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Mission Between the Times

A recent issue of the *International Review of Mission* deals with the theme 'The Future of Mission'. The articles in the issue include 'Shape of Mission for the Future', 'Should We Stop Using the Term "Mission"?', 'The Old Age of the Missionary Movement', 'Crucial Trends and Their Implications for Mission', 'Toward Multilateral Mission Strategy'.

The periodical thus raises a number of fundamental issues questioning the very future of Christian mission. Perhaps the truth was more exactly expressed by a book recently published entitled *Mission Between the Times* (C. René Padilla; Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1985). Following Padilla this issue of *Evangelical Review of Theology* assumes the inevitability of Christian mission between the two comings of Christ, and so is concerned not so much with the 'The Future of Mission' as with the form 'Mission of the Future' will take. As long as the Christian Church holds on to the finality of Jesus Christ, Christian mission will be imperative.

Our six articles deal with crucial issues for the mission of the 21st Century. The first article, by Ajith Fernando, addresses the central abiding issue of Christian mission: other religions with which Christian mission comes into direct confrontation. The following article by Norman Geisler deals with a spiritual movement which has become a quasi-religion. This is specially the case in the West. The third article by Nigel Cameron is also concerned with the content of the Christian message; as dialogue, syncretism and anonymous Christianity gain popularity, universalism remains a crucial problem. The fourth article by René Padilla has to do primarily with the Latin American context; yet the basic questions are universally relevant to ecclesiology. The last two articles, by Lesslie Newbigin and Eugene Rubingh, deal with directions Christian missions will be taking in the future.

All the articles have thorough documentation, but we regret that due to reasons of space most of the footnotes have had to be omitted; and so also most of the usual book reviews.

Accompanying the multiplication of all sorts of Christian activities there seems to be an increasing dearth of authentication of the Gospel message in personal, family and congregational life. As our Lord Jesus said, the tree is known by its fruits. What is really at stake is the very heart of the Gospel—the finality and the reality of the resurrected Lord Jesus Christ.

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Truth in Other Religions

Ajith Fernando

Reprinted from the book The Christian's Attitude Toward World Religions by Ajith Fernando (Tyndale House Publishers, Wheaton, 1987) with permission.

Despite the rapid secularization especially endemic in so-called Christian countries, there is a tremendous resurgence of all religions, both modern and primitive, all over the world. The

question of other religions remains the crucial issue of mission of the future. Ajith Fernando, from his experience in the Third World context of religious pluralism, speaks to this central issue from an evangelical perspective.

Editor

There are truths in other faiths that we could affirm, even though we know these truths do not suffice to lead a person to salvation. But what is the source of these truths? Can they be described as God's revelation in the same way that the Bible is?

THREE SOURCES OF TRUTH

The Scriptures teach that there are three sources of truth available to man apart from the Scriptures.

God's Original Revelation. The first source is God's original revelation to Adam, the first man. Paul said that from 'one man he made every nation of men' ([Acts 17:26](#); see also [Romans 5:12-21](#)). This implies that Adam was the father of the whole human race. The Scriptures teach that God had a warm personal relationship with Adam. This could only have been possible if God had revealed key truths about his nature to Adam.

Yet with the Fall, man's nature was corrupted and untruths entered his mind. Paul wrote: '[Man] exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshipped and served created things rather than the Creator' ([Romans 1:25](#)). So man's religion deteriorated.

Yet that original revelation given to Adam was not entirely lost by the human race. In man there remained what has been called *reminiscent knowledge*. In this reminiscent knowledge there is found truth about God.

The idea of the deterioration or devolution of religion is not accepted today in many circles. Many people prefer to explain the history of religions in terms of evolution rather than devolution.

The evolution theory claims that religion is man's attempt to answer p. 293 certain questions and challenges he faces. From the earliest times man needed to explain how the world, with all its complexity, came into being. Man felt insecure because of his inability to control nature, so he began to look for someone bigger than himself to whom he could go for protection and blessing. He needed to attribute the misfortunes he faced to some source. Gradually man 'created' ghosts, spirits, demons, and gods to answer his questions. There were gods for different functions and protecting different localities. So polytheism emerged.

As societies advanced, the evolutionary theory holds, man realized that having a supreme ruler for a large area was politically more effective than having many local chiefs. So monarchies emerged. This idea of the supreme ruler was extended to the religious sphere, yielding the belief in a supreme god. The climax of this process was monotheism, the belief in *one* supreme god.

