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Editorial

Welcome to old and new readers. It is a great privilege to be invited by the Theological Commission of WEF once again to take up the General Editorship of the *Evangelical Review of Theology*. Since I handed on my pen to Dr. Sunand Sumithra in 1986 I have been serving as a presbyter or minister of a Hindi-speaking congregation in the Diocese of Delhi of the Church of North India. It has been an enriching spiritual experience and a deepening of my theological understanding. I will continue my church responsibilities.

In earlier editions of ERT we focused on sections including Faith and Church, Theology and History, Theology and Mission, Theology and Culture, Ethics and Society, Pastoral Care and Theological Education. However, for the next two years I want to develop issue-orientated numbers which I trust will have the value of being a mini-reference library on contemporary theological reflection by scholars worldwide. Our goal is to double the number of readers during 1991. I invite you to send me manuscripts, reprints of articles and book reviews for consideration for publishing. A year's subscription will be given to all whose submissions are published. Since our readership is international I would like to be able to publish in every issue articles and book reviews that emanate from different regions of the world, namely Latin America, North America, Europe, Africa, Asia and the South Pacific.

In this issue we are reflecting on the salvation and lostness of mankind. To all who are committed to the biblical faith, to world evangelization and to peace and justice in society, this issue is primary as it is to the heart of God. While we rejoice in the amazing growth of the Church, especially in the developing countries and now in Eastern Europe, we share God's pain in the lostness of the increasing number who have never heard the gospel or who have turned against the gospel misrepresented to them. Multitudes in affluent societies are content to live their lives without reference to God. In this edition we seek to grapple with both biblical and sociological concerns. We pray that God will throw more light on his Word, deepening our understanding, and lead us to greater commitment in discipleship.

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The Salvation and Lostness of Mankind

Bruce J. Nicholls

In this lead article the author surveys the range of issues discussed in this number of ERT and raises some basic questions which demand a response.

INTRODUCTION

The relationship of the gospel of Jesus Christ to the claims and experience of people of other religious faiths is an unresolved issue for those Christians who identify themselves as evangelical. For other Christians some form of universalism offers a possible solution.

Four major international inter-faith organizations are combining to observe 1993 as the year of Inter-Religious Understanding and Cooperation. The year marks the centenary of the World Parliament of Religions held in Chicago in 1893, where Vivekananda's message of 'universal acceptance' marked the beginning of the inter-faith movement. These four organizations which plan to meet in India in August 1993 are The International Association of Religious Freedom, The Temple of Understanding, The World Congress of Faiths and The World Conference on Religion and Peace. It appears that the year of inter-religious understanding has the tacit support of the WCC's unit concerned with 'People of Living Faiths'.¹

The Seventh General Assembly of the WCC, to meet at Canberra in February 1991 on the theme 'Come Holy Spirit—Renew the Whole Creation', will determine the churches' response to this inter-religious challenge. Twenty years ago Metropolitan George Khodr of the Middle East, speaking of the economy of the Holy Spirit in a universal Pentecost, suggested that 'the non-Christian religions may be considered as places where his inspiration is at work. All those visited by the Spirit are the people of God'. Khodr adds that 'while waiting for the coming of the Lord we must secretly be in communion with all men and women and the economy of the Mystery within which we are moving slowly towards the final consummation, when all things will be gathered up in Christ'.² The implied universalism of this understanding of the work of the Holy Spirit is clear. How do we respond to this challenge?

The year 1993 is also the 200th anniversary of William Carey's arrival in India, marking the beginning of the world-wide Christian p. 5 missionary movement. Today the missionary structures of the Church have not lessened, despite the increasing restriction placed on missionary personnel. The younger churches of Latin America, Africa, Asia and the Pacific are sending forth their witnesses to the gospel of Jesus Christ with increasing fervour and the number of indigenous missionary agencies is multiplying. The emphasis is on reaching the unreached for Christ. The unashamed goal is to convert people of other faiths or no faith to Christ, and to plant churches among every people group.

Here then are two interpretations of the gospel that appear to be mutually exclusive. Evangelicals must take up this challenge and develop a coherent theology of mission in the context of the plurality of religions and ideologies. We must start with a biblical understanding of revelation, and then enter into authentic dialogue with people of other faiths in order to understand the dynamics of their spirituality, metaphysical framework and epistemology. At least two-thirds of the world's population have either not heard of Christ or have rejected him. What is their eternal destiny? Are there culturally orientated bridges of experience by which we may communicate the Good News of the gospel?

We begin our study with the belief that the critical issue of the next decade will be Christology—Christ as unique and Christ as universal; Christ in the context of the claims of other faiths; Christ in the midst of enormous human suffering, violence, poverty and oppression; Christ in relation to the ecological issues of human survival; Christ in the sphere of cosmic conflict with the Evil One and demonic evil in society.

One of the most agonizing questions for Christians living in the Two-Thirds World is: 'What is the eternal destiny of those who have never heard the gospel?' Someone asked Jesus as he was on his way through the towns and villages towards Jerusalem, 'Lord, are only a few people going to be saved?' Jesus did not explicitly answer the enquirer's question, but gave him a 'Yes and No' response. Jesus replied, 'Make every effort to enter

¹ *Current Dialogue*, 17 December 1989.

