

EVANGELICAL REVIEW OF THEOLOGY

VOLUME 14

Volume 14 • Number 4 • October 1990

Evangelical Review of Theology



WORLD EVANGELICAL FELLOWSHIP
Theological Commission [p. 291](#)

time, eternity, immutability and the incarnation; his transcendence and immanence. Further study on these ideas will enrich our understanding and experience of our God, who is also the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

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The Gospel and Religious Pluralism

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We are living in a world that is characterized increasingly by religious pluralism. At the beginning of this century most people in Western world would have regarded non-Christian religions as demonic phenomena and their adherents as destined for hell.¹ It was seen as the great task of the Christian world to evangelize the non-Christian world and to save all those millions from eternal perdition. Today the situation is quite different. Many church people believe that there is truth in all religions and that they all provide their adherents with a way to God and to salvation. By means of dialogue we are all called upon to share our spiritual riches with others, whether we are Christian or non-Christian. At any rate we should work together towards a better world and most certainly refrain from all attempts to convert the others to our particular brand of religion.

Why did all these changes take place? A great number of factors could be mentioned here and we could spend a great deal of time on them. We shall restrict ourselves, however, to a brief enumeration of the main factors, without going into details. First of all there is the fact that we know much more about the other great religions than people did at the beginning of this century. Due to increased international travel, the development of modern means of communication, the growth of religious studies in many universities and in particular also the presence of people of other faiths in our own countries, all of us are aware that the other religions are living realities. None of us today would dare to say what Temple Gairdner wrote in his official account of the World Missionary Conference of Edinburgh, 1910: 'The spectacle of the advance of the Christian Church along many lines of action to the conquest of the five great religions of the modern world is one of singular interest and grandeur.'² Not only have we witnessed a strong revival of these great religions, but today their adherents live next door to us. Thousands upon thousands of people from other countries, taking their own religion with them, have settled in the USA and in Britain; on the European continent we daily meet with the many guest labourers, immigrants and refugees, coming from non-Christian p. 342 lands.³ Most of

¹ Wilfred Cantwell Smith tells us in one of his articles that the *Encyclopedia Britannica* has its first article on 'Buddhism' in its ninth edition, in 1875. Cf. 'Mission, Dialogue, and God's will for us', *International Review of Mission (IRM)*, 1988, 360/1.

² Quoted from John R. W. Stott, *Christian Mission in the Modern World*, 1977, 64.

³ Cf. Max Warren, *I Believe in the Great Commission*, 1976, 148. 'It is a new experience in Europe to have some schools in which fifty percent or more of the children are Hindus or Muslims.'

these people are Muslim, Hindu or Buddhist and they often put us to shame by their piety and firm adherence to their traditional beliefs and rites. At the same time we see in our own Western world a strong decline in the number of church members and a tragic weakening of fundamental convictions in those who still go to church. Our Western world is no longer the 'Christian' world; nor can we still call the rest non-Christian. We are in the West are living in a post-Christian era, while in other continents we not only witness the revival of the old religions, but also see that, for instance, sub-Saharan Africa is more Christian than our own so-called Christian continents.

THEOLOGICAL SURVEY

Some historical comments

Undoubtedly it is not the first time that the Christian church has encountered religious pluralism. The early church lived in a similar world and had to find its own place among the various existing religions.⁴ The apostle Paul, in his letters, points out that it was a world of many lords and many gods, over against which the Christian church had to confess that in fact Jesus alone is Lord and his heavenly Father alone is God (cf. [1 Cor. 8:4–6](#)). The ancients themselves reckoned that there were more than thirty thousand gods!⁵ But many philosophers of those days (such as Celsus, for instance) believed that in actual fact people served one God, each approaching him through different intermediaries, by different rituals, using different names. Celsus wrote: 'It makes no difference if one invokes the highest God or Zeus or Adonai or Sabaoth or Amoun, as the Egyptians do, or Papaïos, as the Scythians do.'⁶ For the Christians this was totally unacceptable. Both the Old and the New Testament clearly profess the uniqueness of God and of Jesus. [Deuteronomy 4:39](#) states: 'Know therefore this day, and lay it to your heart, that the lord is God in heaven above and on the earth beneath; there is no other.' And Acts [p. 343 4:12](#) states: 'There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.' Throughout the centuries this has been the classical view of the Christian church. The Council of Florence (1438–1445) speaks for the classical Roman Catholic Church, not just pagans, but also Jews or heretics or schismatics, can become partakers of eternal life; but they will go to the everlasting fire which was prepared for the devil and his angels, unless before the end of life they are joined to the church.'⁷ Luther speaks for the Protestant Churches when he calls Christianity the *vera et unica religio* (the true and unique religion). This very same view is still held by many Christians, as appears from the statement by the congress on World Mission at Chicago in 1960: 'In the years since the war, more than one billion souls have passed into eternity and more than half of these went to the torment of hell fire without even hearing of Jesus Christ, who he was, or why he died on the cross of Calvary.'⁸

Actually it was only in the days of the Enlightenment that in the Western World the absoluteness of the Christian Gospel was really challenged again. One of the best known

⁴ This is denied by W. C. Smith, who asserts that the nascent church had to deal only with two spiritual movements, namely, Greek philosophy and the Roman Empire, *art. cit.*, 361, note 1.

⁵ Cf. Robert L. Wilken, 'Religious Pluralism and Early Christian Theology', *Interpretation*, October 1986, 380.

⁶ *Art. cit.*, 383.

⁷ Denziger, *Enchiridion Symbolorum Definitionum et Declarationum de Rebus Fidei et Morum*. 35th edition, 1965, no. 1351.

⁸ *Facing the Unfinished Task*, ed. J. O. Percy, 1961, 9.

challenges is issued by G. E. Lessing in his famous parable of the three rings. A father has three sons whom he loves equally. He can give his ring with magic power to only one of them. Since he does not want to offend any of his sons he has two perfect imitations of the true ring made and before he dies he gives each son his blessing with one of the rings. Each of the three believes that he possesses the true ring and considers the others false. So they all go to the wise judge Nathan who speaks for Lessing himself and for the whole Enlightenment when he offers the following judgment: 'Let each think his own is the true ring' and in the meantime show forth 'gentleness, a heartfelt tolerance, good works and deep submission to God's will'.⁹ Since that time, the question of how we should regard other religions has been with us, and we all know that there are no easy answers.

The time is past when Christians could say with Fielding's Parson Thwackum: 'When I mention religion I mean the Christian religion; and not only the Christian religion but the Church of England.' Many Evangelicals too realize that we face a host of difficult questions here. Some of these questions have been formulated by the Theological Consultation on Dialogue in Community that was organized by the [p. 344](#) World Council of Churches and held at Chiang Mai, Thailand, April 18–27. We shall mention a few of them. What is the relationship between God's universal action in creation and his redemptive action in Jesus Christ? Are we to speak of God's work in the lives of all men and women only in tentative terms of hope that they may experience something of him, or more positively in terms of God's self-disclosure to people of living faiths and in the struggle of human life and ideology? How are we to find biblical criteria in our approach to people of other faiths and ideologies? What is the biblical view and Christian experience of the operation of the Holy Spirit, and is it right and helpful to understand the work of God outside the church in terms of the doctrine of the Holy Spirit?¹⁰ As a matter of fact, when one surveys the great variety of answers that has been given to these and similar questions during this century only, one feels at times completely at a loss. In this section of the paper we shall look at some of these answers. Naturally this survey has to be brief, and a certain degree of superficiality is unavoidable; but if we really want to gain a proper perspective we have to pay at least some attention to the various answers given so far.

Roman Catholic views

After the period of the Middle Ages, in which the Roman Catholic Church adopted a triumphalistic ecclesiology, based on a virtual equation of the Roman Catholic Church with the Kingdom of God, Roman Catholic theology espoused the so-called 'conquest theory'.¹¹ Christian kings who tried to conquer countries outside Europe were expected to apply the Augustinian dictum '*compelle intrare*' (compel people to enter¹²). In the 19th century this 'conquest theory' was replaced by the 'adaptation theory'. Although the natural knowledge of God in itself is not sufficient for salvation and must be complemented by the special revelation in Christ, all truth contained in it must be preserved and in its mission work the church should adapt itself as much as possible to the religious truths that are present in the other religions. Others went even further and

⁹ Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Nathan the Wise*.

¹⁰ 'Dialogue in Community' (containing the text of the statement of Chiang Mai), *Ecumenical Review*, July 1977, 263.

¹¹ Cf. J. Verkuyl, *Contemporary Missiology. An Introduction*, 1978, 342.

¹² Based on a misinterpretation by the Church Fathers of [Luke 14:23](#).

saw in the other religions, in as far as their adherents live by the '*lumen naturale*', the forecourt of the true church of God, the Roman Catholic Church.¹³ p. 345

In our century these ideas were further developed into the 'fulfilment theory'. This theory is strongly advocated in several documents of the Second Vatican Council.¹⁴ In section 16 of *Lumen Gentium* we read: 'Those also can attain to everlasting salvation who through no fault of their own do not know the gospel of Christ or his Church, yet sincerely seek God and, moved by grace, strive by their deeds to do his will as it is known to them, through the dictates of conscience. Nor does divine Providence deny the help necessary for salvation to those who, without blame on their part, have not yet arrived at an explicit knowledge of God, but who strive to live a good life, thanks to his grace. Whatever goodness or truth is found among them is looked upon by the Church as preparation for the gospel. She regards such qualities as given by him who enlightens all men so that they may finally have life' (35). The document is still cautious. It does not state unequivocally that Christ is present in the other religions or that these religions in themselves are ways of salvation. It does intimate, however, that the qualities of goodness and truth which these non-Christian religions may possess come from Christ ('Him who enlightens all men', cf. [John 1:9](#)). A similar caution is found in *Nostra Aetate*. Here we read: 'The Catholic Church rejects nothing which is true and holy in these [non-Christian] religions. She looks with sincere respect upon those ways of conduct and life, those rules and teachings which, though differing in many particulars from what she holds and sets forth, nevertheless often reflect a ray of that Truth which enlightens all men' (662). *Ad gentes* seems to go even further when it says that 'whatever truth and grace are to be found among the nations, as a sort of secret presence of God, this [missionary] activity frees from all taint of evil and restores to Christ its maker' (595/6).

