issue was not whether Christianity was as a matter of fact universal, or at least implicit in all religion, but whether it possessed ultimate truth, a truth which might easily depend upon a single instance of itself.”<sup>10</sup> There was an element of truth in all religions, recognised “by an intuition which is born of deep personal experience and a pure conscientiousness.”<sup>11</sup> While there was no strict proof possible, it was confirmed retrospectively. In other words, the claim to universal validity of Christianity was something that was first felt and believed, and only then confirmed. He went on to state:

“Now, validity of this kind seems always to rest upon the fine point of personal conviction. We still require a broader foundation upon actual, objective facts. I believed that I had discovered such a foundation for Christianity in the terms in which its claim to ultimate validity finds instinctive and immediate expression; in other words, in its faith in revelation and in the kind of claim it makes to truth. I thought it necessary to compare it from this point of view with other religions, whose belief in revelation and claim to validity were in every case of quite a different kind. If we examine any of the great world religions we shall find that all of them, Judaism, Islam, Zoroastrianism, Buddhism, Christianity, even Confucianism, indeed claim absolute validity, but quite naively, and that in a very different manner in each case, the differences being illustrative of differences in their inner structure. These claims are always naive — simple and direct. They are not the outcome of an apologetic reasoning, and the difference they exhibit in their naive claims to absolute validity indicate the varying degree of such absolute validity as they really mean and intend within their own minds.”<sup>12</sup>

In his Oxford lecture, Ernst Troeltsch was ready to apologise and offer modifications to his thoughts that were to generate critical changes in the years to follow:

“My scruples arise from the fact that, whilst the significance for history of the concept of Individuality impresses me more forcibly every day, I no longer believe this to be so easily reconcilable with that of supreme validity. The further investigations, especially into the history of Christianity..... Have shown me how thoroughly individual is historical Christianity after all, and how invariably its various phases and denominations have been due to varying circumstances and conditions of life. Whether you regard it as a whole or in its several forms, it is a purely historical-individual, relative phenomenon...”<sup>13</sup>

“All our thoughts and feelings are impregnated with Christian motives and Christian pre-suppositions; and, conversely, our whole Christianity is indissolubly bound up with elements of the ancient and modern civilizations of Europe. From being a Jewish sect Christianity has become the religion of all Europe. It stands or falls with European civilization; whilst, on its own part, it has entirely lost its Oriental character and has become Hellenized and Westernized. Our European conceptions of personality and its eternal, divine right, and of progress towards a kingdom of the spirit of God, our enormous capacity for expansion and for the interconnection of spiritual and temporal, our whole social order, our science, ouea of “supreme validitr art — all these rest, whether we know it or not, whether we like it or not, upon the basis of this deorientalized Christianity.”<sup>14</sup> (Troeltsch, Ernst, *The Absoluteness of Christianity*, London)

### QUESTIONS FOR STUDY

1. Define and write your evaluation of Exclusivism.
2. List some lessons learned from Ernst Troeltsch’s shift from absolutes to relatives. Underline the stress on the need to accept relativism from such writers.
3. How would you modify, if you feel it is needed, the exclusivist position to fit into your context.

## END NOTES

1. Hick, John & Hebblewaite Brian, *Christianity & other Religions*, Great Britain; Fount Paperbacks, 1980, p33.
2. *ibid* p 36
3. Knitter, Paul F. *No Other Name* (London. SCM Press. 1985) p 91
4. *ibid* p 92
5. Kraemer, Hendrik. *The Christian Message in a Non-Christian World*. (London. The Edinburgh Press) 1938
6. *ibid* p 220
7. Race, Alan, *Christians & Religious Pluralism*, N.Y., Orbis Books, 1982, p 24.
8. *ibid* p 17
9. *ibid* p 19
10. *ibid* p 19f
11. *ibid* p 22f
12. *ibid* p 23
13. *ibid*
14. (p 24)

## Chapter III

### INCLUSIVISM

*This chapter introduces you to various aspects of inclusivism. We will look at two main interpretations in order to evaluate this position in the light of the challenge faced today. You will be able to review the exclusive claim alongside this position.*

#### UNDERSTANDING INCLUSIVISM

Inclusivism, as the name suggests, attempts to include all religions under the redemptive influence of Jesus Christ. Believing that the exclusivist position was too narrow and restrictive, the inclusivist seeks to broaden out the understanding of Christ and salvation to allow room for other claims to God and salvation. This theological position is associated with a significant section of the mainline Protestant church and the Roman Catholics, but expounded in a variety of ways.

The Roman Catholic Church was historically exclusivist. However, missionaries such as Francis Xavier and Robert de Nobili were challenged as they ministered to a large number of educated, decent and compassionate people of other faiths on the mission field. Soon they were faced with the question – Are all these religious and good people condemned to hell just because they were not baptised as Christians? Responding to the challenge, missionaries began to consider a more open view in relation to grace outside the Church. They sought to develop respect for the cultures of the people outside the European civilization.

They were responding to the theological tension. On the one hand there was the fact of the church's absolute claim of salvation only through Jesus Christ, and this was solely available through the church. Yet, on the other side was the fact of men and women claiming to possess ways to God. The question arose : Was God's love and grace available in some way even outside of Jesus Christ?

### **KARL RAHNER AND THE ANONYMOUS CHRISTIAN**

An attempt to resolve this tension came from Karl Rahner, one of the most respected Roman Catholic theologians. Rahner begins by asserting that Christianity understands itself as the absolute religion, intended for all men, which cannot recognise any other religion beside itself as of equal right. He writes - "Valid and lawful religion for Christianity is... God's free self-revelation by communicating himself to man. It is God's relationship to men, freely instituted by God himself and revealed by God in this institution. This relationship of God to man is basically the same for all men, because it rests on the incarnation, death and resurrection of the one Word of God become flesh."<sup>1</sup>

The arguments so far correspond with those of exclusivism. But then, Rahner moves on to consider the "historical encounter" and "historical power" for the manifestation of Christian presence. And thus his second thesis:

Until the moment when the gospel really enters into the historical situation of an individual ... a non-Christian religion does not merely contain elements of a natural knowledge of God, elements, moreover, mixed up with human depravity which is the result of original sin and later aberrations. It contains also supernatural elements arising out of grace which is given to men as a gratuitous gift on account of Christ.<sup>2</sup>

Rahner clarifies that this does not mean that all the elements of polytheistic religions and other religious, ethical and metaphysical aberrations are to be treated as harmless either

in theory or practice. He affirms that if we believe seriously in the universal salvific purpose of God towards all men in Christ, it cannot be doubted that "gratuitous influences of properly Christian supernatural grace are conceivable in the life of all men... and that these influences can be presumed to be accepted in spite of the sinful state of men and in spite of their apparent estrangement from God."<sup>3</sup>

Other religions must not be regarded as "simply illegitimate" from the very start, but must be seen as quite capable of having a positive significance, Rahner pleads. But, he is careful to say that he refers to "lawful religions" meaning an institutional religion which claims to have means of gaining the right relationship to God and for salvation. For him, even the religion of Israel was only a lawful religion. It could not be considered perfect, even though it is accepted to be the vehicle for God's grace. However, Rahner ignores the fact that God in his redemptive plan made it clear that he chose to operate through Israel, and it was within that particular context that Jesus Christ's universality and historicity is understandable. Israel was imperfect, yet was God's vehicle. It is through that vehicle that salvation was promised and is now actualized in Jesus Christ. To place all religions on the same plane as the religion of Israel is to ignore a historical reality that is central to the redemptive revelation of God in Christ for the whole world.

Rahner's argument could be summarised : Jesus is the only way. Yet, there are claims to other ways which we need to accept. This is the tension, but there is a reconciliation in his third thesis: "... Christianity does not simply confront the member of extra-Christian religion as a mere non-Christian but as someone who can and must already be regarded... as an anonymous Christian." One needs to grasp Rahner's claim – The so called non-Christian has all along been a Christian. The argument is built on the fact of the universal availability of God's grace. It is through this grace that there are those, Rahner

claims, who are already on their way to salvation even though outside of (and ignorant of) Christ. But, this salvation is Christ's, as there is no other name through which salvation is given. In this sense the proclamation of the Gospel does not simply turn someone absolutely abandoned by God and Christ into a Christian. It turns an anonymous Christian to God.

If every one is a Christian and is made to accept this fact are heading for a singular religious environment? Rahner's answer is "No," for according to him the opposition to Christ and to the Church will not disappear until the end of time. We must even be prepared for an increase of this antagonism to Christians. Regardless, "the Church will go out to meet the non-Christian of tomorrow with the attitude expressed by St Paul when he said: What therefore you do not know and yet worship, that I proclaim to you" (Acts 17.23)<sup>4</sup>

### **GOD'S GRACE THROUGH JESUS CHRIST**

But, will adherents of other religions be willing to accept this argument? Will they not have the same kind of reaction as when told that their "gods" are false? Rahner clarifies that what he proposes is more for the Christian rather than the outsider. He wants to provide a tool for dialogue with other religions and break from the attitude of exclusivism. For the exclusivist, this goes too far, while for the pluralist this is just as exclusivistic as the exclusivist's position.

Rahner's concept of grace is questionable. From the biblical position it is quite clear that the grace of God bringing salvation for all men has appeared through Jesus Christ and is made available universally. But then God's grace has not been given for the benefit of an exclusive few, but is available to all who will sincerely desire to receive it. Rahner clearly goes beyond the biblical teaching in his desire to universalise grace by ignoring its explicit link with Jesus Christ.

God's grace must be made available universally, whether it is in religion or outside. It is grace that tolerates the sinful

condition of humanity, the open rebellion against God, even Satan's activity in creation. It is grace that is preparing people to accept salvation in Jesus Christ. This grace must be available in all of God's creation, even outside of the community committed to Jesus Christ. But, it is not saving grace. This is grace that will only lead towards, not result in salvation. But Rahner sees no such thing as grace apart from the saving grace of Jesus Christ. This concept of universal availability of saving grace sets aside the necessity of God's grace being made available through Jesus Christ.

Rahner's theology is more concerned for offering *salvation* rather than Jesus Christ. There ought to be no difference between Jesus Christ and his salvation if one is clear about what we mean by salvation. But to make salvation generally to mean the same whether it is the Hindu idea of *moksha* or the biblical idea of "redemption" is to do justice to neither. The New Testament idea of salvation clearly focuses attention on Jesus Christ himself, the kind of emphasis that makes the Apostle Paul want to "know Christ" rather than merely to know his salvation. Rahner's great pains to universalise salvation is far from justifiable if Jesus Christ himself slips into anonymity within salvation that is sought by human efforts.

However, Rahner makes a point. We have too often taken a totally negative attitude to religions and have dismissed all the sincere attempts of men and women to reach God. Rahner's underlining of "lawful religion" clearly reveals that he is not talking about even demonic manifestations. Religion surely has its shortcomings. As we open ourselves to understanding the faith and practices of our neighbours belonging to other faiths, we see in them something that is genuinely commendable. Although this is not bringing salvation, there is a direction towards ultimate salvation.

If at all there is a reality called religion, it is because human beings made in the image of God are necessarily God-directed. Their attempts to reach God cannot be looked at as rebellion,

as rebellion is the attempt to go away from God. Separated from God, humankind suffering from alienation seeks to return to its maker, and hence expresses itself in religion. However, the influence of Satan and the fall cannot be ignored. And hence religion is not merely the good intentions of human beings, but also demonic deviations away from the divine. Yet, in every form of spirituality there is the underlying fact of a humanity that is longing to become one with its creator.

Rahner's understanding is a good starting point : Grace in other religions is incomplete until it is seen from the perspective of Jesus Christ. Religion by itself is not merely human or even demonic. Men and women need God and they find this desire fulfilled in religion. Satan finds in religion an amiable avenue of control and hence diverts the seeker into deception. But then, not all that is in religion is satanic. People in their sincerity seek God, and God demonstrates his grace by receiving seekers despite their religion. When one encounters God's grace in Jesus Christ, faith, religion and commitment get grounded in the ultimate reality.

### **A CHRIST CENTERED SYNCRETISM**

A popular Protestant Christological treatment of the inclusivistic approach comes from the prolific Indian writer and theologian M.M.Thomas. Thomas from his vast experience in the ecumenical movement, proposes the work of Jesus Christ as one that transforms all religions and ideologies from within. Like the law, religions are fulfilled by Jesus Christ, says Thomas. Although the abolition of religion will only be realised fully in the end, in the eschaton, the path is available even now both through secular and religious movements. A partial realisation of the eschaton is seen right now. He traces some significant movements and the individuals behind them to demonstrate the transforming effects of Christ. The kind of inclusivism derived is one that works from within and ultimately transforms everything into one all embracing Cosmic Christ-centered eschaton.<sup>5</sup>

If Rahner's inclusivism has been accused of being as imperialistic as "colonial" mission, Thomas' inclusivism is an even more subtle form of this same theological position. However, his strength is in the affirmation of his claim with facts that show the 'Christian' influence within secular and religious movements. It will not be disputed that apart from preaching and converting men and women openly to Jesus Christ, missionaries have had a significant part to play in the development of nations through education, health, agriculture and have even seen political, social and economic transformations.

Thomas does not talk about the centrality of Christ in terms of a commitment to the historic Jesus Christ, or even any open acknowledgment of Christ in these movements. It is a Cosmic Christ who remains a nebulous, even unknown entity – an anonymous Christ rather than the knowable Jesus of Nazareth. But he has a pertinent point to make at a time when Christianity is being attacked from very narrow perspectives.

However, the stress on the cosmic and universal Lordship, the centrality of Jesus Christ to all of creation and history, could have biblical backing. A highly respected Indian, P.D Devanandan, from whom Thomas draws inspiration, sees the Gospel as God acting in Jesus Christ to renew the whole of creation and an activity that continues today in the Spirit of the Risen Jesus, recreating humanity towards establishing his Kingdom on earth. However, since divine activity in Jesus for the world is divine-human activity, it is an integral part of human history.<sup>6</sup>

Devanandan's treatment of Ephesians 2 brings out the significance of the cross in its creating "one new humanity in the new place of two"<sup>7</sup> On this foundation, he urges the preaching of the cross with the conviction that religion will be abolished, creating a new *koinonia* transcending the divisions between Christians and adherents of other religions and non religion. On faith, for instance, Thomas following Devanandan pleads – "If faith in Christ transcends Christian religion and tradi-

tional Christological creeds, an inescapable implication is that it is possible to hold that faith within the framework of other religions and secular ideologies.”<sup>8</sup>

Although, in the interest of an openness in dialogue this is a commendable treatment, Devanandan and Thomas need to define how this faith can be the same as the faith towards salvation made available through Jesus Christ. Barth, at the other extreme strongly emphasized that even the faith that brings salvation was given only by God. The overwhelming evidence of the totality of the revelation as recorded in the Bible tends towards an understanding of salvific faith as being salvific purely on grounds of its being directed to Jesus Christ. How else can the centrality of Jesus Christ be acknowledged apart from a conscious faith-response to him.

### **JESUS CHRIST, THE FULFILMENT**

Inclusivists strive to reconcile the reality of other religions with the ultimate validity of Jesus Christ. Rahner, Thomas and Devanandan did this. An earlier version of inclusivism came in the form of the ‘fulfillment’ theory popularised in India after the Jerusalem conference in 1928. J. N Farquhar proposed Jesus Christ to be “The Crown of Hinduism,” as his influential book was entitled. It is a sincere attempt to relate the ultimate revelation of God to all that he thought was good and commendable in Hinduism.<sup>9</sup>

The fulfillment theory could be seen to do much more justice to non-Christian religions than the theory of the “anonymous Christian”. Non-Christians, here, are not finding themselves to be what *we* think they are but they do not know, but what *they* can attain having been prepared for it. While Farquhar popularised this idea of fulfillment, it is the “Vedic Theology” of K.M Bannerjee that first pointed to such an approach. Bannerjee, a committed Indian Christian, equally at home with the Bible as with the Hindu scriptures - the *Vedas*, wrote his book “The Aryan Witness” in 1875.<sup>10</sup> Basically, his approach was to seek to prove the common origins of both the

Aryan and the Jewish race by pointing out a number of parallels including creation, the fall and the flood.

Bannerjee wrote:

This strange pattern of prophecy and fulfillment points to a primeval cosmic religion or cosmic covenant, so that the Vedic writings on sacrifice ‘may be viewed as fragments of diamonds sparkling amid mud and dust, testifying to some invisible fabric of which they were component parts, and bearing witness like planets over a dark horizon to the absent sun of whom their refulgence was but a feeble reflection’<sup>11</sup>

What was commendable in Bannerjee’s approach was the more positive evangelistic point of contact it provided. While the exclusivist started off with the assertion - “I am right and so you are wrong,” Bannerjee was able to say, “You too are right.” To the staunch opponents of Christianity, the Arya Samajists, Bannerjee could say — “You are right to have forsaken popular Hinduism and returned to the pure faith of the Vedas. Now you must realise that the pure faith to which the Vedas testify is found in its fullness in Christ, the true person, the Agent of Creation, the true Self-sacrificing Prajapathi”<sup>12</sup>

Inclusivism can have a wide range of possibilities. Particularly with some correctives to the fulfillment theory, it could help us arrive at an acceptable theology of religions for our present context. Such a theology would not only take seriously the finality of the revelation of God in Jesus Christ and salvation through him, but would also include the reality of religious experiences of those around us. The restrictions of classical exclusivism hinder rather than help in establishing our commonality with the rest of the world. A biblically worked out form of inclusivism could help in restoring our belonging to a world of real people to whom we relate as God’s people.

