

Evangelical Review of Theology

EDITOR: DAVID PARKER

Volume 27 • Number 3 • July 2003

*Articles and book reviews reflecting global
evangelical theology for the purpose of
discerning the obedience of faith*

Published by



PATERNOSTER PERIODICALS



for
**WORLD EVANGELICAL
ALLIANCE**
Theological Commission

God's Work of Grace in the Context of the Religions

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Keywords: Providence, salvation, religions, grace, culture, unevangelised, revelation, secularisation, conversion, conscience, sin

I. Introduction

In spite of the secularization that continues in western societies, an interest in spirituality is on the increase and the religions of the world become more rather than less prominent in our awareness. Agencies of the Christian Church carry on vigorous missionary activity, yet large segments of the world remain dominantly non-Christian. Christian attitudes toward mission and opinions about the status of the adherents

of other religions are far from unified. We are all familiar with the range of attitudes, which is now commonly categorized under the headings of exclusivist, inclusivist or pluralist. Those divisions are frequently protested, particularly by those of us who are dubbed 'exclusivist,' but the language is hard to escape and is still widely understandable.¹

In recent decades, evangelicals have paid much attention to the question of the salvation of the unevangelized. Less attention has been given to the religions of the world and to those who worship within those religions. I have written

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¹ See, for instance, Tim S. Perry's excellent discussion of nomenclature in chapter 2, 'Typological Issues,' of *Radical Difference: A Defence of Hendrik Kraemer's Theology of Religions*. Editions SR, no. 27. Edited by H. Martin Rumscheidt and Theodore S de Bruyn (Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2001), pp. 9-28; and also Harold Netland, *Encountering Religious Pluralism: The Challenge to Faith and Mission* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2001), p. 46.

on the former subject² and now want to address the latter.³ Of course, the two issues cannot be completely separated. How one understands the saving activity of God in the world will affect significantly how one conceptualizes the place of the religions of the world within the providential and redemptive programs of God, that is, in terms of both common and special grace.

I approach the subject as a theologian who works within the Reformed or Calvinist tradition.⁴ Thus, I look at the situation of the world's religions from the perspective of one who believes in God's meticulous providence and in his sovereign grace in salvation. This is sometimes spoken of as a 'monergist' perspective, because it begins with the assumption that God is completely in control in the world. Everything that happens is part of God's comprehensive

purpose from all eternity, including the identity of the saved and the rise and fall of nations or religions. From this perspective, the continuing existence of the religions raises a question which Arminians or synergists do not face: 'How do the religions fit into God's overall purpose?' Synergists, by contrast, are able to assert that some phenomena in the world exist quite apart from God's purposes, so that the religions need not be viewed as necessarily within God's program in the world.

II. Religions as Ambiguous Responses to Divine Revelation

Christian theologians have taken widely divergent approaches to the world's religions. On the one hand are those who assume that non-Christian religions are largely the product of demonic deception, or at best the product of human effort. At the other end of the spectrum one finds relativistic pluralists who believe that all the religions are God's work and are leading people toward the same God, with varying effectiveness, in spite of the very different conceptions about God which are found in these religions. I have concluded that religions arise from the essentially religious character of humanity and that they are ambiguous responses to divine revelation. It is from that perspective that I evaluate their possible role in God's providential program.

A. The Ambiguity in all Religions
Religions are fundamentally the consequence of the fact that God has not

² *Irenaeus on the Salvation of the Unevangelized*, ATLA Monograph Series, No. 31 (Metuchen, N. J.: Scarecrow Press, 1993); 'Divine Justice and Universal Grace: A Calvinistic Proposal', *Evangelical Review of Theology* 21/1 (Jan 1997), pp. 63-83; 'Can the Unevangelized Be Saved?: A Review Article', *Didaskalia* 4/2 (Fall 1993), pp. 77-91; 'The Universal Salvific Work of the Holy Spirit: Reducing the Scandal of Calvinism', a paper read at the Evangelical Theological Society, Jackson, Mississippi, Nov. 22, 1996; 'The Salvation of the Unevangelized: A Position Paper', distributed to members of the International Council of SEND International, January, 1996; 'Irenaeus on the Salvation of the Unevangelized', a paper read at the annual meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society, Washington, D.C., November 19, 1993.

³ I will speak to both issues together in a forthcoming book currently titled *Providence, Salvation and Religions* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press).

⁴ My understanding of divine providence is spelled out in *Providence and Prayer: How Does God Work in the World?* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 2000), chapter 13.

left himself without witness in the world. As J. H. Bavinck observes, 'Buddha would never have meditated on the way of salvation if God had not touched him. Mohammed would never have uttered his prophetic witness if God had not concerned Himself with him. Every religion contains, somehow, the silent work of God.'⁵ But, 'from a biblical perspective, religions are multidimensional,' as Calvin Shenk notes.⁶ 'They reflect God's activity in the world, the human search for God, and the human attempt to flee from God. They seek to reverence the God or gods they know, and they try to manipulate God or gods. They are cries for help and efforts at self-justification.'⁷

We must 'distinguish between profound spiritual impulses which are the moving of God and the local clothing in which such impulses appear. The light is reflected with varying degrees of brightness as the moon is reflected differently in a mud puddle, the sea, or a clear mountain lake.'⁸ 'Cosmic religions are founded on the revelation of God in creatures; ethical religions attest that an absolute will makes itself felt in the conscience of men; salvific religions are founded on the fact of fall and

salvation.'⁹ The consciousness of God, which is an aspect of the universal revelation of God imprinted on the being of humans created in his image, makes people naturally religious, but sin inclines their religious expressions toward idolatry.

The account of Cain and Abel's attempts to worship God concludes with the statement 'At that time [the birth of Adam and Eve's grandson Enosh, the son of Seth] people began to invoke the name of the Lord' (Gen. 4:26).¹⁰ They have been doing so ever since, but it was done in an idolatrous fashion at Babel and has been worked out in a great diversity of languages and cultures ever since.¹¹ Speaking of the message concerning the religions which is derived from Genesis 1-11, John Goldingay and Christopher Wright comment:

On the one hand the religions reflect humanity's being made in God's image and being in a form of covenant relationship with God. Books such as Proverbs, too, point us towards an attitude to other cultures—of which their religions are part—which looks at them as sources of insight and not merely as expressions of lostness. On the other hand, Genesis 1-11 suggests that the religions, like all human activity, belong in the context of a world which needs restoration to the destiny and the relationship with God which were intended for them, which God purposed to bring about through the covenant with

⁵ J. H. Bavinck, *The Church Between Temple and Mosque: A Study of the Relationship Between the Christian Faith and Other Religions* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, n. d.), p. 200.

