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Universalism and the Logic of Revelation

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This was the opening paper of the 1986 Conference of the Fellowship of European Evangelical Theologians, held at Wolmersen, West Germany. The theme of the Conference was 'Modern Universalism and the Universality of the Gospel'. If the gospel does not include the finality of Jesus Christ as its essential part there is no need for Christian Mission—for then the churches would be guilty of proclaiming a transitory truth. The article shows how any acceptance of Universalism—meaning a denial of final separation—is also a denial of the normatives of revelation in Jesus and through Holy Scripture.
Editor

INTRODUCTION

The subject before us is one which is largely ignored. However important we acknowledge it to be, it has long tended to be left out of our active theological consideration; and the reason for that may be thought to lie in the close relations which must always exist between any discussion of Universalism and that doctrine which, above all other, Universalism denies, the doctrine of hell—a subject which is considered only rarely in orthodox circles: and that despite the vital connections which run between the fate of the lost and seemingly every theological *locus*, including at least the church, mission and redemption, and also, putatively, the nature of God himself.

To say this is immediately to set the Universalist thesis in the context of its significance. It would be hard to aver of any doctrine that it could be abandoned, or subject to radical re-interpretation, without implications for other aspects of the Christian faith. That is part of the problem with the piece-meal approach to the revision of Christian doctrine with which much of the church has been preoccupied for too long. But that principle applies to this doctrine more than to most, and as much as to any. For Universalism is an attack on that nexus of doctrines which lie at the heart of the faith, on questions of revelation, redemption, mission, the doctrine of the church, and we have still not named the Last Things themselves. The claim of universal salvation is not congruent with any of these, in any form in which they are recognized p. 322 by Holy Scripture and the Christian tradition. As we shall see, the distortions which are required in order to accommodate Universalism are fundamental.

So a second reason why Universalism has tended to be denounced rather than discussed lies in the far-reaching ramifications of the undertaking. It partakes of an altogether different character to the preferred subjects of evangelical apologetic. Once we take seriously the challenge which it poses, we find that the foundations are being shaken and we are forced into a re-assessment of large areas of Christian doctrine. The Universalist challenge proves not so much a threat to the doctrine of judgement and hell as a threat to the faith as an integrated whole. It is perhaps for this reason that the major Christian denominations, in which the notion of damnation is so distinctly unpopular, have fought shy of the formal adoption of its alternative.

One of the fruits of neglect lies in the area of terminology, and in the interests of clarity, for the purposes of this paper at least, a word is needed to identify that which Universalism opposes. Its antonym 'Particularism' is also, of course, a theological term

already, freighted with the connotations of another debate. That one thing which the Universalists deny is the fact of a final separation, which provides a better indicator of the minimal requirement of orthodoxy. What Universalism denies let Separationism assert: that *some* men (to leave angels out of account!) will finally not be saved. The central conflict with Universalism is not about how many they shall be, nor the kind of retribution which awaits them. In this context it appears that Conditionalism and Annihilationism are deviations from orthodoxy rather than denials of it. For the key question is not 'what awaits the lost?' but 'are there those who will be lost?'. Which is not to suggest that the destiny of the lost is unimportant, but that its importance is secondary, and must not obscure the first-order significance of the final separation. It is this that Universalism, in asserting the final salvation of all men, denies. Conditionalism and Annihilationism are definitely Separationist rather than Universalist in character.

Despite its connections with Christian doctrines other than that of damnation, the assessment of Universalism within an evangelical framework has an appearance of simplicity. Is it only Christians who will be saved, or everyone else too?, we are asked. That is a valid statement of the question, and if it is thus posed the only valid answer is, of course, 'only Christians'. But it is also a potentially misleading statement of the question, and can therefore lead to a potentially misleading answer. The individualistic tendency of modern evangelicalism, partly, perhaps largely, the fruit of practical emphasis on the p. 323 conversion of the individual to the exclusion of other ways of understanding the membership of the church of God, leads to a preference for asking questions about 'Christians' over questions about the church. This is encouraged by another evangelical convention. Out of a commendable, but perhaps short-sighted, concern for practical unity, there is a disinclination to confront disagreements over ecclesiology, and it has led to a neglect of this crucial subject and its effective downgrading almost into insignificance. It is hard to see how, without a fresh perception of its importance, the questions which the Universalist thesis raises for us will be finally resolved. For the point at which Universalism impinges most plainly upon Separationist orthodoxy is that at which our perception of the church begins to extend beyond the company of gathered believers who have entered it by what we may reasonably see as the normal means.