### **AN EVALUATION OF INCLUSIVISM**

The attempts by the inclusivist to resolve the tension between the universality of the revelation of God and the par-

ticularity of redemption through Jesus Christ are commendable. Thomas' treatment, particularly following Devanandan, lends itself admirably to providing the all inclusive basis for universality in its widest sense. While the pluralist will abandon the universal claims of the Gospel, the inclusivist attempts to propose a norm, Jesus Christ who accommodates this universality. But the related problems are to be resolved. The task of the inclusivist is to convince adherents of other religions of this normativeness. Practically speaking this could be as objectionable as the demand of the acceptance of the finality of Jesus Christ.

All inclusivists do not leave room for the salvific validity of other religions in the same way the pluralist will do. Neither does every inclusivist see Jesus Christ's normativeness only in a cosmic manner. The finality of God's revelation in Jesus Christ is carefully maintained, while a sincere attempt is made to allow some justification for the existence of religious beliefs all around us. Rather than merely condemning shortcomings, a more positive relationship is sought. Perhaps with a little more cautious openness to other religions and a much clearer underlining of the finality of Jesus Christ, inclusivism, perhaps an "inclusivistic-exclusivism" may be a justifiable position for even evangelicals to consider. It is thus that Alan Race can say — "As long as the claim that Christ represents the fullest expression of the Godhead is maintained without qualification in the light of the new knowledge, then a reformulated inclusivism is the most open option in the theology of religions."<sup>13</sup>

The strength of the inclusivist position is its validation of the role of religions and the need for the Christian theologian to positively evaluate their place in the world. The Barthian rejection of religion as rebellion, or the Kraemerian argument for discontinuity cannot be justified if the totality of the revelation of God in the Bible is to be considered. Religion is a necessity, particularly if we consider humanity to be the handiwork of God. It is a necessity, not because of sin as Barth would

state, but because of God himself, to whom humankind must eventually relate. If God has created people in his image, there is bound to be a thirsting after God. Although this thirst is unquenchable apart from Christ, it is nevertheless present everywhere.

The exclusivist position does not take this fact seriously. However, the inclusivist position could be problematic. The far too positive an evaluation of religion and the not so strong an emphasis on the nature and mission of the church, the worshipping and witnessing people of God, could easily lead to pluralism. In fact, some inclusivists are "anonymous" pluralists. The position subtly leads to a surrender of the distinctives of the chosen people in their covenantal relationship with God, while elevating the goodness of the other religions. Rahner's generous attitude towards other religions and the grace that operates within them is however conditioned by the fact that in an encounter with Christianity the other religion is almost canceled out. Does this happen in reality? Thomas's optimism is a bit more cautious as he is careful to take from historical demonstrations of the Christian influence. Yet, even this is questionable, not only because of inadequate Biblical support but also on grounds of a lack of clarity in what could be considered "Christian" influence.

Every attempt needs to be made to take a fresh look at the religious experiences of men and women, and tested against the totality of the biblical revelation of God. The foundation for a theology from a creation-framework provides sufficient room for religion to be seen as the natural response of God's creation towards the creator. But the reality of the fall will need to be considered. Any evaluation of religion must also consider the Satanic and demonic elements. In fact, many religious expressions in the Asian and African context are overtly demonic, idolatrous and superstitious.

There is an even more fundamental question. Is God meeting men and women on grounds of their religion, or as indi-

viduals or even communities? With the pressure of pluralism we can easily ignore the fact that eventually God is interested in people as people and not merely as Hindus, or Muslims or even Atheists. God is meeting individual people everywhere. As lofty as the ideal sounds, there is very little justification for showing that God is transforming religions and secular movements towards the final eschaton. But religions are reforming and there is definitely a noticeable change. This reformation is more because of human efforts, through men and women influenced by Jesus Christ that have made this change possible. Raja Ram Mohan Roy brought a reformation to Hinduism in his time as he encountered the message of Jesus Christ. God is at work in the world even apart from saving men and women. He is also shaping history and all that is in it.

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## FURTHER STUDY

### ***Karl Rahner on Faith Present Everywhere***

“... Christ is present and operative in non-Christian believers and hence in non-Christian religions in and through his Spirit. This proposition is to be taken for granted in dogmatic theology. If there can be a faith which is creative of salvation among non-Christians, and if it may be hoped that in fact it is found on a large scale, then it is to be taken for granted that this faith is made possible and based upon the supernatural grace of the Spirit. And this is the Spirit who proceeds from the Father and the Son, so that as the Spirit of the eternal logos he can and must be called at least in this sense the Spirit of Christ, the divine Word who has become man.”

“Insofar as the universal efficacy of the Spirit is always oriented towards the high point of its historical mediation, in other words, insofar as the event of Christ is the final cause of the communication of the Spirit to the world, it can truly be said that this Spirit is everywhere and from the outset the Spirit of Jesus Christ, the logos of God who became man. The Spirit who has communicated himself to the world has himself, and not only in the intention of God which transcends the world and would be extrinsic to him, an intrinsic

relation to Jesus Christ. The latter is the “cause” of the former, although at the same time the opposite relation is equally true, a is always the case between an efficient cause and a final cause. Between them there is both unity and difference, and a relationship of mutual conditioning. Insofar as the efficient cause of the Incarnation and of the cross, namely the Spirit, bears his goal within himself as an intrinsic entelechy, and insofar as he realises his own essence as communicated to the world only in the Incarnation and the cross, he is the Spirit of Jesus to begin with. Insofar as this Spirit always and everywhere brings justifying faith, this faith is always and everywhere and from the outset a faith which comes to be in the Spirit of Jesus Christ. In this Spirit of his he is present and operative in all faith.” (Rahner, p 318)

### ***Raymundo Pannicker on Christ, The Point of Encounter***

“The true encounter between Christianity and Hinduism is only possible where they really meet. And they do not really meet in the doctrinal sphere, but in another deeper stratum that could well be called the existential level, or the ‘ontic-intentional’ stratum.”

The doctrines, despite their undeniable similarities, are far removed from each other and yet somehow have the same aim and point to the same goal. Moreover, they start from the same anthropological situation. In both cases, the same human being is found in his naked existence, striving to reach his fullness and perfection. Indeed, the Christian will say that Christian existence is already a super natural gift, a ‘new creation’, a higher position. But he will not deny that the newness of ‘grace’ descends upon human existence as it is, and is somehow given to all human beings, since God wants the salvation of everyone and without ‘grace’ there is no salvation. Christianity will also say that its specific goal is already coloured by its own constituents, namely the divinisation of man as Christianity understands it. That is to say, it claims to have a unique knowledge: a ‘gnoseological intentionality’, namely the gnosis that God is Trinity and our union is with God in Christ; but it will not contest the fact that the ‘ontic intentionality’ is the same, namely that very union with the Absolute.

The ‘ontic-intentionality’ or goal of existence can obviously not be properly expressed by mere words; for example we have used the expression, ‘union with the Absolute’, whereas a Yogin would prefer to say ‘pune isolation’ and a Buddhist, ‘Nirvana’.

There is neither Absolute to be united with, nor duality to give the union any sense, they will say, and yet the ‘ontic’ goal intended is one and the same; it is precisely that end, that final stage, understood in one way or another, that all are aiming at. In other words, Christianity and Hinduism meet in a common endeavour, which has the same starting point and the same ‘ontic’ goal.” (The Unknown Christ of Hinduism, Darton, Longman & Todd, London, 1964., p5-6)

### QUESTIONS FOR STUDY

1. Define and evaluate inclusivism alongside exclusivism.
2. Critically evaluate the positions of Rahner and Thomas.
3. Write an evangelistic message using some insights learned from inclusivists.

### END NOTES

1. Hick & Hebblewaite, op.cit., p 56
2. ibid., p 60-61
3. ibid., p 66
4. ibid., p78
5. Thomas. M.M., *Man and the Universe of Faiths* (Madras. Christian Literature Society. 1975)
6. Devanandan, P.D., *Preparation for Dialogue*, CISRS, Bangalore; 1961, p 106
7. D'Costa, Gavin, *Christian Uniqueness* (Devanandan's Theology) p 56
8. ibid., p56
9. Farquhar, J.N., *The Crown of Hinduism*.
10. Bannerjee, K.M., *The Asian Witness*, Calcutta, 1875
11. ibid., p 103
12. Boyd, Robin, *An Introduction to Indian Christian Theology*, Delhi, ISPCK, 1991, p 283
13. Race, Alan, *Christians and Religious Pluralism*, N.Y., Orbis Books, 1982, p 69

## Chapter IV

### PLURALISM

*This chapter introduces you to the basic beliefs of pluralism and the concerns of the pluralists. Theological and contextual perspectives will be considered. We will clarify some issues and make an objective assessment of this position.*

#### WHAT IS PLURALISM?

Pluralism is the position that rejects any unique, final or decisive claims to the revelation of God in Jesus Christ; it argues for equal validity for the claims of all religions. Considering exclusivism to be outdated and untenable, and dismissing inclusivism as being just as exclusive as exclusivism, pluralists argue that no single religion can claim to be the norm for the world today. Knowledge of God is partial in all faiths and therefore each religion must acknowledge the validity of every other religions.

As we survey the thought of the pluralists, the following concerns can be underlined. First, traditional Christianity in its historic manifestation has been Western and has demonstrated an aggressive, superior, colonial and imperialistic attitude. Therefore, and second, Christians have not carefully considered the validity of other religions and their claims. Third, our modern commitment to relativity brings us face to face with the irrelevance of our absolutist and exclusive claims to Christianity. Fourth, modern biblical scholarship itself will not allow for such absolute claims and hence Christianity needs to be de-absolutised.

John Hick, Paul Knitter and others in some very influential writings have attempted to justify their growing pluralistic stand based on these arguments.<sup>1</sup> Hick had much earlier called his readers to accept the “Copernican revolution” – calling for a radical shift in our attitude to Christianity and its relation to other religions. Hick makes his task clear, which is to take away from Christianity any claims to being the absolute religion and give to it a position of equal validity alongside all other religions. At the centre is no longer Christianity, but God – or something accessible to adherents of all religions. For him, committing ourselves to relativity, will imply that we abandon our commitment to Jesus Christ as God’s final revelation and accept all religious claims on equal terms.

The Copernican revolution in astronomy consisted in a transformation of the way in which men understood the universe and their own location within it. It involved a radical shift from the dogma that the earth is the centre of the revolving universe to the realization that the Sun is at the centre, with all planets, including our own earth, moving around it. And the Copernican revolution in theology must involve an equally radical transformation of our conception of the universe of faiths and of the place of our own religion within it. It must involve a shift from the dogma that Christianity is at the centre to the thought that it is [God] which is at the centre and that all the religions of mankind, including our own, serve and revolve around him.<sup>2</sup>

### **HICK’S REALITY CENTREDENESS**

John Hick argues that the Christian tradition must now be seen as one within a plurality of contexts of salvation – contexts within which the transformation of human existence from self-centeredness to God (which he refers to as “Reality-centeredness”) is occurring. Any arbitrary superiority-by-definition, he thinks, is no longer defensible, even to many Christians. What is being called for is a totally new assessment of salvation in terms of moving towards reality-centeredness.

Hick believes that it is possible to make a general sweeping investigation of all religions and to come up with some judgment on our own attitudes to Christianity. For instance, he considers individual and social transformation. Looking at the “saints,” who have moved from “self-centeredness to reality-centeredness,” he concludes that “we have no grounds for maintaining that Christianity has produced or is producing more saints... or a higher quality of saintliness, than any other of the great streams of religious life.”<sup>3</sup> Citing the example of Mahatma Gandhi and relating this experience to salvation itself, he urges us to accept that if human salvation, or liberation, has any concrete meaning it must include the kind of transformation of human existence seen in the lives of saints of all the great traditions.

Moving on, he proposes a Christology that is even more questionable. He claims “authority” from the words of Jesus, although this is to be questioned. He notes that “the historical Jesus did not himself teach that he was God the Son, the second person of a divine trinity, living a human life.”<sup>4</sup> The “son of God” title, which was only later to become a standard in the church’s theology, and the theory that Jesus had two natures, were faith commitments, metaphysical and philosophical reconstructions “far removed from the thought world and teaching of Jesus himself.”<sup>5</sup>

Hick prefers an “inspirational Christology” according to which Jesus is seen to be one of those “men and women in whose lives God’s inspiration, or grace, is effectively at work so that they become instruments of the divine purpose on earth.”<sup>6</sup> It is not possible to say that one of these is better than the other and so there is no way in which we could claim Jesus was unique. This kind of an understanding which also departs from the Nicene and Chalcedonian formulations, he thinks, is compatible with the pluralistic position, and moreover “appears to have been the teaching of Jesus himself.”<sup>7</sup>

Hick has his agenda before him and is willing to accept whatever is conducive to affirming this. His is a “purely functionalist reading of religious doctrines.”<sup>8</sup> Aspects of the doctrine can be underlined and the others rejected merely in order to prove particular points. But the problem, it has been pointed out, is that Hick’s functionalist tendencies makes it difficult for him to pay proper attention to “the substantive content of the religious doctrine he examines.”<sup>9</sup> The purely functionalist analysis encourages the tendency to change words, reinterpret them to suit one’s convictions and that is what Hick must answer.

### NEWBIGIN’S RESPONSE

Lesslie Newbigin, with missionary experience in India and its pluralistic context, takes up Hick’s claim and makes five comments. First, he states that “It seems to be logically self-defeating. How does one know that there is a Reality which is unknown? There are, after all, confident affirmations by Muslims and Marxists and Christians and Buddhists about what reality is. On the basis of what prior knowledge is it possible to deny that any of these claims is true? If something is truly unknown, then there is nothing to be said.”<sup>10</sup>

Newbigin goes on to his second criticism, pointing out:

Hick is not without a standpoint. He makes judgments on various aspects of the religious traditions, and particularly upon the evils for which Christianity is responsible. He affirms that we have no agreed definition of sainthood, but has no difficulty in recognizing its absence when he sees it. Where is the ontological foundation for these judgments? Is it anything other than the generally accepted worldview of a Western liberal of the late twentieth century, and if so, what are the grounds for thinking that this worldview corresponds to Reality?<sup>11</sup>

Third, Newbigin refers to Hick’s extension of his well-known ‘Copernican revolution’. “He (Hick) asks that we move from a Christocentric worldview not just to a theocentric, but

to a “Reality-centric” view. Ultimate Reality may be impersonal. We must not exclude the atheist from salvation.”<sup>12</sup> The widening of our viewpoint is being constantly challenged. Newbigin pauses to consider what is involved in this move.

A Christocentric view takes as its clue the person of Jesus Christ, a person about whom there are records which are available for examination. Granted that Christians through the centuries have constantly tried to depict Jesus in their own image, or as a representative of what they conceive to be the ideal human being; nevertheless, such depictions can always be checked and corrected against the record. Jesus, as I read the New Testament, confronts me as a real person whose words and deeds pose radical questions to me and to my own ideals. There is an objective reality which calls into question my own beliefs, ideals and practices. The church has regarded this given reality as the center for its understanding of the world. Hick offers, as an alternative to this, “Reality.” But how am I to conceive of “Reality.” I have to form my own conception of it on the basis on some clue. If all particular and specific clues are excluded, how am I to conceive of “Reality”. Whatever concept I form, it is my own creation. It cannot call me into question. It is I who am at the center. The Hickian revolution is exactly the opposite of the Copernican. It is a move from a view-centered in the objective reality of man Jesus Christ, to a view-centered in my own subjective conception of ultimate reality.<sup>13</sup>

Newbigin puts his finger on the basic problem. In his search for an objective viewpoint that would accord equal validity for all religions, Hick resorts to subjective evaluations. This kind of a relativism eventually dissolves into a subjectivity which offers nothing much apart from a surrender of one’s commitment in favour of something else, with no objective criteria to judge its validity. In fact, very few committed adherents of other religions would yield to this kind of a relativism. The true Hindu is, in fact, the original pluralist. The Sanskrit credo *Sarva Dharma Sambhava* – meaning all religions are equally worthy of respect – has been held by great Hindus like

Vivekananda. But even Hinduism, riding today on its fundamental wave will not tolerate any surrender of its distinctives.

Newbigin goes on to deal with the issue of salvation. "Certainly all human beings seek salvation – in some sense of the word. They seek safety, happiness, security, freedom from oppression. They seek it in vastly different ways. They seek it through religion, through sex, through money, through power. There is hardly any limit to the paths to "salvation." It is our conflicting struggles for salvation that destroy the world. The universal human demand for salvation is in no sense a clue to human unity."<sup>14</sup>

### **A GLOBALLY RESPONSIBLE MODEL FOR DIALOGUE**

Paul Knitter, another ardent pluralist proposes a "Correlational and Globally Responsible Model for Dialogue".<sup>15</sup> Knitter urges that "religious persons seek to understand and speak with each other on the basis of a common commitment to human and ecological wellbeing."<sup>16</sup> He adds, "A globally responsible dialogue is one that is aware that any interfaith encounter is incomplete, perhaps even dangerous, if it does not include, somehow, a concern for and an attempt to resolve the human and ecological suffering prevalent throughout the world."<sup>17</sup>

Negatively, Knitter is keen to get away from "the excesses of exclusivistic model," but, positively wants to search for this correlational approach that will bring dialogue among religions which is necessary for survival of our species and planet.