⁶ Calvin E. Shenk, *Who Do You Say that I Am?: Christians Encounter Other Religions* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1997), p. 75.

⁷ Shenk, *Who Do You Say*, p. 75.

⁸ Shenk, *Who Do You Say*, p. 99.

⁹ Mariasusai Dhavamony, *Christian Theology of Religions: A Systematic Reflection on the Christian Understand of World Religions*. Studies in the Intercultural History of Christianity, Vol. 108 (New York: Peter Lang, 1998), p. 31.

¹⁰ Scripture citations are from the *New Revised Standard Version* unless otherwise indicated.

¹¹ Daniel Clendenin, *Many Gods, Many Lords* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1995), p. 126.

Israel which culminated in the mission and accomplishment of Jesus. Similarly, books such as Proverbs, Job, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Songs recognize the limitations of what can be said on the basis of human experience outside of Yahweh's special involvement with Israel.¹²

Religion can, therefore, be an expression of our rebellion as well as of our response to God. Of course, this was 'as true for Israelite religion (as the prophets pointed out) and for Christianity as "religious observance" as for any other faith'.¹³

There are certainly good and positive things that have resulted from the religions, but we must also recall the evils of temple prostitution, human sacrifice, caste systems, satanic worship, cannibalism and other such departures from God's norms, including the Christian justification of slavery and racism at times in history.¹⁴ All of this has been done in the name of religion, as have been the hateful speeches of Louis Farrakhan, the mind-control of the cults, and the corrupt practices of some

Christian TV preachers.¹⁵ In assessing religions, therefore, we must begin with an awareness of the profound ambiguity in all religious experience. Just because something is religious is no guarantee that it is good for humans or aids them in relationship to God. Christian realism recognizes that human religiosity 'sometimes contains elements of truth, goodness, and beauty, but also elements of error, evil, and ugliness'.¹⁶ Sadly, Christianity is no exception. It is included in our general assessment that religion 'often results merely in self-righteousness instead of an encounter with God in his holiness and majesty'.¹⁷

Properly recognizing the ambiguity of all religions helps us to avoid 'both the undue negativism of atheism and the romantic optimism of pluralism about human religiosity'.¹⁸ As J. H. Bavinck suggests, 'If we could acquire a complete oversight of the history of religion among all peoples,' we would 'see the process of continuous degeneration and decay caused by man's rebellion against God, by his flight from God, and his anxiety in God's presence. We would also see clear proof that God had not abandoned man, has not left himself without a witness, but is unceasingly concerned and active

¹² John E. Goldingay and Christopher J. H. Wright, 'Yahweh Our God Yahweh One': The Oneness of God in the Old Testament.' In *One God, One Lord: Christianity in a World of Religious Pluralism*, edited by Andrew D. Clarke and Bruce Winter. 2nd ed.(Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1992), p. 46.

¹³ Goldingay and Wright, 'Yahweh Our God Yahweh One' p. 46.

¹⁴ I am grateful to Kenneth Stewart for comments upon an earlier version of this paper. At that time, I had mentioned the inquisitions and the crusades as examples of evils done in the name of Christianity. Ken noted that Christians are still debating the merits and demerits of these two items so that I might do better to mention something 'now universally looked upon as hideous,' such as the justification of slavery. I follow his astute historian's judgment, but I remain convinced, personally, that both the Inquisition and the Crusades are a blot on the Church's record.

¹⁵ Clendenin, *Many Gods, Many Lords*, p. 54.

¹⁶ Clendenin, *Many Gods, Many Lords*, p. 51.

¹⁷ R. W. F. Wootton, *Christianity and Other Faiths: An Evangelical Contribution to Our Multi-Faith Society* (Exeter: Paternoster Press, 1983), p. 23.

¹⁸ Clendenin, *Many Gods, Many Lords*, p. 51.

with man.¹⁹ John V. Taylor observes how both the response of disobedience and the response of obedience 'gets built into the tradition and passed on to later generations. And they, in their turn, may respond more readily to the unceasing calls and disclosures of the Spirit, and so be moved to reform some part of the tradition.'²⁰ Thus, Gordon Smith warns us not to be too quick to condemn as rebellion the religious activity of 'the honest seeker after God whose only avenue of expression is the religious environment in which he lives.... It may be rebellion, but it could also be viewed positively as an authentic and sincere quest that is distorted by human fallenness.'²¹

It is serious folly to assume that all religions are leading people toward God, by their own paths, as universalists propose. Scripture condemns all other religions as such as darkness (Eph. 4:18); ignorance (Acts 17:30; Rom. 1:18ff; 1 Pet. 1:14) and foolishness (1 Cor. 1:18ff). The heathen gods are not gods (Is. 41:29; 42:17; Jer. 2:28; Acts 14:15; 19:26; Gal. 4:8) and heathen religions even demonstrate

demoniacal power (Deut. 32:17; 1 Cor. 10:20 ff.; Rev. 9:20). Although idols are not real gods, they are perceived as such by those who worship them, and behind such worship is the activity of demons (1 Cor. 10:20).

Thus, Don Howell, a missionary in Japan, writes: 'The elaborate systems of idol worship centred in temple activities are not neutral social events the believer may freely dabble in. There are dark spiritual forces ultimately at work behind the most frivolous of ceremonies, capturing the allegiance of people and leading to spiritual ruin. This explains Paul's consistent stance in his letters that the worship of the true God and the worship of idols are mutually exclusive (1 Cor. 10:14-22; 2 Cor. 6:15-18; 1 Thes. 1:9).'²² The religions are one instrument which Satan, the 'father of lies' uses to keep people from the only Saviour.²³ Sadly, the demons can also be at work within biblical covenantal religion as is evident in Christ's warnings to the churches in Smyrna, Pergamum and Thyatira! (Rev. 2:8-25).