Individual Roman Catholics have taken this lead and gone much further. Karl Rahner, for instance, has strongly advocated the idea of 'anonymous Christians'.¹⁵ Although maintaining that Christianity is the absolute religion, being founded on the unique event of the incarnation of the Son of God, in his approach to the non-Christian religions he takes his starting point in God's will that all men be saved. Every man is destined for the beatific vision of God and has been created with a view to his grace. Even though creation may not be identified with grace, grace always accompanies it. Even those who p. 346 have never heard the gospel are nevertheless confronted with God's grace by virtue of their being destined for grace. The faithful adherent of other religions can be saved through the faithful practice of his religion. Actually he has to be seen as an 'anonymous Christian' and his religion as lawful and salvific, at least up to the time when the gospel is brought to him. The Christian missionary therefore 'does not simply confront the member of an extra-Christian religion as a mere non-Christian but as someone who can and must already be regarded in this or that respect as an anonymous Christian'.¹⁶

¹³ Cf. Verkuy, *op. cit.*, 344.

¹⁴ *Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions (Nostra Aetate)*, in *The Documents of Vatican II*, ed. Walter M. Abbott, 1966, 660–668; *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (Lumen Gentium)*, *op. cit.*, 14–101; *Decree on the Church's Missionary Activity (Ad Gentes)*, *op. cit.*, 584–630.

¹⁵ Cf. *Theological Investigations*, vol. 5 (the German edition was issued in 1962).

¹⁶ It is interesting to note that the Chang Mai consultation cautioned against misuse of the idea of the 'anonymous Christian'. In the part on Dialogue we read: 'In particular we should avoid using ideas such as "anonymous Christians", "the Christian presence", "the unknown Christ", in ways not intended by those who proposed them for theological purposes or in ways prejudicial to the self-understanding of Christians and others', *Ec. Review*, July 1977, 262.

A Roman Catholic scholar from India, Raymond Pannikar, goes even further. 'Because the human person is not just an individual, but also has a sociological and a historical dimension, salvation, through an inner and personal act of Christ, is prepared and normally carried out by external and visible means which we call sacraments. The good and *bona fide* Hindu is saved by Christ and not by Hinduism, but it is through the sacraments of Hinduism, through the message of morality and good life, through the Mysterion that comes down to him through Hinduism, that *Christ* saves the Hindu normally. This amounts to saying that Hinduism has also a place in the universal saving providence of God.'¹⁷

In a similar vein Hans Küng makes a distinction between the ordinary way of salvation in the world religions and the extraordinary way in the Church. Says Küng: 'A man is to be saved within the religion that is made available to him in his historical situation. Hence it is his right and his duty to seek God within that religion in which the hidden God has already found him.' Thus, according to him, the world religions are 'the way of salvation in universal salvation history; the general way of salvation, we can even say, for the people of the world religions: the more common, the 'ordinary' way of salvation, as against which the way of salvation in the Church appears as something very special and extraordinary.'¹⁸

All these views are based on the idea that the gospel is the fulfilment of that which, though in a hidden manner, is already p. 347 present in the non-Christian religion itself. In turn, the fulfilment theory itself is based on the well-known Roman Catholic distinction of nature and grace, or the natural and the supernatural. The latter is a kind of superstructure, built upon the former and restoring and elevating it, so that what is hidden in the natural revelation and obscured by the onslaught on sin may be brought to light and thus to its final fulfilment.

The World Mission Conferences

In the first half of this century several important World Mission Conference were held and all of them have dealt with the problem under discussion. Again it is not possible to discuss them at great length. As a matter of fact there have been many publications about them.¹⁹

As we have seen already, Edinburgh (1910) was rather optimistic about the future of Christian missions and of Christianity as a whole. Here too the 'fulfilment' idea played an important role. Some saw a continuous evolution from the non-Christian religions to Christianity as the summit of the religious development of the world. Others (e.g. A. G. Hogg) were of the opinion that both the Christian and the Hindu live in an equally real relationship to God. The report itself, however, although integrating many of these ideas, fully maintained the absoluteness and finality of the Christian gospel.²⁰

At the Conference of Jerusalem (1928) the idea of the fulfilment was still strongly present. Evangelical participants wanted to maintain the uniqueness and the universality of the Christian gospel. Some Anglo-Saxon theologians (e.g. W. E. Hocking), however,

¹⁷ Raymond Pannikar, *The Unknown Christ of Hinduism*, 1964, 54.

¹⁸ Hans Küng, *Christian Revelation and World Religions*, ed., Joseph Neuner, 1967, 52/3. Cf. also Küng, *On being a Christian*, 1978, 91.

¹⁹ Cf. Verkuyl, *op. cit.*, 350ff.; *A History of the Ecumenical Movement*, edited by Ruth Rouse and Stephen Charles Neill, 1954, 353-373; Eric S. Fife and Arthur F. Glasser, *Missions in Crisis*, 1962, 118ff. Cf. also the doctoral thesis of J. J. E. van Lin, *Protestantse theologie der godsdiensten. Van Edinburgh naar Tambaram (1910-1938)*, 1974.

²⁰ Cf. Van Lin, *op. cit.*, 32ff.

proceeded from the starting point of a world religion, in which all religions (including the Christian religion) are rooted. The conference report again contained many of these elements, without achieving a real synthesis. On the one hand, it stated that Jesus Christ is the ultimate revelation of the Father and that there is only one way of salvation; on the other hand, it also stated that rays of the light, which Christ is, are to be found in other religions (169ff.). Bishop Stephen Neill p. 348 later on concluded that the deliberations of the Jerusalem Conference could be regarded as 'the nadir of the modern missionary movement'. 'This was the moment at which liberal theology exercised its most fatal influence on missionary thinking, the lowest valley out of which the missionary movement has ever since been trying to make its way.'²¹

In the preparations for the third World Conference (to be held at Tambaram in 1938), two documents played an important part. In 1932 W. B. Hocking, a Harvard philosophy professor, wrote the report *Re-Thinking Missions* (1932). Under his leadership a group of prominent laymen had made a tour of world mission fields, later on known as the Laymen's Missionary Inquiry. The resulting publication strongly propagated the idea that all religions are ways to God and that Christianity, in co-operation with the non-Christian religions, should seek for the ultimate truth. Missionaries should be 'co-workers with the forces that are making for righteousness'.²² The report suggested that 'the relation between religions must take increasingly hereafter the form of a common search for truth' (47). In his report Hocking wrote: 'The missionary will look forward, not to the destruction of these religions, but to their continued existence with Christianity, each stimulating the other in growth toward the ultimate goal, unity in the completest religious truth' (443/4).

At the request of the International Board of Mission, the Dutch missionary Hendrik Kraemer wrote his book *The Christian Message in a non-Christian World*.²³ Deeply influenced by the theology of Karl Barth, who opposed religion to revelation as man's religiosity over against God's Word, Kraemer strongly emphasized that there is a deep gulf, a fundamental 'discontinuity', between the religions of man (including Christianity!) and God's revelation in Jesus Christ. 'To *decide* for Christ and the world he stands for implies a break with one's religious past, whether this past is "Christian" in the qualified sense of the word or non-Christian' (291). Kraemer emphatically rejected the 'fulfilment' idea. 'It will no more be permitted to call, as so often is done undiscerningly, sublime religious and moral achievements the pure and unmistakable evidence of divine revelation of the same sort and quality as the revelation in Jesus Christ' (122). Consequently Kraemer was a strong advocate of Christian mission. 'The great pathfinder [for every missionary] is the apostolic p. 349 urge to pave the way for Christ and stimulate the growth of communities consisting of Christian men and women, who in the way they express Christianity are not clumsy imitations of Western Christianities, but have the flavour of their own environment' (324).

Kraemer's book received rather mixed reactions. Some, especially those coming from the European continent, wholeheartedly supported his main line of thought. Others, in particular Anglo-Saxon and Asian theologians, rejected his strong emphasis on the idea of discontinuity and opted for continuity. A. G. Hogg, who for very many years taught in Madras, spoke for many belonging to the latter group, when he emphasized the reality of 'non-Christian faith'. 'Why ... am I so convinced of its actual existence? Most of all because

²¹ Stephen Neill, *The Unfinished Task*, 1957, 152.

²² W. F. Hocking, *Re-Thinking Missions*, 1932, 40.

²³ Cf. Van Lin, *op. cit.*, 276ff., 300ff.

I am sure I have already met with it. I have known and had fellowship with some for whom Christ was not the absolute Lord and only Saviour, who held beliefs of the typically Hindu colour, and yet who manifestly were no strangers to the life "hid in God".²⁴ He even goes so far as to reject the necessity of conversion for such people. 'If within non-Christian faiths, such fine levels of spiritual life [as in the case of Mahatma Gandhi] can be reached, why should Christian effort be directed towards getting men to change their religion instead of to make progress within the religion they possess?'²⁵

Liberal theology

To anyone who studies the history of the World Mission Conferences it is evident that already after Jerusalem a parting of the way was taking place. Liberal theology could not accept the traditional view of the uniqueness and finality of Jesus Christ and of the rejection of the other religions as legitimate and genuine ways to God. The report *Rethinking Missions* gave clear evidence of this. After Tambaram the same line of argument was presented by many Anglo-Saxon and Asian scholars.

In 1940 W. E. Hocking himself wrote a book entitled *Living Religions and a World Faith*, in which he advocated the idea that each person should remain in his own religion, but should also be willing to accept good elements from other religions. In this way this p. 350 person would arrive at a 'reconception', a new conception of his own religion, complemented and enriched by his contact with other religions.

In more recent days W. Cantwell Smith has ably defended the idea that the adherents of other religions are also 'people of faith'.²⁶ They too seek and find God. In one of his later publications he stated: 'I do not say that God was revealed in Jesus Christ, just like that, absolutely, impersonally; and I suggest that it is not a good thing to say. I do say that God has been revealed to me through Jesus Christ, and has been to many millions of people throughout history ... I suggest that in the future theology may profitably learn to speak a different language. God is not revealed fully in Jesus Christ to me, nor indeed to anyone that I have met; or that my historical studies have uncovered.'²⁷ Smith also made a contribution to the 1988 issue of the *International Review of Missions* that commemorated Tambaram 1938. He stated his belief that a new day has dawned in the world's religious history (373). In the 'one world' in which we live today we realize that the great religions are 'great movements of the human spirit', each 'of great spiritual depth, and many would now add, salvific force' (361). Today mission work can only be seen as sharing in God's great mission in this world. What began in Bethlehem is not God's only mission, but just part of it. 'Few of us Christians know much about God's mission in the Islamic venture; God's mission to India, and nowadays ... to the world, through the Hindu complex; God's mission to East Asia, and nowadays to the world, in the Buddhist movement' (366). This entire mission of God is the work of the Holy Spirit. Everyone who denies this is disloyal to Christ and is blaspheming God (367)!

Similar ideas are to be found in the publications of John Hick. He is of the opinion that we are witnessing a Copernican revolution in theology. This revolution consists in a shift

²⁴ A. G. Hogg, 'The Christian Attitude to Non-Christian Faith', *The Authority of the Faith*, Vol. 1 of the Tambaram Series, 1939, 101.