MODERN UNIVERSALISM

Our concern here is with what has been called 'modern universalism', and it is important to identify the particular character of the Universalism which we face today. There have been Universalisms before. There was the Origenist doctrine of *apokatastasis* which introduced a stream of Universalist thinking into the church from its very early days. Here as elsewhere, the church generally departed from Origen's thinking; and though it was possible for others to revive it, only a sparse tradition may be traced through the middle ages into post-Reformation times.

But the flowering of Universalist thinking before our own day is to be found in the nineteenth century, and particularly in England. It took its cue from the broad moral revolt against the God of the Bible which sought to convert him into one more acceptable to contemporary *mores*, and was less an espousal of universal salvation than a growing unease about its alternative, hell. It was of a piece with the widespread revulsion at the more gruesome Old Testament passages which reveals itself in the commentaries of the period. At the same time, the orthodox doctrine was maintained by many and asserted by some with vigour; with much less self-consciousness than their orthodox successors today. The detractors of orthodoxy, working in the very conservative theological context provided by English Christianity, found it necessary to be circumspect in their assertion

of universal salvation, and to treat the relevant biblical texts with particular caution. Typical discussions contain lengthy excursions into exegesis which are generally considered of the essence of the argument. p. 324

There are two principal differences between the Universalism of the nineteenth century (and the early twentieth) and that of our own time. First, it is differently established. In a characteristically helpful taxonomy of Universalist arguments, Richard Bauckham draws our attention to the fact that, in the twentieth century, 'exegesis has turned decisively against the universalist case'.[1] As in other areas, the effect of this has not been to bring the argument to an end. But it has made it increasingly necessary for consistent Universalists to make their case outside the pale of the authority of Holy Scripture. Yet as those who claim to work within the Christian tradition they cannot simply abandon its teaching. On the one hand they

> disagree with the NT writers' teaching about a final division of mankind, which can be said to be merely taken over from their contemporary Jewish environment, while the texts which could be held to support universalism represent a deeper insight into the meaning of God's revelation in Christ.[2]

That is to say, contemporary Universalists have generally ceased to claim that their doctrine rather than the traditional one is that which is taught in Holy Scripture. It has become necessary (and also possible) for them to argue in a different fashion.

The second distinction between Universalism today and that of the last century lies in the scope and significance of what is 'universal'. The concept of 'universality' has broadened, and the challenge to Christian orthodoxy become at one and the same time more distant from its original and more coherent as an alternative scheme. That is to say, the traditional Universalist doctrine was almost exclusively concerned with salvation *post mortem*. It took its character from the general revolt against hell and damnation, and it sought to offer in its place a general blessedness, whether come to by some purgatorial process or immediately after death. Eternal life was to be universal rather than particular, available to all and not merely to some. But the general structure of Christian theology, and in particular the uniqueness of the Christian revelation, were left intact; or such, at least, was the Universalists' declared intention.

For a number of reasons this position has been altered. For one thing, the general abandonment of anything other than a notional assent to life after death has removed much of the original drive of *post mortem* Universalism. With few exceptions, not even the orthodox preach about hell and damnation, and none but the orthodox retain an p. 325 interest (and that often only passing) in eternal blessedness. The centre of attention has moved from the world to come to the world of today. Again, the general new interest in non-Christian religion has burgeoned and significantly affected thinking within the churches, forcing Christians to give an account of themselves in the wider religious context and in an atmosphere of *laissez-faire*. Most important, perhaps, the impossibility of arguing the universality of salvation from Holy Scripture (along with the other *shibboleths* of twentieth-century theology) has led to an increasingly frank abandonment of the Christian tradition as the context in which fundamental religious thinking is to be done. That is, the insurmountably Separationist character of not simply *post mortem* soteriology but every other element in the biblical region has led to a general relativizing not simply of its teaching on the final separation but of its character as a particular

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[1] *Op. cit.*, p. 52.