Magic and the occult are condemned, as in Paul's strong words to Bar-Jesus (Elymas), a magician and a false prophet whom Paul denounced as 'son of the devil ... enemy of all righteousness, full of all deceit and villainy' who was 'making crooked the straight paths of the Lord' (Acts

19 J. H. Bavinck, *An Introduction to the Science of Missions*, trans. David Hugh Freeman (Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1954; reprint Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1960), p. 236.

20 John V. Taylor, 'The Theological Basis of Interfaith Dialogue'. In *Faith Meets Faith*, Mission Trends No. 5, eds. Gerald H. Anderson and Thomas F. Stransky (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), pp. 97-98.

21 Gordon T. Smith, 'Religions and the Bible: An Agenda for Evangelicals,' in *Christianity and the Religions: A Biblical Theology of World Religions*, Evangelical Missiological Society Series, no. 2, eds. Edward Rommen and Harold Netland (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 1995), p. 18.

22 Don N. Howell, Jr., 'The Apostle Paul and First Century Religious Pluralism,' in *Christianity and the Religions*, ed. Rommen and Netland, p. 104.

23 Norman Anderson, *Christianity and World Religions: The Challenge of Pluralism* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1984), p. 172.

13:10). The confrontation with magic led to the destruction of magic paraphernalia in Ephesus (Acts 19:11-20). Accordingly, Lesslie Newbigin notes that 'the sphere of the religions is the battlefield *par excellence* of the demonic. New converts often surprise missionaries by the horror and fear with which they reject the forms of their old religion—forms that to the secularized Westerner are interesting pieces of folklore and that to the third-generation successors of the first converts may come to be prized as part of national culture.'²⁴ Any religion, including Christianity, may become 'the sphere in which evil exhibits a power against which human reason and conscience are powerless'.²⁵ Newbigin notes soberingly that 'it was the guardians of God's revelation who crucified the Son of God. It is the noblest among the Hindus who most emphatically reject the gospel. It is those who say, "We see," who seek to blot out the light (John 9:41)'.²⁶

Arthur Glasser reminds us that 'the empirical church is no less than, and no more than humankind's response to God's self-disclosure in Jesus Christ. Being human, it is a historically shaped religious movement, a product of culture, and thus limited,

as is any human institution.'²⁷ The Old Testament clearly attests that some institutionalized and well-intentioned religious practices, in spite of the fact that they had been specifically commanded by God were not only self-serving but were an outright abomination to God (1 Sam. 15:22-23; Is. 1:10-15; Amos 5:21-27; Mic. 6:6-8).²⁸ There was a Jewish zeal for the Mosaic law that sometimes represented a human attempt to earn salvation (Mt. 23:1-37; Lk. 11:37-52) and the same is true of many of the ascetic practices, pilgrimages, prayer and meditation that different religions enjoin upon their followers.

Inevitably, we must face the question of Christianity's place among the religions and it should now be apparent that I see institutional Christianity as no different from any other religion in its character as a humanly constructed institution. Some of its expressions are a response to the divine initiative in revelation and illumination which is elicited by, and is pleasing to, the Spirit of God. But in other expressions it represses God's truth and evidences deception which is both self-incurred and influenced by the demonic adversary. Like other religions, it is both a movement toward and a flight from God. Nevertheless, Christianity is intrinsically superior

²⁴ Lesslie Newbigin, *The Open Secret: An Introduction to the Theology of Mission*. Revised ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), p. 170.

²⁵ Newbigin, *The Open Secret*, p. 170.

²⁶ Newbigin, *The Open Secret*, p. 170.

²⁷ Arthur F. Glasser, 'Response to Stanley J. Samartha's "The Lordship of Jesus Christ and Religious Pluralism"', in *Christ's Lordship and Religious Pluralism*, eds. Gerald Anderson and Thomas F. Stransky (New York: Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1981), p. 38.

²⁸ Clendenin, *Many Gods, Many Lords*, p. 55.

because of its being the institutional response to the *ultimate* revelation of God in Christ, even though it is also ambiguous as a sinful human response to that revelation. It is not superior by virtue of being the fulfilment of the other religions, as though it were the best genus of a species called 'religion'²⁹ Tragically, thousands of people are being kept from Christ by Christian churches. Wonderfully, even in those churches where the official teaching is counter-productive, God is drawing people to himself through the special revelation that is never totally suppressed in the religious forms that have been constructed.

Paul's statement that 'there is no one who seeks God' (Rom. 3:11) has been cited by those who have a very negative view of all non-Christian religions. But others observe that Paul's point is that no one seeks God '*naturally*'. Consequently, those who posit a work of the Spirit of God in the other religions are more hopeful that God may be at work even in the midst of the religious devotional practices of non-Christians. Norman Anderson, for instance, says that his study of Islam convinces him 'that one cannot deny that some of the great Muslim mystics have sought the face of God with a whole-heartedness that cannot be questioned'. And he does not doubt that 'in some cases it was God himself whom they

were seeking, not self-justification or a mystical experience *per se*. Like everyone else, they could be "saved" by grace alone; but may they not have been responding to some initiative of that grace which was *uniquely* operative in the cross and resurrection of One whose story they had never really heard?'³⁰

Similarly, Lesslie Newbigin, after nearly forty years of missionary work in India, writes: 'Anyone who has had intimate friendship with a devout Hindu or Muslim would find it impossible to believe that the experience of God of which his friend speaks is simply illusion or fraud.'³¹ Newbigin notes that

the contemporary debate about Christianity and the world's religions is generally conducted with the unspoken assumption that 'religion' is the primary medium of human contact with the divine. But this assumption has to be questioned. When the New Testament affirms that God has nowhere left himself without witness, there is no suggestion that this witness is necessarily to be found in the sphere of what we call religion. The parables of Jesus are notable for the fact that they speak of secular experiences. When the Fourth Gospel affirms that the light of the Logos who came into the world in Jesus shines on every human being, there is no suggestion that this light is identified with human religion. The text goes on to say that this light shines in the darkness, and the ensuing story constantly suggests that it is religion which is the primary area of darkness, while the common people, unlearned in religious matters, are the ones who respond to the light. And it is significant that Justin Martyr, one of the earliest apologists to use this Johannine

²⁹ Cf. Kraemer's critique of that fulfilment perspective, which was proposed by J. N. Farquhar (1971), Friedrich Schleiermacher, and Karl Rahner (1966), as this is reviewed by Perry, *Radical Difference*, p. 88.