²⁵ *Op. cit.*, 106. It must be pointed out, however, that in a book that he wrote in 1947, *The Christian Message to the Hindu*, Hogg said to a Hindu 'caste-convert': 'The injunction "Follow Me" includes the further command "Join My Church"' (1942).

²⁶ Cf. W. C. Smith, *Faith and Belief*, 1979.

²⁷ W. C. Smith, *Towards a World Theology*, 1981, 174.

‘from the dogma that Christianity is at the centre to the realization that it is *God* who is at the centre, and that all the religions of mankind, including our own, serve and revolve around him.’²⁸ In a more recent publication he states: God ‘is the sun, the originative source of light and life, whom all the religions reflect in their own different ways.’²⁹ But what then about Jesus Christ as the true incarnation of God? According to Hick p. 351 we must take these expressions not as statements of fact, but as poetic or symbolic or mythological language (55).³⁰ It means that Jesus is ‘our sufficient, effective and saving point of contact with God’, but we are no longer forced to say that he is man’s ‘one and only effective point of contact with God’ (56).³¹

The Ecumenical Movement

How did the ecumenical movement, especially as it is embodied in the World Council of Churches, deal with the issue under discussion? in many ways the WCC is a continuation of what had started in the great World Mission Conferences.

In the first period of its existence the WCC was dominated by postwar biblical theology, which stressed the authority and unity of Scripture. An able expositor of this biblical theology was the first general secretary, Dr. W. Visser ‘t Hooft. His was a Christ-centred biblical theology, which was well expounded, for instance, in his book *No Other Name*. In this book he turned against all forms of syncretism and in particular rejected the syncretism that was expressed in the Sufi-hymn:

O God, in every temple I find people that seek thee
In every language I hear spoken, people praise thee ...
Sometimes I frequent the Christian cloister and sometimes the mosque
But it is thou whom I search for from temple to temple.³²

Over against this syncretism he sets the claim of the Christian gospel. In line with the view of H. Kraemer he states: ‘Christianity understands itself not as one of several religions, but as the adequate and definitive revelation of God in history. To classify this faith as one of the expressions of a general phenomenon called religion is to set it in a framework Which is foreign to its nature ... It is high time that Christians should rediscover that the very heart of their faith is that Jesus Christ did not come to make a contribution to the religious storehouse of mankind, but that in him God reconciled the world unto himself’. (95) p. 352

Gradually, however, the necessity of a sincere dialogue with people of other faiths and ideologies came increasingly to the fore within WCC circles. Already in the very first paragraph of the introduction to the report on ‘Witness’, adopted by New Delhi (1961), we read: ‘Christ loves the world, which he died to save. He is already the light of the world, of which he is the Lord, and his light has preceded the bearers of the good news into the darkest places. The task of Christian witness is to point to him as the true light, which is already shining. In Christ was life, and the life was the light of men, the light that

²⁸ John Hick, *God and the Universe of Faiths*, 1973, 131.

²⁹ John Hick, *God has Many Names*, 1980, 52.

³⁰ In defence of this view Hick appeals to the result of modern biblical criticism, cf. 54.

³¹ Carl E. Braaten has rightly pointed out that Hick’s view is nothing but ‘a popularized reissue of Troeltsch’s Copernican revolution’, but lacking the fullness and complexity of Troeltsch’s vision. ‘It is a sheer return to a pre-Barthian theology of the History-of-Religions School.’ Cf. ‘The Problem of the Absoluteness of Christianity’, *Interpretation*, October 1986, 348.

³² *Op. cit.*, 1962, 84.

enlightens every man. The work of evangelism is necessary in this and in every age in order that the blind eyes may be opened to the splendour of light.’³³ On the following pages we read that Christians will go forth with joyful confidence, ‘knowing that the Holy Spirit will lead them *to where Christ already is*’ and that they must be sensitive to ‘the ceaseless work of the Holy Spirit *among men*’. The report affirms the necessity of missions, but also states: ‘We must take up the conversations about Christ with them, knowing that Christ addresses them through us and us through them’ (82). It is not at all surprising that in the last part the word ‘dialogue’ suddenly appears. ‘Dialogue is a form of evangelism which is often effective today’. (84)

At the World Mission Conference at Mexico City (1963), much attention was given to the idea of dialogue. The term was not seen primarily as the indication of a certain method or technique, but rather as the description of an basic attitude that characterizes the Christian in his encounter with people of other faiths. At the Kandy (Sri Lanka) Consultation in 1967 the theme was ‘Christian Dialogue with Men of Other Faiths’. At Uppsala, 1968, the term played an important part in the report on ‘Renewal in Mission’. Already in the first part we read: ‘The meeting with men of other faiths or of no faith must lead to dialogue.’ The report immediately adds: ‘A Christian’s dialogue with another implies neither a denial of the uniqueness of Christ, nor any loss of his own commitment to Christ, but rather that a genuinely Christian approach to others must be human, personal, relevant and humble.’ In other words, the emphasis is again on the basic attitude.

The Assembly of Nairobi (1975) meant another step forward on the same road. Section II dealt with the theme ‘Seeking Community: The common search of people of various faiths, cultures and ideologies’. At the invitation of the Central Committee some representatives of other religions were present at the Assembly (a Hindu, a Buddhist, a Jewish rabbi, a Muslim, and a Sikh) and they all took part in the p.353 deliberations of the section. The report itself shows much confusion, mainly owing to the fact that various concepts and levels of dialogue were mixed together. When the first draft was presented, it created quite a chaos. Several delegates wondered whether there were not a tendency toward syncretism! After much discussion the draft was augmented by a preamble that clearly rejected syncretism.³⁴ But this only applied to crude forms of syncretism. What about the more refined forms? In the second round of discussions the Indian theologian Russell Chandran openly stated that he rejected Kraemer’s view and continued: ‘In a genuine sense, our knowledge and experience of Christ is enriched by the response of people of other faiths. Witnessing to Christ is, therefore, a two-way movement of mutual learning and enrichment. The Church which evangelizes is also evangelized in the sense that its knowledge of Jesus Christ and his gospel is deepened by the response of those to whom the gospel is proclaimed ... Therefore those who preach Christ to people of other faiths should also be willing and expectant to learn about the fullness of the reality of Christ by listening to what they have to say in witness of their faith’ (71). The chairman of the Central committee, Dr. M. M. Thomas, made a plea for a ‘Christ-centred syncretism’ (236). The report in its final form could not agree about the answer to the question whether or not Jesus Christ is at work among people of other faiths. Several answers were enumerated, without a choice being made.

The Theological Consultation on ‘Dialogue in Community’, held at Chiang Mai, Thailand, 1977, produced a cautious document. Paul G. Schrotenboer, the retired General

³³ *The New Delhi Report*, 1961, 77.

³⁴ *Breaking Barriers*, 73.

Secretary of the Reformed Ecumenical Council, is of the opinion that this document is 'better than anything that the WCC produced previously on the subject'.³⁵ There is a clear awareness of the danger of syncretism in both its crude and its more refined forms. As we already have seen the document asks some very pertinent questions with which we all have to grapple. As a matter of fact, the document as a whole contains more questions than answers! Some of these questions and statements, however, are rather disquieting for Evangelicals. What should we think of the idea, held by some, that there is 'a sense of communion with all peoples and everything which is made holy by the work of God in communities of faith and ideology beyond our own'?³⁶ Or of the assurance given to the partners p. 354 in dialogue 'that we come not as manipulators but as genuine fellow pilgrims, to speak with them of what we believe God to have done in Jesus Christ who has gone before us, but whom we seek to meet anew in dialogue' (261)? Or of the statement that problems concerning the authority of the Bible remain unsolved and of the need to give much closer attention to the problem of relating Christian worship and the meditative use of the holy books of other faiths (259/60)?

At Vancouver (1983) a real problem arose, when one of the first drafts contained the sentence: 'While affirming the uniqueness of the birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus to which we bear witness we recognize God's creative work in the religious experience of people of other faiths.' At the plenary many interventions centred their comments on this phrase. Ultimately the last part of it was altered as follows: 'We recognize God's creative work in the seeking for religious truth among people of other faiths.'³⁷ I believe that Schrotenboer is right when he concludes about the position of the WCC on dialogue: 'There seems to be an unresolved tension on the one hand between their claims of the truth of the gospel and on the other the acknowledgment of redemptive truth in all religions.'³⁸

Some 'ecumenical' theologians

Theologians who play an important role within the WCC sometimes go much further, in particular theologians from Asia. In an article from 1977 on the topic 'Towards a Theology of Dialogue'³⁹ S. Wesley Ariarajah, a Methodist minister from Sri Lanka, very bluntly states that Christians in Asia, Africa and Latin America must extract themselves out of the 'Teutonic captivity' of Christian theology. This means the recognition that one of the sins of our past has been to absolutize the Christian religion and theology, implying that the other religions were false or, at any rate, 'not true'. Ariarajah rejects such an absolutization emphatically. The 'stories' of the other religions are just as valid as that of the Christian tradition, which has taken the form of the creation-fall-redemption story. But we all know that this too is not more than a 'story'. As Christians we should not try to break down the stories of the others, but rather try to express the Christian experience within their conceptual framework. In order to be able to do this we need a much broader concept of revelation than is customary in Protestantism. p. 355 He also condemns the attitude of Christians who oppose dialogue by quoting such words as: 'No man can come to the Father except through me', or: 'I am the way, the truth and the life'. Such an opposition is based upon an outmoded understanding of the Bible. In the line of Bultmann

³⁵ Paul G. Schrotenboer, 'Inter-Religious Dialogue', *Evangelical Review of Theology*, July 1988, 213.

³⁶ *Ec. Review*, July 1977, 259.

³⁷ Emilio Castro, 'Mission in a Pluralistic Age', *IRM*, 1986, 198.

³⁸ *Art. cit.*, 214.

³⁹ *Ec. Review*, January 1977, 3-11.

he makes a radical separation of faith itself from the outmoded forms and languages in which it is presented. The 'faith statements' about Jesus are still important but have no binding authority. 'No Scripture is more valid or more true than another ... There is no reason why the Hindu Scriptures should not be meaningful and provide the context of faith in Jesus Christ for an Indian Christian' (9). There is no reason either to see the church as an exceptional, unique community. The divine love for all humankind and the divine Lordship over all life completely exclude any idea 'that salvation occurs only in one stream of history, which is limited in time to the last nineteen centuries and in space to those areas to which the missionaries went' (10). The only thing that is particular about the Christian community is 'that it has come to accept the event of Jesus Christ as a decisively significant event in the whole history of humankind' (11).