The Bible affirms the very opposite of the evolutionary view. The Bible states that the first man had a monotheistic belief in the supreme God that was corrupted after the Fall, resulting in polytheism and animism (spirit worship).

Carl F. H. Henry regards the evolutionary explanation of religious history as typical of the mood of this age. He says, 'In every age philosophers have sought some one explanatory principle by which to encompass and explain all things.' He points out that 'in modern times that principle has been the category of evolution.' So the development of religion is also explained in terms of evolution.

Anthropological studies carried out in this century however have given convincing evidence for the biblical view, which sees the present religious diversity in terms of the

deterioration of an original revelation. Don Richardson has made these insights from anthropology available from a nontechnical viewpoint in his book *Eternity in Their Hearts*. He shows how the idea of a supreme, good God was discovered in thousands of so-called primitive cultures that have been studied in this century.

Richardson relates how these discoveries were embarrassing to many anthropologists because they went against current opinions about the history of religions. They had expected 'unadvanced' thoughts about the divine. The so-called advanced concept of a supreme God was a most unexpected discovery because these primitive cultures were not considered to have evolved to the point of developing such an idea. Richardson reports that 'probably 90 percent or more of the folk religions of this planet contain clear acknowledgement of the existence of one Supreme God.' p. 294

When missionaries go out and proclaim the gospel to these cultures, their hearers often automatically identify the Christian God with their supreme God, a fact that has simplified the Bible translator's task. Bishop Lesslie Newbigin notes that 'in almost all cases where the Bible has been translated into languages of the non-Christian peoples of the world, the New Testament word *Theos* [Greek for "God"] has been rendered by the name given by the non-Christian peoples to the One whom they worship as Supreme Being.' Newbigin cites the great Bible translations consultant, Eugene Nida, who has pointed out that where translators tried to evade the issue by simply transliterating the Greek or Hebrew word, the converts would explain this foreign word in the text of their Bibles by using the indigenous name for God.

Here then is the first source of truth in non-Christian systems—God's original revelation. Though this revelation has been corrupted because of sin, some truth still remains, and that truth may be affirmed and used as a stepping-stone in communicating the gospel.

The Image of God in Man. The second source of truth available, apart from the Scriptures, is the very nature of man. Man is a religious being. The Dutch theologian, J. H. Bavinck, points out that 'this is not to say that every man has this religious trait to the same extent.' Some are more religious than others. But if we look at the human race as a whole, we must agree with Bavinck that 'it cannot be denied that religiousness is proper to man.' Bavinck says, 'Even when a man turns his back upon the religious traditions in which he has been brought up and calls himself an atheist, he still remains in the grasp of his religious predisposition. He can never wholly rid himself of it.'

Religions such as Buddhism deny the necessity of relating to any supernatural being. But most of the adherents of such religions cannot generally be made to stick to a rigid non-theism. Mahayana Buddhism is the largest branch of Buddhism. It is practiced in countries such as Japan, China, Korea, and Tibet. The Mahayana Buddhists worship the Buddha and the *Bodhisattvas* and address their prayers to them as they would to gods. Hinayana Buddhism is practiced in countries such as Sri Lanka, Burma, Thailand and Cambodia. It prides itself in being closer to the teachings of the Buddha and the early Buddhist (Pali) scriptures. Yet Buddhists belonging to this branch have also included the divine factor into the practice of their religion. Many Buddhists of Sri Lanka have literally deified the Buddha, a practice he would have opposed. These Buddhists often talk about the gods who protect them. The morning newspaper on the day that I write this carries a statement by the leading executive officer of Sri Lanka's most prestigious temple. p. 295 He says that the temple lands 'are dedicated to the Buddha and the gods.' These Buddhists often resort to assistance from the gods or spirits in times of trouble.

Communism sought to eradicate religion with its strong rationalistic and materialistic emphases. But today religion thrives in communist lands in spite of the discrimination and persecution that religious adherents have had to face.

The incurable religiosity of man is a vestige of the image of God in man (see [Genesis 1:26, 27](#)). This image was tarnished as a result of the Fall so that no part of man has escaped the taint and pollution of sin. But man still has some of the God-implanted characteristics and abilities originally invested in him. These traits manifest themselves in ways that are both good and bad, which is why man thirsts after the divine. [Ecclesiastes 3:11](#) says that God has 'set eternity in the hearts of men.' That refers to the vestige of the image of God. But it goes on to say that men 'cannot fathom what God has done from beginning to end,' which is a result of the fall of man. What man knows about God because of his natural inclination toward the religious is termed by theologians 'the *intuitional knowledge* of God.'