³⁰ Anderson, *Christianity and World Religions*, pp. 152-53.

³¹ Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), p. 174.

teaching in making contact with the unbelieving world, affirms that the true light did indeed shine on the great philosophers like Socrates, but that the contemporary religion was the work of devils. Our thought must therefore be directed not just to the religions so called; we must ask about the relation of the gospel to all who live by other commitments, whether they are called religious or secular.³²

B. The Forms of Revelation to Which the Religions Are Responding

Religions are ambiguous human constructs, in response to divine revelation, but not all of them are responding to the same forms of revelation and that makes a significant difference in the outcome. Commonly, we distinguish between general and special revelation to indicate the difference between the knowledge that God gives of himself to all people everywhere and the knowledge which he gives more particularly on special occasions. Admittedly, as Hendrik Kraemer noted, 'every kind of revelation is a "special" revelation',³³ but who can deny that God reveals himself to all people in certain ways, while other acts of his revelation are addressed more limitedly to particular individuals or groups? Kraemer preferred to call this 'original revelation' or 'fundamental revelation'.³⁴

1. Universal or general revelation

It is commonly observed that God

has made himself known to everyone by at least three means:

1) God's creative work in the physical world (Ps. 19:1-6; 104; 148; Job 36:24-37:24; 38:1-39:30; Rom. 1:18-21). Psalm 19:4, in particular, says that the voice of God in the cosmos 'goes out through *all* the earth, and their words to the *end* of the world' (emphasis added) which 'seems to speak of God's revelation going to those who have not heard the Lord of Israel—not just to Israelites, as Barth had suggested'.³⁵ Thus Donald Macleod observes that Christianity has no difficulty assimilating the fact of 'overlap between Christianity and world religions.' Christianity 'believes that no man knows the Father except through the Son (Mt. 11:27), but it also believes that the Old Testament is revelatory precisely because the Spirit of Christ spoke in the prophets (1 Pet. 1:11); and that creation is revelatory precisely because the aeons were made through the divine Son (Heb. 1:2).'³⁶

2) The moral conscience of *every* individual (Rom. 2:14-15) and the innate consciousness of the existence of God which is the root cause of the intrinsic religiousness of humankind (Acts 17:22-31) who are created in God's own image (Gen. 1:26, 27). It is possible that John 1:4, 9 offers further testimony to a universal illumination of human intel-

³² Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, pp. 172-73.

³³ *Religion and the Christian Faith* (London: Lutterworth, 1956), p. 353; cited by Perry, *Radical Difference*, p. 80

³⁴ Perry, *Radical Difference*, p. 80.

³⁵ Gerald R. McDermott, Gerald R., *Can Evangelicals Learn from World Religions? Jesus, Revelation and Religious Traditions* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2000), p. 54.

³⁶ Donald Macleod, *The Person of Christ. Contours of Christian Theology* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1998), p. 239.

lectual and moral faculties by the Logos. Donald Macleod observes that 'many theologians of unobjectionable orthodoxy have taken this to refer to a work of Christ, the eternal Logos, in the heart of Everyman'³⁷ and he cites Calvin's statement that

from this *light* the rays are diffused over all mankind.... For we know that men have this particular excellence which raises them above other animals, that they are endued with reason and intelligence, and that they carry the distinction between right and wrong engraven on their conscience. There is no man, therefore, whom some perception of eternal *light* does not reach.³⁸

To Macleod's mind, 'the presence of this *light* gives a perfectly coherent explanation, from the standpoint of Christian exclusivism, for all that is true and valuable in the religions of the world'.³⁹ More cautiously, D. A. Carson states that 'it might be better and simpler to say that John 1:9 insists that the Word of God, the incarnate Jesus, enlightens everyone without distinction' than to speak of him as enlightening every human person.⁴⁰

On the other hand, given that creation is revelatory of God through the mediating activity of the Logos, so that the Word does make God known to every person, it would not be surprising if the Word was also active in enlightening the creatures

who bear God's image. Though illumination is usually referred to the Spirit, within the divine economy, the close relationship which Christ draws between his own work and that of the Spirit whom he will send from the Father, prevents us from drawing too hard a line between the work of Son and Spirit (John 15:26; 16:7-15).

3) God's providential work, which includes his upholding of all that he has created (Col. 1:17), his kindness in providential care for all his creatures (Acts 14:17; Mt. 5:45), and his ordering of the affairs of nations which is specifically done in hope that people will reach out for God (Acts 17:26-27; cf God's working through the Assyrians [Is. 10:5-6] and the Chaldeans [Hab. 1:5-6]).

It is this general revelation of God to all people that helps us to account for the fact that many of the adherents of religions which are officially non-theistic nevertheless pray as they would to gods. Ajith Fernando notes:

Mahayana Buddhists [the majority within Buddhism] worship the Buddha and the *Bodhisattvas* and address their prayers to them as they would to gods. Hinayana Buddhism is practiced [sic] in countries such as Sri Lanka, Burma, Thailand, and Cambodia. It prides itself in being closer to the teachings of the Buddha and the early Buddhist (Pali) scriptures. Yet Buddhists belonging to this branch have also included the divine factor into the practice of their religion. Many Buddhists of Sri Lanka have literally deified the Buddha, a practice he would have opposed. These Buddhists often talk about the gods who protect them.⁴¹

³⁷ Macleod, *The Person of Christ*, p. 239

³⁸ Macleod, *The Person of Christ*, p. 240, citing *Commentary on the Gospel of John*, vol. 1 (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1847), p. 38.

³⁹ Macleod, *Person of Christ*, p. 240.

⁴⁰ D. A. Carson, *The Gaging of God: Christianity Confronts Pluralism* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1996), p. 303.

⁴¹ Ajith Fernando, *The Christian's Attitude Toward World Religions* (Wheaton: Tyndale House, 1987), pp. 106-07.