[2] *Ibid.*

revelation with inherent universal claims. To put it another way: the Universalism of an earlier day sought to live in harmony with the universality of the Gospel. The new Universalism seeks rather to dispense with it. In especial it has therefore to relativize its character as a purported revelation with universal, normative validity. In this process of metamorphosis in the Universalist tradition much has become evident that was previously implicit. What passed as a disagreement about one doctrine has been revealed as a challenge to the integrity of the faith itself.

THE UNIVERSALISM OF JOHN HICK

This is nowhere more evident than in the work of John Hick, who has used the doctrine of universal salvation *post mortem* as a tool for the re-fashioning of the Christian (and with it every other) religion. He has turned it into his fundamental interpretative principle of religious truth. In so doing he has, we may feel, correctly perceived its significance for the Christian tradition, as a pivotal doctrine, a crucial element in that nexus of doctrines which make up orthodox Christianity. It is interesting to note his candid acknowledgement that his approach to the validity of non-Christian religion arose out of his concern for universal *post mortem* salvation; and that this in turn derived from his interest in the question of theodicy. In both these moves Hick is acting in many ways more as a thinker of the nineteenth century than of the twentieth. He acknowledges the general abandonment of theological interest in the after-life, but is less obviously aware of the degree to which his interest in theodicy as, in effect, a regulative principle in theology has a ready context in the profoundly moral character of P. 326 nineteenth-century re-interpretation of Christianity. Hick's conservatism in this and other matters is curious, and it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that part of its explanation lies in the acknowledged origin of his own faith in a conversion to evangelicalism. It is hard to see how anyone could come to his present position *de novo*. More than that of many other liberal thinkers, it bears the vestiges of its derivation from orthodoxy.

Hick's essentially moral approach to theology, and to this question in particular, may be shown with reference to a sermon which he takes to be typical of the old approach to the final separation and the doctrine of hell. Interestingly, his citation is not of an evangelical but of Edward Bouverie Pusey, the Tractarian leader, in illustration of the fact that this was the general mid-Victorian approach to the question. 'Between', Hick writes, 'the moral outlook' of Pusey's sermon on hell,

> and the general ethical outlook of today, both inside and outside the christian church, there is a great gulf fixed. On Pusey's side of the gulf theology was exempted from moral criticism and the theologian could with a good conscience attribute to God an unappeasable vindictiveness and insatiable cruelty which would be regarded as demonic if applied analogously to a human being; whereas today theological ideas are subject to an ethical and rational criticism which forbids [this] kind of moral perversity …[3]

As a result,

> contemporary theologians who do not accept the doctrine of universal salvation usually speak of the finally lost as passing out of existence rather than as endlessly enduring the torments of hellfire.

So his moral criticism of the doctrine of hell, itself a product of his concern for theodicy, leads Hick to repudiate the Separationism of orthodoxy.

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[3] John Hick, *Death and Eternal Life*, p. 200.

On the broader question of revelation, Hick sets out his position in this typical fashion. A 'major challenge to religious faith' is

> posed by the diversity of apparent revelations. If what Christianity says is true, must not what all the other world religions say be in varying degrees false? But this would mean that the large majority of mankind, consisting of everyone except the adherents of one particular religion, are walking in darkness. Such a conclusion would be acceptable within a Calvinist theology, according to which much, perhaps most, of the human race is already doomed to eternal damnation (*Westminster Confession*, III.7). But p. 327 in wrestling with the problem of evil I had concluded that any viable Christian theodicy must affirm the ultimate salvation of all God's creatures. How then to reconcile the notion of their being one, and only one, true religion with a belief in God's universal saving activity?[4]

Hick's theological method is characterized by two related principles which together enable him to work out his theology, although it should be noted that his theology is essentially shaped—as he says in this passage—by the requirements of his theodicy. He is eclectic toward Christianity, and syncretistic toward religions in general. His eclecticism enables him to work from a Christianity suitably emasculated of the Separationism which would make it an unwilling partner in the syncretist venture. His syncretism enables him to treat other unwilling partners similarly and to exploit in the widest possible context the principle inherent in his rejection of the universality of the Gospel. We can look at these in turn. First, his eclecticism.

