

second example comes from the *Pure Land* school of Japanese Buddhism, where instead of strict asceticism implicit faith in the name of Amida Buddha (the Buddha of Infinite Life and Light) ensures the grace of Enlightenment.

In contrast, the good news of Jesus Christ is that salvation is by grace alone. Paul summarised this way when he wrote 'For it is by God's grace that you have been saved through faith. It is not the result of your own efforts but God's gift so that no one can boast about it' ([Eph. 2:8, 9](#)). The realization of this truth gave birth to the European Reformation of the sixteenth century.

The human response is the empty hand reaching out in faith to receive God's free gift of grace. This path of grace alone demands our response of faith alone! To the question, 'Is Christ the only way to God?' our answer is shaped by our understanding of grace or the lack of it.

## CONCLUSION

How then do we discover that Jesus is the true way to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ? The first step is to begin to pray, yes, pray to Jesus. The story is told of Bilquis Sheikh, a high born Muslim and influential lady of Pakistan, who in her pilgrimage to faith made that leap of faith when at midnight she knelt by her bed and for the first time in her life dared to call God 'Father', a step no orthodox Muslim would dare to take. She knew from the Quran that Jesus was a prophet but now she understood that he was also the saviour of the world and her saviour. In the 13th century Anslem, archbishop of Canterbury, put it this way: 'I do not seek to understand that I may believe, but I believe that I may understand: for this I also believe, that unless I believe I will not understand.' When we take that step of faith we begin to discover that Jesus was not only an ideal man, a great miracle worker and one who sacrificed his life for others, but that he is the one who makes God visible to those who have faith. For some it is a giant leap of faith, for others it is one small step at a time. The path to God always begins with a first step. If people of other Faiths turn from their sinful ways and cast themselves entirely on the mercy of the creator-redeemer God, even if they do not know his name, this is a sign of God's grace upon them. We cannot claim that the grace of God is limited to the boundary of the Christian Church, but we can affirm with the early Church, 'Salvation is to be found through him [Jesus] alone; in all the world there is no one else who God has given who can save us' ([Acts 4:12](#))

It is not for us to judge others and God's response to them. At present we see through a glass darkly, but when Jesus returns we will see him face to face and those things which are hidden from us now will be revealed.

Jesus' call to us, his followers, is clear: 'to know him and to make him known'.

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\* All quotations are from *Today's English Version* (Good News Bible) unless otherwise stated and used with permission.

# Why Christianity of All Religions?

# Klaas Runia

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Why Christianity of all religions is a central issue of our time. Are all religions pathways to God? The author systematically and with fairness deals from an historical and theological perspective with many of the ontological issues that arise from this question. He argues that the resurrection of Jesus Christ is our starting point.  
Editor

One of the songs of George Harrison of Beatles' fame is called: 'My sweet Lord'. The refrain of the song is: 'I really want to know you, Lord, but it takes so long.' These words give the impression that this is a Christian song, but this is a mistake. In the background we hear a choir singing 'Hallelujah', but halfway through the record the Hallelujah gives way to Hare Krishna, Krishna, Krishna, and later on the names of other Indian deities are mentioned.

This song is typical of the thinking of many people in our day. They believe that all religions are pathways to God. They like to compare the various religions with spokes of a wheel: they all run to the same centre, the axle. In a similar way all religions lead to the same hidden centre of all reality: God. For this reason it does not really make any difference which deity one worships. It is also possible to insert aspects of other religions into one's own religion. In the past this approach was particularly characteristic of Asian religions. In his book *No Other Name* W. A. Visser 't Hooft, the first secretary-general of the WCC, quotes the following 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 I search for from temple to temple.<sup>2</sup>

In recent years the same approach has become rather popular in the western world too, largely due to the influence of eastern religions and of the New Age movement. In some theological circles, especially in the English-speaking world, it has become the predominant view. It is therefore not surprising to see that common worship services of Christians, Jews and Moslems are becoming more frequent. In such services portions of the New Testament, of the Old Testament and of the Koran are read side by side, and together the worshippers pray to the heavenly Father of Jesus Christ, to Yahweh and to Allah, for they are all names for the One and Only God, the Creator of heaven and earth.

## WAVES OF SYNCRETISM

It is common to speak here of religious pluralism. One can also speak of syncretism. Visser 't Hooft gives the following definition of syncretism: 'It is the view which holds that there is no unique revelation in history, that there are many different ways to reach the divine reality, that all formulations of religious truth and experience are by their very nature inadequate expressions of that truth and that it is necessary to harmonize as much as possible all religious ideas and experiences so as to create one universal religion for mankind' (21).

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<sup>2</sup> W.A. Visser 't Hooft, *No Other Name?* (1963), p. 84.

According to Visser 't Hooft there have been four great waves of syncretism that had a bearing on the life of the church. The *first* one occurred in the days of King Manasseh, who lived in the century before the Jewish Exile. He introduced foreign cults into the temple and worshipped all the host of heaven, serving them next to Yahweh. The *second* wave occurred in the days of the Roman Empire. All kinds of religions found their way to Rome: from Asia Minor, from Syria, from Persia, from Egypt and from many other countries. Their gods were very welcome and each of them obtained his or her own place in the Pantheon, the famous temple at Rome, where the gods of all nations were worshipped together with the Emperor and his 'divine' predecessors. In a letter to the Emperor the Roman prefect Symmachus summarized the underlying concept: 'What does it matter how anyone seeks the truth? It is impossible that so great a mystery should be approached by one road only' (22). No wonder that the Christians who believed that there is only one God, the Father, and only one Lord, Jesus Christ ([1 Cor. 8:6](#)), and who therefore refused to partake in the cult of the Emperor, were bitterly persecuted by the authorities.

The *third* wave broke over Europe in the 18th century, the age of the Enlightenment (22ff.). Thinkers and writers, such as Rousseau, Goethe and Lessing, believed that we should eagerly receive all the wealth of the varieties of religious experience without excluding any. Christianity was just one aspect of the wider religious synthesis. One of the best known examples of this limitless syncretism is Lessing's 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 blesses each of his sons and gives him one of the rings. Each of the three believes 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 judgement: 'Let each think that 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'.