Thus, one of the highest goods Christians can strive for is to promote an authentic, interreligious, intercultural dialogue that will enable all partners genuinely to search for and discover Truth in its inexhaustible richness and to cooperate ever more effectively in removing suffering, human and ecological, that is devastating our globe.<sup>18</sup>

Therefore, says Knitter, such a correlational approach must avoid the exclusivism that "claims that Christians are in possession of the God-given final word of truth." Christians must shy away from such terms as one and only, definitive, absolute, final to describe the truth of the Gospel. Knitter states :

Only if Christians are truly open to the possibility... that there are many true, saving religions and that Christianity is one among the ways in which God has touched and transformed our world - only then can authentic dialogue take place. Only then can Christians enter the forum of interreligious encounter and both witness mightily to what God has done in Jesus and at the same time listen humbly to what God may be doing elsewhere.<sup>18</sup>

Knitter concludes - "Absolute, final oneness does not seem, philosophically, what the world is heading for, or, theologically, what God intends for creation." Christians can continue to announce that Jesus is truly divine and saviour, but they no longer need to insist that he is solely divine and saviour.<sup>19</sup>

One can sympathise with Knitter who is concerned for humanity's suffering and offers a solution from a Christlike heart that goes out to hurting humanity. We must agree that if our claims to Christ will result in bloodshed, suffering, even alienation from neighbours, then we will do better to correct them. But, is the solution in a discarding or compromising of such claims. If all we have is a Christ who changes according to the context, does Jesus not become a mere figment of our imagination rather than God who became man in history and revealed the redemptive plans of God for all of humanity.

### **SAMARTHA AND PLURAL WAYS**

An Indian theologian, Stanley Samartha admits that notions of salvation and of what we are saved from are understood differently in different religions, and that this is to be expected. "The question here is not whether there may be plural ways of salvation. In multi-religious situations the fact is that there are plural ways of salvation, experienced and ar-

ticulated in different ways. Both the context and oppression of salvation are different”<sup>20</sup> He, like other pluralists, pleads for Christians to be open to recognize the validity of other experiences of salvation.

Samartha’s aversion to exclusive claims makes him to believe that “when the distinctives of a particular faith is stated in a manner that avoids open or hidden exclusiveness, then meaningful relationships between different communities become possible.”<sup>21</sup> Here again is a case where the anticipated results are expected to control the agenda. If “meaningful” relationships demand that we sacrifice some of our distinctives then why does one need to speak of any distinctives at all.

The pluralistic answer while sounding generous must be recognized for a fundamental problem not so obvious outside. Every religion defines its notion of salvation in relation to its understanding of this world and the reality beyond. To accept that we could bring about harmony while each one increases his commitment to his own distinctive belief and provoke conflicting attitudes could be suicidal.

Samartha’s reminder for us to recognise the validity of other ways must also allow us the privilege of looking seriously at our own. Can we cling to our distinctive commitment to Jesus, who called all the world to himself as the true and living way to God, without feeling in some way that this message needs to reach others? Perhaps this is not with an air of superiority of an exclusive claim but with an attitude of compassion of Christ that Knitter calls us to demonstrate. Even if we are to take the initiative, surrendering our claims and inviting others to “meaningful relationships,” does that not put the Christian in the driving seat once again?

Some distinct standpoint is needed, and if we are talking about salvation through Jesus Christ it has to be the Bible that will provide this. A closer look at the Bible may challenge our limited understanding of salvation. Jesus encountered people with his unique claims and the accompanying power of God.

Men and women in the New Testament encountered Jesus himself, not merely his salvation. Hick and other pluralists seem to be caught up in merely the human outcome of salvation rather than the fundamental relationship that provides this privilege. Compared to this relationship all else pales into insignificance.

Ian Race, humbly admits that while the pluralistic position, which he himself affirms, has “*prima facie* attractiveness”, it has its problems. “How are judgments between religions to be made?” he asks. He adds -

The apparent danger of pluralism in the Christian theology of religions is that if all religious traditions are made relative it could undermine concern to distinguish good from bad, the spiritually wholesome and profound from the spiritually poor and moribund religion. It could imply the first steps towards an undifferentiated syncretism and that choice between traditions would be rendered arbitrary and meaningless.<sup>22</sup>

## THE CENTRALITY OF JESUS CHRIST

The early creeds stated the Christian commitment to Jesus Christ clearly and forthrightly. The Christian community has from the beginning committed itself to the claims of the historical Jesus of Nazareth in the foundational event through which God identified himself with humanity. This particularity is not accidental, but an essential element of the Christian understanding of how God communicates his plans for humanity. It is in the finality of the history of Jesus in which God reveals those plans, and therefore this particularity of Jesus must form the firm foundation for all Christian claims.

It is hard to conceive of Christianity without particularity, the particularity that grounds it within a given historical event. It is harder still to accept that Hick and his company are able to hold on to their Christian commitment by surrendering any commitment to certain givens in their relationship to God. The pluralistic pressure, rather than making us abandon or even

reinterpret our commitment, enables us to underline some of the distinctives of the Christian faith, the particularity of our belief, the “essential element” that is non-negotiable. The only way to depart is to abandon this in preference of a relativistic reinterpretation. But then, to claim that this is the same as historical Christianity is preposterous.

Writing in response to “The Myth of Christian Uniqueness”, M.M Thomas offers a corrective from an inclusivistic position. Surveying the influence of Jesus Christ in the religious and secular movements of India he concludes that “de-emphasising the centrality of Christ would be betraying the most important Christian element that had been present in the Indian Renaissance and which still has power to redeem it for the future.”<sup>23</sup> Any Christian approach taking the common mission of all religions and ideologies for “cultural renewal and humanization of corporate structures of life in India’s modern historical setting”, Thomas states, cannot minimize the centrality of Christ. Based on this lesson from historical experience he underlines the necessity of a Christ-centeredness for interfaith dialogue, particularly in the context of India’s religious and idealistic pluralism. However, faith in Christ needs to be distinguished from all its historical expressions in religion and culture and shown to transcend them. Rather than religion which divides humankind, Christ brings about “one new humanity,” as Devanandan advocates. Christ-centeredness is not the absolutization of any Christological doctrine.

Thomas feels it is this kind of a “Christ-centeredness” that will provide a more tangible universal principle for interfaith relations, unlike the pluralistic proposition wherein all religions are accepted on their own terms. He observes that the contents of the “universal categories” which the writers have proposed in preference to the aggressiveness of the older Christian formulations “express the same Christian cum Western particularisms and are not really pluralistic.”<sup>24</sup> They remain

“expressions of Western particularism and less than universal.”<sup>25</sup>

Thomas asserts that there is no way humans can “jump out of their religion and culture,” which the writers of the Myth appear to take as a pre-requisite for finding a “universal criterion” to deal with our present human predicament. Speaking from his Indian experience, Thomas points to the way Gandhi used Tolstoy’s and Ruskin’s understanding of Jesus Christ to critique modern civilization and Christianity. He therefore concludes, “Christ is a more transcendent universal ultimate than the ultimates canvassed...”<sup>26</sup> He further suggests that Christ can be the criterion of spiritual evaluation of all religions, including Christianity. In the New Testament, Christians are admonished to “test the spirits to see whether they are of God” in the light of Jesus Christ.

This inclusivistic position is a good vantage point from where we can look again at the Christian distinctive claim to God’s revelation in history. Although there is a particularity in terms of a historic context, which inevitably presupposes a cultural context, biblical revelation never assumes an exclusivism as far as its availability is concerned. It is from within this kind of a particularity that Jesus Christ impacts the world, whether in terms of Thomas’s Christ-centered humanism or in an open radical conversion of men and women fully to Jesus Christ. It is suicidal to totally surrender our particular standpoint, as it is from there that we are able to truly project a universality that will bring healing in a world otherwise torn apart by religious fundamentalism.

## AN EVALUATION

The strength of the pluralistic position is its forceful reminder of the urgent need for us to become an integral part of the global community. The exclusivistic arrogance and its absolutised pronouncements on the positions of other religions has caused sufficient havoc that calls for a humble change of

mind. On the other hand, the subtle takeover of all religions in the name of “inclusivism” is as imperialistic as colonial Christianity. The pluralist’s reminder is for us to correct our approach, reassess our message and to become part of the world of people within which we are integrally located.

The pluralist rightly reminds us that pure “exclusivism” will be hard to sustain if we are to take the context of the world seriously. If God “so loved the world” we too need to develop an attitude that will concretise this concern. Jesus was far from an exclusive bigot in his relations with men and women of varied persuasions. Exclusivism will need to move a bit closer to inclusivism, and conversely, inclusivism will need to patch up its loopholes and draw a bit closer to exclusivism. Will an exclusive-inclusivism find much more validity in resolving the growing tension between Christianity’s ultimate claims *vis a vis* similar claims from other religions?

While we must congratulate Western Christianity for recognizing its problems, and now doing well to reassess its attitudes, Asian and African Christians must make sure we do not carry on similar imperialistic attitudes that will continue to alienate us from our own peoples and our cultures. Pluralism has a timely reminder: We belong to a global community, even more, a God created global community. Witnessing as Christians within this community demands a renewed commitment to Jesus Christ and to a love for our world.

The pluralist is demanding that we surrender our claims in order to appreciate the claims of the other. As generous as this gesture may be, the dangers are clear. The proposal demands that we come to some common understanding with a tradition which conflicts with ours, without sacrificing our integrity. And this is heading for a precarious position with no firm foundation at all. It is one thing to argue for the possibility of independent validity, but then to argue that all these ways are directly related to the same God is wishful thinking. For instance, does God reveal himself in conflicting ways? Whereas

in one religion he reveals himself as the one who has come to save the sinner will he contradict himself in another to save only the righteous?

Can God be an inanimate force in one and a personal being in another? Can what is venerated in one religion be reconciled to the same being anathema in another? Religions corrupted by sin, even Christianity, cannot be harmonized unless there is one theocentric position from which to focus on to the problem. Each religion makes its own distinctive truth claim, often conflicting with other claims, and it is impossible to ignore this fundamental fact when proposing a pluralistic theology of religion.

The problem is to be faced by the pluralist. It certainly is a noble task to bring all religions together under one common “soteriological” umbrella. But is this possible without surrendering the true significance of Jesus Christ and redefining soteriology, which to the biblical theologian is the underlying emphasis in all of his attempts to understand God’s dealings with humankind? And then will we do justice to the teachings of other religions. Harold Netland asks three interrelated questions: What is the nature of the religious ultimate? What is the nature of the human predicament? What is the nature of salvation/enlightenment/liberation? He suggests that “careful examination of the basic tenets of various religious traditions demonstrate that, far from teaching the same thing, the major religions have radically different perspectives of the religious ultimate, the human predicament and the nature of salvation. Any attempt to produce an essential unity in outlook among the many religions will result in distorting at least some of the actual belief of followers of various traditions.”<sup>27</sup>

John Hick asks the question: Can there be a form of Christianity which reveres Jesus as its supreme teacher and inspirer but does not regard him as literally God incarnate; which seeks to nurture men and women from self-centeredness towards a new centring in God, thus promoting not only individual but

also social and national and international unselfishness; and that sees itself as one major spiritual path among others, developing friendly and cooperative revelations with others? <sup>28</sup>

Hick responds from two perspectives. First the theological question: Will this still be Christianity? Tracing the changes that have taken place in Christianity itself over the centuries, Hick states that “the changed Christian self-understanding called for by the recognition of our place within the wider human picture, is feasible... and unavoidable if there is to be a credible Christian faith for the twentieth century.” <sup>29</sup> He then asks the question ecclesiastically. Is such a Christianity possible? Skeptical about any oneness in thought, Hick projects into the future to picture the body visibly split into two Christianities - one predominantly fundamentalist and the other liberal. But in both, Hick says, there will be a diversity with each seeing the other as a religious disaster. <sup>30</sup> Hick may not be saying anything new and unexpected, as we see some of this is already happening.

There is no need to be threatened by changing contexts. We need to strive towards a solution that will be biblically justifiable as well a contextually sustainable. Having accepted that the pluralists have set a purely Western agenda, and have accepted it primarily to be the correcting of the Western triumphalistic attitude to mission, it is rather contradictory that the solution offered by Western pluralists is itself a product of modern, Western rationalization. As Tom Driver sums up – “Pluralists are modernists who think that autonomy is the highest good. Pluralism’s pretended globalism is no less particular than the universality claimed for Christ in traditional dogmatics.” <sup>31</sup> Driver is honest to admit that “it will be the better part of wisdom to acknowledge, even to stress that the whole discussion belongs to Western liberal religious thought at the present time.” <sup>32</sup>

For an Indian, who is writing this exposition, this is perhaps a pacifying reminder. Liberal Christianity does not rep-

resent all that there is of Western Christianity. There is a mainstream conservative element, exclusivist in every way, even apart from the evangelical or other fundamental sections, that will continue to hold faithfully to the central fact of a unique historical revelation of God in Jesus Christ. And this significant section of the church will continue to stand on the belief that through this particular event salvation has been made possible universally, not just for an exclusive Jewish community.

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## **FURTHER STUDY**

### ***STATEMENT ON GOD, THE CREATOR AND REDEEMER***

#### ***Declaration of the Seventh Asia Theological Association Theological Consultation***

We thirty-nine evangelical theologians, pastors, evangelists and educators from twelve countries have gathered together for the Seventh Asia Theological Association Consultation in Manila, Philippines, January 21-26, 1985 to reaffirm our common faith in God among the people of Asia.

Finding ourselves in a critical situation where the knowledge of the true God is being distorted by false religions, and challenged by syncretistic or socio-politically oriented Christian ideologies, and where the divinely intended welfare of life is being threatened by injustice, violence, poverty and despair, nevertheless, we rejoice that our sovereign God is at work today fulfilling His purpose for His people and for the nations. We are convinced that the message of God the Creator and Redeemer needs to be proclaimed afresh through the life and witness of the church in Asia.

#### ***Therefore, We Affirm***

I. Our belief in the one, eternal, living, and personal God revealed to us in the Bible and articulated in the Apostle’s creed. He is the One self-sufficient God who exists and manifests Himself as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

II. God as the Creator of the whole universe, animate and inanimate, visible and invisible, material and spiritual, for His own good purpose. He alone reigns over all things, sustains them, and brings them into subjection. We eagerly await the consummation of His Kingdom in righteousness, power, and glory. He alone is to be worshipped and obeyed.

III. The unique revelation of the Creator God in Jesus Christ, fully God and fully man, our Redeemer and Lord, who in love through the incarnation identified Himself with us in the totality of our humanness except for our sinfulness. He is the one, final and all-sufficient sacrifice and atonement for our sin. He was raised from the dead to liberate us from the bondage of sin, self and satanic power, and to redeem us from death and eternal destruction and to recreate us in Christ. He is the firstfruit of the resurrection and our Hope of glory in a new heaven and a new earth.

IV. That our confession of Jesus Christ, the eternal Son of God, the Messiah, the anointed One of God, is the foundation for the building of the church. We believe the person and work of Jesus Christ is the central issue in the proclamation and defence of the gospel in the midst of plurality of deities, rival claims to being prophets and godmen, and socio-political ideologies of saviourhood. He is not one among other gods, nor just the greatest of all men or teachers, but is the One in whom all the Godhead dwells, and in whom God is reconciling the world to Himself.

V. That the personal, eternal and divine Holy Spirit is the agent of the Godhead in revelation, creation, and redemption, revealing to all people God's truth and righteousness. He convicts men and women of sin, giving them new life in Christ through repentance and faith. He instructs, encourages, sanctifies, and empowers the people of God, through the Word and sacrament for worship, witness and service in Asia and beyond. Through Him the power of God is demonstrated over the spirit world controlled by Satan.

VI. That men and women are created in the image of God and have some knowledge of God through creation and conscience, but their willful disobedience and desire for independence have resulted in separation from God, bringing them under His wrath. This sinfulness is painfully seen in the worship of false gods and goddesses, in materialistic and humanistic philosophy, in the autonomy of science, technology, the state, and education. Men and women stand in condemnation of God, our Creator and Redeemer; but God, rich in mercy and grace, longs for the salvation of all men through His Son, our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

THEREFORE, we have come to understand afresh our responsibilities to this Creator and Redeemer God, and we prayerfully commit ourselves:

1. To trust Him fully, to obey Him humbly and to worship Him joyfully.
2. To dedicate ourselves to seek a clearer understanding and to teach the truth of our great God as revealed in the Bible, and to entrust this truth to faithful men and women who will teach others also.
3. To communicate Christ and His Word through the proclamation of the gospel and through the witness of our lives.
4. To give ourselves to the needy and suffering Asia through the ministry of caring, sharing and serving in the name of God, motivated by the redemptive love of Christ and empowered by His Holy Spirit.

We call upon Christians in Asia to join with us in this commitment to glorify God, our Creator and Redeemer.

#### QUESTIONS FOR STUDY

1. Summarise the concerns of Pluralism and pluralists. Critically evaluate this position.
2. Read and critique the Manila Declaration from the perspective of exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism.
3. What position do you accept? Why?