This is evident especially in the manner in which he seeks to show that his repudiation of the Separationism generally associated with the teaching of Holy Scripture can in fact find some support in Holy Scripture itself. What is unclear is the nature of the standing which he will give to a putative biblical position once it is isolated, although it is hard not to conclude that Hick's use of Scripture is essentially syncretistic also. That is, he expects to find in Holy Scripture a variety of views on a given matter (in this case the extent of salvation), and to seek within them by his own dialectic the view which he will take up. So in his major work *Death and Eternal Life* there is only a passing discussion of the teaching of the New Testament on the subject. He suggests, unconvincingly, that most of our Lord's references are to a judgement which is not final and eternal. He asks whether those that are specific may not be later and therefore not dominical.[5] It is important to note that this attempt to whittle away at the Separationism of our Lord's teaching implicitly acknowledges that the gospels as we have them are incapable of a Universalist reading. Of Paul he writes:

> I would not in fact claim with confidence that he was a universalist; though I suggest that sometimes as he wrote of the saving activity of God the inner logic of that about which he wrote inevitably unfolded itself into the thought of universal salvation.[6]

Thus in both the gospels and the Pauline corpus there are general p. 328 statements which, taken alone, could be interpreted on Universalist lines; and more specific statements, which demand a Separationist interpretation. Hick claims that he can 'harmonize' these two sets of statements, and attempts such harmony by means of the 'unfulfilled threat' hypothesis:

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[4] John Hick, *God has Many Names*, pp. 4, 5.

[5] *Death and Eternal Life*, pp. 243–7.

[6] *Ibid.*, p. 248.

> It may well be true at a given point within the temporal process that unless you repent you will surely perish, and yet also true as a statement arrived at on other grounds, about human existence as a whole, that in the end all will turn from their wickedness and live. The two truths are formally compatible with one another because the one asserts that something will happen if a certain condition is fulfilled (namely, permanent non-repentance) while the other asserts that this same thing will not happen because that condition will not in fact be fulfilled.[7]

This exercise in argument bears an air of ingenuousness, since Hick is himself the author of the problem he is setting out to solve. The general statements which he cites are only capable of a Universalist construction when they are sundered from their context of specific statements about judgement and separation. Left where they are found (chiefly in the mind of Paul) they are qualified and interpreted otherwise. Hick makes out that he has solved a problem, but it has been specifically devised to give the impression of a double tradition within Scripture. The problem he cannot solve is that of the irreducibly Separationist character of, at worse, *some* of the biblical material. Moreover, Hick's argument is not really about eternal separation at all. It is with the claim of the New Testament writers that they bear an unique and final revelation from God, and in this most fundamental matter Hick attempts no facile harmony of his own view with theirs. The small place which biblical interpretation occupies in his discussions is a truer indicator of the relative importance of these arguments when they are compared with his general purpose. There is no necessity for Holy Scripture to back up his theological proposals. Is he perhaps, here as elsewhere, betraying the conservative roots of his theology? It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that his excursions into biblical exegesis are at heart no more than a palliative offered with affection to a Christian tradition from which he has departed. After all, this is the man who holds, among other things, a doctrine of purgatorial re-incarnation.

So what is his fundamental approach to the teaching of the New Testament? By selecting certain statements from Paul, and then p. 329 arranging the rest of Paul's own sayings and others around them, he stands in the eclectic tradition of Procrustes.

The second methodological principle which we find in Hick is in his approach to different religious-theological systems. In this case he is more candid. His fundamental conviction is of the equivalent validity of all religions.

> To realize that God is being worshipped, through different but overlapping mental images of him, not only in churches and chapels but also in synagogues and mosques, temples and gurdwaras, is to realize in a new way that he is the God of all mankind and not only of our own familiar tribe.[8]

Does this mean that a single world religion is in prospect, or indeed is desirable? Hick does not think so:

> the different religious traditions, with their complex internal differentiations, have developed to meet the needs of the range of mentalities expressed in the different human cultures … there will be different traditions of religious faith … The concrete particularities forming a spiritual home in which people can live—the revered scriptures, the familiar liturgical words and actions, the stirring music, the framework of credal belief, the much-loved stories of founder, saints and heroes—must continue in their separate streams of

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[7] *Ibid.*, p. 249.

[8] *God has Many Names*, pp. vii, viii.