² *Living Faiths and the Ecumenical Movement of Geneva*, 1971, p. 140.

through the narrow door because many, I tell you, will try to enter and will not be able'. Then after discussing the agony of the lost he continued, 'People will come from the east and west and north and south and will take their places at the feast in the kingdom of God. Indeed there are those who are last who will be first, and first who will be last' ([Luke 13:22-20](#)). This response comes as a warning to us not to look for simplistic answers to the mystery of God's sovereign work of saving those who enter the kingdom and condemning those who are lost.

The thought of the lostness of the greater proportion of today's world [p.6](#) population is unbearable. We must leave the judgement to God. Abraham felt that agony as he dialogued with the Lord over the imminence of the destruction of the people of Sodom. His only answer was, 'Will not the judge of the earth do right?' ([Genesis 18:25](#)). However, our mandate is clear; Christ commissions us to preach the gospel to all the world and to be his co-labourers in the building of his Church.

WHO ARE THE LOST

Evangelicals are committed to the spirit of Lausanne II, 'The Whole Church Taking the Whole Gospel to the Whole World'. In recent years much attention has been given to identifying unreached people groups. Statistical details have been publicized from time to time. With an emphasis on cultural anthropology the primary focus has been on identifying ethnic groups, especially those in the less accessible regions of the world. While this analysis is important, we believe that the truly unreached peoples are those who live in the millions of ordinary villages in the developing world, and in the rapidly growing slums of their cities.

I am the pastor of a local church in the town of Gurgaon, Haryana, a satellite town of the capital city, New Delhi, India. Apart from the Roman Catholic church and several small splinter Protestant groups, I am the only pastor in a town of approximately 300,000 people. According to the government census the number of Christians in the State of Haryana is .01%, less than a tenth of one percent, while in many of the villages it is estimated only one in ten thousand is a Christian. I have travelled through many villages and towns with a heavy heart without ever seeing a sign of the cross. Our denomination, the Church of North India, has 15 local churches among 15 million people; and we are by far the largest church body! Probably more than 50% of the people are illiterate. They can't read the Scriptures. Christian radio does not reach them. Hit and run evangelism by zealous para-church groups leaves little result. These people are unevangelised, they have never heard the gospel. They are lost.

In each of the four main cities of India—Calcutta, Bombay, Madras and Delhi—approximately one-third of the population live in dehumanizing slum conditions. Few have heard the gospel to the point of understanding it. They are poor, underemployed, sick, diseased and illiterate; they live lives that are dehumanizing. The evangelist who closes his eyes to this deplorable and distressing situation need not be surprised if the slum dwellers block their ears to his verbal preaching. [p.7](#) Words must be authenticated by deeds. If evangelism does not begin with the evangelist living an incarnated life among the people, it is not evangelism at all. We evangelical Protestants are largely middle class people who find it very hard to understand and identify with the lost. We are like the man standing on the sea shore throwing a rope to a drowning man and giving him good advice. We don't want to get our clothes wet.

The number of people who are lost is increasing rather than decreasing, despite the utopia dreams of some who expect to see the world evangelized by the year 2000 A.D. Today three-quarters of all humanity live in the developing countries, and by the year

2000 A.D. the proportion will probably have risen to four-fifths. The unevangelized live in these countries. At the same time there are millions of people of other faiths and ideologies who have misheard the gospel so that their minds are blinded to its truths. There are others who have not heard the gospel because the Christian messenger doubts the uniqueness of Christ or offers a gospel limited to political freedom and social justice.

Lostness has both vertical and horizontal dimensions, and we are called to proclaim a whole gospel which meets the totality of this lostness. Evangelism must include verbal proclamation of the revealed message from God. But it must also be experiential. People of other faiths expect to see a life style that is commensurate with the message. Hence the Asian ideal is a teacher, guru or master who shares only what he has experienced. At the same time the gospel must make sense to the hearer.

Different cultures have different epistemological values. While the West (with its history of emphasis on rational thought) emphasizes the cognitive basis of the gospel, the majority of the people of Asia give greater priority to intuitive knowledge, mystical experience and personal relationships. Communication is more symbolic. Poetry, parables, proverbs, songs, drama and movement take priority over rational discourse. Hinduism has been taught from generation to generation through symbolic action, analogies and myths rather than through logic and historical events. The goal of the Asian mind is 'to see God'. Multitudes remain in their lostness because we have been unable to translate and communicate the gospel in terms of their way of thinking and understanding. We are more interested in the content of the gospel than in the mind set of the hearer.