Similar ideas are propounded by Stanley J. Samartha, the former director of the WCC Unit on Dialogue.⁴⁰ He is also a typical representative of the post-Kraemer theology. In the present situation it is no longer possible to start from the exclusivity of the divine revelation in Jesus Christ. Although we as Christians firmly believe in the Lordship of Christ, we should not see the particularity of his lordship in terms of the rejection of other lordships but rather in terms of relationships.⁴¹ Only God is Absolute, all religions are relative. Therefore, 'Mount Sinai should look at river Ganga; and river Ganga at Mount Sinai. There is no reason to claim that the religion developed in the Sinai desert is superior to that developed on the banks of the Ganga' (99).⁴²

Here ecumenical and liberal theologians close their ranks.⁴³ And the consequences are undeniably very serious. Jesus becomes 'a' significant event in God's dealing with humankind. There is no place for the concept of 'salvation history', as used in Christian theology and indicating the special place of the Jewish nation and of the Christian church in God's self-revelation to this world.⁴⁴ The authority of Scripture is given up, for 'no one Scripture is more valid or true than another' (9). This actually means that there are no criteria by which different concepts of God may be tested. We arrive here at pure subjectivity and pure relativity⁴⁵ and the final upshot may even be unadulterated polytheism. As a matter of fact we find just that in the following statement of Tom Drive: 'God has different "natures". In pluralist perspective, it is not simply that God has one nature variously and inadequately expressed by different religious traditions. It is that there are real and genuine differences within the Godhead itself, owing to the manifold involvement that God has undertaken with the great variety of human communities.'⁴⁶ The final answer that is given here to the question what to think of the non-Christian religions is that of pure syncretism. The Sufi hymn, part of which we quoted before, has won the day!

⁴⁰ Cf. his article 'Mission in a Religiously Plural World', *IRM*, 1988, 311–324.

⁴¹ Stanley J. Samartha, *Courage for Dialogue*, 1981, 97.

⁴² Cf. also the essay 'Ganga and Galilee: Two Responses to Truth', *op cit.*, 142–157. Here he states that 'the Hindu and the Christian have their own particularly distinctive contribution to make to the common quest for truth' (153).

⁴³ In the essay mentioned in the previous note Samartha openly joins in with such liberal theologians as John Hick and Paul Knitter (142, 153f.).

⁴⁴ Cf. Ariarajah, *art. cit.*, 11.

⁴⁵ Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 1989, 161ff.

⁴⁶ Tom Drive, in *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness*, edited by Paul Knitter and John Hick, 198, 212.

Evangelical Theology

Evangelical theology has always rejected all forms of syncretism. It strongly upheld the uniqueness of Jesus of Christ as the only saving revelation of God and generally regarded the other religions as false religions, in which sinful man seeks to save himself on the basis of his own piety and religiosity.

Again I must restrict myself to a few names which I regard as important. In 1950 the British Inter-Varsity Fellowship published a collection of essays under the title *The World's Religions*. The editor, J. N. D. Anderson, wrote an epilogue in which he acknowledged that the Christian 'will find much in those who follow other religions which will rebuke, instruct and inspire him, as, for instance, the Muslim's fidelity in prayer and fast, the Buddhist's dignified self-discipline and the Sadhu's detachment from the things of time and sense' (190). But these matters regard practice rather than dogma. 'In regard to the content of faith, the Christian will neither want nor dare to meddle ..., for he knows that his faith is not man-made but God-revealed, and therefore of universal validity; and he bases this conviction on the deity, authority, and exclusive claims of the historical Christ.' He cannot see the other religions as 'forerunners or harbingers of the full p. 357 revelation in Christ' (191). Although the Christian will trace all that is best in non-Christian religions to its ultimate source and origin (Christ, who said: 'I am the truth' and who is 'the light that lighteth very man'), he nevertheless must regard these religious systems as 'Satanic substitutes, however, good they may be in parts' (192).

We find the same line of argument in the works of my own former teacher, the late Dutch missiologist J. H. Bavinck. In his *Introduction to the Science of Missions*⁴⁷ he has a section on 'elenctics', by which he understand the science that is concerned with the conviction of sin. Its task is to unmask to heathendom all false religions as sin against God and to call heathendom to a knowledge of the only true God (222). He does not deny that each person, however deeply fallen, is within the reach of God's common grace, but fallen man is 'always secretly busy escaping from God' (228). We should also be very cautious in speaking about moments of truth in the other religions, for we may not forget that these moments always function within a framework that is intrinsically evil and therefore have a content different from the same words in the Christian religion. The only one who can really reach the heathen and convict him of sin is the Holy Spirit himself (229).

Bishop Stephen Neill, who may not have regarded himself as an evangelical in the strict sense of the term but who shared many of the evangelical convictions, wrote in his book *The Unfinished Task*: 'We must not let sympathy, or respect, or personal friendship, blind us. Christ is a destroyer as well as a fulfiller. In him every partial or measured truth will find its full and perfect radiance, but only by passing through the experience of death and resurrection. Christianity is not identical with other faiths. If Jesus is the truth, and his Gospel the message for all men, then the Word of God as it comes to us through him is unique, and there is literally no other name under given among men whereby we may be saved. On that we have no right to compromise.'⁴⁸

In the famous Lausanne Covenant of the International Congress on World Evangelization (1974), evangelicals from all over the world professed: 'We affirm that there is only one Saviour and only one Gospel ... 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

⁴⁷ Published in English in 1960, but the Dutch edition was from 1954.

⁴⁸ *Op. cit.*, 1957, 193.

speaks equally through all p. 358 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.’⁴⁹

Johannes Verkuyl, Bavinck’s successor to the chair of missiology in the Free University of Amsterdam, has made a deep study of the *theologia religionum* in several of his works. He fully maintains the finality of Jesus Christ. ‘He is unique, incomparable, irreplaceable and decisive for all ages and peoples’.⁵⁰ Yet he also tries to do as much justice as possible to the non-Christian religions. He does reject, however, the theological *a priori* of such Roman Catholic theologians as Rahner and Panikkar, who regard the other religious systems as ways of salvation, as long as they have not yet met Christ (480). But with W. Pannenberg he does believe that the indestructible urge to religiosity in man manifests that no human being is detached from the transcendental reality of God (479). He himself approaches the problem of the other religions within a trinitarian framework. At times he goes far in his positive appreciation of what he finds in these religions. We give a quotation from each part of his trinitarian approach. From the part about God the Father: ‘How was God involved when the Vedas were being transmitted? What went on between God and Gautama Buddha when the latter received the Bodhi? What transpired between God and Mohammed when he meditated in the grotto?’ (356) From the part about Christ: ‘A theologian of religions who remembers this christological dimension will keep looking for evidences of this Christ who is ceaselessly active; he will be alert for signs of the messianic kingdom in the religious life of mankind both inside and outside the church’ (359). From the part about the Spirit: the convert need not leave everything of his former life behind: ‘His manner of being, living, and thinking may well contain much that stems from God himself, which, when placed within the context of a Christocentric universalism and directed toward Christ can shoot forth in new blossom’ (360). It is not surprising that Verkuyl is strongly in favour of dialogue with the adherents of other religions. At the same time he believes that every successful dialogue is dependent on the work of the Holy Spirit.

In his book *Christian Mission in the Modern World* John Stott, who was also the principal drafter of the Lausanne Covenant, closely follows J. H. Bavinck and fully approves of his idea of elenctics. ‘No p. 359 Christian who accepts the biblical view of the evil of idolatry on the one hand and of the finality of Jesus Christ on the other can escape [the very concept of elenctics].’⁵¹ It is therefore no wonder that in the final chapter of his book he strongly advocates the need for conversion. ‘It is our solemn duty to affirm that those to whom we announce the gospel and address our appeal are ‘perishing’. We proclaim to them the good news of Jesus not because they are saved already but in order that they may be saved from perishing’ (111).

Canon Max Warren also strongly stresses the great need for us today to obey the Great Commission. He utterly rejects all facile talk of ‘different roads to the summit, as if Jesus were in no particular and distinctive sense “the Way, the Truth and the Life” ’.⁵² But he is also close to Verkuyl, when he believes that we need a conversation with the people of other faiths at the foot of the cross of Calvary and that there and then ‘we may expect to discover a Jesus *incognito*’ (151). We are therefore not surprised that he closes the

⁴⁹ *Let the Earth Hear His Voice*, ed. J. D. Douglas, 1975, 3/4.

⁵⁰ J. Verkuyl, *op. cit.*, 358.

⁵¹ *Op. cit.*, 1975, 60.

⁵² Max Warren, *I Believe in the Great Commission*, 1976, 150.

chapter on 'The Christian Response to Religious Pluralism' with the words: 'How exciting it is to live in a world of religious pluralism such as we are experiencing today. What a wonderful opportunity that religious pluralism offers to Christians and to everyone else to make a new discovery of Jesus Christ. How gratefully we should accept God's providential challenge.'⁵³

In 1982 the First Conference of Evangelical Mission Theologians was held at Bangkok. Its papers and findings were published in *Sharing Jesus in the Two Thirds World*, edited by the Indian theologian Vinay Samuel and the English Chris Sugden. In the introduction they state that many of the participants 'questioned the adequacy of the European and North American missionary understanding of the gospel'.⁵⁴ In its findings the conference expressed its deep concern that 'the churches of the Two Thirds world are in danger of bondage to alien categories' (277) and recognized that 'our Christological task is carried out in dialogue with people from other religious traditions' (278). In their own paper the editors deal with the 'dialogue with other religions' (122–140). They believe that it is time for evangelicals to put this dialogue on their agenda (128, 131). With approval they quote the statement made at Nairobi, 1975, by Lynn A. de Silva (Sri Lanka): 'Dialogue, far from being a temptation to syncretism, is a safeguard against it, because in dialogue we get to know one another's faith in p. 360 depth. One's own faith is tested and refined and sharpened thereby. The real test of faith is faiths-in-relation.' (132) They see, among others, the following questionable assumptions underlying the fear of dialogue on the side of evangelicals: (1) the assumption that both Christianity and paganism are closed systems which are both already clearly defined; (2) the stress on the uniqueness of God in Christ at the expense of the universality of God at work throughout all history; (3) the assumption that all religions are primarily a matter of faith and belief, and that we must confront them with our own belief system (132f.). At the close of their paper they formulate an agenda for dialogue, in which many of the burning issues that call for further reflection are enumerated (135ff.).