The *fourth* great wave of syncretism is taking place in our own day. It is promoted by various factors, such as the science of psychology, the end of the colonial period, the revival of the old religions of Asia, the vitalist philosophy, which is a marked feature of modern literature, etc. (28ff.). In recent years the wave has been strengthened by the ideas of New Age, which are based on the premise that all that exists is 'one'. Everything coheres and is connected with everything else; God, nature, the cosmos, the plant, the animal and man – they are all 'one'. In addition, the soul or spirit of man is nothing but a spark from the divine fire or a droplet from the divine ocean, and every religion is nothing but the striving of this spark or droplet to return into the great and eternal fire or ocean.

All these various and varied forms of syncretism have one common structure. They all believe that there are many pathways to God, for God is 'too great, too unknowable to reveal himself in a single revelation and once for all' (48). Syncretism in all its forms is 'essentially a revolt against the uniqueness of revelation in history'. Syncretistic thinking abhors the idea 'that God has actually made himself definitely known in a particular person and event at a particular time'. In our own day this view is strongly and persuasively advocated by such theologians as William Cantwell Smith, John Hick and Paul Knitter. All three of them are of the opinion that we have to abandon the idea that Jesus Christ is the very centre of God's self-revelation. Our religious thinking should not be 'christocentric' but 'theocentric'. Hick calls this the 'Copernican Revolution' that is taking place in our day. 'We have to realise that the universe of faiths centres upon *God*, and not upon Christianity or upon any other religion. God is the sun, the originative source

of light and life, whom all the religions reflect in their own different ways.’<sup>3</sup> Paul Knitter essentially agrees with Hick,<sup>4</sup> although he himself prefers to speak of a ‘salvation-centred’ approach, for such a conception would call on the different religious believers to work for ‘a shared liberative praxis’.<sup>5</sup>

## CHRISTIAN RESPONSES

What is our answer as Evangelical Christians? Almost instinctively we reject this kind of syncretism with an appeal to certain passages of Scripture, such as [John 14:6](#), where Jesus says: ‘I am the way, the truth and the life; no one comes to the Father but by me’; or the words of Peter in [Acts 4:12](#), ‘And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved’; or the words of Paul in [1 Tim. 2:5](#), ‘There is one God and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus’.

For my part, I wholeheartedly believe what is said in these passages. However, an appeal to them is not the correct starting point in a discussion with people of other faiths. For us who belong to the Christian Church, the Bible contains God’s self-revelation to his chosen people. But an appeal to this revelation is valid only for those who believe in Jesus Christ and share the same faith with the Bible writers. The adherents of other religions also appeal to their own holy writings as revelations of God and they are convinced that these writings offer them the truth about God. In a discussion with people of other religions a simple appeal to revelation means that we arrive at a deadlock.

In addition, there is the fact that today these very same passages are interpreted in a different way by fellow-Christians. The Roman Catholic scholar Paul Knitter, for instance, believes that these passages apply to Christians only. When Christians see Jesus as the way, the life and the truth, they actually say no more than that this is the way they personally experience Jesus. Knitter ranks it with the exclamation of a husband to his wife: ‘You are the most beautiful woman in the world.’<sup>6</sup> We have to do here with ‘love’ language, which means that the passages I quoted should not be taken in an absolute sense, but as confessions that hold true within the Christian community only.

Are there other ways to find an answer to our question?

Since the rise of the science of comparative religion, scholars have tried to discover the essence of the phenomenon of religion. The next step, naturally, was to determine which of the various religions met this criterion best. But this method did not provide an answer either.

In the first place there was the problem of the criterion itself. Often it was formulated in such a general and broad manner that every religion was covered by it. Take, for instance, the idea of the holy. This idea, in one form or another, is present in all religions. We encounter it in both the so-called primitive religions (such as Buddhism and Hinduism, Judaism, Christianity and Islam).

A second problem is that nearly always the scholar uses his own view of the essence of religion as the criterion for determining which is the highest religion. The natural result

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<sup>3</sup> J. Hick, *God Has Many Faces* (1980), p. 52.

<sup>4</sup> In his book *No Other Name?*, 1986, he also speaks of a ‘theocentric’ approach.

<sup>5</sup> Paul Knitter, ‘Theocentric Christology: Defended and Transcended’, *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, Vol. 24 (Winter, 1987), 47.

<sup>6</sup> Paul Knitter, *No Other Name?*, p. 187.

is that one finds what one is looking for. One's own religion appears to be the highest form of religion.

A third problem is that in essence all religions are unique. All religions have their own characteristic features and even when they use the same word (e.g. God, or revelation, or salvation), this word appears to have its own inalienable and non-transferable content.<sup>7</sup> Christianity, Judaism and Islam all use the word God, but their conceptions of God differ in various respects, e.g. in the idea of the Fatherhood of God. Both Christianity and Islam claim to be based on revelation, which was written down in the Holy Book. However, there is a decisive difference. For Moslems the Koran is the written transcript of an eternal tablet in heaven, the 'Mother of the Book', and it was transmitted to Mohammed through the angel Gabriel. For Christians the self-revelation of God is to be sought primarily in the person of Jesus and only secondarily in the Bible. Both Christianity and Buddhism are religions of redemption, but in Buddhism it is a redemption from desire and suffering, while in Christianity redemption means the liberation from sin and guilt, from the powers of evil and from death.

When H.M. Kuitert states, in his last book, that the three great monotheistic religions (Judaism, Christianity and Islam) share the idea of transcendence, for they all believe in God as The Creator who can never be confused with his creatures<sup>8</sup>, he makes a similar mistake. Using a philosophical and rather abstract idea of transcendence he regards these three religions as the guardians of transcendence. Consequently, he goes on to argue for the rehabilitation of 'theism'. In the second to last sentence of his book he writes: 'The churches, the synagogue, the mosque they are able, better than hitherto, to teach their people that they do not have to be anybody's servant, if they believe in God' (202). However true this statement may be in itself, it is based on the faulty presupposition that these three religions have the same view of divine transcendence. Kuitert, too, works with a criterion that he has first devised (namely 'theism'). But the fact that it applies equally to three quite different religions is proof that in this way we shall never find an answer to the question: Why Christianity of all religions? On the basis of theism there appear to be three candidates!

## RELIGIONS AS FALSE OR PARTIALLY TRUE

The next question that we encounter in this context is: How do Christians regard the other religions? Can the answer to this question provide a solution? When we look back at the history of the Christian Church there appear to be two main views.