J. H. Bavinck claims that 'each person, no matter how deeply fallen and how far departed, still is within the reach of God's common grace. God has not left himself without a witness.'⁴² Bavinck then cites Romans 1:19 and comments:

While in the midst of their error, they have at times anxiously asked whether they were on a false path. God has had a great deal to do with them before their contact with the missionary. A missionary who worked for years in the prison of Pretoria among the Bantu natives who were condemned to death, says in one of his writings, 'When a person moves every day in a terrain where only the fundamental things remain, wherever he tries to serve as an instrument in God's hands, he discovers with moving surprise that God has already been at work in this soul. No matter how strange this may sound, 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.'⁴³

2. Specific revelation to particular individuals

Through the centuries of God's gracious working in the world, he revealed himself to particular individuals in order to establish a covenant relationship with a chosen people and finally gave the most complete revelation of himself in the incarnation of the eternal Son. In addition to God's normal means of making him-

self known through prophetic spokespersons and through the written and preached Scriptures, there are instances of other fascinating forms of communication, including people outside of the covenant community. We cannot look at these in detail but I mention the following: Abimelech (Gen. 20:1-3), Balaam (Num. 22:9; 23:11; 24:2-9), King Hiram of Tyre (2 Chr. 2:11-12), Pharaoh Neco of Egypt (2 Chr. 35:20), Cyrus, the king of Persia (2 Chr. 36:23; cf. Ezra 1:2-3, 7), Nebuchadnezzar (Ezek. 21:18-23; Dan. 2:1, 29ff, 47; 3:28-29; 4:34, 37), Belshazzar (Dan. 5:5), Darius (Dan. 6:26-28), the Magi from the East who were led by God to worship young king Jesus through their practice of astrology which took them to Herod.

In more recent years, we find numerous testimonies by people to whom God made himself known in a dream or a vision.⁴⁴ All of the experiences about which we know are, of course, experiences of people who later had contact with the gospel through human messengers but can we assume that this is always so? From the history of cross-cultural missionary work, we have numerous stories of God sending messages to individuals. For instance, the stories about a 'lost book' which have people waiting expectantly to hear from God, as among the Myan Mar;⁴⁵ the

⁴⁴ See, for example, Phillip H. Wiebe, *Visions of Jesus: Direct Encounters From the New Testament to Today* (New York: Oxford, University Press, 1997).

⁴⁵ Don Richardson, *Eternity in Their Hearts*. Revised ed. (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1984), Chapter 2.

⁴² J. H. Bavinck, *An Introduction*, p. 227.

⁴³ H. Ph. Junod, *Condamnation à mort et message de vie* (Lausanne, 1950), pp. 35ff; cited by Bavinck, *Introduction*, p. 227.

experience of the Santal people of northeast India, who had an ancient oral tradition concerning Thakur Jiu, the 'Genuine God' whom 19th century Scandinavian missionaries identified as the God who made reconciliation with himself possible through Jesus Christ;⁴⁶ the story of Warrasa Wanga, among the Gedeo people, who approached the high God Magano and asked him to reveal himself to the Gedeo people and was given vivid visions of white men and was told: 'These men will bring you a message from Magano, the God you seek. Wait for them';⁴⁷ and the particularly fascinating story of the Mba-ka people in the Central African Republic, who told Baptist missionaries wanting to understand their remarkable responsiveness to the gospel:

Koro, the Creator, sent word to our forefathers long ages ago that He has already sent His Son into the world to accomplish something wonderful for all mankind. Later, however, our forefathers turned away from the truth about Koro's Son. In time they even forgot what it was that He accomplished for mankind. Since the time of 'the forgetting,' successive generations of our people have longed to discover the truth about Koro's Son. But all we could learn was that messengers would eventually come to restore that forgotten knowledge to us.... In any case, we resolved that whenever Koro's messengers arrived we would all welcome them and believe their message!⁴⁸

Many are inclined to interpret these as divine means of preparation for the gospel and to assume that no

one was actually saved until the gospel arrived. We need to be cautious about making such assumptions, on two accounts: 1) precisely because we are, by definition, ignorant of what God is doing among these peoples; and 2) because we are not in a position to judge at what point God accepts, as justifying, a faith which is wrought in the heart of a sinner by the gracious act of the Spirit of God.

With regard to the great religions we encounter today, a particularly significant question is whether God has given special revelation of a saving kind to people outside the covenant communities. Might Mohammed and Gautama and others have had particular disclosures from God, beyond general revelation but apart from the special revelation given in connection with the covenant program of God with Israel and the church? I think no better answer to this question has been offered from a Reformed perspective than the one so clearly enunciated by J. H. Bavinck, who believed that God did reveal himself to these leaders of other religions:

In the night of the *bodhi* when Buddha received his great, new insight concerning the world and life, God was touching him and struggling with him. God revealed Himself in that moment. Buddha responded to this revelation, and his answer to this day reveals God's hand and the result of human repression. In the 'night of power' of which the ninety-seventh sura of the Koran speaks, the night when 'the angels descended' and the Koran descended from Allah's throne, God dealt with Mohammed and touched him. God wrestled with him in that night, and God's hand is still noticeable in the answer of the prophet, but it is also the

⁴⁶ Richardson, *Eternity*, pp. 41-47.

⁴⁷ Richardson, *Eternity*, p. 56.

⁴⁸ As relayed to Don Richardson, *Eternity*, p. 57.

result of human repression. The great moments in the history of religion are the moments when God wrestled with man in a very particular way.⁴⁹

Tragically, because of the characteristic repression of divine revelation, of which Paul wrote in Romans 1, the God whom these devout people sought is different from the true God and the religions that follow from their encounter with God, while bearing the marks of divine revelation, represent primarily the human rejection of God. Yet, the work of the Spirit is evident at times when God, 'as it were, stop[s] the noiseless engines of repression and exchange and overwhelm[s] man to such an extent that he is powerless for the moment'.⁵⁰ Bavinck cites Cyrus as such a case, in which God anointed him with his Spirit and empowered him for the task to which God called him, even though Cyrus did not know God. Thus, says Bavinck:

We meet figures in the history of the non-Christian religions of whom we feel that God wrestled with them in a very particular way. We still notice traces of that process of suppression and substitution in the way they responded, but occasionally we observe a far greater influence of God there than in many other human religions. The history of religion is not always and everywhere the same; it does not present a monotonous picture of only folly and degeneration. There are culminating points in it, not because certain human beings are much better than others, but because every now and then divine compassion interferes, compassion which keeps man from suppressing and substituting the truth completely.⁵¹

III. Salvation of Individuals May be *Within* but is not *Through* the Religions

As I have indicated in earlier writing, I find no indication anywhere in Scripture that God's saving work in the world is restricted to knowledge of the special revelation God gave to his covenant people, both in the Old and the New Testament periods. In other words, I believe that the unevangelized can be saved, if God graciously chooses to give them the faith which is appropriate to the means of revelation with which they have been blessed. But, although I grant that adherents of other religions may be saved by God's grace, I do not believe that their religions are God's ordained means of salvation for them. As Christopher Wright says, 'Religion does not save anybody—God does;' other religions 'are not salvific because they do not tell the story of what God has done to save people.'⁵²

The unique thing about Christianity as a religion is that it tells the story of God's saving work in Jesus, and God uses that telling as a means of salvation. I take this to be the point of the denial stated in Article 5 of the 1999 declaration of 'The Gospel of Jesus Christ': 'We deny that anyone is saved in any other way than by Jesus Christ and his Gospel. The Bible offers no hope that sincere worshipers of other religions will be

49 J. H. Bavinck, *The Church*, p. 125.

50 J. H. Bavinck, *The Church*, p. 125.

51 J. H. Bavinck, *The Church*, p. 126.

52 Christopher Wright, 'What Difference Does Jesus Make?', in *Practicing Truth: Confident Witness in Our Pluralistic World*, eds. David W. Shenk and Linford Stutzman (Scottsdale PA: Herald Press, 1999), p. 247.

saved without personal faith in Jesus Christ.⁵³ I understand this to mean that the religions are not saving instruments of God, as though sincere fulfilment of the requirement of those religions would itself serve as a means of salvation. I firmly believe that salvation comes only through a Spirit illumined faith response to the self-revelation of God and that all who are finally saved will have joyfully received Christ at some point in their life, even if it is not until the moment when they left this world and met Jesus, at death.

It is one thing to say that God can be known savingly by those who are outside of Christianity, it is quite another to say that people can know God savingly *through* other religions. If people are saved in other religions, it is in spite of, rather than because of, those religions as such. It could be only because God, in his great grace, has drawn them to faith through those aspects of their experience and knowledge which are true to God's self-revelation and which have come to them as a part of that self-revelation, either directly or through a transmission of special revelation made in the past. It is important that we not leap from the recognition that there is truth in other religions, even truth which owes its origin to divine revelation, to the assumption that the religions themselves are salvific.

IV. The Religions and God's Providential Program for Humanity

Given my monergist assumption that God is working out his eternal purpose in and for the world by means of the meticulous providence through which he exercises his general sovereignty, we are now ready to ponder God's intention and providential action in the rise and development of the religions of the world. Approaches which have commonly been identified as 'inclusivist,' often suggest that non-Christian religious traditions 'may be regarded as legitimate vehicles of salvation, included in God's great plan of redemption, to the extent that they serve positively to bring persons into a right relationship with God and neighbor'.⁵⁴ The inclusivist claim is not that every religion is in fact, a vehicle of salvation, but that any religion *may* be so. What are we to make of this? Did God raise up the many religions to serve his saving purposes in the world?

A. Religions: Stepping-Stones to Christ?

Gerald McDermott notes that Christian thinkers have 'argued that foreign systems of thought—both philosophical and religious—can be stepping-stones or schoolmasters to lead the heathen to Christ' and suggests:

Perhaps the religions will serve this function: as providential preparations for

⁵³The Gospel of Jesus Christ: An Evangelical Celebration', *Christianity Today*, June 14, 1999, p. 54.

⁵⁴ Don A. Pittman, Ruben L. F. Habito, and Terry C. Muck, eds., *Ministry and Theology in Global Perspective: Contemporary Challenges for the Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), p. 58.

future peoples to receive the full revelation of God in Christ. This does not mean that there is direct continuity from the religions to Christ, but it does mean that the religions may be used by Jesus to prepare their devotees to understand and receive himself—just as the practice of animal sacrifice instituted by the Triune God (and copied by nearly every world religion thereafter) prepared the Jews to be able to understand and receive Christ as the Lamb of God who takes away their sins.⁵⁵

A Reformed doctrine of divine providence affirms God's complete control of all things in his creation, so that everything that occurs is part of the outworking of God's eternal purpose (sometimes spoken of as God's 'decree'). An important distinction is made, however, between the things that God wills to *effect*, or to bring about by his own initiative, and the things that God wills to *permit*. The latter are incorporated by God into the larger program whereby he achieves his purposes and brings good, even out of evil, while not being morally accountable for the evil that his creatures do freely.

On the assumption that everything in human history is ordered by God's providential governing of his creation, the question here is, then, 'Which kind of divine purpose is at work in regard to the religions?' Is God actively at working bringing the religions into being because he has redemptive purposes for them, as 'fulfilment' theories would suggest,

or are these ambiguous *human* constructions, such as I have described above, in and through which God nevertheless works for good? I am inclined to see the latter, but I hear a stronger sense of divine positive intention in McDermott's description, though I would not want to put words in his mouth. Nevertheless, given my recognition that there is a work of illumination by God's Spirit going on at significant moments in the religious experience of individuals, which experiences occasionally contribute to developments in the life and thought of religions, the work of God within the development of religions should not be ignored. But, we are unable to affirm positively the final result, because of the additional negative contribution of human suppression of the truth and of demonic deception. This point is made nicely by Amos Yong⁵⁶ who rightly suggests that we 'see religious traditions as serving divine purposes in greater or lesser degrees at each stage of their evolution' and to include Christianity in this assessment.⁵⁷

Christopher Wright and John Goldingay posit that 'Deuteronomy suggests that worship of other deities offered by non-Israelites is ordained by God (see Deut. 4:19; cf 32:8-9 RSV, NIV mg following the Qumran ms and LXX).'⁵⁸ But, taking note of the ambiguity in regard to God's

⁵⁵ Gerald R. McDermott, 'What If Paul Had Been From China?: Reflections on the Possibility of Revelation in Non-Christian Religions', in *No Other Gods Before Me?: Evangelicals and the Challenge of World Religions*, ed. John G. Stackhouse Jr. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001), p. 32.