> living tradition: for in losing their particularity they would lose their life and their power to nourish.[9]

But at the level of theology Hick's perception of the validity of the variety of religious revelations can be put to use:

> whilst there cannot be a world religion, there can be approaches to a world theology … a global theology would consist of theories or hypotheses designed to interpret the religious experience of mankind, as it occurs not only within Christianity, but also within the other great streams of religious life, and indeed in the great non-religious faiths also, Marxism and Maoism and perhaps—according to one's definition of 'religion'—Confucianism and certain forms of Buddhism.

Hick's work on *Death and Eternal Life* is intended as a pioneering venture in this field, though he has himself already made more limited use of particular ideas from non-Christian religions in other works.

We do not have opportunity here to engage in a full discussion of this book or the theological method which underlies it. Suffice it to say that Hick has openly taken the path of syncretism as the way to theological truth. His statement just quoted about 'theories or p. 330 hypotheses designed to interpret the religious experience of mankind' (with its odd automatic inclusion of communism and uncertainty about some non-theistic eastern religion) is a manifesto for what looks uncommonly like the old 'comparative religion' approach which has been largely abandoned *adopted as the way to religious truth*. The speculative and arbitrary character of the exercise on which Hick has embarked can be readily and reasonably imagined. The combination of an eclectic approach to his own religion and syncretism in his handling of others leads Hick to the formulation of what he calls 'theories and hypotheses' which are effectively isolated from evaluation within any particular religious tradition. It is difficult not to conclude that his original approach to theological method has led him into a logical quagmire out of which he will be unable to escape onto the dry land which would be afforded by either the Christian theology which he has left behind, or for that matter by any one of the alternative religious-theological systems in whose general direction he has set off.

It is difficult not to conclude that Hick has journeyed from the premises supplied by his theodicy to an ultimate Universalism which, by accepting every claim to religious (and non-religious) experience and every reflection upon it as 'revelation', is the *reductio ad absurdum* of its kind.

THE LOGIC OF AUTHORITY

This brief sketch of Hick's Universalism provides a useful starting-point for reflection on the logic of authority which underlies the Universalist case. Since Hick is willing to press further than many others in reassessment of the uniqueness of the Christian revelation he well illustrates the direction of all Universalist thinking. In his move away from the Christian tradition toward the use of other religious materials in the construction of a 'global theology' Hick is also particularly candid, certainly more than the generality of modern Christian thinkers who are nevertheless Universalists *de facto*, and who implicitly share his essential position.

The crucial question which is raised is one which may be held to lie behind much of the theological debate of today. It is the question of authority, which may be seen as the

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[9] *Ibid.*, pp. 7, 8.

obverse of that of theological method. Specifically, it is the question of the competence of the human mind to make the judgements which are required for the eclecticism which Hick evidences in his use of Holy Scripture, and the cognate syncretism by means of which he has begun to construct his p. 331 'global theology'. The fact that few have ventured as far as he in this direction does not detract from the general importance of these principles for Universalist thinking as a whole. As will emerge in the following discussion, it is impossible for any consistent or dogmatic Universalism to resort to any other method than eclectic use of biblical data and, implicitly or otherwise, a synthetic approach to other pretended revelations.

Whether or not this is a coherent possibility for Christian theology was penetratingly and lucidly assessed in a volume which, though celebrated in its day, has since been largely ignored. This is partly because it had the misfortune to be published in 1858, one year before Darwin's *Origin of Species* and (in some ways more significantly in English theology) two years before *Essays and Reviews*, which together radically altered the terms of theological debate in England and marked the death-knell of the consensus conservatism of the English churches.

Henry Longueville Mansel's Bampton Lectures, delivered and also published in the year 1958, bore the inauspicious title *The Limits of Religious Thought*. His starting-point is contained in the question, Is the revelation of God open to assessment and evaluation by man? This can be so only insofar as it is possible for the unaided human reason to construct its own philosophical knowledge of God, apart from his revelation. It is unreasonable to believe, on the one hand, that a comprehensive knowledge of God apart from his revelation is impossible, and on the other to consider it appropriate for the human mind to criticize particular elements within the revelation itself. In Mansel's words,

> If Revelation is a communication from an infinite to a finite intelligence, the conditions of a criticism of Revelation on philosophical grounds must be identical with those which are required for constructing a Philosophy of the Infinite … Whatever impediments, therefore, exist to prevent the formation of such a Philosophy, the same impediments must likewise prevent the accomplishment of a complete Criticism of Revelation.[10]

So:

> If the teaching of Christ is in any one thing not the teaching of God, it is in p. 332 all things the teaching of man: its doctrines are subject to all the imperfections inseparable from man's sinfulness and ignorance …[11]

That is to say, the human mind is not equipped to 'divide God's Revelation'. Indeed, Mansel writes,

> Many who would shrink with horror from the idea of rejecting Christ altogether, will yet speak and act as if they were at liberty to set up for themselves an eclectic Christianity.