The first is to regard all other religions as false religions. This was the view of Tertullian and many Church Fathers. It was also the view of the medieval church. It adopted the formula, first introduced by Cyprian '*extra ecclesiam nulla salus*' (there is no salvation outside the church). In his bull *Unam Sanctam*, issued in 1302, Pope Boniface VIII reaffirmed it and stated: 'That there is only one holy, catholic and apostolic Church we are compelled by faith to believe and hold; we firmly believe in her and simply confess her; outside her there is neither salvation nor remission of sins'.<sup>9</sup> The Council of Florence (1438–1445) repeated and confirmed this view when it said: 'Outside the Catholic Church

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<sup>7</sup> Cf. Harold A. Netland, *Dissonant Voices. Religious Pluralism and the Question of Truth*, 1991, especially chapters II and III about 'Conflicting Truth Claims'.

<sup>8</sup> H.M. Kuitert, *Zeker weten* (1994), p. 201.

<sup>9</sup> *The Teaching of the Catholic Church* (ed. Karl Rahner), 1967, 203, No. 872 in Denziger's *Enchiridion Symbolorum*.

no one, neither pagans nor Jews nor heretics nor schismatics, can obtain eternal life, but will go to the everlasting fire . . . , unless before the end of life they are received into the Church.’<sup>10</sup> Basically this was also the view of the Reformers. Luther spoke for the entire Protestant tradition when he called Christianity the *vera et unica religio* (the true and unique religion). According to Calvin Scripture condemns ‘as falsehood and lying whatever of divinity had formerly been celebrated among the heathen’.<sup>11</sup>

The second view regards the other religions as a mixture of truth and error, the latter obscuring the former. Yet, because of those elements of truth, the non-Christian religion may function as a *praeparatio evangelica* (an evangelical preparation) for the gospel of Jesus Christ. Since the 19th century this view has become predominant in Roman Catholic teaching and theology. The *lumen naturale* (the light of nature), by which the adherents of other religions live, is the antechamber to the true Church of God, the Roman Catholic Church. In the documents of the Second Vatican Council in particular we encounter this ‘fulfilment’ theory. Thus we read in section 16 of *Lumen Gentium*: ‘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.’<sup>12</sup>

### EXCLUSIVE? INCLUSIVE? OR PLURALIST?

In our own day we still encounter these differing attitudes toward other religions. In fact, today it is customary to make a threefold distinction: the exclusivist, the inclusivist and the pluralist or liberal approach. Since time does not allow me to deal with them extensively I will make a few short comments on each position.<sup>13</sup>

*The exclusivist view* was generally held by the Church up to the Middle Ages, and by the Reformers. In our century it was strongly advocated by Karl Barth and Hendrik Kraemer. Barth rejected all divine self-revelation outside Christ and declared every form of religion (including the Christian ‘religion’, which he distinguished from the Christian gospel) to be sheer unbelief.<sup>14</sup> Likewise Kraemer regarded all religion, all philosophy and all moralism as constituting various ‘endeavours for self-redemption’.<sup>15</sup> 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 have to say *point-blank* about the “other” religions is that in their deepest and most essential intentions all of them are errors’.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> op. cit., 342.

<sup>11</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes* I, v. 13. In another place he calls the human heart a ‘fabricator of all kinds of idols’.

<sup>12</sup> *The Documents of Vatican II* (ed. Walter M. Abbott), 1966, 35.

<sup>13</sup> For a more comprehensive discussion, see my article ‘The Gospel and Religious Pluralism’ in *Evangelical Review of Theology*, vol. 14, no. 4 (October 1990), 341–379.

<sup>14</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, Vol. I, 2, 299ff.

<sup>15</sup> H. Kraemer, *The Christian Message in a Non-Christian World*, 1938, 70.

<sup>16</sup> H. Kraemer, *Waarom nu juist het Christendom?*, 1960, 84.

In my own Reformed tradition we encounter a rather similar view in the works of J.H. Bavinck and J. Verkuyl. They differ from Barth in that they both believe that there is, in addition to the revelation in Christ, also a general self-revelation of God in creation, in the work of the law written on the heart of every human being and in the human conscience. But they also believe with Paul that fallen man suppresses the truth of this general revelation by his wickedness ([Rom. 1:18](#)). Bavinck sees behind all idolatry 'rebellion against God, vain illusion, and self-deceit'.<sup>17</sup> J. Verkuyl, Bavinck's successor to the chair of missiology in the Free University of Amsterdam, is of the opinion that at no point are the religions of this world identical. 'They differ deeply in the wells from which they draw and in their contents and in their aims.'<sup>18</sup> He also agrees with Kraemer that self-redemption is the hidden motive of all the non-Christian religions (116). Therefore, he cannot possibly agree with the view, rather popular in some Roman Catholic circles, that all religious systems are ways of salvation, as long as they have not yet met Christ.<sup>19</sup>

The exclusivist view is also held by the great majority of evangelical theologians. In the famous Lausanne Covenant (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 speaks equally through all religions and ideologies. Jesus Christ, being himself the only God-man, 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.'<sup>20</sup>

*The inclusivist view*, though never quite universally adopted, has quite a long pedigree, too. We find traces of it already in the writings of Justin Martyr, one of the early Apologists (c.100–c.165). In one of his writings he affirms: 'It is our belief that those men who strive to do the good which is enjoined upon us have a share in God; according to our traditional belief they will by God's grace share his dwelling. And it is our conviction that this holds good in principle for all men.' Behind this affirmation lies the idea of the eternal divine Logos, which as the philosophical principle of coherent rationality permeates the basic reality of the universe as a whole. Because Justin identifies this Logos with Christ he can write: 'Christ is the divine Word in whom the whole human race share, and those who live according to the light of their knowledge are Christians, even if they are considered as being godless.'<sup>21</sup>

As stated before, in recent Roman Catholic teaching and theology the inclusivist approach takes on the form of the 'fulfilment' theory, meaning that the qualities of goodness and truth which non-Christian religions may possess come from Christ and reflect rays of that Truth that enlightens all men (cf. [John 1:19](#)).<sup>22</sup> The Vatican II *Decree on the Church's Missionary Activity (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

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<sup>17</sup> J.H. Bavinck, *Introduction to the Science of Missions*, 1960, 84.

<sup>18</sup> J. Verkuyl, *Zijn alle godsdiensten gelijk?*, 1981, 41.