The last author I want to mention is Lesslie Newbigin. As early as 1968, when he was still Bishop of Madras, he wrote the fine booklet *The Finality of Christ*, in which he stated: 'To claim finality for Christ is to endorse the judgment of the apostles that in this [Christ's] life, death and resurrection God himself was uniquely present and that therefore the meaning and origin and end of all things was disclosed; it is to join with the apostles in making this judgment.' (76). Last year he wrote a new book on the same topic, but in a broader perspective: *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*. Here he strongly opposes the views of Paul Knitter, John Hick and the authors of the essays that were published in the July 1985 issue of *IRM*, in commemoration of the fiftieth anniversary of Tambaram. Again he firmly upholds the finality of Christ (159f.) and denies that this idea is culturally conditioned. 'The gospel is not just the illustration (even the best illustration) of an idea. It is the story of actions by which the human situation is irreversibly changed' (166). At the same time he rejects the 'exclusivist' view which holds 'that all who do not accept Jesus as Lord and Saviour are eternally lost' (173). But the 'inclusivist' position which 'acknowledges Christ as the only Saviour but affirms that his saving work extends beyond the bounds of the visible church' does not satisfy him either. His own view is well summarized in the following convictions: 'I believe that we must begin with the great reality made known to us in Jesus Christ, 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

⁵³ *Op. cit.*, 170.

⁵⁴ *Op. cit.*, 1983, ix.

all creation and to all human beings ... 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 none in whom that grace does not evoke some response—however feeble, fitful, and flawed' (175). p. 361

THEOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS

I begin with some preliminary remarks.

1. As evangelicals we have given *comparatively scant attention* to these problems. Quite often we dismissed them as 'unreal', for it was quite clear to us that only those who believe in Jesus Christ will be saved. Full stop! When other theologians spent much more time and energy on these problems, we usually agreed to disagree with their solutions and left it at that. Full stop! If we did pay attention to the problems involved we were usually much better in asking questions than giving answers.⁵⁵

2. We should take as our starting point the *authority of Scripture*. The main weakness of the greater part of the ecumenical discussion of our subject is that it does not recognize this authority. It is impossible to find an answer to the difficult questions under discussion if one agrees with S. Wesley Ariarajah's statement that 'no one Scripture is more valid or true than a reflection of 'the faith and belief of the people who composed reflection them'.⁵⁶ Chiang Mai did not help much either. It did ask some pertinent questions on this point, but did not give any answer to its own questions.⁵⁷ For us as evangelicals the authority of Scripture is decisive. I think we all agree with what H. Kraemer said in his paper after Tambaram: 'In all my reasoning and in all my efforts to formulate my opinion, I take my starting point *within* the realm of the Christian revelation. From it I take my standards of judgment and evaluation. The Christian revelation is my authoritative guide and no other principle or standpoint.'⁵⁸ But I think we also agree with him when he acknowledges that his great problem is that he has only a partial and imperfect understanding of this revelation and that he needs the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

3. However, Scripture is not the only factor that determines our thinking. Every text, including that of Scripture, is always written in the particular *context* in which the writer finds himself and it is read and interpreted in the particular context in which the reader finds himself. It is striking, for instance, that the way in which the apostles preach the gospel to the Jews is different from their preaching to the non-Jews. It is the same gospel, but they use a different terminology, p. 362 and the emphasis is also different. When one compares Peter's 'sermons' in [Acts 2](#) and [4](#) with Paul's 'sermons' in [Acts 14](#) and [17](#), they appear to be quite different in approach and structure. For instance, while Peter emphasizes that Jesus is the Christ, the God-given Messiah, Paul does not use this term. Today we are living in an entirely different historical and cultural setting. This new setting does not mean a changed gospel, but it does mean that we come to the very same gospel with different questions and that we have to listen with fresh attention, expecting new answers from this inexhaustible source.

⁵⁵ Cf. the agenda for dialogue given by Samuel and Sugden, *op. cit.*, 135ff. and Schrotenboer, *art. cit.*, 224f.

⁵⁶ *Ec. Review*, 1977, 9.

⁵⁷ *Ec. Review*, 1977, 163.

⁵⁸ H. Kraemer, 'Continuity and discontinuity', in *The Authority of Faith*, Vol. 1 of *The Tambaram Series*, 1939, 7.

4. This is not to say that we may come to the gospel with any question we like. Certain questions may even put us on the wrong track! An example is the question often asked in evangelical circles: *Will all who do not believe in Jesus Christ be lost for ever?* Many evangelicals are inclined to answer this question with a quick and straightforward affirmative. I remember that when in 1968 I attended the World Congress on Evangelism in Singapore we had a special conference hymn that spoke of the billions that were lost. After one or two days I felt unable to sing that hymn any more. How can one praise the Lord with full dedication, while in the same breath one expresses the judgment that billions are lost? We already encountered something similar in the statement of the Chicago Congress, 1960, which I quoted before: since the Second World War about half a billion people have gone to the torment of hell fire, because they did not hear of Jesus Christ. I believe such statements go beyond what we are allowed to say. In his *Reformed Dogmatics* the Dutch theologian Herman Bavinck rightly wrote: 'With regard to the salvation of the heathen and of children dying in infancy, we can, on the basis of Scripture, only refrain from a definite judgment, in either a positive or negative sense.'⁵⁹ Lesslie Newbigin, who for many years worked as a missionary in India and later on served as a bishop of the Church of South India, also finds it hard to believe that all who do not consciously accept Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour are eternally lost.⁶⁰ His main ground is the same as that of Bavinck: it has not been revealed to us. Says Newbigin: 'It is a question to which God alone has the right to give the answer' (177). He further adds that the question is wrong because it starts with man instead of starting with God and his glory (179). 'The gospel ... shifts the centre from the self and its desires to God and his glory.' Summarizing his argument p. 363 he says: 'Who is going to be saved at the end? That is a question which God alone will answer, and it is arrogant presumption on the part of theologians to suppose that it is their business to answer it. We have to begin with the mighty work of grace in Jesus Christ and ask, How is he to be honoured and glorified? The goal of missions is the glory of God' (180).⁶¹

5. My last preliminary remark is that all parties in this debate agree that man is 'incurably religious'. This is due to two factors. (a) Man was created in the image of God and therefore designed for communion with God. (b) God himself continues to reveal himself to man, even after the Fall. J. Blauw rightly says: 'A man without "religion" is a contradiction in itself. In his "religion" man gives account of his relation to God. His religion is reaction upon the (real or pretended) revelation of God. Man is "incurably religious" because his relation to God belong to the very essence of man himself. Man is only man as man before God.'⁶²

But how to evaluate this 'religiousness' of man? In my opinion there are two 'solutions' that lead us into a *cul-de-sac*.

The exclusivist view

This is the traditional evangelical view, as we noted in our brief survey of evangelical theology. Only those who know the gospel and consciously believe in Jesus Christ will be

⁵⁹ H. Bavinck, *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek*, vol. 4, 708.

⁶⁰ *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 173f. and 177ff.

⁶¹ In a discussion with W. Visser 't Hooft, Dr. Ariarajah called this view 'theological neutrality', which can no longer be maintained in our age (*IRM* 1, 1985, 420/1). In reality, however, it has nothing to do with neutrality. It is the attitude of faith which respectfully leaves the secret things to the Lord (cf. [Deut. 19:29](#)).

⁶² J. Blauw, 'The Biblical View of Man in his Religion', in H. G. Anderson (ed.), *The Theology of the Christian Mission*, 1961, 32.

saved. It is also the traditional view in my own Reformed tradition. J. H. Bavinck speaks for it when he states that we must distinguish between the general and the special revelation. In his general revelation God has revealed and still is revealing himself to every human being. Ever since the creation of the world he makes known 'his invisible nature, namely, his eternal power and deity' ([Rom. 1:20](#)). This very formulation shows already that this general revelation does not impart saving knowledge. Yet this revelation in itself is not defective. If man had not fallen into sin, it would be sufficient for a believing relationship with God. But man *has* fallen and by his wickedness he now 'suppresses' the truth of this revelation ([Rom. 1:18](#)) and consequently falls into the sin of idolatry, which is foolishness. It is such, because [p. 364](#) behind it 'there lies hidden rebellion against God, vain illusion, and self-deceit'.⁶³ John Stott follows this same line of thought. After dealing with such passages as [Acts 10:34, 35](#); [Acts 14:16, 17](#); and [John 1:1-3](#), he summarizes his interpretation as follows: 'The witness ... of Peter, Paul and John is uniform. All three declare the constant activity of God in the non-Christian world. God has not left himself without witness. He reveals himself in nature. He is not far from any man. He gives light to every man. But man rejects the knowledge he has, prefers the darkness to light and does not acknowledge the God he knows. His knowledge does not save him; it condemns him for his disobedience. Even his religiosity is a subtle escape from the God he is afraid and ashamed to meet.'⁶⁴

Karl Barth and Hendrik Kraemer had similar views. On the basis of his so-called Christomonism, Barth in the first volumes of his *Church Dogmatics* rejected all divine self-revelation outside Christ and declared all religion, even the Christian religion, to be sheer 'unbelief'.⁶⁵ Kraemer followed him on this path. He, too, stated: 'The Christian revelation testifies to the self-disclosure of God in Jesus Christ, the Crucified and Risen Lord, which is a "stumbling block" to the Jew, "sheer folly" to the Gentiles, and only adorable and saving mystery to the eye of faith. Revelation in Christ is a free divine act of redemptive irruption into the life of man and of the world. This is an offence to man, because all philosophy, all idealistic religion, all consistent mystical religion, all moralism meet in one point. They constitute various endeavours for self-redemption, and instinctively reject the truth that God and God alone can work redemption.'⁶⁶ In one of his last books he repeated this same view and wrote that in the light of Christ (and not in that of Christianity!) 'the first thing we must say *point-blanc* about the "other" religions is that in their deepest and most essential intentions all of them are errors'.⁶⁷

In this exclusivist view all emphasis is on 'discontinuity', to borrow Kraemer's famous term. But is this really all that is to be said? It is striking to see that many of the authors whom I just quoted also acknowledge that there is more to it. Bavinck, for instance, also quotes with approval a missionary who for many years worked in a prison in Pretoria, South Africa, and who wrote: 'I have frequently found God in the soul of the South African Bantu [= the black]. [p. 365](#) Certainly it is not the full revelation of the Father. But nevertheless, God himself is the one who lies hidden behind a curtain, as a shadowy figure, but the main outline is visible. A surprising and glorious experience! And when I experienced the moment that a soul surrenders, I understood that the Master had been

⁶³ *Introduction*, 228.

⁶⁴ *Op. cit.*, 69.

⁶⁵ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, Vol. I 2, 299ff.

⁶⁶ *The Christian Message in a Non-Christian World*, 70.