#### END NOTES

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## Chapter V

### BIBLICAL INSIGHTS

*You will gain some important biblical insights that will help evaluate the conflicting claims we have considered earlier. Old and New Testament passages will be explored.*

We are now ready to take a look at some biblical passages and draw out insights to assist in developing a theology of religions. As we read the Bible there is hardly any doubt that God has a universal plan that is being worked out within real history. Right from the start - from the account of the creation and the fall, and on to the account of God's covenant both universal and eternal, the choosing of Abraham for the benefit of "all the people of the world," and onwards - there are revelations of a God who not only claims to be Lord of all, but also has laid out a plan for all of his world and its peoples.

#### OLD TESTAMENT REFLECTIONS

The Old Testament is the place to start. Apart from creation, the one overarching theme that cements the whole sequence of God's dealings with the world is the covenant. This theme provides the all inclusive horizon that will first universalise God's intentions for all peoples and then particularise it to show the purposes of God for humankind. Within this covenant Jesus Christ's life, death, and resurrection take on their intended meaning and significance. Jesus both particularised as well as universalised its influence of the covenant to all who will be willing to submit to his Lordship.

There are implicit references to the covenant right from the start of the Bible, but explicit reference first appears only in God's encounter with Noah. In Gen 6 v18 God says "I will establish my covenant with you..." The note of promise is prominent. God in his intimate concern for his people fulfills purposes on the basis of the covenant – an agreement made within history. The covenant with Noah interestingly reveals the two important aspects of all of God's covenants — universality and eternity. These themes are highlighted in God's covenant with Abraham and David.

In the covenant with Noah, there is a very clear reference to an everlasting covenant between God and all flesh that is upon the earth. Note that it is between God and 'the earth' (v 13). The emphasis points to God's redemptive purposes for all of the created order, and this is not merely a passing reference. Religions often restrict themselves to a human, even spiritual dimension of salvation, but the implications of the covenant are for all of creation. The universality referred to is not merely people; it is effective for *all* of God's creation.

The more we read the Bible the more we discover how restricted we have been in our understanding of God's dealings with his world. Sadly, we have sacrificed the Hebrew understanding of "wholeness" in favor of a Greek dualism. The dualism of the spiritual and the material, the body and the soul and other such dichotomies have stifled our idea of God and spirituality today. If God is Lord of all the created order, then his redemptive concern must extend to all creation as well. And therefore, creation has to be considered more positively, in terms of its interrelatedness to humanity within God's covenant. If the fall brought about a break in relationship between God, humanity and the world, the reconciliation that God now makes possible must restore all broken relationships.

Moving to God's promise to Abraham, we encounter the widest significance of the long-range plans of God's mission. The covenant God made with Abraham in Gen. 15 and 17,

rather than an isolated one, is in continuation of what he has already initiated. Abraham is chosen so that God could demonstrate his purposes for the whole world. God needs a vehicle, and Abraham is this vehicle through whom all nations will be blessed. The primary concern of God is certainly the redemption of a people that he will form for himself, and it is through this people that he will accomplish his plans for the entire world. Abraham, in this sense, is to become the Father of nations, through whom all the peoples of this world will get an opportunity to become God's covenant people.

Universality is one aspect of the covenant. Eternity is the other. In God's covenant with David - the messianic promise in Psalm 110 v4, we read — "You are a priest forever," and here any temporality is given eternal significance. God's covenant is not restricted to time, and hence John can refer to Jesus Christ as the "Lamb slain before the foundation of the world." Also, as recorded in Psalm 2, David is told — "I will make the nations your inheritance, and the ends of the earth your possessions (Psalm v8). It echoes the same note as the covenant with Abraham.

God had entrusted to Israel a message of universal availability but she had claimed it for herself. The book of Jonah summarizes the core of the theological problem faced by Judaism, and indeed of significance for the debate today. God's redemptive plans as revealed in the Bible can hardly be seen to be restricted. Jonah, the picture of the exclusive Jew, struggled with the fact that God truly desired to widen out the particular choice of the people of Israel. The struggle is to reconcile the universality of God's grace with the particularity of Israel's choice. And so Jonah could not see how God's salvific plans could be made available to all, particularly the abhorrent Assyrians. He ignored the fullest scope of God's grace. The pluralist today seeking to widen out salvation without any restrictions is guilty of the opposite — ignoring the deepest implications of God's particularity.

## THE MINISTRY OF JESUS CHRIST

The Gospel of Mark records Jesus ministry beginning with a bold assertion - "The time has come.... The kingdom of God is near" (Mark 1.15) There is a broadening out of God's purposes through the Gospel now available for all of humanity. But Jesus has a mission prior to that.

Interestingly, Jesus sets out by initially limiting his influence purely to Israel. In Matt. 15.24, Jesus says — "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." In fact, he similarly restricts the activity of the disciples. (Mt 10.5f.) Rather than being looked at in isolation, this restriction needs to be placed within the context of the total revelation of God. If the revelation of Jesus Christ stands within the history of Israel, his revelation must first be historically attested within this history. Only then will its universal validity be extended.

Despite this restriction, Jesus set out to universalise the revelation of God. His attitude to the "faith" of the Gentiles is a good indication that he did not close his mind to Gentiles being saved. Clearly then, the establishing of the validity of his Jewish credentials, the particularising of his salvific claims, was only intended to eventually be widened into universal salvation. It is with reference to this fact that the importance of Israel must be seen. Attempts to ascribe a similar preparatory role to other religions miss this point. The historicity of the revelation of God in Jesus, and thereby its authenticity, rests on the fact of its continuity with God's revelatory acts through Israel.

Jesus' immediate mission during his lifetime was not an evangelistic mission. He did not set out to convert the masses to himself. This was to be the disciple's task. He set out to fulfill the event of the cross and the resurrection, and these were to bring about the redemptive plan of God as promised in the Old Testament. The disciples were to tarry till the Holy Spirit would empower them to carry out the universalising of the influence of the Gospel. Some argue from Jesus' own re-

striction of his and his disciples ministry that there was an exclusivistic concern with no universal intentions in his mind. But this is hardly true.

Jesus' total ministry on earth was so future-oriented that it is impossible to speak of any of his immediate actions without reference to the future manifestations. Whether it be his wide acceptance by the masses or his rejection by the authorities, the successful outworkings of his power or his suffering and surrender to the forces that prevailed, there was a future fulfillment that preoccupied him. His journey towards Jerusalem powerfully demonstrates this overwhelming preoccupation with that which was to be accomplished rather than with the ignominy of the immediate event in his lifetime.

There is therefore no room to suggest an absence of universal concern in Jesus mind. In fact, some very helpful insights into his attitude to men and women of other "faiths" are discernable in his dealings with them. Even the Syrophenician woman (Mk 7.24-30), very clearly a Gentile follower of Jesus, received a share of blessings from him. The Centurion at Capernaum was commended — "Truly I have not found such great faith with anyone in Israel." (Mt 8.10). Immediately after this commendation, Jesus goes on to stating that "men shall come from east and west and dine at table with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, in the kingdom of heaven." The kingdom is certainly not restricted exclusively for the Jews. Encounters such as these reveal that Jesus had no intention to restrict his influence. Although for a particular period his activity needed to be restricted, it was for the specific purpose of the attestation of his messianic mission within Israel.

These brief insights into Jesus attitude bring a few reminders to our notice. First, there is no doubt that Jesus himself was aware of his universal significance. Any restrictions are intentional, and only for the immediate. Second, in his few recorded encounters with the Gentiles it is clear that he is not even restricted by the limitations he sets upon himself. The benefits of

his earthly ministry are available for any that are bold enough to approach him.

The forceful reminder that comes to us is that there is a continuity with the beliefs of men and women outside of the Jewish community. The fact that Jesus Christ is willing to commend the “faith” of the Gentile and build on it shows that God works out his plans for the non-Christian in fulfillment of a quest that is already there. Within the context of our inter-religious encounters, there is little room for a hard line condemnatory claim to discontinuity that hinders rather than helps our proclamation. The question that arises is — What are the points of continuity that we need to discern as we seek to build positive relationships with men and women of other religions.

### **THE PARABLES OF JESUS**

When we consider some of the parables of Jesus, we are once again confronted with an overwhelming emphasis on the universality of the Gospel, while at the same time note the particularity of Jesus Christ. For instance, in the parable of the Wedding Banquet (Matt 22.1-14), there is practically the entire plan of God summarized within the span of a few terse verses. The restricted invitation in the beginning is undoubtedly reference to the election of Israel and the privilege they had enjoyed as the ones initially invited. And then the invitation is thrown open to everyone, but only as result of the refusal of the first invited to heed to the call. This does not mean that the universalising of the Gospel only occurred because of the disobedience of the Jews. Even the book of Acts depicts this kind of a sequence — the initial lack of response of the Jews, and then the opening out of the opportunity for the Gentiles. Jesus himself instructed his disciples to first preach to the Jews, as we have seen.

A parable must be looked at for its central message and very clearly the emphasis in this parable is the making available of the invitation of the banquet to everybody. The stub-

bornness of Israel is already evident and did not need to be stressed any more. Jesus is now disclosing the fact of God’s plan for making salvation available to everybody through his sacrifice on the cross soon to be accomplished. However, the universal availability does not mean an availability with no personal cost involved, neither an anonymous entity that gets one into the wedding feast. The second round of invitations still requires men and women to be dressed appropriately. To think that the universality of the availability of salvation implies an entry into the Kingdom regardless of the way one chooses to enter is contradictory to the intention of Jesus as well as the development of this fact in the rest of the New Testament.

In the parable of the sheep and the goats (Matt 25.31-46), Jesus continues to stress the universality of his ministry as he refers to the last judgment when all the nations will be gathered. However, the problem is to do with the criteria the parable sets as valid for the separation of the two different kinds of people — one commended to eternal life and the other condemned to eternal punishment. The problem that arises is whether Jesus here speaks of the anonymous Christians, men and women saved on grounds of whatever light is made available to them, on grounds of their own goodness, good works, sincerity etc.

Some comments will need to be made. First, if this parable is looked at in isolation of all the other teaching of Jesus Christ, there should be no doubt that the only criteria for salvation is human compassion and generosity. But surely that is not what the rest of the Bible affirms. Having to hold this parable alongside all else that Jesus has said, we must first note that Jesus certainly expects his people not to neglect their Christlike acts of mercy and compassion to a world that will continue to be in need because of the sin of humankind. Greed and covetousness will always leave some men and women deprived and the Christian must respond as Christ would.

However, the other point that will need to be admitted is that there appears to be the possibility of men and women being saved on grounds of their sincere and genuine attempts to attain salvation, those who operated within a limited knowledge of God's salvation having been denied the opportunity to know Jesus Christ in this world. This is a challenge to the neat formulae we have developed to distinguish the saved from the unsaved and the arrogance that we display in rejecting those whom God may have already received. It does not mean there are no external signs which will enable us to distinguish those who are in Christ from those who are not. But rather we note a challenge to our judgments based on static formulated approaches to conversion with little concern for God's prerogative or the Holy Spirit's action in the process of drawing men and women to himself.

The question is often asked - Will sincere, good and devout men and women be saved despite their lack of commitment to Jesus Christ? The standard reply is "No," the reason being men and women are only saved through Jesus Christ. While this is theoretically correct, we must ask whether we really are in a position to make such judgments ourselves? Commenting on the kind of attitude with which Christians make claims that pre-empt the final judgment of God, Lesslie Newbigin points out - to ask who will be saved or not saved "is the wrong question". It is a question to which God alone has the right to give an answer."<sup>1</sup> He elaborates —

Nothing could be more remote from the whole thrust of Jesus' teaching than the idea that we are in a position to know in advance the final judgment of God. It would be tedious to repeat again the innumerable warnings of Jesus in this matter, his repeated statements that the last day will be a day of surprises, of reversals, of astonishment. In his most developed parable of the last judgment, the parable of the sheep and the goats, both the saved and the unsaved are astonished. Surely theologians at least should know that the judge on the last day is God and no one else."<sup>2</sup>

Exclusivists have privatised and individualised the Gospel to such an extent that statements are made on behalf of God from limited interpretations of a few Biblical passages. The verses selected are those that emphasise individual benefits rather explore the wider dimensions of salvation and what it means to God and his kingdom. On the question — Who will be saved? Newbigin makes his dissatisfaction known because "the question starts with the individual and his or her need to be assured of ultimate happiness, and not with God and his glory."<sup>3</sup> "Christians have privatised (the) mighty work of grace and talked as if the whole cosmic drama of salvation culminated in the words 'For me, for me.'"<sup>4</sup>

This is a powerful reminder when we find ourselves facing the pluralistic predicament. The privatization of the Gospel has reached such frightening proportions that we seem to be launching out on an updated version of the older colonial imperialism. We strive for "converts" into the Kingdom merely on grounds of their "yes" or "no," or in some cases the signing of a card stacked away for statistics once they have found their place in our reports. We must not discard the personal emphasis of the Gospel as that is part of the uniqueness of Jesus' relationship to his followers. What Newbigin is concerned about, and what should be our concern too, is that the emphasis has shifted to so much of what we have made the Gospel to be, an over emphasis on human efforts with little room for God's miraculous outworking anymore.

The point that Jesus makes in his parables is that the universal scope of his influence within the particular plans of God for his world is much broader than we can comprehend. The grace of God is unreachably beyond our conceptualizing, even more beyond our attempts to press into predictable patterns. Even the observable seeds we plant are those that will grow into infinitely greater proportions than we can imagine. It is within such unpredictable and immeasurable dimensions that our finitude finds its meaning and significance both now and

in the kingdom to come. The Bible is clear that it is the grace of God that saves us and the universality of this grace is not for us to restrict.

### **THE DISCIPLES AND THEIR UNIVERSAL CONCERN**

The disciples did not initially accept Jesus' concern for the universal availability of the Gospel. The book of Acts opens with their expectation of the restoration of Israel - as a present political entity within God's plans for the kingdom. Their utter refusal to understand what Jesus had really intended is frustrating. The point to be noted however is that the disciples were restricted primarily because of their Jewish exclusivism. On the one hand is their bias like that of Jonah, restricting everything of God's plans for themselves, and on the other is their prejudice towards the non-Jew. This narrow Jewish perspective is clearly a carry over of the Old Testament Judaism that had met with the rebuke of Jesus himself.

God's intentions as we have seen in the reference to the covenant have all along possessed a universal dimension. It would be totally against the character of God to have created the world and its peoples, only to abandon it later, without providing some opportunity for reconciliation. It is thus that Jonah had to learn that even the Assyrians, symbolising people of utter rebellion against God, could have access to God's grace. The disciples who were so concerned for their own salvation could not even entertain the possibility of God being able to include any others. This kind of exclusivism was constantly being challenged by God's wider inclusivistic purposes.

On the other hand, there is also the restriction of their typically Jewish expectation of the kingdom which they along with other faithful Jews, had long been awaiting. The expectation of this political reality had stifled any openness for the universality of God's desires for his world. They were only concerned for the restoration of their own glory. Jesus immediately revealed to them the empowering of the Holy Spirit that would widen their horizons sufficiently to accept the fullest scope of

the Kingdom. It was to be their task to make this Gospel of the Kingdom known to the uttermost parts of the world — not merely to their Jewish world. However, it is only at Pentecost that the disciples recognise their restricted framework

It is the fulfillment of the promise of the Holy Spirit that is experienced at Pentecost. Not only are they reminded of their universal mission, they are also equipped with power to fulfill this task. The Church and the ministry of the Holy Spirit is ushered in. Luke stresses the scope of the Gospel by referring to the disciples who "began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them." (Acts 2.4) The point here is that the Spirit is enabling the disciples to speak in tongues not for any personal spiritual benefit but for the fulfillment of God's universal purposes. The emphasis is entirely on the fact of the *hearing* — "each one heard them speaking in his own language." (v6) God was giving a message of universal significance to his people, and so in inaugurating their identity as a church he intensified his intentions for its universal availability.

### **PAUL AND THE UNIVERSALITY OF THE GOSPEL**

Paul's theology is firmly based on the fact of the validity of salvation of Jesus Christ for all the world. Starting from the emphasis in his conversion experience, through to his own calling to be an ambassador to the Gentiles, and then in his letters, we are confronted by the claims of Jesus Christ beyond his Jewish boundaries. It is in Luke's portrayal of Paul that this movement really begins to surface. The entire second half of the book of Acts is basically concerned with this. The gospel spread out from Palestine in every direction, but the direction in which Luke is interested is its fulfillment of the Gentile search for God. From there its universal validity will be accelerated.

However, Paul does not divorce himself from an intense burden for the Jews. His longing for them to be saved is obvious in his letter to the Romans. But, this driving desire makes his burden for the Gentiles even more emphatic, believing that if the Jews were to fully accept Jesus Christ the resultant bless-

ing for the Gentiles would be even greater. The shift is clear and needs to be captured in its relevance to our discussion. All through the history of his dealings with his people, God challenges Israel to move forward so that they could come closer to the vision for the whole world. The struggles of the early Christians in the book of Acts are symbolic of the deeper struggles that the Church faces today. We too need to break from our exclusivism into the fullest scope of the inclusive claims of Jesus Christ. Any barriers set are only human and need to be constantly and critically corrected. However, in so doing there ought to be some biblical criteria that will keep us anchored to God's covenantal purposes.