<sup>19</sup> J. Verkuyl, *Contemporary Missiology. An Introduction*, 1978, 480.

<sup>20</sup> *Let the Earth Hear His Voice* (ed. J.D. Douglas), 1975, 3/4. John Stott, who was the principal drafter of the Lausanne Covenant, advocates the same view in his book *Christian Mission in the Modern World*, 1975.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Alan Race, *Christians and Religious Pluralism*, 1983, 42f.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Abbott, op. cit., 662 (from the *Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to non-Christian religions (Nostra Aetate)*).



of God, this (missionary activity) frees from all taint of evil and restores to Christ its Maker' (595/6). Individual Roman Catholic theologians have moved even beyond this cautious approach of their church. Karl Rahner, for instance, believes that, even though creation may not be identified with grace, grace always accompanies it. For this reason the faithful adherents of other religions can be saved through the faithful practice of their religion. Rahner calls these people 'anonymous' Christians.<sup>23</sup> The Asian theologian Raymond Pannikar takes a big step further, when he states: 'The good and *bona fide* Hindu is saved by Christ and not by Hinduism, but it is through the Sacraments of Hinduism, through the *Mysterium* that comes to him through Hinduism, that *Christ* saves the Hindu normally.'<sup>24</sup> Some Eastern Orthodox theologians move in the same direction. Metropolitan Georges Khodt speaks of the hidden Christ within other religious traditions. 'Christ is hidden everywhere in the mystery of his lowliness. Any reading of religions is a reading of Christ. It is Christ alone who is received as light when grace visits a Brahmin, a Buddhist or a Mohammadan reading his own scriptures.'<sup>25</sup>

Even though the inclusivists show very considerable appreciation of the non-Christian religions, they refrain from saying that those religions themselves can save a person. It is always *Christ* who saves by his hidden presence in the other religion.

The third approach, which is often called the *pluralist or liberal approach*, moves beyond this, no longer having a place for the uniqueness of Jesus Christ. In the early decades of this century the German theologian and philosopher Ernst Troeltsch already disclaimed Christianity as the supreme expression of religious life. All evidence we have for such a claim is 'the evidence of a profound experience', but this kind of evidence is valid only for those who share this experience. Christianity, therefore, is no more than one faith among many others.<sup>26</sup>

In preparation for the World Conference at Tambaram (1938) W.E. Hocking, a liberal Harvard professor, wrote the report *Re-Thinking Mission* (1932). In it he 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' (443/3). Some twenty years later he advocated the idea of one universal world religion. His premise was that all religions contain an inalienable core of truth. 'In proportion as any religion grows in self-understanding through grasping its own essence, it grasps the essence of all religion.'<sup>27</sup> Hence there is no need to relinquish one's own religion and convert to another religion, but staying in his own religion the believer should aim at 'reconception', that is, a new conception of his own religion, complemented and enriched by his contact with other religion.

In our own day the pluralist approach is strongly advocated and defended by such theologians as William Cantwell Smith, John Hick and Paul Knitter.<sup>28</sup> Cantwell Smith is of

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<sup>23</sup> Cf. K. Rahner, *Theological Investigations* vol. 5, 1966, 131, and vol. 6, 1969, 393ff. Cf. also Race, op. cit., 45ff.

<sup>24</sup> Raymond Pannikar, *The Unknown Christ of Hinduism*, 1964, 54.

<sup>25</sup> Georges Khodr, 'Christianity in a Pluralistic World', in *Sobornost*, The Journal of the Fellowship of St Alban and St Sergius, Series 6, No. 3, Summer 1971, 171.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. Race, op. cit., 78ff.

<sup>27</sup> W.E. Hocking, *Living Religions and a World Faith*, 1940, 198.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness* (ed. John Hick and Paul F. Knitter), 1987.



the opinion that the adherents of other religions are also 'people of the faith'.<sup>29</sup> In his contribution to the 1988 issue of the *International Review of Missions* which commemorated Tambaram 1938 he wrote that 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, of salvific force' (361). 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, in the Buddhist movement' (366). This entire mission is the work of the Holy Spirit. Everyone who denies this is disloyal to Christ and is blaspheming God (367)!<sup>30</sup>

John Hick, who wrote many books on the subject, states in one of his last publications: God is 'the sun, the originative source of light and life, whom all the religions reflect in their own different ways'.<sup>31</sup> The title of his very last book speaks for itself: *The Rainbow of Faiths* (1995). The title of the last chapter reads: 'A Christianity That Sees Itself as One True Religion among Others' (125). In the last part of this chapter he offers a 'spirituality in a pluralistic age', which is drawn from a number of non-Christian writings, Talmudic, Hindu, Sikh, Buddhist, Taoist, Moslem, etc. (139ff.).

Paul F. Knitter who is another spokesman for the pluralist view wrote the book *No Other Name?* (1986). The question mark in the title is telling and indicates where his problem lies. He rejects the mainline Protestant model that ties salvation to the Christ event (119), because Christ does not limit his working to the Christian faith; one can encounter him in other religions as well. The Catholic model (many ways, one norm) is better, for it recognizes that grace (which is of Christ) operates also through non-Christian religions (123) and that authentic religious experience also takes place in them (14). Knitter himself prefers the theocentric model (many ways to God) or better still, the salvation-centred model (many ways of salvation). There is no reason to believe that God's full offer of grace was given only once (191). Incarnation was not a unique event that took place literally and historically, but we should see it as a meaningful myth, indicating that in the encounter with Jesus Christ we encounter God himself. The final bar of religious truth is 'an authentic experience of the divine that gives one a secure place to stand and from which to carry on the frightening and fascinating journey, with other religions, into the inexhaustible fullness of divine truth' (220).

## PHENOMENOLOGY OR REVELATION?

The pluralist approach is largely built on the phenomenology of religious experience. Hick does not deny that there are differences in the mode of experience, but he regards such differences as consequences of the fact that the Ultimate exceeds all our thoughts and speculations and is indefinable.<sup>32</sup> Our image of God is always a 'human' image and therefore inadequate and incomplete. For that same reason the various experiences are not mutually exclusive but rather complementary. This, however, is not a conclusion based on the factual data that came to light in his investigation of the various experiences, but it already served as the premise of his phenomenological investigation and at the end

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<sup>29</sup> Cf. W. Cantwell Smith, *Faith and Belief*, 1979.