THE UNIVERSALITY OF THE LOVE AND THE JUSTICE OF GOD

The first eleven chapters of Genesis outline the universality of God's **P.8** love and justice in all of creation and for the whole of mankind. These chapters are an amazing introduction to the gospel. Again and again I am overwhelmed with their relevance to our Asian context. Genesis begins with God the creator finding satisfaction in everything he has created. He saw that it was good. He brought order out of chaos. The most incredible statement in the story is that God culminated his creative work by creating man, male and female, in his own divine image and likeness, giving to this special creature the capacity to relate in love and holiness with the Creator himself. But for this relational image to have meaning it must include the capacity for rational thought and to act with freedom of will. From Adam to Abraham God revealed himself as a covenant-making and covenant-keeping God, who demands a response of love and obedience among those with whom he chooses to enter into this divine-human relationship. In these early chapters the universality of the justice of God is also seen. God punishes those who rebel against him and his commands. Yet this judgement is tempered by mercy. God made a covenant with Noah and his descendants that the Great Flood would not be repeated. God accepted Noah's sacrifice of a burnt offering as a sufficient sign of his repentance and faith. Noah became the heir of righteousness that comes by faith ([Hebrews 11:7](#)). God scattered the rebellious people of Babel and confused their language. Yet this severe judgement was in fact an act of God's mercy to save them from total self-destruction.

From [Genesis 12](#) to Malachi the story is the same. The universality of God's love and justice is seen throughout the period of more than 1000 years. God chose a people to be his own, not for their own sake but to be the channel of blessing to all the peoples of the earth ([Genesis 12:3](#)). God's covenant with the descendants of Abraham was motivated by love and faithfulness to his promises to them. But to those who disobeyed his law and fell

into idolatry and immorality, the severity of his judgement was overwhelming. The greater the privilege, the greater responsibility to obedience and faithfulness.

God's redeeming love was not limited to Israel. The promise of the Messiah was not for Israel alone, but for all people. The most significant example of God's love outside the seed of Abraham was Melchizedek, king of Salem and a priest of God Most High. We presume he was a Canaanite, probably a Jebusite from the region of Jerusalem. In the name of God Most High, Creator of heaven and earth, he blessed Abraham, who responded with a tithe of all his acquired wealth ([Genesis 14:19–20](#)). He is portrayed as a type of the coming Messiah ([Hebrews 5:6–10](#), [7:1–3](#)). He was an outsider who undoubtedly had a living relationship with his Creator God. The Bible [p. 9](#) records a wide range of people to whom God revealed himself. God rebuked Abimelech, king of Gerar, in a dream for taking Abraham's wife Sarah ([Genesis 20](#)). Jethro, a Midianite priest, became Moses' father-in-law and offered sacrifices to the God of Moses ([Exodus 18:12](#)). We also remember the prophet Balam, the prostitute Rahab, the widow of Zarephath, Naaman the Syrian general, and Nebuchadnezzar the King of Babylon who having received a vision in a dream acknowledged the Most High God ([Daniel 4:2f](#)). After the miracle of the lion's den, Darius the Median king worshipped Daniel's God and decreed that he must be feared and revered, 'for he is the living God and he endures forever' ([Daniel 6:26](#)). The most striking example in the New Testament of God's special self-revelation to the pagan world was his disclosure to the Magi who appear to have been practising astrologers as well as astronomers but who came to worship the new born King. Much of the wisdom literature of the Old Testament reflects the divine wisdom independent of God's revelation to Israel. Job also appears to have been an outsider, but one who had a true knowledge of God. We do not know whether those who lived outside the knowledge of revelation given to Israel were reckoned by God as righteous through their faith, but we can affirm that there was a wideness in God's mercy.

The universality of the love and justice of God is central to the New Testament revelation. John declares that the goal of God's universal love is not to condemn the world but to save it ([John 3:17](#)). Eternal life is shown to be partaking of the life of God, through faith in Jesus Christ. Similarly, eternal death is an absolute quality of separation from the presence of God. However, says John, the light has come but men love darkness rather than light and flee from it. They prefer hell to heaven. But the terror of hell is that it is a state from which there is no return. It is a life sentence without parole. Eternal life is not in the immortality of the soul, but is to be experienced through resurrection of life in the body. The bliss of the resurrection life will transcend the bliss of our humanity. On the other hand the terror of the resurrection body in hell will be the inability to fulfil those desires which are partially fulfilled in the body on earth and in the remorse of living without forgiveness. In eternal life and eternal death there is both continuity with life on earth and the discontinuity which transcends it. Those who reject God in this life would find heaven in the next life intolerable. Ultimately, every argument in favour of universalism falls short of the justice of the love of God.

Paul writes to Timothy that God our Saviour wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth, for the one mediator [p. 10](#) between God and man, Christ Jesus, gave himself as a ransom for all men ([1 Timothy 2:3–6](#)). In the midst of the joy and terror of the Final day of our Lord, Peter declares that the Lord is patient, not wanting anyone to perish but everyone to come to repentance ([2 Peter 3:9](#)). This is not a case for universalism, as William Barclay hints, but rather a statement that God has given freedom to all to choose. All have the freedom to resist the Spirit of God. At the same time we affirm that those who come to the light do so because the light of Christ draws them; they do not come on their own. Salvation from beginning to end is by the grace of God. It was true for

those who lived under the old covenant as it is for those who live under the new covenant. It is in this context of the universal love and justice of God that we understand divine election unto salvation. God predestines to eternal life those whom he will. This mystery of the relationship between the love and justice of God is beyond our comprehension. If we could rationalize it, we would be God ourselves. The tragedy of Islam is that it rationalizes the divine mysteries—the mystery of God’s triune nature, the incarnation and the redemptive work of the cross. The result is that though God is merciful he is not love. He predestines to hell as well as to heaven. The Muslim submits but he is not liberated. Allah is just, but there is no universality in his love.