Once this dismantling of the racial boundaries imposed on the Gospel has been accomplished, Paul moves to the second stage. He boldly emphasises an enlarging of the spatial boundaries of God's sovereignty from here on earth to one over all creation. Writing to the Ephesians and the Colossians Paul refers to "God's plan for the fullness of time" (Eph. 1.10). The extension of the Gospel's influence to the Gentiles seems far too insignificant, for now God's influence is over the whole universe. Underlined here is the cosmic ramifications of the fall that had broken the intimate relationship between God and creation. Peace must be experienced, oneness must be restored and this is made possible only through the Lord Jesus Christ. For Jesus Christ's work to be complete the Gospel's influence must be total, and hence its redemptive effects must impact his entire created order.

The Gospel of the Kingdom has been "bearing fruit in the whole world and growing" (Col.1.6), even more, it has been "preached to every creature under heaven." (1.23) And Paul has been commissioned to accomplish this task. He undoubtedly is satisfied that he has been faithful to this task assigned to him by the risen Lord. But he is conscious of an even greater task that God himself is accomplishing through his dominion over all the universe. Christ who is the head of the Church is also the fullness of God and Lord of the Universe.

Paul underlines the fact that God has "made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, to be put into effect when the times will have reached their fulfillment — to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ." (Eph.1.9ff). Creation itself awaits the fulfillment of this originally intended purpose of its Lord. Here again, we see the totality of God's concern to restore all of his creation into his Kingdom purposes.

### **CORNELIUS' CONVERSION**

The conversion of Cornelius (Acts 10) is a powerful pointer to the universal scope of the Gospel. Luke utilises the event to show how this universality is truly set into motion. It is Peter the Jew who is entrusted with the task of making the Gospel known to Cornelius the Gentile. The intensity of the prejudice against the Gentiles would have been the initial factor for Peter to overcome. The division between Jews and Gentiles had been so wide that the power of the cross is depicted as breaking down this nasty chasm and making people into one humanity in Jesus Christ.

Peter's sermon to Cornelius' household has some interesting highlights. First, Peter accepts the radical transformation that has come about through the Gospel. His exclusive Jewish attitude has been shattered. "I now realise how true it is that God does not show favoritism." he admits. (Acts 10.34) God does not demonstrate any partiality. And therefore secondly, they had been forced to accept that God was at work even outside of the Jewish community. In contrast to Israel's antagonistic enemies, Cornelius is a "God-fearing" Gentile. Acts 10 v35 makes it clear that this is not an isolated case, but that there are in every nation such god-fearers, worshipping God beyond the fences that we have erected to restrict divine activity. This is certainly indicative of those outside who are not left without a witness. It must be noted however that the term "god-fearer" had been used for Gentiles who were quite friendly

and in fact very close to accepting the Jewish religion. They even attended the Synagogue activities.

The account of the encounter of Sadhu Sundar Singh is one amongst many where God has spoken directly to men and women outside of the church or some familiar Christian setting. Following his encounter, Sundar Singh openly identified himself with Christians, but there are many other sincere believers who have been forced to stay outside of the Christian community even after experiencing Jesus Christ directly. The revelation of God if truly seen within its universal scope must have the unlimited potential to make God known everywhere in his creation. Either we accept this as God truly working outside the church, or else we will need to broaden our understanding of the church. The church is much wider than our sacramental and denominational bound institutions.

God now welcomes everybody, but Peter clarifies that it is through the particular revelation in Jesus Christ. There is the freshness of a first hand witness in the recalling of the accounts of the life and ministry of Jesus. Peter emphasises the fact of Jesus' command to the disciples to preach this Gospel and "to testify that he is the one whom God appointed as judge of the living and the dead." (v42) Furthermore, "everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name."(v43)

While Peter was still speaking there is an outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the Gentiles, much to the amazement of the "circumcised believers." (v44f) The universality of the Gospel is once again confirmed and Peter is quick to accept that they belong with him in the community of those baptised in the name of Jesus Christ. Jesus is responsible for breaking down the walls between the Jew and the Gentile. That which had been on God's heart right through the ages, has now been demonstrated in its reality, throwing open the door for millions of Gentiles to be welcomed into his Kingdom.

The incident is a vivid representation of the way in which the universality of God's revelatory actions is reconciled with the particularity of God's redemptive intentions. Inclusivists will pick up this account and show how there are men and women from various religions whom God deals with directly. There is no doubt that God is able to deal in this way and is confronting many outside of the church.

The Lukan narrative describes Cornelius as being "god-fearing" and even as one whose prayers were acceptable before God (v4) and whose alms had been remembered by God (v 31). Is this then a case for believing that God accepts everyone who does right and therefore it is unnecessary for us to emphasise the need for saving grace only through Jesus Christ? God cannot be partial, as he reveals to Peter. One of the first things that needs to be said in reply to this question is that the incident rather than minimizing the need for Jesus does exactly the opposite. The emphasis is on the fact that despite Cornelius being good and acceptable, in whatever way these terms could be interpreted, still needed to come into the family of Christ.

Second, it will need to be pointed out that the "impartiality" that Peter refers to is not a justification for the availability of other means to approach God outside of Jesus Christ. God has made Jesus Christ available as the means of salvation and there is no partiality in relation to people who have access to him. It is not the prerogative of the Jews, the facts that even the disciples found hard to accept. God's impartiality now has made salvation freely accessible to all who accept the grace available through Jesus Christ.

There is, however, a reminder that we will need to accept. There are men and women outside of the visible community of Christians who are just as holy or devout, sometimes even more, and God is able to deal with them directly even outside the church. Are there Corneliuses who have not yet entered the church, and may or may not encounter Jesus Christ before

their death? Are there are people who have some form of relationship to God even apart from Jesus, and like Cornelius can please God through their “religious” lives?

However, in stressing Cornelius’ acceptance *vis a vis* the acceptance of non-Christians before God, it must be questioned whether the acceptance spoken of here is synonymous with salvation. If it is, why did Cornelius need to “repent” (11.18), be forgiven (10.43), and then be baptised? Is it on grounds of his baptism that he is received into the community of Christ? Or was it because of his being accepted earlier and remembered by God? Any redemptive activity of God outside the church must eventually relate to Jesus Christ, or else God will be contradicting himself.

The tension between the universal and the particular is clearly resolved when we allow for God’s activity all over and to everyone. The universality of God’s revelation must imply that everyone has access to some knowledge of God’s existence, his activity and his ultimate reality. We must continually widen the circle of God’s influence. There is a demonstration of God’s activity, manifested through the ministry of the Holy Spirit, and available for men and women of all religions. However, it is ultimately Jesus Christ who is the one through whom this revelation is focused for salvation. Even the sheep and the goats who were not distinguishable here on earth, were finally separated only by Jesus.

What about the Corneliuses who have not had an opportunity to come face to face with Christians even though they have encountered Jesus Christ? Are these the “other sheep” that Jesus will bring into his fold? (John 10.16) It maybe that Jesus at judgment will recognise those whom we have rejected at present. Whatever it may be, these are crucial questions that we need to approach humbly, accepting that it is ultimately God’s prerogative.

#### QUESTIONS FOR STUDY

1. Explore some biblical passages and note how you see God at work in the world today.
2. Do you have any reports or records of people meeting Christ outside of the normal way we have allowed? Write them briefly, and see whether you can gain more information on these later.
3. Now that you have read this chapter what is your attitude to the theological positions of exclusivism and inclusivism?

#### END NOTES

1. Newbigin, Lesslie, *The Gospel in a Pluralistic Society*, London: SPCK, 1989, p 177
2. *ibid.*
3. *ibid.*, p179
4. *ibid.*

## Chapter VI

### SOME CRUCIAL QUESTIONS

*Some important questions are being asked in today's sensitive multireligious contexts particularly in relation to salvation in other religions. We will consider these questions from biblical perspectives.*

There are crucial questions we must address today. Will believers of other faiths be saved on grounds of their own claims? Will genuine seekers of God of any religion be saved? What about their good works? What about those who did not get an opportunity to encounter Jesus Christ in this lifetime? The discussion in this chapter will help us get some insights to approach these questions biblically.

A large part of humankind either lived before or outside of the scope of Jesus Christ's redemptive activity and therefore the questions become even more critical. Evangelists go everywhere to make the Gospel known in order to provide an opportunity to hear the Gospel. Radio, television and all media forms are used to broadcast the message. But we still are not sure everyone will hear. The question then - Will God reject those who were not given an opportunity to commit themselves to Jesus Christ?

From the strictly exclusivist view (which holds that all who do not accept Jesus as Lord and Saviour are eternally lost) we must conclude that without Christ anyone is without salvation. But will a God of mercy allow this? The question haunts us. Lesslie Newbigin states that "if it were true, then it would

be not only permissible but obligatory to use any means available, all the modern techniques of brainwashing included, to rescue others from this appalling fate."<sup>1</sup> It is God alone who knows the heart of every person, he states, and so how are we to judge whether or not another person is saved.

Newbigin cautions against declarations which may lead us to become judge of that which God alone knows. We will need to avoid a glib and naive approach to decisionism, an easy believism that has hindered rather than helped the evangelistic mission in recent decades. We seem to have taken up the business of selling salvation so cheaply that the whole question of one's eternity is settled in a matter of a few external expressions. Having made it so simple to grant admission to people into the kingdom, we have not found it difficult to deny God's blessings to many, setting criteria from our narrow perspectives.

Yet, Newbigin is not promoting the attitude that everything will be all right for everybody in the end. Such an attitude will not take full account of sin. He points to the tension between the two poles — "the amazing grace of God and the appalling sin of the world." He refers to the humanly speaking "impossible position of knowing that one is — along with all others — at the same time the enemy of God and the beloved child of God. To live in this charged field of force is always at the same time supremely demanding and supremely affirming. But we are always tempted to slacken the tension by drawing away from one or other of the two poles."<sup>2</sup>

Some may give to sin and rebellion such weight that the grace of God is minimised, or conversely presume upon the grace of God ignoring the gravity of sin. Newbigin comments—

We can opt for a solution which relies wholly on the universality and omnipotence of grace and move toward some form of universalism. Here the sharpness of the issue which God's action in Christ raises for every human soul is blunted.<sup>3</sup>

But then, the other side of the tension is that God has made available his grace, which operates despite human sin. Newbigin points out that "the Christian may be so conscious of the abyss of sin from which only the grace of God in Jesus Christ could rescue him that he is unwilling to believe that the same grace can operate in ways beyond his own experience and understanding."<sup>4</sup> Perhaps, the limitations we have imposed on God will need to be questioned. If grace is truly grace it must have no restrictions.

Newbigin's suggestions are worth noting. First of all, there is affirmation of the central fact of salvation through the unique revelation of God in Jesus Christ. However, he wants to allow God's grace to be truly universally available. There is certainly room for a bit more openness in the strictly exclusivistic position, and Newbigin is offering some ways in which this can be considered. He states his belief in Jesus Christ, noting that God — the creator and sustainer of all that exists — is "in his own triune being an ocean of infinite love overflowing to all his works in all creation and to all human beings." Drawing our attention to the fact of Jesus "welcoming signs of faith among men and women outside the house of Israel" he says that "we are seeing the most fundamental of all realities, namely a grace and mercy and loving kindness which reaches out to every creature. I believe that no person, of whatever kind or creed is without some witness of God's grace in heart and conscience and reason and one in whom that grace does not evoke some response — however feeble, fitful, and flawed."<sup>5</sup>

Is this really, after all an inclusive position implying that "grace and mercy and loving kindness" is tantamount to salvation being generally available outside of Jesus Christ. There certainly are isolated instances that could be brought into this discussion but these cannot be generalized to argue for salvation apart from Jesus Christ. While it is true that we must avoid a judgmental attitude, taking upon ourselves the right to declare who is saved and who is damned, are we being just as

presumptuous to universalize the scope of salvation outside of the revelation of God in Jesus Christ. Newbigin himself is being cautious. We are again reminded that there are some issues, which ought to be surrendered to the mystery of the transcendence of a God who has chosen to be immanent.

Newbigin is careful not to ignore the sin of man's rebellion against God. The pluralist, as well as the inclusivist in some cases, glosses over this dimension. We will need to carefully underline "the state of alienation, rejection and rebellion" against God in any assessment of the world of people. The creation framework that we propose to utilise for theology also includes the fact of the fall. It is therefore God as creator as well as redeemer that we confront in the Bible.

Considering the issue from the various perspectives, we must humbly admit that the hard-line exclusivist position needs to be seriously reviewed in the light of all that the Bible states. The particularity of salvation through Jesus Christ must be held alongside the universal availability of God's grace. The Bible only provides some implicit clues, and these will need to be faithfully handled. However, there are answers the Bible does not provide and we must therefore be willing to accept that there are some questions that are best unasked

#### **HOW WIDE IS GOD'S MERCY?**

Clark Pinnock offers another perspective. He draws our attention to crucial questions such as: Is there hope for the unevangelised? What is the eternal destiny of millions who have never heard of Jesus? Will God extend an opportunity for salvation to them? Is it necessary for the non-Christian to call explicitly upon the name of Jesus in order to benefit from his work on their behalf? If God has grace for all, how do people benefit from grace if they have not been told about it? Is the universal salvific will of God frustrated by accidents of birth?<sup>6</sup>

Pinnock takes up the challenge by proposing "the biblical and theological basis for an optimism of salvation grounded in the love of God for all humanity" while opposing the doctrine that only a small number will be saved."<sup>7</sup> Affirming his belief in Christology being part of any Christian theology of religions, he argues, does not by any means entail a negative attitude toward the rest of the world, nor does it require Christians to be exclusivist or restrictivist in their interactions with world religions.

Pinnock justifies his optimism for salvation through the words of Jesus echoing the Old Testament background - "People will come from the East and the West and from North and South, and will take their places at the feast in the kingdom of God." (Luke 13.29) The Gentiles will share in the messianic banquet. The same theme occurs in Matt 12.41-42 and Matt 25.31 - 46. God's concern for the nations will issue in a large number being redeemed. Based on such texts, he states:

We have to confront the niggardly traditions of certain varieties of conservative theology that present God as miserly and that exclude large numbers of people without a second thought. This dark pessimism is contrary to Scripture and right reason. Not only does it contradict the prophetic hope of salvation, it is a cruel and offensive doctrine. What kind of God would send large numbers of men, women and children to hell without the remotest chance of responding to his truth?<sup>8</sup>

Is this universalism which teaches that all will be saved? Pinnock refutes such a charge, but believes there is a middle way. There would have to be an opportunity for all people to participate in the salvation of God. They cannot lack the opportunity merely because someone failed to take the gospel to them. "God's universal salvific will implies the equal universal accessibility of salvation for all people."<sup>9</sup>

Pinnock starts by establishing the fact that "God does have regard for faith in him even when it is forced to rely upon defective and incomplete information."<sup>9</sup> Drawing from Hebrews

11.6 which states “God rewards them that diligently seek him” Pinnock claims –

God is able to take account of faith even when it arises in a person within a pagan context. He called Abraham from within this condition, and others such as Melchizedek, Jethro, Job, Abimelech, Naaman, and Balaam all had faith in God even though they lived outside the range of Israel’s revelation. In the same way today, people who are spiritually “Before Christ” even though they are chronologically “Anno Domini” can trust in God on the basis of the light they have.<sup>10</sup>

Pinnock suggests that this is what Paul is saying in Romans. “All people possess a sufficient knowledge of God on the basis of which they are justly condemned if they reject it. But the converse is also true – it is possible for them to renounce their sin and seek God, even if ignorant of Christ’s provision, so that on the day of judgment the evidence of their conscience may “accuse or perhaps excuse them”(Rom. 2:15). On the basis of the evidence of precedents such as Melchizedek, a symbol of “genuine piety outside the church,” which he refers to as the “Melchizedek factor”, Pinnock concludes – “God most certainly does save people in this way. I do not know how many, but I hope for multitudes.”<sup>11</sup>

The treatment sounds quite convincing but raises questions that will need to be answered before any conclusions are made. For one thing, there are a limited number of references in the Bible. Moreover, there are unusual encounters with people that God will utilize to reveal his will, and these are exceptions rather than norms to be generalised. But then, Pinnock’s concern for biblical insights rather than mere speculation makes one give him a hearing. He complains:

My objection to the traditional Protestant treatment of general revelation is that it overlooks the Melchizedek factor and places all or most of its emphasis on the negative side of the ledger. It is time to remember that Melchizedek worshiped the true God before Abraham met him, and that Jethro, a Midianite priest, knew God and even instructed

Moses before learning of Israel’s commission. God is known throughout the whole world on account of his mighty acts in creation (Ps. 104). The supreme revelation in Christ is not the sole revelation of God.<sup>12</sup>

The question is – How far does the Bible enable us to go? Is it proper to build a theology purely on Old Testament precedents? Pinnock is himself careful to observe that it is possible to let this insight get out of hand. He states – “Although it would be reasonable to call Jethro a pre-Christian believer, it would not be accurate or helpful to call him an anonymous Christian. The evidence does not allow us to say that Jethro enjoyed the benefits that are ours from knowing Christ and had no need of ever meeting Christ in a fulfilled relationship.”<sup>13</sup>

Pinnock, it must be clarified, is only concerned for those with no opportunity to encounter Christ for no fault of their own. He is not arguing for salvation to be generally available outside of Jesus Christ. However, in doing so he provides some insights – “If God desires to save sinners, and if sinners have responded positively to the light they have, then it follows that at some point in the future the opportunity to encounter Christ will present itself.”<sup>14</sup>

Jesus seems to stress the element of surprise when discussing the subject, as though the unexpected is what can be expected. Naturally this works both ways. It rebukes the hardliners for insisting that they already know how God will treat all the unevangelized, and it warns us all against speculating. Nevertheless, the way Jesus showed mercy, Pinnock thinks, suggests “that the element of surprise is likely to work in favor of the marginalized, in this case the unevangelized — the neediest of all – rather than work against them.”<sup>15</sup> God will surely condemn his enemies, but will he condemn those who did not know the truth and reject it but rather never knew it at all?

