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More than most other modern forms of universalism, Hick's bears a striking resemblance to both the Origenist and Victorian types, in that he envisages his life as merely the first stage in a long—in many cases, unimaginably long—post-mortem progress towards final salvation. Within this process hellish or (more properly) purgatorial experiences take their place. In his most recent work, Hick (drawing eclectically on [p. 35](#) Eastern, rather more than Christian, ideas of the future life) sketches a highly speculative account of the many subsequent lives through which men will pass in their gradual approximation to the divine purpose.⁴⁸ It is typical of this variety of universalism that our ultimate salvation becomes a prospect so distant as to be hardly capable of concerning us at all in this first of our many lives.⁴⁹ This is a far cry from Jesus' message of present salvation to be apprehended or lost in immediate response to his preaching.

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The Salvation of the Gentiles Implications for Other Faiths

Evangelical Alliance (UK)

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A group of evangelical Christians prepared a booklet of 40 pages to help concerned Christians relate to their immigrant neighbours of other faiths in urban Britain today. This article, which is one of three chapters, studies the salvation of the Gentiles in biblical history and its implication for the status of other faiths. While the article covers ground outlined in other articles in this issue of ERT, it makes its own special contribution to our witness and dialogue in a multi-faith society.

(Editor)

In assessing the status of other faiths in relation to his own and to God's plan for his creation, the Christian will naturally start with the witness of the Scriptures.

THE OLD TESTAMENT

In the first eleven chapters of Genesis we read of God's dealings with the *whole* of mankind, before the calling out of a special people. We read of his creation of human beings 'In his own image', i.e. with the gifts of reason and conscience and with the capacity

⁴⁸ *Death and Eternal Life*, ch. 20.

⁴⁹ Hick admits this: *ibid.*, p. 420.

to respond to God in a personal way, of his giving them dominion over other creatures, of his provision for their family life, and of their rebellion and punishment. We also read that sin continued in the human race from generation to generation, but that some at least were accepted by God through the means of sacrifice offered in faith ([Gen. 3:3](#); [8:20](#)) and that one person, Enoch, for many years ‘spent his life in fellowship with God’ ([Gen. 5:24](#) GNB). With the great flood, the survival of Noah and his family and the offering by Noah of an acceptable sacrifice, comes the account of God’s first and everlasting covenant with mankind ([Gen. 9:16](#)), a token of God’s mercy, a ‘cosmic covenant’ which was never cancelled or forgotten. This was followed by the event of Babel ([Gen. 11](#)), speaking once more of human sin and divine judgement. This whole section is vitally important as indicating God’s relations with all people, before the call of Abraham and his descendants, **P. 37** with the special covenants which were given to them. Kenneth Howkins’s comment (in an unpublished essay) is apposite: ‘God has not entirely ceased his gracious activity among men; there is the “common grace” of God operating in the world, preventing it from becoming entirely corrupt’.

The rest of the Old Testament is mainly the story of the people of God, chosen not for their own sake, but to be the channel of blessing eventually for ‘all the families on earth’ ([Gen. 12:3](#)). To them he reveals something of his glory and majesty, his mercy, holiness and judgement. He gives them his law, making a covenant with them through sacrifice. Those outside the Mosaic covenant (including of course many descendants of Abraham and Isaac outside the chosen line) mostly figure as the enemies of Israel, who worship false gods, whose customs (which include idolatry and human sacrifice) are abominable to God, to such an extent that close contact with them itself brings defilement and judgment and so is forbidden to God’s people. Some writers have sought to tone down the Old Testament denunciation of idolatry on the ground that idol-worship is mainly denounced when it involves unfaithfulness on the part of Israel to their covenant God, like that of an unfaithful wife. But the frequent occurrence of the phrase ‘the abominable customs of the nations’ (e.g. [Deut. 18:9](#)) makes it plain that such practices were hardly less blameworthy among other nations than in Israel.

While due weight must be given to this important strand of Old Testament teaching, there are other strands which appear to reveal a somewhat different attitude.

1. *Many individuals among the Gentile nations are shown in living contact with God.* Melchizedek, king of Salem, presumably a Jebusite, was ‘priest of God Most High’, and pronounced this blessing on Abraham:

Blessed be Abraham by God Most High, creator of heaven and earth. And blessed be God Most High, who has delivered your enemies into your power.