⁶⁷ H. Kraemer, *Why Christianity of All Religions?* Dutch edn., 1960, 88.

there earlier.' (227) And after Tambaram Kraemer felt compelled to admit that Barth's view did not wholly satisfy him. Barth left unanswered too many questions that cannot be ignored. Such as: 'Were those who lived under the sway of the non-Christian religions entirely left to their own devices, or has God also somehow worked in them? If it is true that there is much that is true, good and beautiful in the non-Christian religions, what is their relation to God and his working in man?'⁶⁸ In his later book Kraemer also states emphatically that he does not mean to say that the 'other' religions are erroneous in their totality and in every aspect.⁶⁹

The inclusivist position

Must we then go to the other extreme and adopt the inclusivist position? As we have seen in the first part of this paper, this solution is very current in present-day theology. We discovered it in the 'fulfilment' idea which is so popular in Roman Catholic theology, especially since Vatican II. We found it in Rahner and Küng. We recognized it in the writings of Hick and Cantwell Smith. It is almost everywhere. To mention one more example, the Japanese theologian Kosuke Koyama is of the opinion that the Christian mission should not only be ready to respect the tradition of the other, but also to hear speaking through it the voice of the Christ who stands outside our understanding of him. 'For Christ names his own name ... Our joy is simply to acknowledge that name wherever we recognize it, be it in a Presbyterian Kirk or a Buddhist temple.'⁷⁰

Naturally all these theologians try to find some theological foundation for their inclusivist position. It is striking, however, how varied these arguments are. Without aiming at completeness I mention the following. 1. The *christological* argument. This often takes different forms, but generally it amounts to some kind of cosmic Christ or Christ-principle. The unknown Christ is present in Hinduism (Pannikar). Christ's work of salvation is the completion of his work of creation p. 366 (Camps⁷¹). We should search for a Christ-centred syncretism (Thomas⁷²). 2. The *pneumatological* argument. W. Cantwell Smith argues that God through his Spirit is constantly and everywhere at work. We should therefore not set ecclesiastical frontiers to his activity.⁷³ 3. The *theocentric* argument. According to Hick we should go through the Copernican revolution of moving from the christocentric to the theocentric perspective. 'The universe of faith centres upon *God*, and not upon Christianity or upon any other religion ... This means that the different world religions have each served as God's means of revelation.'⁷⁴ 4. The *soteriological* argument. Christopher Duraisingh, general secretary of the Council for World Mission, rejects the dilemma of 'theocentric' or 'christocentric' and opts for a 'soteriocentric' approach.⁷⁵ We should engage in 'a common search for salvation'. Paul Knitter also prefers this 'salvation-

⁶⁸ H. Kraemer, in *The Authority of Faith*, 22.

⁶⁹ *Why Christianity of All Religions?*, 93. Cf. also L. Newbigin, *op. cit.*, 172ff.

⁷⁰ *One World*, July/August, 1977, 9.

⁷¹ A. Camps, *Christendom en de godsdiensten der wereld*, 1976, 37ff.

⁷² M. M. Thomas, *Man and the Universe of Faith*, 1975. Cf. also his paper at the National Assembly, 1975, and the article: 'The Absoluteness of Jesus Christ and Christ-centred Syncretism'. *Ec. Review*, 1985, 387-397.

⁷³ *Op. cit.*, 366.

⁷⁴ *Op. cit.*, 52.

⁷⁵ 'Issues in Mission and Dialogue: Some Reflections', *IRM* 1988, 398ff.

centred' approach, for it would call on the different religious believers to work for a 'shared liberative praxis'.⁷⁶ 5. The *kingdom-perspective* argument. Emilio Castro, the general secretary of the WCC, believes that our mission work should not be done as 'a limited movement from one centre, the remembrance and adoration of Jesus Christ', but 'within the wider frame of the kingdom of God and especially of the eschatological perspective of that concept'.⁷⁷ We should not forget that 'in the biblical revelation we have the names of people who were part of God's overall plan, totally outside of the direct history of Israel'.

All these arguments, however well they may be intended, are not convincing. Some are based on the old idea of a *theologia naturalis*. Others are new forms of the old 'fulfilment' theory. But whatever their form, underlying nearly all of them is the idea that somewhere in the depth of all religions there is a fundamental unity of divine self-revelation, a unity that later on has become manifest in an exemplary way in Jesus Christ. In other words, the basic line of thought in most of these views is that of 'continuity' between the essential tendencies and aspirations of the great religions and the p. 367 divine self-revelation of Kraemer's great book P. Chenchiah admitted: 'If we take the "revelation" claimed in different religions, we have to confess that they do not piece together or form an intelligible whole. The Vedas, the Koran, the Gospel do not make a coherent scheme. They do not even answer the same questions.'⁷⁸ He maintains that it is simply untrue that Christianity satisfies the Hindu search for salvation. 'Jesus kindles new hopes *not* felt before and kills some of the deepest and persistent longings of man.' (6) Kraemer himself pointed out that even the *bhakti* religion, which does know of grace and experience, is 'fundamentally anthropocentric, as all good monistic, mystic Hindu religion is'.⁷⁹

Each solution mentioned so far appears to be a *cul-de-sac*. But which way should we go then? Or are we facing an insoluble dilemma? Let us turn to the biblical evidence and try to find out where it leads us.

Old Testament

We start with the Old Testament. From the very outset we notice a strong tension at this very point. It is the tension between the universal and the particular. In the Old Testament we find the broad panorama of the history of salvation, in which God is dealing with mankind. It starts on a universal level. After creation and fall God continues to deal with the whole of mankind. He does the same after the Flood, making in Noah a covenant with all of humankind. But when new generations arise they deviate from the living God and fashion gods after their own image. Then God calls Abraham and the era of particularism starts.

But how did Abraham know that it was God who called him? There are many obscure points here, which we can hardly understand. Christopher J. H. Wright has pointed out

⁷⁶ 'Theocentric Christology: Defended and Transcended', *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, Vol. 24 (Winter, 1987), 47.

⁷⁷ 'Mission in a Pluralistic Age', *IRM*, 1986, 203.

⁷⁸ H. Kraemer, 'Continuity or Discontinuity', in *The Authority of Faith*, 5.

⁷⁹ *The Christian Message*, 171. For the same reason Bavinck warns against facile talking about 'moments of truth' in non-Christian religions. He does not deny the existence of such moments, but points out that they always function within the total framework of the religion and therefore usually have a different meaning. 'Concepts such as sin, grace, redemption, prayer, sacrifice, which we encounter in other religions, all have a different content than in the Bible' (*op. cit.*, 228).

that the patriarchs worshipped the Mesopotamian and west Semitic high God, El, who was often called El Shaddai. 'They receive commands and promises from him directly (without prophets) and they build altars and offer sacrifices to [p. 368](#) him (without priests).'⁸⁰ The writer of Genesis clearly identifies El, as the patriarchs know him, with Yahweh. Johannes C. de Moor has shown that this development accords with what happened in that same period in Egypt and Babylonia. There Amun-Re and Marduk were exalted as the one god above all other gods.⁸¹ In the stories about the patriarchs we see that 'the living God is known, worshipped, believed and obeyed, but under divine titles which were common in the rest of contemporary semitic culture' (Wright). But something special must have happened. God himself took the initiative and revealed himself in a special way to Abraham, calling him to a very special service and making a very special covenant with him, containing some very special promises. The era of particularism sets in, but from the very beginning it has universal overtones, for the God who calls Abraham out of his country and his father's house, also says: 'By you all the families of the earth shall be blessed' ([Gen. 12:3](#)).

The period of particularism covers the remainder of the Old Testament. Abraham's descendants grow into a nation and at Sinai God makes a covenant with the entire nation. But the struggle with baalism continues and the nation again and again surrenders to baalism and its concomitant idolatry. In the prophets we then see the idea of the 'remnant' gradually arising. The 'funnel' of particularism becomes very narrow. But at the same time the prophets cling to the idea of a universal outcome of history. In the future the *goyim*, the nations, will share with Israel in the universal salvation of Yahweh. They will all come to Jerusalem and share in the blessings of Zion (cf. [Is. 2](#); [Micah 4](#); [Zech. 8:20ff.](#)).

The New Testament

In the New Testament we see that the funnel of particularism narrows itself to one human being: Jesus of Nazareth, who is called the Christ, the Messiah. As the suffering servant of the Lord he gives his life as a sacrifice for the sins of the whole world, in that sacrifice on the cross the entire history of a salvation seems to come to an end. But God raises him from the dead and before his ascension he himself gives his disciples the Great Missionary Command. Forty days after the ascension the outpouring of the Holy Spirit takes place and the church is born. And immediately we see that is an evangelizing church. At first this [p. 369](#) evangelistic activity is limited to the Jews, but the Spirit himself takes care that the gospel of Jesus Christ goes to all the nations. The Book of Acts shows us how it moves on and arrives at the very heart of the pagan world: Rome. The most extreme particularism issues in the widest possible universalism!

But in the New Testament, too, particularism and universalism are related in such a way that they are in constant tension. On the one hand, there is the uniqueness of Christ; on the other there is the universality of Christ.

The uniqueness of Christ

We find this throughout the entire New Testament. It is connected with the very essence of Jesus, He is not just one in the long line of prophets (although he is a prophet too), but he is the only-begotten Son of God who became man and dwelt among us, 'full of grace and truth' ([John. 1:14](#)). W. Visser 't Hooft summarized the teaching of the New Testament well, when he wrote: 'This person is completely unique. There is only one teacher, the

⁸⁰ 'The Christian and other religions: the biblical evidence', *Themelios*, January 1984, 6.

⁸¹ Cf. *The Rise of Yahwism. The Roots of Israelite Monotheism*, 1990.

Christ ([Matt. 23:10](#)), one Lord ([Eph. 4:5](#); [1 Cor. 8:6](#)), one shepherd ([John 10:16](#)), one mediator ([1 Tim. 2:5](#)). He has a name which is above every name ([Phil. 2:9](#)). He is the only Son ([John 3:16](#)). Every one of the christological titles signifies that he has a mission that no one else ever had or will ever have. "There is no other name granted to men, by which we may receive salvation" ([Acts 4:12](#), NEB).⁸²

It is evident that in speaking of him we are not dealing with an idea of principle, nor with a religious human experience (although faith in him does create its own experiences), but with a fact of history. It is the stupendous fact that 'almighty God, the Creator and Sustainer of all that exists in heaven and on earth, has, at a known place and time, so humbled himself as to become part of our sinful humanity to take away our sin and to rise from the dead as the first-fruit of a new creation' (Newbigin⁸³).