<sup>30</sup> For a systematic account of his view, see Edward J. Hughes, Wilfred Cantwell Smith. *A Theology for the World*, 1986, with a Preface by John Hick.

<sup>31</sup> John Hick, *God has Many Names*, 1980, 52.

<sup>32</sup> Cf. J. Hick, 'The Outcome: Dialogue into Truth', in J. Hick, ed., *Truth and Dialogue*, 1974.

of the investigation it is simply repeated. Rightly Ninian Smart observes that 'from a phenomenological point of view it is not possible to base the judgment that all religions point to the same truth upon religious experience'.<sup>33</sup> The great 'phenomenologist' G. van der Leeuw already observed: 'Vor der Offenbarung macht die Phänomenologie halt'. (Phenomenology comes to a halt when it encounters revelation.)

It is obvious that in this approach there is no place for the idea of a real Incarnation. One may still use the term, but it no longer describes factual history. It now belongs in the same group of categories of language as parable, story or image.<sup>34</sup> It is not, strictly speaking, descriptive language, but language designed to evoke a response of faith and commitment in the person who hears or reads it.' It is no longer possible to believe that at a certain point of time in the history of this world the Second Person of the Divine Trinity came to earth in order to live here as a human being, for the salvation of the world, but the story of the Incarnation is a religious story that tells us that the encounter with the man Jesus was and is, in some sense, an encounter with God. Here the idea of the Incarnation as one of the criteria for the truth of revelation has been discarded and abandoned.

As we all know, the Christian faith does not say that the revelation in Jesus Christ is the only revelation. With a few exceptions (for instance, Karl Barth) Christian theology has always recognized a general self-revelation of God in nature and in man's morality and conscience, but it also recognized that this revelation is always suppressed by man's wickedness ([Rom. 1:18](#)), the result being that all religions are a mixture of truth and error, of true and false trails. For this reason a new revelation was necessary, a revelation that started immediately after the Fall and had its culmination in the appearance of Jesus Christ. This new revelation, however, does not negate the reality of the general revelation. Most Christians believe that to some extent the general revelation still shines through the various religions. The norm for the evaluation of all religious knowledge and experience, however, is the revelation in Jesus Christ.

I accept that what I have just said is a statement of faith that cannot be proved at the bar of pure science, including the science of the phenomenology of religion. But for a Christian who through the work of the Holy Spirit has been touched and reached by the gospel, Jesus Christ is the central revelation of the only true God who is the Creator of heaven and earth. As Hendrikus Berkhof has put it: 'for the Christian the divine revelation in Christ is not exclusive, but it is normative'.<sup>35</sup>

So the question, 'Why Christianity of all religions?' cannot be answered by means of comparative religion or the phenomenology of religion. That way leads to a dead end. Therefore we have to start somewhere else and ask another question, namely, what is the unique character of the Christian gospel. I use the term 'the Christian gospel', and not 'Christianity', deliberately. Christianity is the particular religious and/or cultural form of a society or a segment of society that was addressed and touched by the Christian gospel. Such a Christian society is always a mixture of Christian and non-Christian elements. This was also the reason why both Barth and Kraemer in their critique of the phenomenon of religion included the Christian religion.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> N. Smart, 'Truth and Religions', in *Truth and Dialogue*, 50.

<sup>34</sup> Cf. Alan Race, *op. cit.*, 118.

<sup>35</sup> Hendrikus Berkhof, *Christian Faith*, 1979, 48.

<sup>36</sup> Cf. H. Kraemer, *Waarom nu juist het Christendom*, 70, 82, 100ff. Even seen as a religion Christianity is not the best of all religions in the sense that in comparison with the other major religions it presents the 'best and noblest' expression of divine truth and experience. During his many travels Kraemer noticed that

Therefore, if we want to find an answer to our question, we cannot take Christianity or the Christian religion as our starting point. Not even Christian theology or the Christian faith can serve as a starting point. Even the latter is not an absolute norm, for it is the human response to the gospel and therefore always incomplete and imperfect. There is only one correct starting point, namely the Person of him who is the spring and the object of the Christian gospel and the Christian faith.

It is precisely here that we find an essential difference between the Christian faith and the other religions. At the centre of every other religion is, not the founder, but his teaching or doctrine. Gautama Buddha told his followers that only his teaching was important. Mohammed called himself the last of the prophets. But Jesus, the man of Nazareth, not only claimed that his teaching came from God, but also that *he himself* came from God (cf. [Matt. 21:37](#); [Mk. 12:6](#); [Lk. 20:13](#)). We observe this claim not only in the Fourth Gospel, but in the Synoptic Gospels as well. In all the gospels Jesus made his own person the decisive and final criterion, both for this life and for the life to come. 'Every one who acknowledges me before men, I also will acknowledge before my Father who is in heaven' ([Matt. 10:32](#); cf. [Lk. 12:8](#)). 'He who receives you receives me, and he who receives me receives him who sent me' ([Matt. 10:40](#); [Mark 9:37](#); [Luke 10:16](#)). 'Whoever would save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it' ([Matt. 16:25](#)). According to the Gospel of John Jesus says to Thomas and the other apostles: 'I am the way, the truth and the life; no one comes to the Father, but by me. If you had known me, you would have known my Father also; henceforth you know him and have seen him' ([14:6, 7](#)).

## THE RESURRECTION AS OUR STARTING POINT

But how do we know that such statements are really true? In today's theological climate it is not enough to say: 'Well, that's what I read in the Bible and the Bible is God's Word for me'. Undoubtedly this is a good Christian answer and yet it is not enough. We all know of the historical-critical research of the Bible that has been going on since the end of the 18th century and has boomed in this 20th century. Many of the leading theologians are of the opinion that we can no longer read the gospels as if they present us with a truly historical picture of the real, historical Jesus, that is, the beginning of the Christian era. These questions are, unfortunately, beyond the scope of this essay, but we cannot pretend that they do not exist.

This is the reason why I take my starting point in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. This, in my opinion, is the only proper point of departure for obtaining a good and reliable picture of the real Jesus. The gospels themselves were written from this perspective. I know, of course, that according to historical-critical research into the New Testament the fact of the resurrection itself is by no means certain. Most of the theologians and historians involved in this research do believe that after Jesus' death on the cross something must have happened that evoked the idea of a resurrection in the minds and hearts of the disciples, but whether it was a real resurrection we do not and cannot know on the basis of the evidence available. The data we find in the gospels are scant and contradictory. The only thing we really know is that a few days after Jesus' death on the cross the idea that Jesus was raised from the dead was present and alive in the minds and hearts of the disciples.