Conversely,

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[10] H. L. Mansel, *The Limits of Religious Thought*, London, 1958, pp. 27, 8. The present writer has also discussed the significance of Mansel's argument for the evangelical understanding of Scripture in 'The Logic of Biblical Authority' in *The Challenge of Evangelical Theology*, edited by himself, Edinburgh, 1987, pp. 1ff; and *On the Interpretation of Scripture*, pp. 283ff.

[11] *Ibid.*, pp. 246, 7.

> Many a man who rejects isolated portions of Christian doctrine, on the ground that they are repugnant to his reason, would hesitate to avow broadly and unconditionally that reason is the supreme arbiter of all religious truth; though at the same time he would find it hard to point out any particular in which the position of reason, in relation to the truths which he still retains, differs from that which it occupies in relation to those which he rejects.[12]

Since a 'direct intuition of the infinite is unattainable by human consciousness'[13] the human mind is incompetent to make any such distinctions within the body of revelation itself.

> The conclusion, which an examination of the conditions of human thought unavoidably forces upon us, is this: There can be no such thing as a positive science of Speculative Theology; for such a science must necessarily be based on an apprehension of the Infinite; and the Infinite … cannot be positively apprehended in any mode of the human Consciousness … We can test the progress of knowledge, only by comparing its successive representations with the objects which they profess to represent: and as the object in this case is inaccessible to human faculties, we have no criterion [by which to judge…. Such a criterion] can obviously have no place in relation to those truths, if such there be, which human reason is incapable of discovering for itself.[14]

AN ASSESSMENT

Hick's eclectic approach to the teaching of Holy Scripture is required for two distinct, though related, reasons. First, his maintenance of *post mortem* universal salvation, if it-is to stand within the Christian tradition from which he works, must be shown to have some **P. 333** connection with Holy Scripture. As David H. Kelsey has shown,[15] and indeed as is our common experience, every strand of Christian theology seeks authorization of its theological proposals in Scripture. So it is with Hick and the Universalists, and since the consistent teaching of Scripture is against them they resort to the attempted use of some texts as a basis for the criticism of others. The Separationist character of biblical theology leaves them with no option. We may note in passing that this approach to Scripture is the converse of that which assumes the analogy of faith.

The second reason is only indirectly connected with the question of *post mortem* Universalism, since it is the consequence of Hick's general view of the status of the Christian and other revelations. Syncretism as theological method must always be eclectic in the use that it makes of the particular religious revelations which are being drawn together into harmony. If more than one seemingly distinct revelation is authentic, and unless some kind of analogy of faith may be presumed to operate among them all, there are choices to be made. The choices that Hick makes in his divide-and-rule approach to Holy Scripture are therefore inherent in his approach to all 'revelations'. That is, an eclectic approach to particular 'revelations' is a requirement of the wider Universalism (whose focus of interest is universal *validity* before it is universal *salvation*) to which Hick has come.

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[12] *Ibid.*, p.1.

[13] *Ibid.*, p. xxvi, introduction to fourth edition, 1859.

[14] *Ibid.*, p. 258.

[15] David H. Kelsey, *The Uses of Scripture in Recent Theology*, London, 1975.

But such an approach to revelation is only possible on the assumption that the human reason is competent to judge the adequacy of the particulars of divine revelation. As Mansel argues, a general competency of this kind can only be predicated of a reason capable without the aid of revelation of arriving at its own comprehensive knowledge of God. Of course, such a view of human reason would render revelation superfluous, unless, of course, in Mansel's nineteenth-century reference to earlier debate, 'Revelation *cannot be* any thing more than a republication of Natural Religion'.[16] That is to say, the eclectic handling of revelation rests on the assumptions of natural religion. Only if a merely natural knowledge of God is possible, and insofar as his revelation comprises its 'republication', can such an approach to revelation be justified. Revealed religion which is necessarily revealed—that is, which is anything other than the 'republication' of natural religion—entails both coherence and integrity p. 334 within the compass of its revelation, since its premise is that human reason is incompetent to construct what Mansel calls 'Speculative Theology', and therefore, by extension, to engage in critical evaluation of theology that has been revealed.