So we find that man can think reasonably. He has a sense of the reality of the divine that expresses itself in religiousness. He has a sense of truth, of beauty, and of goodness. He has the potential for creativity. He has a sense of the eternal, which makes him want to transcend his limits of time and space. These are qualities with the potential of being used in the service of truth for the benefit of man. But they may also be used in ways that are dangerous to man. So we find accomplished art, literature, and music that are good and we also find accomplished art, literature, and music that are evil. We have beautiful ancient buildings regarded as wonders of the world that were built using slaves in a most inhuman way.

A Christian, therefore, may enjoy the music of Ravi Shankar or be challenged by the heroism of Mahatma Gandhi. We may learn from the literature of Greece. We could say that, because these are expressions of the image of God in man, the good features in these creations are derived in some sense from God. But we also know that those who created them do not know God, and this makes us unwilling to endorse the system of life to which they subscribe. As a youth I used to follow Hindu processions for hours, thrilled by the music I heard, but deeply troubled by what caused the musicians to play what they played.

The Plan of the Universe. A third source of knowledge, outside the [p. 296](#) revelation of God in the Scriptures, is the plan of the universe. Looking at the universe, man is able to make inferences about the One who created it. We may call this the *inferential knowledge* of God. The Psalmist said, 'The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands.' ([Psalm 19:1](#)).

Paul explained this knowledge of God more clearly: 'What may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made' ([Romans 1:19, 20](#)).

In his speeches in Lystra and Athens, Paul said that the plan of creation is a testimony to God, creating in man a desire to know more about him ([Acts 14:17; 17:26, 27](#)).

By observing the grandeur of creation, people may be led to acknowledge the greatness of the Creator. By observing the laws of nature, people may arrive at a conviction about the importance of order for a secure life. This in turn will become a base for formulating the laws of a given society.

GENERAL REVELATION AND SPECIAL REVELATION

The three sources of truth outside the Bible are: reminiscent knowledge, based on the original revelation of God; intuitional knowledge, which comes by the use of our natural instincts; and inferential knowledge, which comes by observing creation. In theology, this type of knowledge is described under the heading of *general revelation*. It is truth, derived from God and available to all people. It is distinguished from *special revelation*, which is truth communicated by God infallibly, in the form of language. This truth is recorded in

the Bible. Whereas general revelation gives hints about the nature of reality, special revelation is a clear guide to all that is needed for salvation and for authentic living.

[Psalm 19](#) describes these two sources of truth. Verses [1-6](#) describe general revelation. This revelation is not made through 'speech or language' (v. [3](#)). But 'their voice goes out into all the earth' (v. [4](#)). Verses [7-11](#) describe special revelation. This description begins with the words, 'The law of the Lord is perfect' (v. [7](#)). It goes on to describe this revelation as 'trustworthy' (v. [7](#)), 'right', 'radiant' (v. [8](#)), 'pure' and 'altogether righteous' (v. [9](#)). This passage also describes the amazingly complete influence it exerts on believers. We affirm that only the Bible can exert such infallible authority upon man. No other writing, Christian or non-Christian, is revelation in the sense that the Bible is. [p. 297](#)

Some recent works on the Christian attitude to other faiths have disputed the Christian claim to a unique revelation. One writer says, 'What we have in the Bible are not attempts to project objective truths, but a struggle to understand, to celebrate, to witness, and to relate.' To that writer the Bible is an expression of the faith and experiences of its writers. We must not make claims that it presents 'absolute and objective' truths based on our belief that it is a unique revelation given by God, he says, 'for most religions like Islam and Hinduism, are also based on the concept of revelation; and throughout history different persons have claimed to have various revelations from God.' It is not within the scope of this book to defend our belief that the Scriptures are a unique revelation from God, containing objective and absolute truth. This has been adequately done in numerous books on revelation that have appeared recently.

LEARNING FROM OTHER FAITHS?

If glimpses of truth are found in other faiths, then there may be times when Christians can learn from those other faiths. This can be explained in two ways.

First, even though the revelation of God is complete in that it gives all that is needed for salvation and authentic living, God has given us the privilege and responsibility of applying this revelation to our specific situations. In some areas, we have specific instructions that are absolutes, such as the prohibition of adultery. But in other areas, we have general principles. And it is our task to apply these principles to our specific cultural situations. An example of this is the principle of reverential worship. In applying this principle, we may learn much from the music used by the non-Christians in a given culture. Music has been called the language of the heart. By listening to non-Christian music, we may learn much about the type of music that is suitable for the people of the culture which we are considering.