The pivotal point of salvation and lostness is the uniqueness and finality of Jesus Christ; unique and final in his incarnation, his cross and resurrection. He alone is worthy to say, ‘I am the Way, the Truth and the Life. No one comes to the Father except through me’ ([John 14:6](#)). Peter proclaimed, ‘There is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved’ ([Acts 4:12](#)). Paul expounds that there is only one mediator between God and man, the man Christ Jesus ([1 Timothy 2:5](#)). He alone is the one who can reconcile man and God and break down the wall partition between men ([Ephesians 2](#)). In the words of John, ‘He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only ours, but also for the sins of the whole world’ ([1 John 2:2](#)). Sir Henry Holland received his missionary call to the North West Frontier of India when he came to understand the meaning of a plaque on the mantelpiece of a home he was visiting: ‘Not for ours only’.

We affirm that the love and justice of God in Jesus Christ is the only ground for our salvation. All who have been, are, and will be saved and enter the kingdom of God will do so through the finished work of Jesus Christ. Salvation which is by grace alone is received through faith in Christ alone. But faith has no merit of its own; it is the outstretched empty hand grasped by the nail-pierced hand of the Saviour. This claim to the exclusiveness of salvation in Christ is undoubtedly the [p.11](#) greatest stumbling block to the religious mind. It is foolishness to the secular mind. Judaism in the modern state of Israel is bitterly anti-Christian. Fundamentalist Islam dominates the Muslim world. The Hindu is deeply offended when told that he is an anonymous Christian. To the Buddhist the exclusive claims of Christ are foolish and irrelevant, for all of life is in a constant state of impermanence and change. For Rajneesh, the modern guru, and for the masters of Zen Buddhism rationality itself is futile. As Christians, our glory is not in the superior claims of our religion but in the cross. We are bonded servants of Jesus Christ.

THE UNIVERSAL KNOWLEDGE OF GOD IN THE WORLD OF RELIGIONS

Paul in [Romans 1:18–32](#) gives us the most profound explanation of God’s wrath against mankind. It is pivotal to Paul’s understanding of lostness. In anticipation of the criticism that God’s wrath is immoral, unjust and contrary to the nature of God as love, Paul argues his case to show that men are without any excuse ([1:20](#)). God punishes the wicked and abandons them to the hell they have created here on earth because they have rejected the universal knowledge of God. They have suppressed the truth by their wickedness. They gave only themselves to blame; they cannot blame God.

Our basic premise is that all men and women seek after God or Ultimate Reality because by nature they are created in the image of God and they find no rest until they rest in him. In the words of John B. Taylor, ‘Religion is a tradition of response’.³ Each religion has its own metaphysical and spiritual core, its own path to reaching that goal tested by many generations of followers and enshrined in a cultural way of life which

³ John B. Taylor, *The Go-Between God* (London, SCM, 1972), p. 82f.

reflects the dynamic essence of the religion. As Paul Tillich has well said, 'Religion is the substance of culture and culture is the form of religion'. The evolutionary theory of the development of religions is misleading.

Each religion is *sui generis*. Each is a tradition of response to fundamental issues of life, offering its own solutions. For example, the *samadhi* trance experience of conscious bliss or of total unconscious absorption in Ultimate Reality is the goal of millions of sincere Hindus. The few who achieve it experience inexpressible bliss within their own metaphysical framework. It is a real experience. The Christian outsider will acknowledge its reality but deny its ultimate truth because he [p. 12](#) believes its metaphysical assumptions are false. In a similar way, we say that the psychology of Christian conversion, which varies enormously from personality to personality and from culture to culture, is real to the one converted. While the reality of the experience cannot be denied, the truth of it may be, unless it coheres with the biblical criteria for conversion. The experience of conversion may be the work of the Spirit of God, or it may be self-induced or even demonically controlled, as it appears to be in so-called Christian sects.

Thus mankind made in the image of God is incurably religious and seeks for fellowship with God. Therefore the mind is not a blank page; it is already preconditioned towards God. This is abundantly true in all world religions. Every day millions of Hindus pray the Upanishadic prayer:

From the unreal lead me to the real,
From the darkness lead me to light,
From death lead me to immortality.

The search for God among many Hindu *sannyasins* puts us Christians to shame. The *sannyasin* will forsake his family and home, comforts, even clothes and food and retire to the stillness of a Himalayan cave or to the solitude of the jungle in order to meditate and wait for the *darshan* or vision of God. Why do people willingly endure such personal privations? Because they are created in the image of God. Their rationality and creativity will be directed to the single goal of knowing God. In authentic dialogue Christians will recognise this divine image both in themselves and in their interlocutor.