In our day this claim of uniqueness for Christ meets with widespread protest and resistance. We only need to refer to the names of Stanley J. Samartha, John Hick and W. Cantwell Smith. At times theologians try to escape from this uniqueness by stating that it is limited to the faith community that believes in Jesus.⁸⁴ But this will not do. The p. 370 terminology used throughout the New Testament is too explicit: 'there is *no other name under heaven given among men* by which we must be saved' ([Acts 4:12](#)).⁸⁵ To say it again in the words of Verkuyl: 'He is unique, incomparable, irreplaceable, and decisive for all ages and peoples.'

The universality of Christ

But this unique Christ is also the universal Redeemer. His coming is not only a *moment* of history, but it is the very *centre* of history.⁸⁶ It happened not only 'once upon a time', but also 'once for all'. For this reason, 'there cannot be other incarnations'. In [Romans 5](#) Paul calls Christ the second Adam. He is the centre of a new humanity. No wonder, therefore, that Paul in this chapter constantly speaks in universal terms. 'Then as one man's trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one man's act of righteousness leads to acquittal and life for all men. For as by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so by one man's obedience many will be saved' ([Rom. 5:18, 19](#); cf. [Mark 10:45](#)). In his First Letter to the Corinthians Paul says: 'One has died for all; therefore all have died' ([5:14](#)). There is no essential difference between the words 'all' and 'many' in these passages. In my own Reformed tradition there has been much discussion about the extent of the atonement. Eventually there came about the idea of 'limited atonement'. But in this way the tension between particularity and universality is solved in a one-sided manner. 'Many' in these and other New Testament passages (just as the word 'world' in [John 3:16](#) and [1 John 2:2](#)) has the force of 'all'. This universal intent of Jesus' coming and his atoning work does not mean universalism in the sense that eventually all people will be saved. The gospel of Jesus always calls for faith, as Paul writes to the Romans: 'There is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all and bestows his riches upon *all who call upon him*' ([Rom. 10:12](#)). Here the tension between universality and particularity is fully maintained.

⁸² *No Other Name*, 1963, 96.

⁸³ Quoted by Jean Stromberg, 'Christian Witness in a Pluralistic World', *IRM*, 1988, 422. Cf. also Lesslie Newbigin, *The Finality of Christ*, 1969, 76f.

⁸⁴ Cf. C. Duraisingh, *art. cit.*, 406.

⁸⁵ Cf. C. J. H. Wright, *art. cit.*, 13f.

⁸⁶ W. Visser 't Hooft, *op. cit.*, 97.

Visser 't Hooft draws two important consequences from these data. The first one is that Christ is the centre of two concentric circles: the circle that represents the church and the circle that represents humanity. But these circles are not in a static equilibrium. The smaller circle must become wider and wider (101). The second consequence is that the attitude of the church to the religions of the world can only be the [p. 371](#) attitude of the witness who points to the one Lord Jesus Christ as the Lord of all (116).

Those outside the circle of the gospel

But what about those who stand outside the circle of light produced by the gospel? What does Scripture say about them? Before we look for the biblical data I want to point out that many conservative theologians, who do maintain that only the gospel of Jesus Christ brings salvation, nevertheless are not willing to deny that there is some work of God in adherents of the other religions too. After Tambaram Kraemer asked the question: 'Were those who lived under the sway of the non-Christian religions, entirely left to their own devices, or has God somehow worked in them?' He said he believed that there are indications in the Bible pointing in that direction.⁸⁷ Bavinck says that his missionary experience has taught him 'that God has had a great deal to do with [the converts from non-Christian religions] before their contact with the missionary'.⁸⁸ In another of his books he writes: 'On the mission field we again and again encounter the surprising fact that God guides people on the way to the gospel by dreams or visions, and in such cases one wonders whether one has to do with "general revelation" or with something very special.'⁸⁹ And Lesslie Newbigin writes that in his opinion there is a genuine self-disclosure of God in non-Christian religious experience⁹⁰ and there is a real communion between God and the believer in non-Christian religious experience (38). Yet he also maintains that the acceptance of Jesus Christ means 'radical repentance and conversion from pre-Christian religious experience' (57). This repentance and conversion, however, does not alter the fact that these converts very often have the strong conviction afterwards that 'it' was the living God who was dealing with them in the days of their pre-Christian wrestlings' (59). In other words, there is real discontinuity, but also some form of continuity.

What does the Bible say about all this?

When we study the *Old Testament* it is quite obvious that it does not in any way regard the heathen nations as 'anonymous Israelites' (to borrow Rahner's term). The entire Old Testament condemns all idolatry and fights a continuous battle against it. Idols are false gods [p. 372](#) which human beings have fashioned from the created world, idolized and used for their own purpose. Think, for example, of the Baals and Ashtarothe, whose worshippers elevated nature, the tribe, the state and the nation to divine status. God fights against magic and astrology which, according to Deuteronomy, bend the line between God and his creation.⁹¹ Psalmists and prophets poke fun at those who fashion 'gods' out of wood or silver and gold ([Ps. 115; 135; Jer. 10; 51:17, 18](#)). But does this strong condemnation mean that there is no salvation for people who do not belong to Israel? The remarkable

⁸⁷ *The Authority of Faith*, 22.

⁸⁸ *An Introduction to the Science of Missions*, 227.

⁸⁹ *Religieus besef en christelijk geloof*, (1949) 1989, 180/1; cf. also 176.

⁹⁰ *The Finality of Christ*, 36.

⁹¹ J. Verkuyl, *op. cit.*, 95.

thing is that this question is never explicitly asked in the Old Testament. It is a question of *our* time, not of the Old Testament. The faith of Israel is entirely particularistic.

And yet there are some strange and striking universalistic 'edges' to the particularistic witness of the Old Testament. On the fringes we meet some people who do not belong to Israel and nevertheless do have a relationship with the living God. After the defeat of the kings Abraham encounters Melchizedek, the king of Salem, who is called a 'priest of God Most High' (El Shaddai) and who blesses Abraham ([Gen. 14:18-20](#)). There is Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, who is called the 'priest of Midian' ([Ex. 3:1](#); [18:1](#)). After the exodus from Egypt he meets Moses again at the Horeb, praises Yahweh (note the use of this Name!) for the deliverance of his people and offers a burnt offering and sacrifices to God ([18:10-12](#)). When Israel is about to enter the promised land there is suddenly the strange figure of Balaam, to whom Yahweh speaks ([Num. 22:19](#)) and who prophesies in his name ([23:5ff.](#)). There is that strange man Job, who lives in the land of Uz and about whom God himself says to Satan: 'Have you considered my servant Job, that there is none like him on earth, a blameless and upright man, who fears God and turns away from evil?' ([Job 1:8](#)) Finally, there is the remarkable answer Elisha gives to Naaman, the Syrian, when the latter asks whether he is allowed to bow in the house of Rimmon. Elisha replies: 'Go in peace' ([2 Kings 5:19](#))!

What do all these examples mean? That there are other ways of salvation? That the non-Israelite religions are just as valid and saving as Israel's faith in Yahweh? This would be a preposterous conclusion. There is no indication whatever in the Old Testament that there is salvation apart from the grace of Yahweh. All we can say is that apparently this grace is not strictly limited to the descendants of Abraham. There is an extension of grace also to some people outside Israel. p. 373

When we now turn to the *New Testament* and ask the question whether there is salvation outside the Christian gospel we discover again that this question is neither asked nor answered in the New Testament. What is evident, however, is that there is no salvation apart from Jesus Christ. Paul writes to the Ephesians: before you became Christians, you 'were dead through the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience. Among these we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, following the desires of body and mind, and so we were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind' ([2:1-3](#)). A little later he writes that before their conversion they were 'alienated from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world' (verse [12](#)). These are strong and harsh words, making it quite clear that apart from Jesus Christ there is no salvation and no hope for the future. But do these words also mean that the grace of Jesus Christ is strictly limited to those who hear and accept the gospel? Such a conclusion might be correct, but it is not the only possible answer. We should not forget that Paul is speaking here to people who now are believers and have broken with their pagan past. Whether his words also mean that no one outside the circle of light of the preached gospel is under the sway of God's gracious action in Jesus Christ, is still debatable.

At any rate, it is noteworthy that the New Testament is entirely free of the panicky attitude: 'Let us as quickly as possible preach the gospel everywhere, for otherwise all these people are eternally lost'. The moving force behind the strong missionary movement in the early church is rather: 'We have received such a treasure of grace that we cannot but share it with those who do not yet know it'. Or to put it in Paul's own words: 'The love of Christ constrains us, because we are convinced that one has died for all' ([2 Cor. 5:14](#)). That is the glorious message of the gospel: we have a Saviour who died for our sins, indeed for the sins of the whole world. Of this gospel Christians are ambassadors:

‘God making his appeal through us. We beseech you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God’ (verse [20](#)).

But are there not other indications as well in the New Testament? Does it not speak of a witness of God to all people? Does Paul not say to the people in Lystra that God ‘did not leave himself without witness, for he did good and gave you from heaven rains and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness’ ([Acts 14:17](#))? What do these words ‘not leaving himself without witness’ mean? Do they only refer to a ‘general’ revelation of God which is not salvific? Here we [p. 374](#) are back to the question: what is the nature of God’s self-revelation to humanity as a whole and what is the relationship of this general self-revelation to his special revelation to Israel and in Jesus Christ?

In the final part of this paper we will try to answer this basic question. We agree with Lesslie Newbigin that the answer can be found only when we start with God and not with the religious experiences of man. This is the great mistake of the ‘comparative religion’ approach that is followed by many present-day theologians. It starts with man and his religious experiences. On this ground W. Cantwell Smith calls the other religions ‘*great movements of the human spirit, each with great historical legacies of, of course, cultural moment, and of scientific, theological, and sociological, and political, and artistic; but also ... of great spiritual depth, and many would now add, salvific force*’.⁹² This approach is sociological rather than theological. A truly theological approach starts with God himself and his self-revelation. And since we know God as the Triune God, our approach to this problem should also be Trinitarian.⁹³

God the Father, the overflowing fountain of goodness.

We borrow this term, ‘the overflowing fountain of goodness’, from article 1 of the Belgic Confession. Although the description of God in this article is rather formal and abstract, the last phrase beautifully indicates the deepest nature of God. It is another way of saying what the apostle John wrote: ‘God is love’ ([1 John. 4:8, 16](#)). God is self-communicating love, both in himself and towards his creation. At this point, too, Bishop Newbigin begins the exposition of his own view. ‘We must begin with the great reality made known to us in Jesus Christ, 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 work in all creation and to all human beings’.⁹⁴ We see this in Jesus’ own attitude to people. Eagerly he awaits signs of faith, not only among his fellow-Jews but also among men and women outside the house of Israel. We see it in his outstretched arms on the cross, embracing the whole world. In him and his actions we see ‘the most fundamental of all realities, namely, a grace and mercy and loving-kindness which reaches out to every creature’. Therefore, Newbigin feels unable to restrict the words ‘not leaving without witness’ to general revelation [p. 375](#) and common grace only. Says he: ‘I believe that no person of whatever kind of creed, is without some witness of God’s grace in heart and conscience and reason.’