Although it is clear that Pinnock is not talking about a “second chance” to those who have willfully rejected Christ, some

would still be unwilling to consider these suggestions. No matter what our stand, we will need to accept that it is best to avoid categorical conclusions made with limited treatment of isolated texts. The deliberate silence in the biblical records on some matters ought to be emphasised even more in order to restore some of the mystery of the transcendent God. Our preoccupation with majoring on the minors has robbed some of the significance of both the transcendence of God as well as his gracious dealings with humankind.

We have been guilty of dwelling far too much on some questions which take away from God's prerogative. For instance, Newbigin responds to the question – What happens to the non-Christian after death? This is the wrong question, he affirms, and as long as it remains the central question we shall never come to the truth. He offers three suggestions, briefly noted here. First, he says, "it is a question to which only God has the right to give an answer." Second, by concentrating on what happens to the soul after death we are only dealing with an abstraction. Third, and the most fundamental reason for Newbigin — "the question starts with the individual and his or her need...of ultimate happiness, and not with God and his glory." <sup>16</sup>

Newbigin's stress is needed, particularly when mission is tending to become more and more a matter of human manipulation. If God does want to save those who have not had an opportunity within their lifetime it does not make him anything less than the God the Bible reveals. There are some facts that come through with certainty and we can build certain claims on these grounds. However there are other areas that we will need to tread with caution, only making tentative statements that will allow the final answers to God's omniscience. Pinnock himself is careful not to overstress the probability he entertains of an opportunity after death. He writes — "I do not think of it as a dogma enjoying the kind of biblical certainty the deity of Christ, for example, enjoys, but only as a

broad hint from the Lord that he will do what our hearts long for him to do." <sup>17</sup>

We do well not to reject Pinnock's suggestions without adequately understanding his burden. He clearly wants to avoid any theological speculation that will completely discard our claims but wants to question our own presumptions. He clearly avoids universalism, and states – "... this is out of the question. Far too many judgment texts depict the destruction of the wicked to allow any such wishful thinking. All that I feel justified in concluding is that everyone will have an opportunity to be saved so that the possibility of salvation is universally accessible. Scripture permits no more." <sup>18</sup> Clearly, he is not sacrificing the finality of Jesus Christ.

#### **WHO WILL GO TO HELL?**

Although we hear very little hell-and-damnation in today's evangelistic messages, the question still hits us hard – Will all those who do not receive Christ go to hell?. In a stimulating dialogue with David Edwards, a prominent British liberal Anglican, veteran Evangelical John Stott, examines the question – "Who will go to hell?" He discusses the question of the destiny of those who had never heard of Christ, and so have never had a reasonable opportunity to respond to him.

Stott offers four suggestions. His first three affirmations are undeniably conservative Evangelical. First, all human beings are 'Hell-deserving' sinners.<sup>19</sup> Although "an absurdly antiquated truth," Stott believes it is sober truth. Second, human beings cannot save themselves and so it is God who saves those who respond to him.<sup>20</sup> Third, Jesus Christ is the only Saviour and hence those outside of Jesus will go to hell. Having dealt with these affirmations, acceptable to all Evangelicals, he grapples with suggestions that lead to a "precarious area of wondering and speculating". He states —

Speaking now for myself ... I believe the most Christian stance is to remain agnostic on this question. When some-

body asked Jesus, 'Lord, are only a few people going to be saved?' he refused to answer and instead urged them 'to enter through the narrow door' (Luke 13:23-24). The fact is that God, alongside the most solemn warnings about our responsibility to respond to the gospel, has not revealed how he will deal with those who have never heard it. We have to leave them in the hands of the God of infinite mercy and justice, who manifested these qualities, most fully in the cross. Abraham's question, 'will not the Judge of all the earth do right?' (Genesis 18:25) is our confidence too.<sup>21</sup>

The popular evangelical belief has been that the majority will be lost and condemned to hell. The universalist will take the other extreme and conclude that all will be saved. Stott wants to make sure he is not mistaken to be a universalist. But he confesses that he has never been able to conjure up the appalling vision of the millions who are not only perishing but will inevitably perish. Between these extremes he cherishes the hope that the majority of the human race will be saved. And for this he believes there is biblical basis.

True, Jesus said that those who find the narrow road that leads to life were 'few' (was he referring to the little remnant of his own day within the nation of Israel?) But we need to remember that God is the Creator of all humankind, and remains infinitely loving, patient and compassionate towards all whom he has made. He is also everybody's 'Father', both in the sense that they 'live and move and have their being' in him, deriving the richness of their human life from his generosity (Acts 17:25-28), and in the sense that he continues to yearn for his lost children, as in the parable of the prodigal son. (It is the intimacy of a father-child relationship, which according to the New Testament is given only to those whom God has reconciled to himself through Jesus Christ.)<sup>22</sup>

God's desire is for universal salvation, Stott reminds us, pointing to some of the well-used texts for this claim. For instance, we are reminded that God does not want anybody to perish but wants everybody to be saved (2 Peter 3:9; 1 Timothy 2:4). Even...

...Jesus expressed his compassion for society's outcasts (the 'publicans and sinners' and the prostitutes), refused to reject them, but deliberately made friends with them; that his own forecast was that 'many' would come from the four points of the compass and the four corners of the earth to join the Jewish patriarchs in God's kingdom (Luke 13:29); and that the final vision of the redeemed in the Book of Revelation is of 'a great multitude that no-one could count' (7:9), "a huge international throng, in whom God's promise to Abraham will at last be fulfilled."<sup>23</sup>

God's desire is for many to be saved, and we should have no problem accepting this fact. We have already stressed the universality of the Gospel and the love which motivates God to make this gospel available to all humankind. But we will have to reconcile even this kind of universality with the scandal of particularity. There is the sobering reality of the lost and we feel they must be saved. But the question is: If not all, how many? Stott's honesty is admirable and he thinks that many will be saved, but confesses — I remain agnostic about how God will bring it to pass.

The discussion has been stimulating as well as sobering. We have considered cautions from Newbigin, Pinnock and Stott, and have been challenged to avoid any categorical conclusions so characteristic of the exclusivistic hermeneutic. Let us sum up a few observations to assist in discussing the issues further.

First, Newbigin's reminder that the question is for God to answer is to be heavily underlined. While we claim the Bible declares the revelation of God in Jesus Christ, we will simultaneously need to admit that we do not know everything about God and his will. Paul burdened with his desire for the conversion of Israel humbly concluded - "Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counselor?" We will need to be cautioned about our own judgmental attitudes. It is God who will judge.

Second, there is no firm biblical evidence that God has closed the door completely for those who do not have an opportunity to encounter Christ in their lifetime. Pinnock's proposal is a useful reminder, and based on the limited biblical evidence available, the possibility of an encounter after death does not seem to be outside of the plan of God. Given the brevity of life, such a possibility would be in keeping with God's compassion for his creation.

Third, there are some issues within our pluralistic predicament that are better left alone without the "iron-clad certainty" that can cause more damage than has already been done. Stott's "agnosticism" is a humble reminder that as long as we have clearly affirmed the known parameters necessary for our relationship to God and our mission, there are some unknowns that could be left unanswered.

Fourth, Newbigin's necessary caution about us dealing with an "abstraction" needs to get us in touch with the realities of our mission now. The over-academising of theology to the extent that it only faintly relates to the realities we confront is a luxury we cannot afford. There are concrete situations we confront and our response needs to be with a correspondingly concrete involvement. We need a heart that longs for the salvation of those we meet now in flesh and blood, rather than confound our mission with a fruitless concern for the salvation of those we will never meet.

Fifth, it is God's prerogative to save, not ours. Our preoccupation with criteria for salvation has led us to static claims rather than the dynamism of the God and his relationship to the created world. If God has created the world, he is certainly concerned for its redemption. How this will be accomplished has been revealed to us to a certain extent in the Biblical accounts of God's dealings with his people. But beyond that are the questions that are for God to answer.

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## FURTHER READING

### *Shurmal Das – An Indian Example*

There is an intriguing episode from Gujarat that can add a contextual dimension to God's dealings with men and women directly. Shurmal Das during the latter part of the nineteenth century was a charismatic leader of a large sect known for its lusty singing of *bhajans* - worship songs. Many of these *bhajans* were filled with prophesies of the future, including some about a coming sinless incarnation. Prior to his death he called his disciples together and foretold of a famine and many facts about the coming of missionaries who would teach about the sinless, invisible God.

Sava was one of Shurmal Das' disciples. In the famine that came about as had been predicted, his own son died. And just before dying, the little boy, having been influenced by his mission school education, urged his family to become Christians. Sava was ready but needed to be convinced. An Indian pastor, Luxman Hurry, father of a well-known political leader Violet Alva, arrived. A three day discussion followed, and at the end the group was convinced that Jesus Christ was the one that they had been awaiting ever since the prophecy of their revered leader. Sava became their new leader, and changed his name to Sat Guru Das and along with twenty two others was baptised in 1901.

God truly must be seen to act in ways and means that are beyond what we may prescribe, for the Holy Spirit is able to take the Gospel of Jesus Christ where the church cannot. The universality of God's revelation will have to find expression in many other ways than in the case of Shurmal Das and we must be willing for some surprises. Just as in Cornelius' case, Shurmal's prophesy pointed to Jesus Christ. God's dealings with his world cannot be at the expense of ignoring his chosen community, particularly so powerfully presented in the doctrine of election.

We have made it clear that the universality of God's revelation does not imply an equal and universal validity of all means of salvation. It is a universal availability through a God whose activity is universal. To be truly universal this activity must be noticeable even outside of the Church, and this on the biblical grounds of his being Lord of heaven and earth. But God by so doing will not bypass Jesus Christ. Many Christians may hesitate to acknowledge this kind of universal activity of God, but there is sufficient biblical justification for this unpredictable outworking of God through the Holy Spirit. I am concerned that while we enthusiastically claim the universal Lordship of the biblical God, we are still struggling to recognize the infinite implications of this assertion. We will need to humbly accept that God moves in mysterious ways his wonders to perform.

### QUESTIONS FOR STUDY

1. What is your response to Newbigin's position?
2. Are Pinnock's arguments biblically based? If so, what conclusions do you draw for the evangelistic task today? If not, what correctives do you offer.
3. Is the concept of hell and judgment tenable today? State your case.

17.Noel and Wells. op cit p 166

18. ibid.

19. Edwards, L. David and Stott, John. *Essentials*, Hodder and Stoughton, London, 1988, p 321

20. ibid., p 323

21. ibid., p 327

22. ibid., p327f

23. ibid., p328

### END NOTES

1. Newbigin, Lesslie, *The Gospel in a Pluralistic Society*, London, SPCK, 1989 p 173

2. p 175

3. p 179

4. p 175f

5. ibid

6. Pinnock, Clark H ., *A Wideness in God's Mercy - The Finality of Jesus Christ in a World of Religions*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, 1992, P 149.

7. ibid., p 13

8. Noel Mark A and Wells, David F Christian, *Faith and Practice in the Modern World*, Michigan:. Eerdmans Publisher Co. 1988, p 154

9. ibid., p 157

10. ibid., p 164

11. ibid., p 163

12. ibid., p 159

13. ibid., p 165

14. ibid., p 163

15. ibid. p 166

16. Newbigin, op. cit., p 177f

## Chapter VII

# TOWARDS A THEOLOGY OF RELIGIONS

*As we conclude our discussion we briefly touch upon the concept of religion and begin to develop a theology of religion. There are some propositions to help in developing a biblically based theology of religions. You will be encouraged to address your own context as you think through the issues raised.*

Amid all the atrocities in the name of religion - terrorism and extremist expressions on the one side and bizarre manifestations and cults on the other, religion is still that which will give meaning and direction to the world. The Islamic fundamentalists and their attacks in the US have sent shock waves all over. As a result there is growing hunger for knowledge of other religions just to find out what others believe.

Pluralists ask - Can we not bring all religions together? There is to a certain extent a consensus among pluralists, with their claim that all religions seek one Ultimate Being. However, even a staunch pluralist like Paul Knitter, gave up the idea in exchange for a plea for "well-being". In his book "No Other Name" written in 1985 he had proposed a non-normative theocentric approach to dialogue, but ten years later in his book "One Earth Many Religions" it was a sobering reminder.

I was seeking a dialogue in which God and not the church or Jesus, would be in the centre, and in which Christians would no longer insist that they have the only or the final norm for all religious truth; let all religious people come

together on the basis of their different experiences of the one Ultimate Reality or Go. Having been shaken by the voices of suffering and by the voices of theological critics both from within the Christian community and the academy, I would like to now plot the course... of what is called the "multi-normed soteriocentric (salvation-centered) approach to dialogue based on the common ground of global responsibility for eco-human wellbeing."<sup>1</sup>

The burden is clearly only to bring religious people together and not to unify common truth claims. This is urgently needed. Can we not come together without surrendering our deep-rooted affirmations? If God is creator of all, then there ought to be a common plane on which we can interact in love and concern. Such a coming together could be for peace, for justice, for environmental concerns, even political involvement for the welfare of the world. Religions corrupted by sin, even Christianity, cannot be harmonized, but people can live in harmony. Each religion makes its own distinctive truth claim, often conflicting with other claims, will only clash when brought together; but people can agree on other focal points of life and well-being.

### **IS OUR UNDERSTANDING OF GOD A STARTING POINT?**

Our multi-faith context today frequently confronts us with the question - Is the God of the Christian, the Muslim, the Hindu or whoever the same? Even more specifically, one is often asked - "Is the God of the Christian, Muslim and the Jew the same, as they all draw from the Old Testament? Questions like this recall lectures from comparative religion courses, which will not find too much appreciation today. What good will it do to find out the similarities and the divergences of these understandings. On the other hand, what a good launching point it is just to be able to start positively with a common concept of God and then lead to a deeper appreciation of the personal God that we would like to communicate.

Lesslie Newbigin speaking from his own rich missionary experience amongst Hindus provides some insights into an

understanding of God in encounters between non-Christian religions and the Gospel. Every missionary knows that it is impossible to communicate the gospel without acknowledging in practice that there is "some continuity between the gospel and the experience of the hearer outside the Christian Church." He elaborates:

One cannot preach the gospel without using the word "God". If one is talking to a person of a non-Christian religion, one is bound to use one of the words in her language, which is used to denote God. But the content of that word has necessarily been formed by his experience outside the Church. By using the word, the preacher is taking the non-Christian experience of the hearer as the starting point. Without this there is no way of communicating. This fact by itself does not refute the position we are considering but it makes it impossible to affirm a total discontinuity between Christian faith and the religions. And anyone who has had intimate friendship with a devout Hindu or Muslim would find it impossible to believe that the experience of God of which his friend speaks is simply illusion or fraud.<sup>2</sup>

In communicating the Gospel, we are bound to use some common language, common concepts, even address one another being worshippers of God. Paul's oft-quoted message on Mars Hill starts with a very positive introduction... "I perceive that in every way you are very religious," (Acts 17 v22). He had definitely observed several things that brought him to this conclusion, chief among them being the altar to 'the unknown God'. The continuity that Paul establishes is definitely not merely a preacher's ploy but a fact that needs to be looked at for lessons for our proclamation today. Just like the "faith" that Jesus was able to positively commend in the life of the Gentile centurion, Paul is able to commend their worship, even though this is to an unknown God rather than some known manifestation.

Behind Paul's commendation is the fact that the Athenian has a sincere desire to worship the true God even though sur-

rounded by the material manifestations in the form of idols. Interestingly, he has earlier been “greatly distressed” by these. 9v 16). Christians in India, meeting men and women who truly desire to worship the true God but who still linger within idolatry, face this situation. We discern a longing for God. The understanding of God and salvation are different, but the desire is the same.

Paul has no problem accepting the Athenian sincerity and building on their understanding, or lack of understanding of God in order to present the reality of Jesus Christ. We should not be surprised to find common elements. Missionaries who have worked with primitive peoples, sometimes with even more developed religions, have discerned parallels that are striking. These relate to the character of God, the understanding of salvation, the responses of awe in worship and so on. There is always some continuity between other faiths and Christianity. Many could add their own experiences with numerous such parallels in Asia and Africa.

Therefore, drawing from Paul, we can conclude that there is no justification for any outright condemnation of the religiosity of human beings and their understanding of God and related concepts. Even amid all the perversion that is externally apparent, there is a sincere search for the true God, a search that God himself can utilise for his glory. Just like these Greeks, there are many Hindus who search for the unknown beyond the known, the truth beyond all the falsehood, the light beyond the darkness. Rather than drawing out the differences, it is best to build on commonalities.

### **IS THERE A COMMON GROUND?**

What then? Is there common ground for religion and for religious experiences? With the arguments above, we have to answer that there is. Religion is not merely a matter of external non-essentials that popularly are considered to make up the phenomenon, but the very essence that holds together the fabric of society. Those who live in Islamic and Hindu contexts

will testify to the overwhelming influence of religion on their lives. The Hindu will say - Hinduism is not a religion but a life style. Christians within these contexts have assimilated various elements into their expression, whether language or worship style, without in any way feeling they have deprived their faith of its distinctive quality. There is an underlying distinctive that is unchanged, but the externals may vary.