A second premise in understanding why all seek after God is that our God, the creator-redeemer God of the Bible, is not asleep needing to be awakened by the temple bells or by repetition of prayers. God is the living God; his nature is triune; his attributes of love and holiness are ultimately personal. He is the I AM—the eternal Present. He is the ever seeking God reaching out in love to all mankind.

God is not imprisoned by time for he is the creator of time and space. Yet for our salvation he chose to enter time and be subject to it. He was the Word who tabernacled among us. Yet this eternal Word has been present in the world since the beginning of creation. In the words of John, 'he is the true light that gives light to every man who comes into the world' ([John 1:9](#)). He is more than the impersonal reason of Greek philosophy. He is the eternal personal Word of God. His speaking is creative as it was in the original creation. This Word manifested himself in many forms in the past through the angel of the Lord, in dreams and visions and the quietness of the inner voice. He is the light that enlightens every man. All religious traditions give recognition [p. 13](#) to this light. It is a universal symbol for the ever-seeking God.

Another stream of the triune God's self-revelation to all men is through the Holy Spirit. The Spirit of God hovered over the chaos and was the agent of creation. The same Spirit is the missionary of God. He is there when the Word is preached. He is always ahead of Christ's missionary disciples preparing the way, and the wise and sensitive cross-cultural missionary will always be sensitive to signs of the work of the Spirit. Tukuram, the low

caste grain seller who lived in the village of Dehu near Pune in western India in the sixteenth century, cried out in one of his poems:

As on the bank the poor fish lies,
And gasps and writhes in pain,
Or as a man with anxious eyes
Seeks hidden gold in vain—
So is my heart distressed and cries
To come to Thee again.⁴

In most preliterate traditional societies there is a vague knowledge of the Most High Creator God. This has been well researched among tribal groups in West Africa. It is equally true of the Pacific Islands. In the earliest of Hindu scriptures, the Rig Veda, Varuna is the creator and ruler of the moral universe. In later Hindu mythology three gods Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva form a *trimurti* or triad representing three aspects of the Supreme. Brahma is the creator, but there are few who describe themselves as devotees of Brahma and remarkably few temples dedicated to him. God the creator is only vaguely grasped in the world of religions. He is too distant to become central to everyday religion.

A further evidence of God's universal love is his self-disclosure through creation itself. Paul declares that 'God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature' have been clearly seen and understood by all ([Romans 1:20](#)). Calvin described creation as a mirror which reflects the attributes of the universal God. Thus God is known by inference from his works.

The universality of God's love and justice comes into sharper focus in the universal recognition of moral law and justice. Paul argues that 'when the Gentiles who do not have the law [of Moses] do by nature those things required by the law they are a law for themselves, since they show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness' ([Romans 2:14f](#)). Conscience is p. 14 the human response to the divine law reflecting the *imago dei* intuitive in human personhood and enlivened by the ever-speaking Spirit. The response to a bad conscience is a sense of shame or loss of status in the eyes of society. Shame is the dominating factor in the religions and cultures of Asia dominated by societal relationships. In those religions which have a sense of the otherness of the creator God, who is moral and just, there is also an awareness of guilt, a sense of failure or coming short in the sight of the law-giver God. The monotheistic faiths of Judaism, Christianity and Islam have this inner awareness of both guilt and shame, whereas the polytheism of Hinduism and the agnosticism of Buddhism are essentially shame-orientated. The spirit-dominated animist faiths, which are conscious of good and evil inherent in nature itself, also have some awareness of both guilt and shame.

The universality of moral principles is seen in the concept of *karma* or moral law, common to both Hinduism and Buddhism. *Karma* is the law of cause and effect. It expounds the biblical principle that 'as a man sows so shall he reap' ([Galatians 6:7](#)). *Karma* is central to these two religions. The awareness of man's inability to outweigh his evil deeds by good deeds in a time span of one life led to the development of the companion doctrine of *samsara* or rebirth, in order to overcome the evil *karma*. This *samsara* is an admission of failure before absolute moral law. The common element in the moral codes of all religions testifies to the intuitive moral nature of mankind created in the image of God and to the working of the Spirit of God among all people.

⁴ A. J. Appasamy, *Temple Bells* (Calcutta, YMCA Publishing House).

The more difficult question is to know how far the universal knowledge of God as creator also includes some awareness of God as redeemer. I think it does for without this knowledge Paul could not claim that all of mankind is without excuse. The universal awareness of a need for forgiveness, however vaguely understood, points to the intuitive longing for a redeemer. In the first chapters of Genesis the practice of sacrifice to God is introduced without explanation. It is the natural response to a sense of guilt and shame. It may take the form of appeasement rather than propitiation or expiation, but the latter is sometimes present. In the Vedas we meet the creator as *prajapati*, the god who sacrifices himself for the salvation of the people, a theme which the early 19th century convert K. M. Banerjee used in his discourses with Hindus. The elaborate details and year long preparation for the *aswamedha* (horse sacrifice) in early Hinduism suggests a highly developed sense of shame and guilt and the belief that salvation or liberation from *karma* can only come through sacrifice. In animist faith the concept of appeasement to the spirits through blood sacrifices is a central motif of their religious life. Thus we conclude that God's p. 15 universal revelation as creator cannot be isolated from his revelation of redemption through sacrifice. God's universal revelation is one.