I believe that this is a correct starting point. When the Bible speaks of God it always speaks of the Father of Jesus Christ. God in the Bible does not exist as a God-in-the-abstract, a God who can be seen apart from Jesus Christ and his own eternal plan of salvation through the incarnation, death and resurrection of his own eternal Son. The God who is revealed to us in the Bible is from the very beginning God-in-Christ. Paul writes to the Ephesians that God chose them in Christ ‘before the foundation of the cosmos’ ([Eph.](#)

⁹² *Art. cit.*, 361.

⁹³ Cf. J. Verkuyl, *op. cit.*, 355.

⁹⁴ *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 175.

[1:4](#)). In his high-priestly prayer to his heavenly Father Jesus himself speaks of 'thy love for me before the foundation of the world' ([John 17:24](#)). When God reveals himself he is always the God-in-Christ, also in his so-called general revelation. This does not mean that this general self-revelation is a clear revelation of Christ himself. It is no more than a '*clair-obscur*' of God, of his divine power and goodness. Or to borrow an image that Barth uses in the last volume of his *Church Dogmatics*: the lights kindled by the general revelation are the small lights that at the most 'reflect' the great light that has been kindled in Christ.⁹⁵ 'The prophecy of Jesus Christ [says Barth] is the one truth and the one light. But as this light rises and shines, it is reflected in the being and existence of the cosmos which is not created accidentally, but with a view to this action and therefore to this revelation' (153). Undoubtedly, even this reflection is in many ways distorted, for it is constantly mixed with human interpretations. Even worse, it is constantly suppressed and replaced by artificial lights of our own devising. For this reason the religions can never be seen as equally valid ways of salvation. Verkuyl rightly points out that our approach to and appreciation of the religions should always be of a 'tri-polar' nature. There is God and his self-revelation giving man a 'transcendental experience of reality'. But there is also the 'sphere of human reacting, repressing, projecting, searching, groping, questing and fleeing'. And, thirdly, there is the dimension of the 'powers' that collectively influence us for good or ill.⁹⁶ This tri-polar relationship also explains the ambiguity of all human religiosity. There is too much of human 'suppression' of the truth ([Rom. 1:18](#)) and too much of oppression by the 'powers' in them. And yet we should not exclude the possibility that the light of God's grace shines into these dark corners too. The experience of the missionary p. 376 in the prison of Pretoria is exemplary for the experience of many other missionaries: God was already at work before we came with the light of the gospel. Our God *is* an overflowing fountain of goodness and salvation!

Jesus Christ, the Mediator of all revelation and grace

For a proper approach to and understanding of the religions of this world we also have to take into account the confession of the Christian church that Jesus Christ is Lord of all. He, the eternal Son of the Father, became incarnate as the man Jesus of Nazareth. he emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross. Therefore God exalted him and gave him the name 'Kurios', the name above every name ([Phil. 2:6-9](#)). He, therefore, is the mediator of God's special self-revelation in grace and mercy. He is the one Mediator between God and men ([1 Tim. 2:55](#)).

But this is not all that is to be said about him. Looking back through the prism of his resurrection and exaltation the apostles began to realize that from all eternity he was the medium of God's self-giving love. The Mediator of revelation and reconciliation, that is of recreation, is also the Mediator of creation. So the apostle Paul confesses: 'For us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist' ([1 Cor. 8:6](#)). A similar line of thought is found in [Col. 1](#), where Paul calls Jesus not only the 'first-born from the dead' (verse [18](#)), but also 'the first-born of all creation', in and through whom all things were created and in whom all things hold together ([15-17](#)). The writer to the Hebrews affirms the same truth when he says that God created the world through him and that he upholds the world by his word of power ([Heb. 1:1-3](#)). The early church was deeply convinced that in Jesus they had to do with the eternal Son of God, who with the Father

⁹⁵ *Op. cit.*, IV, 3, First half, 164.

⁹⁶ *Op. cit.*, 356.

was involved in the creation of this world and who from the very beginning was the mediator of all God's self-communication. Newbigin rightly says: 'Jesus is the personal presence of that creative word by which all that exists was made and is sustained in being.'⁹⁷ This does not in any way derogate from that stupendous historical fact which we call the incarnation. He was not incarnate from all eternity. The *Christus incarnatus* is a fact of history that happened once upon a time. but this *Christus incarnatus* was from all eternity the *Christus incarnandus*. As p. 377 such he was and is God's self-revelation from creation to consummation. It is only through the Son that the Father makes himself known. Therefore our conclusion, also with regard to the religions, can only be that whatever truth is present there is due to this very same Lord Jesus Christ, who 'reflects the glory of God and bears the very stamp of God's nature' ([Heb. 1:3](#)).

All this has nothing to do with the idea of the so-called cosmic Christ who 'is present in all developments of history, in all the social revolutionary moments, and in all human religious ideas and quests'. Verkuyl rightly points out that this idea is 'merely a caricature of a genuine Christology for a theology of religions'.⁹⁸ It completely ignores the fact that it was highly religious men who put Jesus to death on the cross! The cross therefore is the divine judgement upon all human religiosity ([1 Cor. 1](#) and [2](#)). At the same time this same cross (and the following resurrection) is the concentration point of all previous and following divine self-revelation. It is such a cosmic event that 'its importance extends to human beings of every religious stripe', and it is therefore the task of every theologian of religions to 'keep looking for evidences of this Christ who is ceaselessly active; [such a theologian] will be alert for signs of the messianic kingdom in the religious life of mankind both inside and outside the church' (359).

The Holy Spirit as 'Christ active in the world'

God's Spirit, who is at work in the world, is the Spirit of Christ, both of the *Christus incarnandus* and the *Christus incarnatus*. This is the deep truth of the '*filioque*'. The Spirit from all eternity proceeds from Father and Son. The Spirit is God active in this world, but since God can never be seen apart from Christ, we can also say that he is Christ active in this world. When Christ was exalted to the right hand of the Father, he sent the Spirit in a new manner, as the One who was to bring sinners to Christ and thus to make them participants in the benefits of Christ's reconciling work. 'He awakens in man that deeply hidden awareness of guilt. He convinces man of sin, even where previously no consciousness of sin was present.'⁹⁹ He opens the heart for the grace that God has provided in Christ. He creates faith that embraces this grace as its greatest treasure.

He is at work, however, not only in the sphere of special revelation, but also in that of the so-called general revelation. There too he is the p. 378 Spirit of the *Christus incarnandus* or the *Christus incarnatus*. From the very beginning of creation he was active ([Gen. 1:2](#)) and he continues to work in history. All understanding of God's self-revelation is due to his activity. All that is true and good in whatever religion is due to his enlightenment. Again, this does not make the other religions ways of salvation next to the way of Christ, but it does mean that at times there may be some understanding of the true light. J. H. Bavinck, who is straightforward in his refusal to accept the religions as ways to God, nevertheless also says: 'No one can say what is going on in the heart of the individual, no one can imagine what the endless patience and goodness of God may work out in such

⁹⁷ Lesslie Newbigin, *op. cit.*, 180.

⁹⁸ *Op. cit.*, 358.

⁹⁹ J. H. Bavinck, *op. cit.*, 229.

a heart.¹⁰⁰ Verkuyl is more outspoken when he says that he agrees with Max Warren, when the latter says that ‘the Holy Spirit is latently active in so many ways among those people who live within the context of other religious traditions’. Verkuyl even asks the question: ‘Is it really possible for any one of us to believe that human beings can be found somewhere who have *not* been touched by the hand of Jesus Christ who goes out to them in reconciliation?’¹⁰¹ I am not sure whether we have the right to be so expansive, but I do know that if it is possible that people of other faiths may be saved, they most certainly will not be saved by their own religiosity, by their own religious experiences and rites¹⁰², but only because the Spirit of Christ was active in their lives; because by the work of the Spirit the secret of Christ became manifest to and in them, too.

Consequences

This trinitarian approach as outlined by me has some important practical consequences. I largely follow Newbigin here.¹⁰³ (1) We [p. 379](#) shall expect, look for and welcome all the signs of God’s grace at work in the lives of those who do not know Jesus as Lord. (2) We shall be eager to cooperate with people of all faiths and ideologies in all projects that are in line with the Christian’s understanding of God’s purpose in history. This purpose has been revealed in Jesus Christ and he is the sole criterion by which we must evaluate all such projects. (3) In this context of shared commitment to the business of this world, there is also place for true dialogue. Undoubtedly we will reach a point where our ways have to part. But there will also arise opportunities where both parties cannot but witness to what motivates them at the deepest level. Here the dialogue becomes witness. (4) The essential contribution of the Christian to the dialogue will simply be the telling of the story; the story of Jesus, the story of the Bible. (5) Newbigin adds that it is not the task of the Christian to try to convert the others, for this is the work of the Spirit of God. Here I disagree with him, because I regard this to be false dilemma. The apostles always called those outside the circle of light of the gospel to conversion. That does not mean that we should do it always in a very explicit way, showing the others how wrong they are. In our day and age the call to conversion will usually take place in an implicit way. But even so, it must take place. Conversion is a ‘must’, for our true situation is, as Paul says, that ‘all men, both Jews and Greeks, are under the power of sin’ ([Rom. 3:9](#)), and for all of them there is only one way of salvation: justification by faith in Jesus Christ, whom God made our wisdom, our righteousness and sanctification and redemption ([1 Cor. 1:30](#)).

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¹⁰⁰ *Religieus besef en christelijk geloof*, 206.

¹⁰¹ *Op. cit.*, 359.

¹⁰² It is striking that the advocates of the other religions as ways of salvation usually refer to the many good and pious people they find among the adherents of these religions. In doing so, they actually introduce the principle of meritorious good works, which is quite foreign to the Bible. In his book *The Open Secret* (1978, 196) Lesslie Newbigin rightly says: ‘It is the “men of good will”, the “sincere” followers of other religions, the “observers of the law” who are informed in advance that their seats in heaven are securely booked. This is the exact opposite of the teaching of New Testament. Here the emphasis is always on surprise. It is the sinners who will be welcomed and those who were confident that their place was secure who will find themselves outside.’ It is also in direct opposition to the doctrine of the justification of the ungodly.

¹⁰³ *Op. cit.*, 180ff.