This criticism applies, of course, not simply to Hick's Universalism, but to any Universalism which goes beyond the question of *post mortem* salvation to the prior question of the validity of competing revelations or, as it might better be put, to the question of the universality of any single revelation. The idea of revelation in religion which we have outlined entails not simply the inability of human reason to sit as its judge, but, with that inability and to meet it, its own universality. That is to say, universality is not simply an accident of the particular character of the biblical revelation, it is a necessary feature of the character of any possible revelation. No revelation which fails to carry a claim, explicit or not, to unique and universal significance, is suited to the condition of the human reason. The Universalist approach to religion in general must depend upon an altogether distinct concept in which religion is inherently natural rather than revealed. But thereby the myth of 'revelation' as the foundation of 'global theology' is exploded. The Universalistic, 'global theologian' has abandoned revealed religion and returned to man's ancient natural quest for God by way of alternative.

The question remains of Universalisms which are less thoroughgoing than that of John Hick. Their adherents' chief interest remains the question of man's destiny *post mortem*, and their conviction that there will be no final separation is formally independent of any interest in the validity of other pretended divine revelations, whether in Islam, Hinduism or even (where Hick seems to find one) the writings of Mao. Yet the same critique can be shown to apply, for every repudiation of the teaching of Holy Scripture entails the self-same assumption of the competence of the human reason in matters of religion which, were it justified, would not simply enable critical assessment of revelation to take place; it would in fact make any such revelation redundant and superfluous to the exercise of reason itself. Which is another way of saying that in venturing to disagree with what Scripture says one is implicitly and perhaps unknowingly adopting another religion, inherently Universalist in the broader sense, and natural rather than revealed. As Mansel writes, in his highest ascription of authority to Holy Scripture, which sets its teaching finally beyond the pale of human assessment:

[16] Mansel, *op. cit.*, p. 258.

If there is sufficient evidence, on other grounds, to show that the Scripture, in which this doctrine is received, is a Revelation from God, the doctrine p. 335 itself must be unconditionally received, not as reasonable, nor as unreasonable, but as scriptural.[17]

THE EVANGELICAL POSITION

Finally, we may briefly delineate the minimum which is required for the maintenance of the universality of the Gospel. The doctrine of a final separation is cognate with the normative status of the revelation in Jesus Christ and Holy Scripture. Any denial of the one undermines the other. There is scope for more and less positive assessments of the degree to which non-Christian religion perceives the truth, and also for considerable difference (some of it related to the assessment of non-Christian religion and the possibility of 'anonymous Christianity' of some kind, some not) as to the classes of person who will be found on each side of the final divide. And, of course, there is particular scope for disagreement as to the comparative numbers involved. Our contention is that these and others are entirely 'proper' questions, indeed that they are questions we have no option but to ask. Our arbiter, of course, must be Holy Scripture. What is crucial is to maintain the integrity and the uniqueness of the Christian revelation, since it is this which is in doubt; and not to forget that the religion which is seeking to take its place is ultimately that of natural man. We know that such religion is 'natural' not merely in repudiating the supernatural, but in repudiating the spiritual too, and with it the very principle of a revelation to man from God as its foundation. And it is not finally a religion which comes from man, but from elsewhere.

'Has God said?', asked the serpent, initiating this self-same debate in which we are currently engaged; and as he has persisted his question has gained him a hearing.

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The New Ecclesiology in Latin America

C. René Padilla

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This paper was presented by its author to the WEF Theological Commission's triennial meetings held at Singapore in 1986. It describes and assesses the peculiar Latin American phenomenon. Though not much known, the 'BEC' is at least as revolutionary and significant a development as its complementary part, the Theology of Liberation. In conclusion the author also brings out certain implications for the evangelicals of BEC—social, ministerial and missional.
—Editor.

[17] *Ibid.*, p. 118, fourth edition.