Abraham gave him a tithe of all the booty ([Gen. 14:19–20](#)). Thus Melchizedek earned for himself a place of honour among the types of the Messiah ([Ps. 110:4](#); [Heb. 5:6–11](#); [7:1–3](#)). Abimelech, king of Gerar (near Gaza) received a message from God in a dream rebuking him for taking Abraham’s wife Sarah; he obeyed God, returned Sarah and made a pact with Abraham; his family was healed of barrenness of Abraham’s intercession ([Gen. 20–21](#)). Jethro, a Midianite priest, became Moses’ father in law and ‘rejoiced at all the good the Lord had **p.38** done for Israel in saving them from the power of Egypt’. He also blessed the Lord as ‘the greatest of all gods’ and offered sacrifices to him ([Ex. 18:9–12](#)). We might look on him as a convert to the true God, but Scripture does not suggest this nor record his circumcision. The prophet Balaam, apparently a Moabite, received messages from God and ‘the spirit of God took control of him’, so that he uttered prophecies of God’s blessing on Israel ([Num. 22–24](#)), Rahab, the prostitute at Jericho, was spared by the invading Israelites because she protected Joshua’s spies ([Jos. 2:1–6](#); [6:23](#)), and so she was included

in the roll of honour of the people of faith ([Heb. 11:31](#)). Ruth, a woman of Moab, was drawn through misfortune into the company of God's people and became an ancestor of the Messiah. A widow of Zarephath in Phoenicia fed the prophet Elijah and received a gracious promise from God whereby her family's needs were supplied through a long drought; her child was restored to life in answer to the prophet's prayer ([1 Kings 17](#)). Naaman, the Syrian general, believed in God through the ministry of the prophet Elisha, yet stayed within his own community and made no open breach with idolatry ([2 Kings 5:1-19](#)). The people of Nineveh in Assyria repented at the preaching of Jonah and were spared from destruction ([Jonah 3](#)).

Nebuchadnezzar, the King of Babylon, the worshipper of a golden image, received a vision from God in a dream and acknowledged the Most High God ([Dan. 3](#) and [4](#)). Darius, the Median king, was brought to worship the God of Daniel as 'the Living God the Everlasting' ([Dan. 6](#)). Cyrus, the Persian emperor, was called by God to fulfil his purpose by restoring Judah from captivity and is named the Lord's shepherd and his anointed ([Is. 44:28](#); [45:1-7](#)), 'whom he has taken by the hand', and receives the promise, 'I will go before you and level the swelling hills ... I will strengthen you, though you have not known me'.

2. *Gentile nations are declared to have their place in the gracious purpose of God.* Amos reports his action on their behalf as parallel to the great deliverance of Israel from Egypt: 'Are not you Israelites like Cushites to me? says the Lord. Did I not bring Israel up from Egypt, the Philistines from Caphtor, the Arameans from Kir?' ([Amos 9:7](#)). They too like Israel are subject to God's judgement ([Amos 1:3-2:8](#)). Egypt and Assyria have with Israel a special place in God's plan and one day will be numbered among his people: 'When that day comes Israel shall rank with Egypt and Assyria, those three, and shall be a blessing in the centre of the world. So the Lord of Hosts will bless them: A blessing be upon Egypt my people, upon Assyria the work of my hands, and upon Israel my possession' ([Is. 19:24-25](#)). Among many nations God is being worshipped with pure offerings ([Mal. 1:11](#)—the context requires [p. 39](#) the present tense, not the future, and any reference to a wide-spread Jewish dispersion—'from furthest east to furthest west'—is inappropriate in the 5th century B.C. when Malachi was writing).

3. *The Wisdom literature* (Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and some of the Psalms) *speaks of the divine wisdom and of living one's life in accordance with it without reference to God's revelation to Israel.* It has close links in spirit, content, form and method with similar literature in Egypt. God is referred to as the creator and guide of mankind and the source of wisdom, but not as the great law-giver and deliverer of Israel; historical allusions are entirely lacking and references to worship are few and far between. In Job particularly we read of God speaking to a Syrian chief ('my servant Job') outside the context of Israel and revealing his majesty and glory to him.

We may conclude therefore that though God chose Israel as his special channel of blessing to mankind, acting powerfully on their behalf and giving them the law and the prophets, he did not confine to Israel his dealings with the children of Adam; he still had his faithful ones in other nations, men and women enlightened by his wisdom, conscious of his majesty and offering acceptable worship to him, though continuing in the traditions of their own people, and others whom he used in various ways, though they lacked a living relationship with him.

THE NEW TESTAMENT

Here we are faced with the question: what status does the New Testament give to other faiths in view of the unique and absolute claims made for 'our great God and Saviour Jesus Christ' ([Titus 1:18](#)) as the one way to God and the one and only Saviour of mankind? For many the answer would seem to be simple. In him alone is salvation ([Ac. 3:12](#)), he alone can reveal the Father ([Matt. 11:27](#)), no one comes to the Father but by him ([John 14:6](#)), he is the one mediator between God and man ([1 Tim. 2:5](#)). The gods worshipped in other faiths are nonexistent beings ([1 Cor. 8:4-6](#)) or even demons ([1 Cor. 10:20-21](#)), and their worshippers are really 'godless' ([Eph. 2:12](#)). But if the whole emphasis is placed on these and similar passages (of which there is no lack), we are faced with the problem of finding a place in the scheme of salvation for God's ancient people, Israel, and for those other men and women of faith who, as we have seen, were in living contact with him. Clearly they must be included in the scheme of salvation, though it was God's purpose that 'only in company with us would they be made perfect' ([Heb. 11:40](#)). **P. 40**

Besides these there are other strands of New Testament teaching which must be taken into account.