Another way to learn from other faiths is a little more complex to explain. Even though God's revelation is complete, our perception of it is incomplete. So, we have a lot to learn. The Scriptures contain all that is necessary for a complete life, but because of our cultural conditioning, we may be hindered from learning some of the things clearly taught in the Scriptures. Other cultures may not have these cultural hindrances. So, even without the light of the gospel, people of other cultures may achieve heights in these areas simply by availing themselves of general revelation.

I have a dear friend, a convert from Hinduism, for whose spiritual [p. 298](#) nurture I have had some responsibility. As my relationship with him developed, I realized that there was much I could learn from him about meditation, devotion, and reverence in prayer. Many of us in Sri Lanka, who grew up in a Christian background, were weak in our understanding and practice of meditation, devotion and reverence. I sensed that his Hindu background had contributed positively to the development of his Christian prayer life.

When my friend came to Christ, he understood the true nature of prayer. He saw that prayer is a personal conversation between a child and his loving Father. To him this was a new, revolutionary, and liberating truth. He knows now that the Hindu prayers, which he had offered in some sense as a means of salvation, had no saving value. He does not use prayer hoping that it will be a way to merit salvation. Prayer is now a consequence of the salvation that he received as a gift from God, an expression of an intimate relationship he has with God, who is now his loving Father.

Into this relationship with God he brought a meditative, devotional reverence that he had acquired from his Hindu background. This reverence had expressed itself in ways that were contrary to the gospel. But the reverence itself was a good feature. We could say that it had its roots in God's general revelation and, therefore, we could learn from it.

Reverence is advocated in the Bible, too. The second statement in the Lord's Prayer, 'Hallowed be thy name,' is evidence of this. But the Christian tradition in which I grew up was so rational in its approach to truth that it had lost some of the reverential character essential to Christianity. My Christian experience in that area was biblically defective. Asian religion had preserved this reverential aspect, partly because the Asian culture is not overly rational in character. So, even though we know that Hinduism is not a way to salvation, we can learn from the Hindus about reverence. We know, however, that the fullest revelation about reverence is found in the Scriptures, but we had been blinded from seeing it because of the defective Christianity we inherited.

A good example of the defectiveness in our Christianity emerges when we look at our attitude toward nature. The Psalms tell us that the creation is daily proclaiming truths about God ([19:1-6](#)). Yet most Christians do not seem attuned to these messages. In fact, we don't know how to listen to such a voice. To us, nature is something to be used for the benefit of man. We may perhaps use its greatness to argue for the existence of God, but beyond that, we hardly see it as a source of truth. We have lost the meditative or contemplative aspect of life. p. 299

I believe this deficiency is one reason why Christianity has made minimal inroads into the societies of Asia, where the religions with a high emphasis on the contemplative are practised. Many Buddhists and Hindus, for example, have been unimpressed by Christianity. They view Christians as irreligious people because of our lack of emphasis on the meditative and contemplative aspects of life. This is unfortunate, because these two areas are clearly presented as important aspects of God's complete revelation to man.

UNACCEPTABLE SYSTEMS

Though we may accept and learn from certain practices in non-Christian systems, we must reject the systems themselves. We know that Hindu devotion does not lead to salvation, for only faith in Christ does that.

We must disagree with the syncretist who says, 'Let us learn from each other and live harmoniously with each other. After all, we are headed in the same direction, even though some of our practices may differ.' The biblical Christian says, 'We are not headed in the same direction. Some of our practices may be similar. We may learn from each other, but there is a sense in which we cannot live harmoniously with each other. We seek to bring all who are outside of a relationship with Christ into such a relationship, and that necessitates the forsaking of their former religions.'

The syncretist says that we are one in the centre, though we may differ on some peripheral details. The biblical Christian says that, though we may have some peripheral similarities, we are different in the centre. Christianity revolves on a different axis from

other religion. The way of Christ leads to life. The Bible teaches that other ways lead to death.

We approach the issue of truth and goodness in other faiths from the basis of our belief in the uniqueness of Christ. If an aspect of a certain religion conforms to the complete revelation in Christ, we affirm it. But if it does not conform to this revelation, we reject it. As Lesslie Newbigin puts it: 'Jesus is for the believer the source from whom his understanding of the totality of experience is drawn and therefore the criterion by which other ways of understanding are judged.' These are implications of Christ's proclamation that he is 'the truth' ([John 14:6](#)).

The good points in a religion that have their base in general revelation, as we said, may be used by the Christian evangelist as points of contact and stepping-stones in preaching the gospel. But we [p. 300](#) need to add that these same good features in a religion can also lead people astray.