This concept of God's universal or general revelation, as distinct from his special and final revelation in Jesus Christ, has had an important place in the history of Christian doctrine. Augustine and the Catholic tradition culminating in Anselm and Thomas Aquinas laid the foundation for the doctrine. The Reformers Luther and Calvin put the doctrine on a biblical foundation and stressed that all people possess a general knowledge of the creator God and of his moral law. Calvin stressed the internal and intuitive knowledge of God through the *imago Dei* and the external and inferential knowledge through the creator's works in the space-time world.⁵ Demarest traces the alternative Reformed approach, beginning with Abraham Kuyper, going on to G. C. Berkouwer and more recently Cornelius Van Til, all of whom reject the idea that Calvin taught, that a true knowledge of God is mediated through God's general revelation in nature and in providence. Demarest then analyses the 'Barthian backlash' and the rejection of the distinction between the general and special revelation by many contemporary Protestant and Catholic scholars. Such a historical survey is beyond the scope of this study.

THE UNIVERSALITY OF GOD'S WRATH

In discussing Paul's positive approach to God's universal revelation through creation and moral law, it is sometimes overlooked that the primary purpose of [Romans 1:18-32](#) is to show that the wrath of God is being revealed against all godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness. Paul argues that all who sin apart from the law will also perish apart from the law ([2:12](#)) and that there is no one righteous, not even one. All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God ([3:10, 23](#)). Clearly in Paul's mind there is no salvation in God's universal revelation in nature or in conscience, not because they are not valid paths to a true knowledge of God, but because of the enormity of human sin and rebellion so that all men are blinded to their truths. Paul argues, 'Although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened' ([1:21](#)). Paul then P. 16 shows that humankind expresses its rebellion against God's self-revelation by creating images of God in humankind's own image or that of creation and by worshipping and

⁵ For an excellent historical review see *General Revelation* by Bruce A. Demarest (Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 1982). This is the most comprehensive and up-to-date study on the theme of general revelation known to this author.

serving our own created gods. Finally, God gives the human race up to natural consequence of the cause and effect of their sin, but as a just and holy God he will punish with retributive justice all who wilfully rebel against him. The universality of idolatry, explicit or implicit in all religions, is universal evidence that humans have become corrupt in the totality of our being. [Romans 1–3](#) is a profound theological commentary on the story of the creation and fall in [Genesis 1–3](#). Images may be in the form of human gods and goddesses; or animals; or part of each, as in Hinduism; or they may be in the subtle form of sacred scriptures or of mystical experience. Idolatry may also take the form of moral perversion ([Colossians 3:5](#)). The idolator seeks to manipulate his own god through cultic practices, through *mantras* or incantations, or through subtle forms of mental images such as the *atma* or self being absorbed into the *brahma* or ultimate Self.

Paul's argument—that men in their wickedness suppress the truth and exchange the truth of God for a lie, and worship the gods they have created—is born out in the world of religions. For example, the concept of *karma* or moral law in Hinduism and Buddhism enshrines the biblical principle of justice but it becomes an end in itself. *Karma* is independent of God and even the gods are subject to *karma*. The cyclic wheel of illusion revolves by the inherent forces of *karma*, over which neither the gods nor God can exercise any control. In the stricter sense there is no possibility of forgiveness for *karma* is unalterable. Thus *karma* becomes the abuse of true law. Such a doctrine leads to fatalism and in the allied doctrine of *samsara* or rebirth, to despair and pessimism. *Karma* which rose as a standard of justice in human behaviour has become the curse of Hinduism and Buddhism. I have no hesitation in saying that casteism is at the root of the fragmentation, poverty and corruption in Indian society today. As a social principle under the strictures of religion every Hindu is born into a particular caste and cannot change his caste status. Casteism is not far removed from the principle of apartheid.

Another example is the abuse of the concept of grace, a concept which is not exclusive to Christianity. There are different schools of grace in both Hinduism and Buddhism. Grace is inherent in the Hindu school of thought that advocate *prapatti* or absolute surrender to God. The *charama slok* of the Bhagavad Gita ('abandoning every duty, come to me alone for refuge; I will release thee from all sins; sorrow not' [17:62, 65]) is the classic statement on grace. However, the [p. 17](#) clearest expression of grace is found in the southern school of Vaishnavism in the worship of Vishnu. The leader of this school, Pillai Lockachari (1264–1327) took his stand on the *charama slok* of the Gita, teaching that salvation is by grace alone. He defied the karmic law and rejected *bhakti marga* as a way of salvation; yet even this understanding of grace, which comes closest to the biblical revelation, falls short of saving grace. He worshipped God as Krishna, who is an indulgent god and whose attributes cannot be compared with the love and justice of God in Jesus Christ. There is no doctrine of atonement in Lockachari's grace for he has no concept of the cross. Grace without the cross remains an aid to salvation, not salvation itself. Hence we may conclude that though all men have the possibility of a true knowledge of God, all are under the wrath of God, for there is no salvation for those who reject or pervert God's universal revelation of love and justice.