1. God's universal revelation of himself, as witnessed in [John 1:9](#), 'the light that enlightens every man'. William Temple's comment on this verse in *Readings in St John's Gospel* is apt: 'From the beginning divine light has shone; it has always enlightened every man alive in his reason and his conscience. Every check on animal lust felt by the primitive savage, every stimulation to a nobler life, is God self-revealed within his soul. But God in self-revelation is the Divine Word, for precisely this is what that term means'. Similarly John Stott declares: 'We should not hesitate to claim that everything good, beautiful and true, in all history and in all truth, has come from Jesus Christ, even though men are ignorant of its origin'. But this light is not in itself salvation; light judges as well as enlightens, and 'men preferred darkness to light because their deeds were evil' ([John 3:19](#)).

2. While idolatry springs from the rejection of the knowledge of the true God ([Rom. 1:20-23](#)), it incurs condemnation in proportion to the light which people have received from God. So St Paul could speak of 'the times of ignorance' when referring to the idolatry of the Athenians ([Acts 17:30](#)).

3. God's providential supply of human needs bears witness to people of all races of his goodness and mercy. St Paul tells the pagans of Lystra, 'God has not left you without some clue to his nature, in the kindness he shows: he sends you rain from heaven and crops in their seasons, and gives you food and good cheer in plenty' ([Acts 14:16-17](#)). In this way people are prompted to 'seek God, and, it might be, touch and find him; though indeed he is not far from each one of us' ([Acts 17:26](#)). Similarly St Paul writes to the Romans of a revelation of God's 'everlasting power and deity' through nature, though people have rejected this knowledge by 'stifling the truth', by refusing to honour him and lapsing into idolatry ([Rom. 1:18-23](#)).

4. 'There's a wideness in God's mercy' which exceeds the limits we often place upon it. Peter's word to Cornelius is the clearest testimony to this: 'God has no favourites, but in every nation the man who is godfearing and does what is right is acceptable to him' ([Acts 10:34](#)). But in assessing the significance of this statement we must bear in mind that Peter goes on at once to proclaim that Jesus Christ is 'Lord of all' and that forgiveness is through faith in his name (vv. [35](#), [43](#)). Further it is clear from the next chapter that Cornelius and his friends found 'salvation' and 'life' only through repentance and faith in Jesus ([Acts 11:14, 18](#)), even though his prayers and acts of charity had gone up to heaven ([Acts 10:4](#)).

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CONCLUSIONS

1. *Jesus Christ is supreme over all.* That Jesus is Lord is the basic confession of the New Testament. That he is Lord of all was Peter's proclamation to Cornelius and others like him. He is 'the first and last, the beginning and the end' ([Rev. 22:13](#)). 'In him everything in heaven and on earth was created ... The whole universe has been created through him and for him ... He is ... the first to return from the dead, to be in all things supreme' ([Col. 1:16-18](#)). In Jesus of Nazareth the eternal God came once for all in great humility to dwell for a season in a human life, not in the mere appearance of a man but as a real human being like ourselves, yet without sin. He offered once for all one sacrifice for the sins of the whole world, then rose triumphant, to reign for ever as King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

2. *No form of syncretism is acceptable to Christians.* In the light of these tremendous claims no solution which makes Jesus one of many 'lords' or which acknowledges many paths to God can possibly be accepted. If this may seem narrow-minded or intolerant, we must remember that truth in its very nature is intolerant. Some people are seeking a 'deeper' or 'higher' truth which would transcend the differences of the religions or a kind of federation of religions, each acknowledging the truth of the others and influencing one another by a sort of osmosis, or a core of religious experience common to all religions. Typical, perhaps, is the Liverpool parson who recently said, 'Christianity will have to negotiate a new system of belief with other faiths, a new understanding of God'. He, like others engaged in such a quest, was ignoring 'the faith which God entrusted to his people once for all' ([Jude 3](#)) and the Bible's and the Church's claim for Jesus Christ. These matters are not negotiable—either Jesus is Lord of all or he is not Lord at all.