The noble ethic of Buddhism, with all its good features, gives many people the encouragement to try to save themselves. They feel satisfied that they are using their own efforts to win their salvation. But self-effort is the opposite of God's way of salvation, which is by faith. Before one exercises such faith he must first despair of his ability to save himself. The ethic of Buddhism may cause people to trust in their ability to save themselves and so blind them from the way of salvation. So, Satan can use the best in other faiths to lead people away from the truth ([2 Corinthians 4:4](#)).

CO-OPERATING IN COMMON CAUSES

Another implication of our belief in general revelation relates to our co-operation with non-Christians in moral, social, or political causes of mutual concern. Theologian John Jefferson Davis has given a rationale for such activity. He says that even unbelievers have a God-created conscience. Because of general revelation, believers and unbelievers can overlap in their moral concerns. So we may cooperate with non-Christians in causes such as peace, ecological responsibility, social development, and opposition to abortion.

We must, however, be warned that such co-operation is fraught with numerous pitfalls. Davis says that one of the keys to avoiding problems is to define the basis of co-operation narrowly and specifically. We co-operate on some agreed-upon causes and no more. Davis also says that we must ensure that the group that is formed has a clear written statement of goals that does not conflict with Scripture.

We must remember that our supreme task, evangelism with conversion in view, is repulsive to most non-Christians. Co-operation with non-Christians must not result in a blunting of our evangelistic emphasis. Sometimes evangelistic organisations downplay their evangelistic emphasis so as to get assistance from the government or a non-Christian foundation for some social venture. This practice can be very dangerous. We must make known the fact that along with our social concern is an evangelistic concern, which we will not drop in order to get funds. Because they refused to hire homosexuals on their staff team, the Salvation Army in New York recently forfeited large sums of state assistance.

Following the recent racial riots in Sri Lanka, I participated happily in a neighbourhood peace committee chaired by a Buddhist and of [p. 301](#) which most of the members were Buddhists. I found that what I did in that committee did not conflict with my Christian principles. But I could not participate in some ventures organized by certain Christians, such as an ecumenical rally at which the chief speaker was a Buddhist chief priest. I felt I could not take part because true Christian ecumenicity cannot extend to other religions. I also could not participate in many united services of prayer for peace that were held all over the land in Christian church buildings. At these services Hindus

and Muslims joined with the Christians and offered Hindu and Muslim prayers for peace in the land along with Christian prayers.

These ecumenical rallies and united prayer services were hailed as great steps forward in the quest for interreligious understanding and harmony. But a biblical Christian, in his search for harmony with others, cannot surrender the scriptural teaching about Christ's uniqueness. Paul stated very clearly that the only acceptable way to God in prayer is through the mediation of Christ ([1 Timothy 2:1-8](#)). A Christian, therefore, cannot have a 'united' prayer service where both Christian and non-Christian prayers are offered.

Murray Harris described the principle Paul laid down in his famous passage about being unequally yoked with unbelievers ([2 Corinthians 6:14-16](#)):

Do not form any relationship, whether temporary or permanent, with unbelievers that would lead to a compromise of Christian standards or jeopardize consistency of Christian witness. And why such separation? Because the unbeliever does not share the Christian's standards, sympathies, or goals.

Mr. Ajith Fernando is the National Director of Youth for Christ in Sri Lanka. p. 302

The New Age Movement

Norman L. Geisler

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The New Age Movement is a unique spiritual phenomenon of our time whose influence (next only to Communism) encompasses all realms of life—spiritual, social, personal, ecumenical, political, cultural, scientific. Dr. Geisler offers a thorough and systematic study of the movement, describing the background, the basic tenets and key leaders, as well as his evaluation of the movement.

Editor

BACKGROUND: A SHIFT IN WORLD VIEWS

On Mars Hill the Apostle Paul faced the Epicureans and the Stoics ([Acts 17:18](#)). The Epicureans were the atheists of the day and the Stoics were the pantheists. Today Christianity again stands between the materialist and the mystic. Present-day 'Epicureans' are secular humanists, and contemporary 'Stoics' are proponents of what has come to be known as the New Age movement.

Western society is experiencing an ideological shift from an atheistic to a pantheistic orientation. The basic difference between these two views is that atheists claim there is no God at all, but pantheists say God is all and all is God. Atheistic materialists believe all is matter, but mystics hold that all is mind.

The shift from secular humanism to New Age pantheism has occurred gradually over the past few decades. It has been a relatively smooth transition because of the