⁵⁶ Amos Yong, *Discerning the Spirit(s): A Pentecostal-Charismatic Contribution to Christian Theology of Religions* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), pp. 48-49.

⁵⁷ Yong, *Discerning the Spirit(s)*, p. 50.

⁵⁸ Goldingay and Wright, 'Yahweh Our God Yahweh One', p. 51.

providence which I have identified above, they suggest that 'this may be an example of the way the Hebrew Bible attributes to Yahweh as sole cause phenomena which we tend to attribute to secondary human volition'. This is done, 'for example, in some cases of human lying, or disobedience, or hardening of the heart. If Israelites observed that other nations worshipped their own deities, and if Yahweh was sovereign high God over all, then he must in some way be responsible for the fact.' Wisely, however, they see this as only an 'interim acceptance', given that such religion is shown to be inadequate by the later fuller awareness.⁵⁹ D. A. Carson puts the matter well:

Even if one decides that what is meant is that God apportions the worship of the heavenly array to the pagan nations, this may mean, within the context of the storyline (not least in Deuteronomy), no more than that God's sovereign sway extends even over the pagan nations and their false gods, but that is no reason for the covenant community who truly know God to follow in their path. In other words, the verse provides no optimism for the view that the worship of idols is an acceptable alternative approach to the one living and true God.⁶⁰

Earlier, I cited Gerald McDermott's suggestion that the religions may have a providential role, preparing their adherents to receive 'the full revelation of God in Christ', although there is not a direct continuity between the religions and Christ. I am willing to grant this, if we

think of God's providential work as inclusive of the things that he permits with good intentions. However, I would not be comfortable affirming 'providential preparation' if that is taken to mean that God was intentionally developing these religious systems in preparation for the gospel, as a parallel to his work with Israel. If that is not McDermott's intention, I think I am prepared to affirm his statement. I see an ambiguity in his language, however, because the animal sacrifices were 'instituted' by Yahweh and that makes it sound as though some of the other religious constructs were also 'instituted' by God.

In this vein, McDermott cites Jonathan Edwards as believing 'that God has planted types [in the sense of Old Testament types, pointing forward to Christ] of true religion even in religious systems that were finally false. God outwitted the devil, he suggested, by using diabolically deceptive religion to teach what is true. For example, the practice of human sacrifice was the result of the devil's mimicry of the animal sacrifice that God had instituted after the Fall.'⁶¹ Animal sacrifice was the main type of Christ in the Old Testament but it was also revealed to all the Gentiles. Satan distorted this and led the Gentiles to sacrifice human beings, even their own sons. In doing this,

Satan believed he had 'promote[d] his own interests,' outsmarting God; but God outflanked the devil. He permitted this diabolical deception because through it

⁵⁹ Goldingay and Wright, 'Yahweh Our God Yahweh One', p. 51.

⁶⁰ Carson, *Gagging*, p. 296, fn. 76.

⁶¹ McDermott, *Can Evangelicals Learn*, p. 106.

'the devil prepared the Gentile world for receiving ... this human sacrifice, Jesus Christ.' Similarly, the devil induced human beings to worship idols and think that the Gentile deities were united to their images. But God used this deception as well for his own purposes, to prepare the Gentile mind for the concept of incarnation, perfectly realized in Christ: 'And so indeed was [the] heathenish doctrines of deities' being united to images and the heathenish fables of heroes being begotten [by] gods, a preparation for their receiving the doctrine of the incarnation, of the Deity's dwelling in a human [body], and the Son of God's being conceived in the womb of a virgin by the power of the Spirit of [God].'⁶²

These 'pagan practices thus pictured divine realities in distorted (and sometimes horrific) fashion'. They were 'not merely human insights but developments (albeit twisted and broken) of original perceptions granted by God himself'.⁶³

This is the sort of divine providential work that I would want to affirm. Edwards' proposal puts an interesting twist on the 'no agreement' approach to other religions which views them as simply the product of demonic deception. It grants this to be the case but then puts Satan's work under subjection to God who is able to use it for his own good purposes. Thus, we do not have to conceive of the religions as designed or intended by God but we can still see his providential work *within* them, bringing good and gracious effects out of what is intrinsically evil. However, when McDermott speaks of

this as indication that 'God sometimes plants within the religions types of His fuller Christian realities',⁶⁴ he discerns a divine intentionality in the situation which I do not think is necessitated by his own description of Edwards' concept.

As other examples of 'revealed types' such as Edwards found in other religions, McDermott would add 'the idea that human beings are accepted by the divine on the basis of divine love rather than human effort', taught by Mahayana Buddhists and Hindu *bhaktas*.⁶⁵ It is not 'general revelation' but it is also not 'special revelation' because it does not reveal salvation through Jesus Christ. McDermott is quick to note that 'the grace taught by these communities is not the same as the grace shown by the God of Jesus Christ. Humans are sometimes expected to do something to merit this grace, and the Hindu and Buddhist deities do not manifest the holiness of the God of Israel. Hence the grace is not as costly as for the Christian Trinity. Nevertheless, the basic idea of divine love overruling legal demands is present.'⁶⁶

Don Richardson's account of the concept of the peace child among the fierce, cannibalistic Asmat people of New Guinea, would appear to be an instance of this typology present in other religious structures. Richardson calls them 'redemptive

⁶² McDermott, *Can Evangelicals Learn*, p. 107, citing Jonathan Edwards, *Miscellanies*, entry 307.

⁶³ McDermott, *Can Evangelicals Learn*, p. 114.

⁶⁴ McDermott, *Can Evangelicals Learn*, p. 108.

⁶⁵ McDermott, *Can Evangelicals Learn*, p. 113.