3. *Other faiths are not devoid of truth.* Our acknowledgement of Christ as Lord of all does not oblige us to think of other faiths as entirely in error. Lesslie Newbigin well says, 'The Christian confession of Jesus as Lord does not involve any attempt to deny the reality of the work of God in the lives and thoughts and prayers of men and women outside the Christian church. On the contrary, it ought to involve an eager expectation of, a looking for, and a rejoicing in the evidence of that work ... If we love the light and walk in the light, we shall also rejoice in the light wherever we find it.' (*The Open Secret*, S.P.C.K., p. 198). There is much in other faiths which is in harmony with the Christian faith, e.g. the sense of the tremendous majesty of God, so [p. 42](#) clearly proclaimed by Islam and also by the Bible (e.g. [Isa. 40](#), [1 Tim. 6:15-16](#)), and the love and adoration of a personal God, found in Sikhism and the *bhakti* movements in Hinduism. We can see here the Divine Word enlightening all men, the Word which is Jesus himself; for all truth is his truth. Sir Norman Anderson writes, 'It is, of course, a common experience for a Christian to learn much from men of other faiths—in devotion, humility, courage and host of other virtues; and it is perfectly possible for him to learn from the teaching of some other religion a lesson he has failed to learn from his own' (*Christianity and Comparative Religion*, I.V.P., p. 93). But our glad acknowledgement of this fact must be qualified by our conviction of the supremacy of Christ. At night the moon and the planets glimmer with the sun's reflected light and dispel a little of the darkness, but when the sun rises in all his glory the planets vanish from sight and the moon's light become a pallid glow.

4. *There are sinful and demonic elements in all religions.* This was true of Israel—when the high priest entered the holy place, he was commanded to wear on his forehead a plate of pure gold engraved with the words 'Holy to the Lord'—'Aaron shall take upon himself any guilt incurred in the holy offering which the people of Israel hallow as their holy gifts; it shall always be upon his forehead, that they may be accepted before the Lord' ([Ex. 28:38](#) RSV). It was not simply the official leadership of Israel, the Sadducean priests, but the most

devout, the Pharisees, who rejected Jesus and demanded his death. Religion itself can easily become the enemy of truth, man's self-protection against the living God. This is evident in tribal religions, witness the ritual murders which occur from time to time. It is true in other religions, witness the clerical regime in Iran, which claims to be God's rule in opposition to Satan. It is true too in Christianity, seen as a historical phenomenon (and that is how people of other faiths view it, and how we are bound, at least in part, to view other faiths): we may cite the horrors of the Crusades, the appalling persecution of Christian by Christian in many eras, the acceptance by Christian leaders of slavery, oppressive wars and the ruthless exploitation of the poor in the past and of racial oppression in South Africa today. So religion, Christian and other, often results merely in self-righteousness instead of an encounter with God in his holiness and majesty.

5. *People without Christ are lost*, though not precisely as this has been generally understood. The teaching of the New Testament on this subject seems perfectly clear. It would be obviously wrong to interpret Peter's words to Cornelius ([Acts 10:34](#)) to mean that for people of other p. 43 faiths ordinary human goodness and piety earns them salvation, as this would run counter to the whole teaching of St Paul and St John. Those who receive Christ are saved; those who reject him are lost. But what of those who have never really had the opportunity to receive him, because they have never heard the gospel or have been presented with only a distorted picture of the Christian faith? In considering their situation we must bear in mind that judgement is in proportion to light received; Lesslie Newbigin (*The Open Secret*, p. 196) reminds us that 'we are warned to judge nothing before the time ([1 Cor. 4:1-5](#)) ... It is simply honest to refuse to answer the question which our Lord himself refused to answer ([Luke 13:23-30](#))'. Sir Norman Anderson examines the question carefully (*Christianity and Comparative Religion*, pp. 100-107). After referring to the salvation of people in the Old Testament through the merits of Jesus Christ he continues, 'May we not believe that the same would be true of the follower of some other religion in whose heart the God of all mercy had been working by his Spirit, who had come in some measure to realise his sin and need of forgiveness, and who had been enabled, in the twilight as it were, to throw himself on the mercy of God?' He refers to many precious promises made in the Bible to those who seek God and quotes Zwingli's 'somewhat sweeping' words, 'There has not lived a single good man, there has not been a single pious heart or believing soul from the beginning of the world to the end, which you will not see there in the presence of God'. He adds that this view should not lead to any diminution in evangelism; for such people still lack the *knowledge* of salvation, the assurance of sins forgiven, they do not yet know 'the present experience of joy, peace and power, which a conscious knowledge of Christ, and communion with him, alone can bring', and they have no clear message to pass on to others.

Salvation is indeed through Christ alone, won for humanity through the 'one full, perfect and sufficient sacrifice for the sins of the whole world' which he offered upon the Cross; but this does not necessarily mean that it is limited to those who hear, understand and consciously respond in a positive way to his message. There are those too who, like Cornelius, have a sense of loving dependence upon God and a hope in his mercy without ever having heard that message—can we doubt that God's mercy extends to them?

The Evangelical Alliance Study Group, London, included the late Canon R. W. F. Wootton and Canon Patrick Sookhdeo. p. 44