What is this essence? For Emile Durkheim, the influential sociologist, the essence of religion was the sense of the sacred. Sociologists, anthropologists and theologians of religion will underline some unifying factor behind all religious expressions. Our question is – What is the contributing factor behind this unifying essence? Further, and even more importantly, we need to ask why there is such a common integrating factor, particularly if we consider the fact of humanity being such a diversity of peoples, with a staggering plurality of cultural and religious contexts.

There have been at least two levels at which such a theological study has been considered and we will need to differentiate these, for the sake of clarity. The historian Arnold Toynbee had made quite an attempt to show that all religions have one common essence and move towards a common goal. Taking the study from the viewpoint of a historian, he carefully studied various aspects of the major religions and came up with the idea of a “spiritual essence” — despite all their external differences, religions possess the same essence. He accepted that differences in the externals, the “non-essentials,” were really superficial. But Toynbee’s search was superficial, wanting to prove a commonality, although this was made by searching for the underlying essence.<sup>3</sup>

On another level, an even deeper one, it may be possible for us to find a starting point in the approach of W. Cantwell Smith. Smith pleads for us to drop the word religion, because “the only effective significance that can reasonably be attributed to this term is that of ‘religiousness’, but for this generic

term other words are available — we could rehabilitate perhaps the venerable term ‘piety’.”<sup>4</sup> He accepts that the adjective “religious” could be retained, as “living religiously” is an attribute that does not necessarily have to do with some entity called ‘religion’ but some reference to “transcendence.”<sup>5</sup> Smith prefers adjectives to nouns, seeking to build the needed bridge between religious communities on that which is common rather than distinctive or unique.

Cantwell Smith rightly suggests that “fundamentally one has to do not with religion, but with religious persons.”<sup>6</sup> This is important for us to underline. Within pluralistic pressures, to play one religion against another, purely on fundamental distinctives rather than on the even more basic issues of people in their contexts and in their relationship to God, will only aggravate tensions. Is it really possible for a fundamentalist Muslim to live in harmony alongside a loyal Christian or even a Hindu? Our threatened context today increasingly proves that it is not possible. But, there is a good possibility of peace between religious *people*.

Smith seeking to discover a “new conceptual apparatus or theoretical framework” rather than those currently available, proposes that “what men have tended to conceive as religion... can more rewardingly, more truly, be conceived in terms of two factors, different in kind, both dynamic: an historical ‘cumulative’ tradition’, and the personal ‘faith’ of men and women.”<sup>7</sup> In a more recent essay he suggests a further component element — “community.”<sup>8</sup>

Smith along with pluralists accepts that “faith” behind all the religions is common, as “there is no generic Christian faith; no ‘Buddhist faith’, no ‘Hindu faith’, no ‘Jewish faith’.” There is only “my faith and yours.”<sup>9</sup> There is not even such thing as “ideal faith” as “the ideal towards which I move is not an ideal of my own faith but is God himself...” This is “my present awareness of eternity.”<sup>10</sup> He goes further, for even this faith is not the fundamental common element for Christian, Muslim

and all else. “...what they have in common lies not in tradition that introduces them to transcendence, not in their faith by which they personally respond, but in that to which they respond, the transcendent itself.”<sup>11</sup>

## IS THERE A FUNDAMENTAL UNITY?

Our religious context in ferment calls for action. We need to look afresh at the Biblical texts for such a commonness, one that will bring us back to a real relationship to our world within which the incarnated Jesus himself identified. Merely distancing ourselves through our exclusive attitudes will take us no further than where we are.

Is there an underlying fundamental factor that lies behind the reality of religion? Smith’s ‘religiousness,’ speaks too much of external attributes. We look for a common characteristic expressing a concrete commonality that is even deeper than religiousness. The term “religionness” could more precisely describe this factor. It is not merely the feeling or the expression but that deeper something which makes men and women feel and express their religion. It is the factor, which is inescapably part of humankind in their being essentially and inextricably a part of God’s creation. In this sense, religion is not post-fall, as some would claim, but pre-fall, an essential element that belongs to our creationality. If religion is not the acceptable term, then we should not be speaking of religion-ness but perhaps god-ness ‘or even’ creation-ness. Whatever it is, there ought to be some sense in which “religion” can actually be true to one of its implications in its Latin root – “a binding together”.

The biblical starting point for all we do in theology must be the creative act of God, particularly as we confront plurality in a variety of forms,. For it is “since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities - his eternal power and divine nature — have been clearly seen from what has been made...”(Rom 1.20). Paul’s emphasis is on that which is known about God himself. This preparatory revelation made available to the whole world must essentially link us with all men

and women rather than separate us from a world to which we integrally belong. The fact that people are made in the image of God must invest them with a capacity to know God, although their sin hinders them from fully recognizing him and receiving the redemptive benefits of this knowledge. There is very little ground for us to say that sin completely eliminates the knowledge of God.

What we have seen Cantwell Smith point us to is that there is something behind religious traditions, communities and their faith — a direction towards God, or the transcendent which is inherent in every creature. “The end of religion, in the classical sense of its purpose and goal, that to which it points and may lead, is God,” Smith states.<sup>12</sup> Religious traditions, even religions themselves may be filled with error, human and demonic influences, but there is an essential core behind with a direction towards the divine. That is the common element that we need to discover. The treatment of religions phenomenologically as independent units cannot be disputed, but to emphasise a discontinuity with no fundamental grounds for commonality is to discredit the biblical account of God’s creative act, as well as his Lordship encompassing the totality of humanity and its physical environment.

As a theologian wanting to base his conclusions on the facts revealed in the Bible, I therefore find no problem in accepting that there ought to be some commonness that could be found in all religions. Take for instance, prayer and meditation. Are these not characteristic of all religions? With our Western orientation, we sometimes dismiss meditation as Hindu or Buddhist. Awe and worship are natural responses to the pressure of the divine on all human beings. Sacrifice has not been purely a Jewish religious act. There are even supernatural manifestations like healing, prophesying and other gifts that are found in other religious practices. Perhaps these acts are wrongly directed, perverted at times, even demonic, but their lingering presence tells us something. If we are committed to the fact that God is Creator, we will need to accept a grounding from

which many of the religious, social and cultural manifestations find their root.

The concept of the image of God, which is the possession of every creature of God, will provide an even greater case for commonality. This investment of God in humanity must certainly be an obvious integrating factor. Although the possession of each person individually, the fact must collectively express itself in community in their relationship to one another and in their direction towards God. Being created by God itself presupposes that human beings are capable of responding to “the pressure of the Ultimate Reality on their Spirit.”<sup>13</sup> On the other hand, being in the image of God must also presuppose the fact that humanity is capable of choosing its own direction and making its own gods.

Even more importantly, there ought to be some commonality in our understanding of God himself. The Apostle Paul seems to have no problem with this fact as we have noted (Acts 17). It is very instructive to note that early Hinduism as known from the Rig-Veda pointed to monotheism rather than the polytheism we so often associate with this religion. Therefore, monotheism rather than being an evolution of the Hindu concept of God is the original understanding with which people approached the pressure of the divine.

This must imply one of two things. Either, there was an exchange of the thoughts and ideas pertaining to God, as men and women traveled around, and therefore there is commonness reflected in the various scriptures. Or else, there is some form of general revelation from which all people draw their understanding of God. I am convinced that it is the latter that the biblical teaching points towards. It is on such grounds that the “Vedic Theology” of K.M Bannerjee<sup>14</sup> developed the concept of a “cosmic religion” from which the Aryan and the Jewish religions originated. We may not accept all the details of such propositions, but there is an inescapable reality, a biblical fact that we perhaps have not considered seriously enough.

## SOME PROPOSITIONS FOR A THEOLOGY OF RELIGIONS

In summary of our discussion, I offer seven propositions that will assist us in writing a theology of religion appropriate to our context, yet true to the Biblical claims.

1. A theology of religions will need to begin with a commitment to God as Creator of heaven and earth. This commitment will ascertain that we consider the widest circle of God's dealings with humankind, accepting all men and women as made in the image of God. There is therefore an inherent spirituality in all humankind.

2. Although all humankind is the creation of God and therefore belongs to God, the Bible clearly underlines the influence of Satan and his forces within all creation. Hence, all "spiritual" activity is not necessarily of God. There is sufficient evidence, directly and indirectly, to reveal the work of Satan drawing men and women away from God.

3. The Bible depicts men and women as sinful and fallen. Subsequently, they have been distanced from God. Yet, in the fact of their being made in the image of God, there is within them a direction towards God. There is within every human being this inherent 'religionness' that gifts them with the capacity to know God. It is this religionness that leads to religion. In this sense, religion is a necessity, being a pre-fall reality. We do not mean that religion is necessarily good. Being created by God, the pressure of the divine impels all humanity to get back to the creator. However, men and women being made in the image of God are also capable of setting their own direction.

4. Since religion is a consequence of the religionness of humankind directing them towards God, God has revealed himself in a limited way in all religions. Whether this is to be seen as "general" or "preparatory" revelation, God is active even in religions, not in order to transform them, but to convict and to draw men and women into a true relationship with himself.

The Holy Spirit is active, convicting men and women of their sin and revealing the truth and grace of the Lord Jesus Christ.

5. Although we may speak of God revealing himself to religious people even outside of Jesus Christ, this revelation does not directly bring salvation. It points towards, even leads towards salvation. It has pre-salvific significance, preparing people to accept the grace and truth of God. A person or a community may genuinely experience the revelation of God outside of Jesus Christ, but the test of its genuineness is that the Holy Spirit will lead the individual or the community to an encounter with the Lord Jesus Christ, through whom alone salvation is available for all who believe.

6. There is therefore continuity between the religionness of humankind and the revelation of God in Jesus Christ. This is not the same continuity as in the case of the Israel's history and its fulfillment in Jesus Christ. It is purely the continuity based on our creationality, from which people can be drawn further towards an experience of new creationality in Christ. Evangelism and dialogue based on this continuity will be a more positive involvement in the lives of men and women searching for God in many different directions.

7. There is only one decisive revelation of God available to all the world, and that is his revelation through the Lord Jesus Christ. Although this final revelation has already been made known to us in the historic event of Jesus' life, death and resurrection, the world is yet to fully come face to face with God's grace and justice in his ultimate triumph at the climax of history.

### QUESTIONS FOR STUDY

1. What common elements do you accept in religions?
2. What foundations would you see necessary for a biblical theology of religions?
3. Write a brief note on the centrality of Jesus Christ for your theology?

### END NOTES

1. Knitter, Paul, *One Earth, Many Religions, Multifaith Responsibility & Global Welfare*, Orbis, 1995, p17.
2. Newbigin, Lesslie, *The Gospel in a Pluralistic Society*, op.cit. p 173.
3. Toynbee, Arnold, *An Historian's Approach to Religions*, N.Y. OUP, 1956.
4. Smith, William Cantwell, *The Meaning & End of Religions*, USA, Mentor Books, 1962, p 175.
5. *ibid.*, p 176
- 6, *ibid.*, p 138
7. *ibid.*, p 175
8. Smith, op.cit., p 172
9. *ibid.*, p 173
10. *ibid.*
11. *ibid.*, p 181
12. Thomas M.M., *Risking Christ for Christ's Sake*, Geneva, WCC 1987, p 8
13. See. K. Baago, *Pioneers of Indegenous Theology*, CLS Madras, 1969 (pp 89-103); Robin Boyd, *Indian Christian Theology*, ISPCK, 1971, p. 280 ff.

## Chapter VIII

### FACING OUR CONTEXT TODAY

*In this final chapter you will be encouraged to consider how best to communicate Christ within today's context. Some recent challenges will be addressed in order to help us take a stand that will be true to the Bible and relevant to the context.*

The religious situation all over the world demands urgent attention. Other religions are making their own claims while challenging the claims of Christianity. Some Christians are carefully adapting to the context today, but others continue with outdated styles that provoke the wrath of the hearers of the message rather than endearing them to Jesus Christ. We do not need to compromise our biblical claims. For one thing, why should we, when others are being just as dogmatic about their claims. But what we need is sensitivity to harmonise these claims with the spirit of love that Jesus Christ would have us demonstrate.

The resurgence of religions is certainly taking us to frightening extremities. Peace is being threatened. Hans Kung, the prominent Roman Catholic theologian suggests that there will not be world peace unless there is religious peace. He notes a significant connection between ecumenism and world peace.

Anyone who feels a sense of obligation toward the world community who takes seriously the fragility of all human arrangements, who has glimpsed all the possibilities of technical and human error, must know what is at stake here. He must know that the threats to peace and the need to regulate it have long since burst through the dimension

of specific, regional conflict, and have become global political problems, on which the survival of us all depends. The alternative is peace in the ecumene (inhabited world) or destruction of the ecumene itself.<sup>1</sup>

The Indian Christian community faces an unprecedented attack from fundamentalist and militant sections within the Hindu community. The tolerant Hindu is still the majority, but it takes just a handful to cause panic. Whether it was the dastardly burning to death of the Australian missionary Graham Staines and his two young sons, or the destroying of small churches in various parts of India, the media and political circles have widely publicised these blatant blows on Christians. More recent clashes have served to shake the Christian community out of its complacency.

Religious extremists have terrorized the whole world into a state of panic. Whether it be the Islamic fundamentalists or the extremist Hindu Bajrang Dal activists (see note on Hindutva below), there is a wave of mindless violence in the name of religion. It is the inexplicable phenomenon that finds fulfillment in the kind of religion that sees no evil in destruction, or even sees value in unworthy causes that only harm masses of innocent men and women. Any religion that sanctions heinous crimes against humanity is to be shunned.

Islamic fanatics? Yes, we may say! Hindu fundamentalists? O yes, we would affirm! But what an irony that the very same people to whom Jesus' message of love came, are the people continuing in increasing brutality. The Arab-Jew conflict is of deep significance to us Christians. Why is it that these religions (and Islam) that have their foundation in Biblical roots are the very ones that are breeding intolerance and degenerating into savagery? It is therefore necessary for us to get back to the Bible for answers.

#### **MUST EVANGELISM CONTINUE?**

The visit of Pope John Paul II to India in 1999 was much publicised in the light of the ongoing attacks by Hindu funda-

mentalists on the Christian community. After a yearlong intensifying of the tension with attacks on the activities of Christian "missionaries", anything was expected. The much-awaited visit went smoothly. At the end of his visit the Pope chose to respond to some sensitive issues, amongst which was the question - Will the Church continue its conversion and evangelistic activities? A gist of his response - "The Church cannot exist without evangelism. This is central to its life. But we are not here to force conversions. Conversion is an individual response."

Interestingly, even the RSS chief in a personal interview affirmed - Genuine conversions cannot be questioned. (See note on RSS in Hindutva below) It is mass conversions, conversions only in name that are the problem. Rightly said. Our task is the proclamation of the evangel. It is God through his Spirit who works in the hearts of men and women to bring change. We need to review what we mean by evangelism. Evangelism is not conversion, particularly if conversions are sought for at any price provided our church is growing. Evangelism is not even preaching, particularly the kind of preaching in public that has only provoked the hearer. Have we confused the message with our methods? Hard-sell pressurized forms of evangelism will only invite more opposition.

In India, we have recently read much about the "dalits" and their conversions to Buddhism, Islam and Christianity. The dalits, literally oppressed or downtrodden, have been condemned to be outcasts in the country's caste system. Deprived of many basic privileges that the members of the four castes can claim, these masses have been groveling under Hindu dominance for centuries. Being led by various "saviors" into conversion events, "mass conversion" has become an issue for the Indian church once again. With an estimated 150 million dalits, there are millions who are knocking on the doors of the Indian church. We must approach this phenomenon cautiously rather than rush in with an eye only on numbers. For one thing, the dalits come with social and political aspirations. Can we

meet their demands? And apart from this there is the nagging question – Is this really spiritual transformation. But the response is not in a distancing of ourselves. Evangelisation, in its broadest form, must here become the educating and developing of these men and women to levels of dignity they have lacked. Gospel values must be imparted. I am not even talking about pre-evangelism. Christians must invest in all kinds of development programmes out of genuine Christ-like love for the needy in their neighborhoods. Genuine seekers will flock to the church when they see that it is there that they will fully discover love, dignity and identity.

The Gospel – the *dunamis* of God - is something dynamic and not static. It evolves into newer and newer forms according to the needs of the hour. Historically, there was a time for a worldwide missionary movement which freely took the message of Jesus Christ all over the world. There were mass movements. There were some remarkable individual conversions. The global Christian community is what it is today primarily because of the sacrificial commitment of thousands of men and women, “missionaries” who even gave their lives for the Gospel. But the dynamic message grows into addressing newer contexts in newer ways. The content remains the same; the outcomes are the same, but the packaging varies.

Although only the negatives of the colonial mission are highlighted, not many will deny the powerful impact the Gospel has made, in Asia, Africa and Latin America. M.M Thomas’ Christ-centered syncretism underlines the transformation that has come to India because of the Christian influence. More recently, Vishal Mangalwadi, a writer argues that it is Christians and no one else who are responsible for India’s development.<sup>2</sup> We may not agree with all that Thomas and others say, but the truth remains that in many parts of the world it is the Christian message that has brought true transformation.