We have thought of a religion as 'a tradition of response'. It is the response of mankind created in the image of God and the calling of the Spirit of God to a perpetual search for God and his peace. Man is incurably a God-seeker. But at the same time all religions are a tradition of response of man in his sinfulness rebelling against God's lordship and creating his own gods in idolatrous worship.

RESPONSE TO THE EXCLUSIVENESS OF SALVATION IN CHRIST

The *impasse* created by mankind's idolatrous response to the universal revelation of God can be solved only by God himself. Salvation is God's work from beginning to end. God's response was to send his only Son as a once-and-for-all accomplishment of redemption in his incarnation, death and resurrection. The cross is God's event in time which has significance for all time. The Eternal Son of God is the lamb slain from the foundation of the world. Thus the cross is efficacious both for those who lived before Christ and those who have lived after Christ. All who enter the kingdom of God, whether past, present or future, do so because Christ died for their sins and rose again for their justification. As human beings immersed in the stream of time we cannot comprehend the whole of time or the mystery of eternity. Only God, who is both inside and outside of time, can do so. It is therefore not surprising that people of other faiths find our claims of the finality and exclusiveness of salvation in the cross incomprehensible. Mahatma Gandhi exclaimed, 'I may suggest that God did not bear the cross only 1900 years ago, but he bears it today and he dies and is resurrected from day to day. It would be poor comfort to the world if it had to **P. 18** depend on a historical God who died two thousand years ago'.⁶ For Gandhi, as for the Hindu mind generally, no event in time could have eternal significance, for time and space belong to the phenomenal world of relativity and are less than ultimately real. Reality is beyond time. History is reduced to suprahistory and the objective to the subjective. Only the existential is real. Contemporary Christian missiologists are grappling with the same problem of the exclusiveness and inclusiveness of salvation in Christ in the midst of the plurality of religions. Many reject any exclusive uniqueness of Christ and argue for inclusiveness. Raimundo Panikkar argues for the universal saving power of the anonymous Christ in Hinduism, but through the sacraments of Hinduism.⁷ Others, including the process theologians and the explicit universalists such as John Hick and Wilfred Cantwell Smith, argue for a theocentric christology and the relational uniqueness of Jesus in religious experience. Karl Rahner's transcendental christology belongs to this category of understanding: for him Jesus is the symbol of what human beings really are. God in the man of Nazareth is 'the realisation of the highest possibility of man's being, the unique, supreme case of the total actualization of human reality'.⁸

The logical consequence of the rejection of the uniqueness of Jesus Christ in his incarnation, cross and resurrection is universalism; the belief that in the end the love of God will triumph and all will be saved and hell emptied. The advocacy of universalism goes back to Origen, but until recent time has been a minority view. Today it is a live option for both Protestant and Catholic scholars. Mission theologians such as Nels Ferré, John Hick and Paul Knitter openly espouse the cause of universalism. Others are more cautious; their universalism is more implicit than explicit. This was true of D. T. Niles of Sri Lanka, who argued for an agnostic universalism. He asks, 'Will not all finally arrive in the Father's kingdom, can it be that anyone can reject him even at the last?'⁹ Karl Barth, whose influence on the theological thinking of Asia has been enormous, denied that he was a dogmatic universalist. He maintained an agnostic stance on the extent of God's saving work because he felt that to affirm or deny universalism would be equivalent **p. 19** to denying God's freedom. However, his emphasis on the divine election of all in Christ,

⁶ M. K. Gandhi, *The Message of Jesus Christ*, p. 37f.

⁷ Raimundo Panikkar, *The Unknown Christ of Hinduism* (London, Darton, Longman & Todd, 1964).

⁸ Cited by Paul F. Knitter, *No Other Name?* (Maryknoll, Orbis Books, 1985), p. 188. Knitter gives a comprehensive survey of Christian attitudes towards world religions. He advocates the unitary principle of revelation and salvation.

⁹ D. T. Niles, *Upon This Earth* (Madras, CLS, 1963), p. 95.

and on the triumph of grace, opened the door to an implied universalism. Emil Brunner declared that Barth taught the most radical form of universalism that has ever been proposed and is more far-reaching than that of Origen. According to Barth the difference between the believer and the unbeliever is that the believer 'knows that he has been reconciled whereas the unbeliever does not and tries to live as if he is not'.¹⁰

The contemporary dialogue movement is more implicit than explicit on the issue of universalism, though the present director of the WCC Unit on Dialogue with People of Other Faiths, Dr. S. Wesley Ariarajah, is increasingly explicit in his espousal of universalistic salvation. For these scholars the title of this paper, 'Salvation and Lostness', is a misunderstanding of the central questions confronting the plurality of religions today; but evangelical scholars see lostness as the most agonising question confronting the Christian church especially in those contexts where Christianity is a minority faith. The issue again brings us back to the earlier question: 'Have those who have never heard the Gospel no hope?'¹¹