For a Reformed church and a Reformed theologian this view is utterly unacceptable. The resurrection of Jesus on the third day after his death is not an 'idea' that one can

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certain religious feelings and attitudes are much better expressed in other major religions than in Christianity, op. cit., 104/5.

accept or reject. Jesus' resurrection is the very centre of the entire New Testament. All four gospels mention it. It is also the foundation and heart of the apostolic preaching as reported in the book of Acts. All the letters in the New Testament presuppose it. In other words, all the early witnesses speak of it as a truly factual event. All four gospels mention several witnesses who met the risen Lord. Paul, whose letter to the Corinthians was written much earlier than the gospels, mentions quite a list of witnesses. 'He appeared to Cephas (Peter), then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brethren at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me' ([1 Cor. 15:5-8](#)). Very intriguing is the reference to an appearance to five hundred brethren at one time. This appearance is not mentioned in its factuality. Paul's formulation is quite striking. It is as if he is saying: 'If you don't believe me, go to Palestine and talk to those brethren, for most of them are still alive'. All the writers of the New Testament are absolutely certain that the same Jesus who in the late afternoon of (what we call) Good Friday died on the cross was raised from the dead by God himself on the first day of the following week. As a matter of fact, God is the only one who can do this. The resurrection is a divine miracle. Yes, we may say: it is the greatest miracle of all times. It is a pure *novum*. It is also different from all the other raisings mentioned in both the Old and the New Testament. The son of the widow of Zarephath ([1 Kgs. 17](#)) and the son of the wealthy woman of Shunem ([2 Kgs. 4](#)), the little daughter of Jairus, the young man of Nain and Jesus' friend Lazarus were also raised from the dead, but they all returned to this life and therefore had to die again. Their resurrections were strictly personal and had no consequences for the fate and future of other people. They were at most a signal that death does not have the last word. Jesus' resurrection was quite different and unique. He did not return to this world and this life, even though he did appear to his disciples during the forty days between his resurrection and ascension, but he went, so to speak, right through death and arrived at the other end of it in order so to enter into the eternal life with his Father in heaven. His resurrection was also unique in that it had consequences for other people. Paul says that he was raised as the 'first fruits of those that have fallen asleep' ([1 Cor. 15:20](#)). A little further he says: 'As in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive ([22](#))'. Jesus' resurrection is the anticipation of the great eschatological resurrection that shall take place at the end of the history.

## THE MIRACLE OF RECONCILIATION

From the unique perspective of Jesus' resurrection the disciples of Jesus looked back at Jesus' life and discovered things they had never seen or understood before. From this perspective they realized there was a mystery in Jesus' life, even a double mystery. First, there was a mystery in what he did and why he had to die. Second, there was a mystery in who he was: not an ordinary man, not even an extra-ordinary man, but more than man.

During the years that the disciples followed Jesus, while he travelled around the country and preached the gospel of the Kingdom, they were deeply impressed by what he did and said. With their own ears they heard that the Kingdom of God was at hand ([Mk. 1:15](#); [Matt. 3:17](#); [Lk. 10:9, 11](#)). With their own eyes they saw the signs of the Kingdom. But they had little idea of what this Kingdom was and who this Jesus who announced it was. A very clear example of this lack of understanding is the story of Peter's confession of Jesus as the Messiah, the Son of the living God ([Matt. 16:16](#)). This must have been a high point in Jesus' life. At long last some one recognized him as the Messiah sent by God. But he also realized that Peter, and the other disciples as well, still had an entirely wrong conception of his messiahhood and of his messianic task. This becomes apparent when

Jesus immediately after Peter's confession begins to speak about his suffering and death. Peter at once rebukes him, saying: 'God forbid, Lord! This shall never happen to you' ([Matt. 16:22](#)). In turn, Jesus rebukes Peter and even calls him 'satan': 'Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me'.

During those years of close companionship the disciples did love Jesus (I think that this also holds true of Judas, most certainly in the early years) but they understood very little of him and his work. And when Jesus' words about his suffering and death come true, they all abandon Jesus and flee. When a few days after Jesus' death some women tell them that they have met Jesus again, none of the disciples believes them. They regard this story as an 'idle tale' ([Lk. 24:11](#)). Even during the last appearance they still see the promised Kingdom in earthly and Jewish-national terms, as appears from their question: 'Lord, will You at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?' ([Acts 1:6](#)). Jesus waves this question aside and commands them to wait for the coming of the Holy Spirit who will make them his witnesses ([1:8](#)).

After the outpouring of the Spirit on the day of Pentecost we see that they gradually begin to understand the meaning of Jesus' life and death. It is a step-by-step process of enlightenment. In his first sermon on the day of Pentecost Peter does proclaim that Jesus' death was according to the plan of God ([2:23](#)) and that it was God who had raised Jesus ([2:24](#)), but he is not yet able to say what the full import of this death and resurrection is. Due to the illumination of the Spirit the disciples progressively discover that the cross was much more than a judiciary mistake or a judicial murder. No, God himself was involved in this death. On the cross the great miracle of the reconciliation of man with God took place. Jesus himself had already intimated this in those mysterious words spoken at the Last Supper: 'This bread is my body for you. This is my blood of the covenant, poured out for you' (cf. [Matt. 26:26-29](#)). At that time these words must have been rather obscure for the disciples, but afterwards they began to understand them. Already in one of the earliest documents of the New Testament, Paul's letter to the Galatians, written in the early fifties, we read that 'Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us' ([3:13](#)). In all his other letters we again and again encounter the idea that Christ died for our sins. We also encounter it in the letters of Peter and John and the letter to the Hebrews. They all express it in their own way, but the refrain is the same: he died for our sins.

According to the authors of the New Testament this meaning of Jesus' death was not something that in retrospect was added to the messianic life of Jesus, but from the very beginning this was God's plan with his Messiah. John writes: 'God so loved the world that he gave his only-begotten Son' ([3:16](#)), and Paul writes to the Romans that 'God shows his love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us' ([5:8](#)). According to Luke Jesus himself, during one of his last appearances, says to his disciples 'that everything written about me in the law of Moses and the prophets and the psalms must be fulfilled'. We do not know why God chose this way. We can only say that sin is apparently so awful that it has to be 'burnt away'. The church has always believed that this happened in particular when during the three hours of darkness that enveloped Calvary and the cross Jesus cried out: 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?'