All this happened when missionaries crossed fierce and formidable barriers to take the message of Christ’s compas-

sion to people in need. The results speak for themselves. But, the older kind of mission must give way to newer forms of mission today. We need mission from people within their own cultures making the Gospel known to their own people. People understand their own people and can communicate to them with a lot more ease than an outsider.

The older era of mission was *cross-cultural*. Some are convinced the cross-cultural mission is the only expression of the Church in mission and hence have not seen the wideness of God’s plans for the world today. There will continue to be a need for cross-cultural mission, but more will be done in the next decades through *intra-cultural* expressions of the church and its mission within each peculiar cultural context. These expressions will need to be far more than evangelism in the sense of converting people. The proclamation of the Gospel will be through word and deed in genuine expressions of the love of Jesus Christ for the world we live in.

We have concentrated on what we call the Great Commission, but have given little attention to the Lord who showed us the Great Commandment. The life and ministry of the Christian is far more than merely preaching the Gospel. It is communicating the Gospel in all its power and love in works of service that will transform people and their contexts. Moreover, it is the kind of power that fits into varied contexts.

The Church must keep in touch with the times. There will need to be a sensitivity to know what to do at times like this, with pressures on the Church all over the world. The Church waits for a wider concept of mission that requires us to be involved in the world as real human beings, not just people with a message to share. It needs to be a message to live out in our pluralistic context. We may reject pluralism, but we live in a pluralistic context and that cannot be avoided. Our evangelistic methods went unquestioned in the colonial times, but today with a growing awareness of our pluralistic environment, we have to align our methods accordingly. A celebration of

our plurality will call for a need to live comfortably within diverse cultures and religions and yet live faithfully as disciples of Christ.

Our theology of evangelization will need to avoid the triumphalism of earlier theologies of mission, the arrogance that often accompanied a cultural sense of superiority, and the unwillingness to accept any significance in other religions and cultural systems. While there are non-negotiables and a givenness to the Gospel being God's revelation, there are non-essentials that will need to be reexamined to make our message receivable within present contexts. There will always be the offense of the cross but this must not be seen to involve offensiveness. There is a faith-exclusiveness to the gospel. But, this must not result in a relational-exclusivism that will distance us from our hearers.<sup>3</sup>

#### **WHAT CHANGE?**

While there is no need to discard our commitment to evangelism, we will need to realise the need to change the manner and style of our communication. Asian and African evangelists deliver their messages as if they are in North America. Dressed like their American counterparts, they do not even consider the need to alter the language used. Aggressive "crusades" are still conducted and warfare language liberally employed with no concern for the damage being done. There is a triumphalism reminiscent of the colonial days that continues in our thinking, praying and preaching that is unrealistic as well as unbiblical.

It is these insensitive approaches that have provoked the fundamentalists. We need to put ourselves into their shoes. How would we react if we thought we were called the "enemy" and hear that "the whole armour of God" was being employed to destroy us? Our language has sent wholly unintended messages. Some of our words represent our task in battlefield with the charge given for us to advance and attack.

Some hymns not only picture us in this warfare but also portray a totally negative image of the non-Christian as the "heathen" living in darkness.

We know it is Satan who is referred to as the enemy. But is this clear to the hearer? We live in a day when all what we say and do within the Church is being exposed outside, and most times conveniently misrepresented or even exaggerated. When countered with militant reactions we rationalise this to be the "stumbling block" or the "offence" of the cross. One will need to discern the difference between the sufferings we bring about because of our own negligence and those that come genuinely because of the cross.

The use of triumphalistic and aggressive language must be questioned. There was a time when even the battlefield language was effective. While such language is certainly biblical, even biblical words had their own contexts. Interestingly, today such language is quite prevalent in the business world rampant with fierce competition. But, for a message of love it is counterproductive with negative reactions. The cross will continue to be an offence. But much more than an offence, is not the cross love, peace, forgiveness and reconciliation? Do Christians not have a major role in bringing healing to the nations? Aren't Christians the best agents of communal harmony? Rather than separating ourselves, we must get integrated into a world of real people and make a Christlike impression.

Considering some of the challenges being faced by Christians worldwide, we must urgently identify crucial areas to be given attention. First is our communication of the claims of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Second is the need to build bridges and seek harmony with those who belong to other religious communities. Third is the need to underline the identity of Christianity within each local context. This not only means discarding outdated forms and methods but the developing of indigenous expressions of our faith in Jesus Christ. And finally, it is time for us to restore the image that the Christian

community has had for being a people truly committed to serving people for Christ's sake, and not merely for making them Christian "converts." The world still awaits the demonstration of a true and total Christlike impact, and the Church must respond.

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## FOR FURTHER STUDY

### *Hindutva*

Hindutva is the ideology of fundamentalist Hindu groups such as the RSS, VHP and Bajrang Dal. But who are these groups. The RSS - Rashtriya Swayamsevak Samaj (loosely translated as National corps of volunteers) started in 1925 at a time nationalist movements were rising up against the British colonial powers. Dr K B Hedgewar, a freedom fighter, launched the RSS with a commitment to establish a Hindu nation. In 1948 the organisation was banned, after one its members assassinated Mahatma Gandhi. The RSS leadership then gave birth to the VHP - Vishwa Hindu Parishad (the World Council of Hindus), the body involved in the recent Mosque/Temple conflict in Ayodhya (the birthplace of their God Ram) in North India. The two bodies continue in close association and share the common ideology of Hindutva. More recently, The Bajrang Dal was formed which has been responsible for the violent attacks all over the country. The BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party - Indian (Hindu) People's party) is the political arm of all these affiliate bodies.

The term "Hindutva" is derived from the two terms *Hindu* and *Tattva*, which literally mean "Hindu Principles". The followers of Hindutva would claim that Hinduism is a culture and not necessarily a religion. Two of these principles that symbolize the thought are - "This world is one family" (*Vasudaiva Kutumbakam*) and that "The Universal Reality is the same, but different people can call it by different names" (*Ekam Sat Viprah Bahuda Vadanti*). The proponents of this vision see a unification of everyone in India under a *Ram Rajya*, the kingdom of Ram.

Most Hindus, whether orthodox or liberal, do not endorse the 'Hindutva' strategy. Its rise and implementation has sparked off clashes in the whole country with an anti-Western, dogmatic, and sometimes violent cultural and religious assertions. Many secular Hindu thinkers and academicians even attack the BJP's election manifesto of 1998 which stated: "India is one country, one people, and one nation"(Note the 'hindutva' emphasis).

Hindutva followers devalue minority identities, and erase constitutionally guaranteed rights, in order to institute their ideology. As Neera Chandhoke writes in "Beyond Secularism"(Oxford 2000), "(Hindutva), as we can see, has serious implications not only for the multi-religious, multi-linguistic, and multi-ethnic nature of Indian society, but also for the cultural and religious rights that the Constitution has granted to the minorities. For somewhat worryingly, the concept easily slides into the legitimisation of the dominant culture and denial of other ways of life, as indeed it does in the formulation of hindutva".

### *Islamic Fundamentalism*

The governments of the USA and UK have attempted to qualify their harsh statements against Islam soon after the Sep 11 terrorist attacks. Islamic scholars too are wanting to show the other side of Islam. Read some clarifications of Islam in its stand against terrorism.

"Islam does not support terrorism under any circumstances. Terrorism goes against every principle in Islam. If a Muslim engages in terrorism, he is not following Islam. He may be wrongly using the name of Islam for political or financial gain." (USA Today)

"Muslims throughout their history never allowed the killing of civilians, even in the midst of wars such as the Crusades. There is no respected Islamic scholar here in Saudi Arabia or anywhere else in the Muslim world who would support such a *fatwa*." (*The Guardian - Khashoggi*)

"The Prophet also said that there are people who kill in the name of Islam and go to hell. And when he was asked why, he said, 'Because they weren't fighting truly for the sake of God.' (Hamza Yusuf)

"Muslims against Terrorism" requests the media not use phrases such as "Islamic Fundamentalists" or "Muslim Terrorists" regarding terrorist attacks "Because such things do not exist. Islam is the religion of peace, love and mutual respect. Islam is the religion of moderation. Islam is the religion of human value and dignity." They ask that religious affiliation not be mentioned in terrorist attacks. Terrorists associated with the September 11th disaster could be called "al Qaeda Terrorists" since their involvement has been proven according to US, British, and Pakistani officials. When the Ku Klux Klan claimed credit for terrorist attacks in the 1960's, they were not

identified by religion as “Christian Fundamentalists” or “Christian Terrorists.” Although they identified themselves as a Christian movement, media never labeled them as Christians because their terrorism was regarded as a basic violation of Christian principles. We owe the same respect to the Muslim religion. (Muslims Against Terrorism) Jihad “is an Arabic word the root of which is Jahada, which means to strive for a better way of life.” “Jihad should not be confused with Holy War. The latter does not exist in Islam nor will Islam allow its followers to be involved in a Holy War.”

“Not only in peace but also in war Islam prohibits terrorism, kidnapping, and hijacking, when carried against civilians. Whoever commits such violations is considered a murderer in Islam, and is to be punished by the Islamic State.” (Islamic Server of MSA-USC)

### ***Yes, This Is About Islam Salman Rushdie***

Writing in response to clarifications such as the above, this provoking article is from The New York Times.

LONDON — “This isn’t about Islam.” The world’s leaders have been repeating this mantra for weeks, partly in the virtuous hope of deterring reprisal attacks on innocent Muslims living in the West, partly because if the United States is to maintain its coalition against terror it can’t afford to suggest that Islam and terrorism are in any way related.

The trouble with this necessary disclaimer is that it isn’t true. If this isn’t about Islam, why the worldwide Muslim demonstrations in support of Osama bin Laden and Al Qaeda? Why did those 10,000 men armed with swords and axes mass on the Pakistan-Afghanistan frontier, answering some mullah’s call to jihad? Why are the war’s first British casualties three Muslim men who died fighting on the Taliban side?

Why the routine anti-Semitism of the much-repeated Islamic slander that “the Jews” arranged the hits on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, with the oddly self-deprecating explanation offered by the Taliban leadership, among others, that Muslims could not have the technological know-how or organizational sophistication to pull off such a feat? Why does Imran Khan, the Pakistani ex-sports star turned politician, demand to be shown the evidence of Al Qaeda’s guilt while apparently turning a deaf ear to the self-incriminating statements of Al Qaeda’s own spokesmen (there will be a rain of aircraft from the skies, Muslims in the West are warned not to live or work in tall buildings)? Why all the talk about American military infidels desecrating the sacred soil of Saudi Arabia if some sort of definition of what is sacred is not at the heart of the present discontents?

Of course this is “about Islam.” The question is, what exactly does that mean? After all, most religious belief isn’t very theological. Most Muslims

are not profound Koranic analysts. For a vast number of “believing” Muslim men, “Islam” stands, in a jumbled, half-examined way, not only for the fear of God — the fear more than the love, one suspects — but also for a cluster of customs, opinions and prejudices that include their dietary practices; the sequestration or near-sequestration of “their” women; the sermons delivered by their mullahs of choice; a loathing of modern society in general, riddled as it is with music, godlessness and sex; and a more particularized loathing (and fear) of the prospect that their own immediate surroundings could be taken over — “Westoxicated” — by the liberal Western-style way of life.

Highly motivated organizations of Muslim men (oh, for the voices of Muslim women to be heard!) have been engaged over the last 30 years or so in growing radical political movements out of this mulch of “belief.” These Islamists — we must get used to this word, “Islamists,” meaning those who are engaged upon such political projects, and learn to distinguish it from the more general and politically neutral “Muslim” — include the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, the blood-soaked combatants of the Islamic Salvation Front and Armed Islamic Group in Algeria, the Shiite revolutionaries of Iran, and the Taliban. Poverty is their great helper, and the fruit of their efforts is paranoia. This paranoid Islam, which blames outsiders, “infidels,” for all the ills of Muslim societies, and whose proposed remedy is the closing of those societies to the rival project of modernity, is presently the fastest growing version of Islam in the world.

This is not wholly to go along with Samuel Huntington’s thesis about the clash of civilizations, for the simple reason that the Islamists’ project is turned not only against the West and “the Jews,” but also against their fellow Islamists. Whatever the public rhetoric, there’s little love lost between the Taliban and Iranian regimes. Dissension’s between Muslim nations run at least as deep, if not deeper, than those nations’ resentment of the West. Nevertheless, it would be absurd to deny that this self-exculpatory, paranoiac Islam is an ideology with widespread appeal.

Twenty years ago, when I was writing a novel about power struggles in a fictionalized Pakistan, it was already de rigueur in the Muslim world to blame all its troubles on the West and, in particular, the United States. Then as now, some of these criticisms were well-founded; no room here to rehearse the geopolitics of the cold war and America’s frequently damaging foreign policy “tilts,” to use the Kissinger term, toward (or away from) this or that temporarily useful (or disapproved-of) nation-state, or America’s role in the installation and deposition of sundry unsavory leaders and regimes. But I wanted then to ask a question that is no less important now: Suppose we say that the ills of our societies are not primarily America’s fault, that we are to blame for our own failings? How would we understand them then?

Might we not, by accepting our own responsibility for our problems, begin to learn to solve them for ourselves?

Many Muslims, as well as secularist analysts with roots in the Muslim world, are beginning to ask such questions now. In recent weeks Muslim voices have everywhere been raised against the obscurantist hijacking of their religion. Yesterday's hotheads (among them Yusuf Islam, a k a Cat Stevens) are improbably repackaging themselves as today's pussycats.

An Iraqi writer quotes an earlier Iraqi satirist: "The disease that is in us, is from us." A British Muslim writes, "Islam has become its own enemy." A Lebanese friend, returning from Beirut, tells me that in the aftermath of the attacks on Sept. 11, public criticism of Islamism has become much more outspoken. Many commentators have spoken of the need for a Reformation in the Muslim world.

I'm reminded of the way noncommunist socialists used to distance themselves from the tyrannical socialism of the Soviets; nevertheless, the first stirrings of this counter project are of great significance. If Islam is to be reconciled with modernity, these voices must be encouraged until they swell into a roar. Many of them speak of another Islam, their personal, private faith.

The restoration of religion to the sphere of the personal, its depoliticization, is the nettle that all Muslim societies must grasp in order to become modern. The only aspect of modernity interesting to the terrorists is technology, which they see as a weapon that can be turned on its makers. If terrorism is to be defeated, the world of Islam must take on board the secularist-humanist principles on which the modern is based, and without which Muslim countries' freedom will remain a distant dream.

In India, Christians and Muslims face attacks from Hindu fundamentalist groups. In response to the recent Islamic and Hindu clashes in Gujarat, the RSS chief asserted - "The minorities must live by the goodwill of the majority." The following is one among many reactions to this statement and is by a well-known secular Indian Muslim.

### ***An Insult to the Constitution: By Asghar Ali Engineer***

Recently the RSS advised the minorities, especially the Muslims, that their safety depends on the goodwill of the majority community. Such statements by themselves do not create any goodwill among the minorities. They almost amount to a veiled threat. All secularists and leaders of the minority communities, including Christians, have rightly condemned this resolution passed at the Bangalore session of the RSS.

All communities should have one another's goodwill. The safety and security of the country depends on harmony among all the communities.

That is self-evident. However, no community, whether in the minority or the majority, can insist that its security depend on the goodwill of the other communities. All communities and all individuals have equal rights according to the Indian Constitution. Every Muslim has as much rights as every Hindu. And according to the constitutional theorists these rights do not accrue to them from the generosity of the Constitution makers. They are inherent rights, inherent in individuals as human beings.

It is strange that when the world is recognising cultural and religious plurality, the RSS is rejecting it and going backwards. The West had not known cultural and religious plurality until the first half of twentieth century but when migration began from ex-colonial countries of Africa and Asia to the Western countries, they (the Western countries) began to recognise cultural and religious plurality. The Western constitutional theorists not only recognised religio-cultural pluralism but also accorded the minorities equal rights.

... Let the RSS theorists note that Indians in countries like the UK or the USA or Canada do not live at the mercy or goodwill of the majority of those countries but live there with the constitutional rights accorded to them after they became citizens of those countries.

The rights accorded to the Muslims and other minorities in the Indian Constitution are in no way conditional on goodwill of any community. These rights are absolute in every sense of the word.

The RSS, which talks of Indian culture, is not aware of the fact that India was always home to various religions and cultures. The West accepted plurality, as pointed out above, only recently whereas India was plural in every sense of the word for centuries. India did not owe its plurality to only those who came from outside - Jews, Christians and Muslims and so on - as repeatedly asserted by the RSS. Within India, there has always been plurality, both culturally and religious. In fact, there never was one religion or one culture in this country. India as never saw religious or cultural homogeneity in its known history.

### QUESTIONS FOR STUDY

1. How much Western influence still prevails over Christianity worldwide? Discuss the need for change in worship and witness.
2. List any outdated words and metaphors (even hymns and prayers) frequently used in your circles. Can these cause damage? Can we change?
3. Write out a Gospel message for an audience where people of all faiths are present.

### END NOTES

1. Kung, Hans, *Christianity and World Religions: Paths to Dialogue*, Orbis Books, 1993 p 441
2. Mangalwadi, Vishal, and Ruth Mangalwadi. *The Legacy of William Carey: A Model for the Transformation of a Culture*, Wheaton, Ill: Crossway Books, 1999
3. The WEF-TC Study group on 'A Theology of Evangelism'. WEF, Singapore

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