In summary we may say that because God's general revelation is a true revelation, all are without excuse; because all are sinners all are under the wrath of God. Salvation is not possible in general revelation; salvation is only in the special revelation in Christ. However, it is significant that many converts from other religious faiths recognise the continuity between their new experience of God in Christ and their former search for God. Professor J. N. D. Anderson, a noted evangelical authority in comparative religion, states, 'I have also found that converts from Islam never regard the God whom they previously sought to worship as wholly false but rather rejoice that they now, in Jesus Christ, have been brought to know, and have fellowship with, that God as he really is'.¹² For many, the attributes of Godhead dimly perceived before are now made explicit through faith in Jesus Christ. It is for the same reason that many tribal communities immediately respond to faith in Christ on hearing the gospel, for they see in it the fulfillment of their search for atonement or appeasement in sacrifice.¹³ p. 20

One final question needs to be considered. Must faith in Jesus Christ which is a necessary response to God's offer of salvation always be explicit? Could an implicit faith in Christ, but a Christ whose name was never known, be accepted by God as a sufficient response to his offer of salvation?

All the examples of conversion in the New Testament era follow from explicit faith in Jesus Christ. Paul argues, 'How can they believe in one of whom they have not heard? How can they hear without someone preaching to them?' ([Romans 10:14](#)). The necessity of preaching the gospel to the unreached who have never heard his name has always been a strong motivation for missionary service, and rightly so. The Great Commission offers no substitute for the proclamation of the gospel.

But this problem is not new. The people of God who received salvation under the old covenant did not know the explicit name of Jesus, although they were saved by Jesus Christ alone through the typology of the sacrificial system. Similarly, we believe that children who die below the age of discretionary knowledge, or who are mentally retarded, also experience God's redeeming love. But is there any hope for those who have never heard the name of Christ through no fault of their own? As we have earlier argued, their

¹⁰ Cited Ajith Fernando, *A Universal Home Coming?* (Madras, ELS, 1983), p. 24.

¹¹ See C. Evert Osburn's article, "Those Who Have Never Heard; Have They No Hope?" in this *Journal* of the Evangelical Theological Society, September 1989, pp. 367-372, reprinted in this issue of *ERT*.

¹² J. N. D. Anderson, *The World of Religions* (London, IVP, 1975), p. 236.

¹³ See D. Richardson, *Eternity in their Hearts* (Ventura, Regal, 1981).

numbers are increasing day by day. Have the accumulated generations of human history no possibility of knowing salvation in Jesus Christ? The answer must be No and a cautious Yes. No, because Scripture gives no clear statement on the salvation of those who have never heard the name. But at the same time a cautious Yes, cautious for we have little evidence of those who without knowing the name of Jesus fulfil the condition of salvation. We can only affirm that salvation from beginning to end is the work of God in Christ. None are saved by their good works or because they have lived according to the light they have received. In practice general revelation becomes a vehicle for divine judgment and not for salvation. The biblical response to God's offer of salvation is repentance and faith in the triune God. Both are a gift of God in Christ. Could it be that those to whom God has uniquely revealed himself as Saviour, but without revealing his name, be saved if they have responded by casting themselves wholly in repentance and faith upon the God of whom they are dimly aware? Professor J. N. D. Anderson thinks so.¹⁴ p. 21

Should God save such, it is only by his grace; for there is no merit in repentance and faith. Would Cornelius the Roman centurion have received eternal salvation if Peter had failed to obey the heavenly vision, and had not gone to his house to preach the gospel to him and his family? Would Cornelius' knowledge of the true God of Judaism save him? I doubt it. It remains an open question. My final question is this: 'Would the Hindu who in all sincerity casts himself on Krishna find salvation?' My answer is No, because Krishna is not a projection of the true God. The true God is both creator and redeemer. There is no sacrificial principle in Krishna, and no moral perfection. The knowledge of the true God as the creator-redeemer can only come through revelation of God in Christ. Apart from direct grace there can be no I-Thou relationship between the sinner and his God.

We are distressed but not in despair on these perplexing questions. We do not play God. Our knowledge and understanding is limited and fallible. We put our confidence in him, the living God. He will judge rightly and reward and punish according to his sovereign wisdom. Our commission is clear: we are to preach the gospel, to baptize, to establish his church and to do works of service and justice in the world. Jesus said, 'As the Father has sent me, so I am sending you' ([John 20:21](#)). This is our mandate. p. 22

Universalism: A Historical Survey

Richard J. Bauckham

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This valuable and often quoted article is worthy of a reprint, despite the fact that it was written 12 years ago. As a historical survey of universalism in salvation it lays the foundation for a better understanding of the contemporary debate and the reasons for the widespread acceptance today of universalism or its alternatives, conditional immortality and annihilation. The author shows the influence of platonistic philosophy on Origen, the stand taken by Augustine and the Reformers, the effect of evolutionary thought on the 19th century debate and questions raised by the neo-orthodox theologians Karl Barth and Emil Brunner.

¹⁴ J. N. D. Anderson, *Christianity and Comparative Religion* (London, Tyndale Press, 1970), pp. 91–111.