At times I have a feeling that poets understand this better than many theologians. I am thinking of the poem 'You have broken the high secret', by the Dutch poet Gerrit Achterberg. I render it here in my own translation:

You	have	broken	the	high	secret,	Lord	Jesus,
between	us	and	the	Father;	according	to	your
we	may	be	without	sin	and	new	Word,
whatever	may	have	happened	in	our	life.	beings,

I did, of all that could be done,  
the most criminal . . . and was damned.  
But you, God, have named a new name  
together with mine. Now it has become quiet,  
like a summer blooming around the villages.

And even though the flowers will wither again:  
my loins will be girded; my feet are shod.  
Born once again from your hand,  
I stride to You out of the darkness.

## THE MIRACLE OF THE INCARNATION

This is no cheap poetic language; Achterberg speaks about the ‘most criminal thing’ – he had shot and killed his landlady, an act that could never be redressed. The guilt of this act pressed as a heavy burden on his soul; ‘I was damned’. But Jesus entered into his life and gave him a new name. Then his life began to bloom ‘like a summer around the villages’. The poet does realize that one day he will have to die (‘the flowers will wither again’), but he also knows: ‘out of the darkness I stride to You’.

But there is still another mystery about Jesus. The resurrection shed new light not only on his work, but also on his person. Already during his lifetime people wondered who he was. They gave various answers. They said: He is a rabbi (e.g., [John 3:2](#)) or a miracle worker ([Lk. 9:43](#); [Ac. 2:22](#)) or a prophet ([Lk. 7:16](#); [John 6:14](#)). Some even called him Elijah, of whom it was generally believed that he would return before the coming of the Messiah. As we have already seen, the majority of today’s critical theologians also believe that Jesus was a miracle worker and a prophet. But the New Testament itself goes much further. In several passages Jesus is called the Son of God and that in a very special sense. In [Gal. 4:4](#) Paul writes that ‘when the time had fully come God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law’. The expression ‘his Son’ occurs ten times in Paul’s writings. In the letter to the Romans he twice calls Jesus God’s own Son ([8:3](#), [32](#)). Eight times we encounter the expression ‘his Son’ in the letters of John. In his Gospel he even calls Jesus the only or only-begotten Son of the Father ([John 1:14](#), [18](#); cf. also [1 John 4:9](#)).

Admittedly, this is hard to imagine. We are speaking about a human being, a man of flesh and blood, as Paul says: ‘born of woman’. And of this man we believe that at the same time he is God’s only or only-begotten Son. It is no wonder that it took the church a very, very long time to reflect on this and to understand some of its ramifications. The first traces of this understanding we find in the early baptismal creeds, in which Jesus was professed as the one Lord and as the only-begotten Son of the Father. However, it was not before the year 325 that the Eastern Church, represented by all its bishops, confessed in the Nicene Creed:

We believe . . . in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of his Father before all worlds, God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father.

He is *vere Deus* truly God! But immediately after these words we read:

Who for us men and for our salvation came down from heaven, and was incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the Virgin Mary, and was made man.



He was also *vere homo*, truly man.<sup>37</sup>

Naturally, the mystery of Jesus Christ is not unveiled in these words, but merely indicated. It is not surprising either that after Nicea and Constantinople the question arose: How is this possible? How can one person be God and man at the same time? In the decision of the Council of Chalcedon (451) the church made an attempt to say a little more about this unfathomable mystery. It spoke of one Person having two natures, a divine and a human nature. In the one Person these two natures are so conjoined that there is no confusion or change, neither division nor separation of the two natures.

The final step in this confessional development was the confession that God is triune in his innermost being. To say it in the words of the Heidelberg Catechism: We speak of thee: Father, Son and Holy Spirit, 'because that is how God has revealed Himself in his Word: these three distinct persons are one, true eternal God' (Lord's Day 8). This is a mystery beyond all our comprehension, but it also means riches beyond all comprehension, for as the Father God is our Creator, as the Son he is our Redeemer and as the Holy Spirit he is our Renewer. As the Triune God he is God-above-me, God-with-me and God-in-me! And I may confess this, because I have come to know Jesus as my divine Redeemer.

## DISBELIEF OR BELIEF?

In our day, it is true, many leading theologians no longer accept this classical Christology. Many Roman Catholic theologians (e.g., P. Schoonenberg, E. Schillebeeckx and Hans Küng) and Protestant theologians as well (e.g., E. Flesseman, H. Berkhof, H.M. Kuitert, C.J. den Heyer and S. Schoon),<sup>38</sup> no longer believe that Jesus is the incarnate Son of God, even God's own or only or only-begotten Son. Most of them interpret the term 'Son of God' entirely within the context of the Old Testament. There it is used of Israel (e.g. in [Hosea 11:1](#)) and is indicative of a very special covenant-relationship between God and Israel. Jesus' sonship must be seen within this same covenantal tradition. Berkhof says: 'He is pre-eminently the obedient and therefore beloved covenant partner'. 'He is man, the perfected covenant man, the new man, the eschatological man.'<sup>39</sup> He is not God the Son, but a human being whose 'human "I" is, out of free will, fully and exhaustively permeated by the "I" of God.'<sup>40</sup> H.M. Kuitert says it in his own way. The expression 'Son of God' means that Jesus is 'occupied, "possessed", filled to the brim by God'.<sup>41</sup>

Anglo-Saxon theologians often say that in expressions such as Son of God or Incarnation we have to do with 'mythological' language. To quote Alan Race once more: 'It is not, strictly speaking, descriptive language, but language designed to evoke a response of faith and commitment in the person who hears or reads it.'<sup>42</sup> It indicates that encountering Jesus is, in some sense, encountering God. Frances Young believes that the 'symbolical model' of incarnational language conveys a twofold meaning. First, it is the

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<sup>37</sup> The original Nicene Creed dates from the Council of Nicea, 325, and was revised and reaffirmed by the Council of Constantinople, 381.

<sup>38</sup> Cf. my book *The Present-day Christological Debate*, 1984, 47ff. and 66ff.

<sup>39</sup> *Christian Faith*, 283.

<sup>40</sup> op. cit., 287.

<sup>41</sup> H.M. Kuitert, *Het algemeen betwijfeld christelijk geloof* 1992, 140.

<sup>42</sup> Alan Race, op. cit., 118. Cf. also J. Hick (ed) *The Myth of God Incarnate*, 1977. In the Preface the expression 'God incarnate' is called 'a mythological or poetic way of expressing his significance for us' (5).



story of a man who lived as the 'archetypal believer', living and dying in trust in God. Secondly, it is the story of God involved in the reality of human existence with its compromises, its temptations, its suffering, its pain, its injustice, its cruelty, its death.<sup>43</sup>

Undeniably, all these theologians also want to maintain the uniqueness of Christ, but this uniqueness is of a different kind or order from what the Church always meant in its 'classical' Christology. Jesus' divine Sonship is no longer of an 'ontological' order, but must be understood 'functionally'. On the one hand, God uses this particular human being, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Mary and Joseph, to achieve his divine purpose, namely, the liberation of this world from the forces of evil, including death; on the other hand, this man Jesus allows himself to be used by God. I recognize that this functional Christology still allows for the possibility of reconciliation and redemption but this reconciliation and redemption is now the fruit of the cooperation between God and man.

This new Christology is quite different from that of the ancient church. This church fought the Christological battle because it believed that the gospel itself was at stake. They were deeply convinced that we can be saved only by God himself! When later on the Church became divided all the divided churches adhered to the ancient Christology. It is still the confessional stance of the Roman Catholic Church, of the Eastern Orthodox Churches and of the Churches of the Reformation. It is the faith of the Younger Churches and of the Evangelical Movement, of the Pentecostal Churches and the Charismatic Movement.

## WHY CHRISTIANITY OF ALL RELIGIONS?

I believe that this twofold mystery of Jesus Christ, both of his work and of his person, is the answer to the question: 'Why Christianity of all religions?' We can also formulate it in the famous *solas* of the Reformation: we are saved by God's grace alone (*sola gratia*) as it was manifested in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ (*solus Christus*), and this salvation is ours only by faith (*sola fide*). No other religion knows of this mystery of a God who sends his own Son, sharing in his own divine being, to the world in order to redeem this world. It is an unfathomable mystery of which we can actually speak only in doxological terms, as Paul did in the hymn he quotes in [Philippians 2](#). The hymn speaks of 'Jesus Christ, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father' ([Philp. 2:5-11](#)). This early Christian hymn expresses in all clarity the uniqueness and finality of God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ.

Does this mean that there is no truth in all the other religions and that all the adherents of the other religions will be lost for ever? Some of the 'exclusivists' do take this position. The Congress on World Mission at Chicago in 1960 stated: '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'.<sup>44</sup> When in 1968 I attended the World Congress on Evangelism in

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<sup>43</sup> *The Myth of God Incarnate*, 37.

<sup>44</sup> *Facing the Unfinished Task*, (ed. J.O. Percy), 1961, 9.

Singapore we had a special conference hymn that spoke of the billions that were lost. I believe such statements go beyond what we are allowed to say. In his *Reformed Dogmatics* 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 a negative sense.'<sup>45</sup>

Bavinck's nephew, the missiologist J.H. Bavinck, who was a firm exclusivist and refused to regard the other religions as ways to God or ways of salvation alongside the way of Christ, nevertheless also wrote: '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 in such a heart.'<sup>46</sup> In another book he approvingly quotes the words of a missionary who for many years worked in a prison in Pretoria, South Africa: 'I have frequently found God in the soul of the South African Bantu. 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 there earlier'.<sup>47</sup> Even Hendrik Kraemer, who regarded all other religions as 'endeavours for self-redemption', wrote in his last book that he did not mean to say that 'the other religions are erroneous in their totality and in every respect'.<sup>48</sup>

It is evident that Bavinck and Kraemer are rather circumspect in what they say. J. Verkuyl is more outspoken. He, too, is an exclusivist. He fully maintains the uniqueness and finality of Jesus Christ, as appears from the following statement: 'Jesus Christ is unique, incomparable, irreplaceable and decisive for all ages and peoples.'<sup>49</sup> At the same time he tries as much as possible to do justice to the other religions within a trinitarian framework. At times he goes rather far in his positive appreciation of what he finds in them. I 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 mediated in the grotto?' (356) From the section on Christ: 'A theologian or 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 section on 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). After these quotations it does not surprise us anymore that Verkuyl 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

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<sup>45</sup> Herman Bavinck, *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek*, vol. 4, 708.

<sup>46</sup> J.H. Bavinck, *Religieus besef en christelijk geloof*, 1949, 100.

<sup>47</sup> J.H. Bavinck, *An Introduction to the Science of Missions*, 227.

<sup>48</sup> H. Kraemer, *Waarom nu juist het Christendom?*, 69.

<sup>49</sup> J. Verkuyl, *Contemporary Missiology*, 358.

can be found somewhere who have *not* been touched by the hand of Jesus Christ who goes out to them in reconciliation?’<sup>50</sup>

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 rites<sup>51</sup>, but only because the Spirit of Christ was active in their lives and because by his work the secret of Christ became manifest to and in them, too. For it remains true for all times and all people: ‘There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved’ ([Ac. 4:12](#)).

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# Confessing Christ in a Multicultural Society

Lesslie Newbigin

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Lesslie Newbigin, one of the great missiologists and churchmen of this century entered into his rest on January 30th, 1998. He had recently celebrated his 89th birthday.

This paper given four years ago is evidence enough of Bishop Newbigin’s lifelong call to mission service in both India and Europe. I knew him during his years as C.S.I. Bishop of Madras. I always admired him for his commitment to Christ, his discipline in administration and writing and his deep love for his clergy, his church and for common people, irrespective of race, religion or social status. A tribute to him will be included in a later issue of the ERT.

In this address Bishop Newbigin sets the facts of the gospel in context of post-Enlightenment cultures, secular and religious, and calls for mission as a conversational dialogue.

Editor

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<sup>50</sup> op. cit., 359.

<sup>51</sup> It is striking that the theologians who see 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, 1996) 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 the New Testament. Here 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’. Such confidence, of course, is quite contrary to the biblical doctrine of the justification of the ungodly.