⁶⁶ McDermott, *Can Evangelicals Learn*, p. 113, n. 38.

analogies'.⁶⁷ Again, McDermott is careful to note, as I would do, that 'this is not to equate the Christian Scriptures, which contain types, with other scriptures that may contain types. The Bible is in a different category of revelation from that of the religions since it alone mediates the reality of the triune God as incarnate in Jesus of Nazareth.'⁶⁸ But, 'among the religions are scattered promises of God in Christ' and 'these promises are revealed types planted there by the triune God'.⁶⁹ Once more, provided this is not taken to imply that the religions *per se* are an intentional divine development, I concur with McDermott.

B. Religions as Analogous to Governments

Stanley Grenz proposes another way in which the religions may have a providential role in the work of God in history:

The biblical visionaries anticipate the establishment of the eternal community of a reconciled humankind dwelling within the renewed creation and enjoying the presence of the redeeming God. Although the fullness of community comes only as God's gift at the culmination of history, the biblical writers also assert that foretastes of the future reality can be found in the present. The providential place of human religious traditions, therefore, may lie in their role of fostering community.⁷⁰

⁶⁷ Don Richardson, *Peace Child* (Glendale, CA: Regal Books, 1974).

⁶⁸ McDermott, *Can Evangelicals Learn*, p. 114.

⁶⁹ McDermott, *Can Evangelicals Learn*, p. 114.

⁷⁰ Stanley J. Grenz, 'The Universality of the "Jesus-Story" and the "Incredulity Toward Metanarratives"', in *No Other Gods before Me?: Evangelicals and the Challenge of World Religions*, ed. John J. Stackhouse (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001), p. 104.

Grenz suggests that 'whatever their ultimate vision of reality may be, all religious traditions contribute to identity formation and social cohesion. Their immediate goal is to assist their adherents in the task of gaining a sense of identity as persons standing in relationship to something 'larger' than the individual, however that encompassing reality may be understood. In this sense, religions fulfil a divinely sanctioned function. Because God's ultimate purpose is the establishment of community, evangelicals ought to affirm each religious tradition in its intent to promote social cohesion among human beings, for in this manner each contributes to the present experience of community.'⁷¹

Here, I see evidence of God's work of (common) grace, one of those aspects of a religious construct which we can affirm as good, and for which we can give praise to God, but I would not suggest that God had intentionally raised up the religion to accomplish this purpose. It is a case in which the ambiguity of all religions is evident and in which a sign of the grace of God is to be welcomed without thereby endorsing the whole religious construct as God's work.

Grenz suggests a parallel with 'Paul's affirmation of government as God's agent in promoting good and punishing evil (Rom. 13.1-6)',⁷² I understand human government to be an institution set up by God to function as an instrument of common grace in the world, providing

⁷¹ Grenz, 'The Universality', pp. 105-06.

⁷² Grenz, 'The Universality', p. 106, n. 54.

order and justice in a society where sin inevitably works toward disorder and injustice. To parallel religions to governments is to recognize a divine intention in their existence as institutions, but it need not suggest that any particular religion is therefore serving completely as God wishes it to do. Grenz himself is quick to note that 'religion readily becomes an expression of human fallenness, even falling prey to the demonic' and, thus a parallel to government is further demonstrated. Governments too, though ordained by God to do good, can be perverted and can work against the moral purposes of God for humanity instead of promoting them.

C. Religions as Analogous to Cultures

Personally, I am more inclined to parallel religion and culture (as Harold Netland does⁷³), while recognizing that in non-secular cultures, it is often difficult to distinguish between the two. Particular cultures need not be viewed as developed by specific divine providential intention but they have come about through both God's good creative activity and human activity, which is a mixture of good and evil. Once this parallel is drawn, much can be gained by applying the insights offered by Richard Mouw on culture and common grace to the aspect of religion. Here, as well, we can see the grace of God at work, bearing fruit which gives God pleasure and in which we too can delight, without affirming the

entire religious system. Where other religions serve to restrain the expression of sin within their community, and to foster works of civic good, we can be thankful and we should attribute these relative goods to the grace of God.

Richard Mouw has suggested that 'one legitimate way to think positively about the fact of multiple Christian denominations may be to see different denominational groups as having different vocations—different assignments from the Lord to work out different virtues and to cultivate different spiritual sensitivities'.⁷⁴ I do not wish to extend the language of denominations within Christianity to the various religions of the world, which would give the impression that the divine assignments given to Lutheranism and Presbyterianism are analogous to different assignments given to Christianity and Buddhism. That would be the road of thoroughgoing pluralism, down which a biblically informed theology cannot walk. But, granting the more general analogy between culture and religion, without suggesting that the religions *as such* are divinely ordered, we can see how the common grace purposes of God for a fallen world may be providentially served by the religions. We can see how God might bless particular communities through the ways in which sin is restrained, the needy are cared for, those who do good to others are encouraged and assisted, and human

⁷³ Netland, *Encountering*, p. 328.

⁷⁴ Richard J. Mouw, *He Shines in All That's Fair: Culture and Common Grace* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), pp. 79-80.

well-being in general, is fostered, even when the agencies bringing this good are religious.

By keeping clearly in view the differences between God's common and his special (saving) grace, we can see, in the religious systems we encounter, cause for gratitude to God and his grace as well as opportunity to proclaim and to model the much greater blessings that God communicates through union with Christ. Ironically, evangelism seems easiest where God's common grace has least been experienced, because the restraint of sin and its consequences that comes about through God's gracious working in a community makes it more difficult to convince people of their need of saving grace. As Jesus himself observed, it is to sinners who are aware of their own sinfulness and the desperation of their situation that the liberating message of the gospel is most evident as good news.

Nevertheless, as Mouw helpfully demonstrates, Christians should seek to be agents of common grace, doing 'common grace ministries'.⁷⁵ These have an intrinsic legitimacy and value, even though we must not be satisfied to stop with them, knowing that we are also called to be agents of special grace. It is as agents of special grace that the religions which are not based upon the revelation of God in Christ fail disastrously but, as agents of common grace, they may sometimes exceed some Christian communities. Recognizing this to be true should keep

us from triumphalism in our relationship with the other religions of the world and should enable us to be positively appreciative of ways in which God is at work in and through them. The fact that the grace of God which we observe in those religions is not saving grace should not prevent us from valuing the evidences of common grace that we observe. Indeed, we need to be cautious about claiming that we can accurately define the line between common and special grace, as Mouw warns us, when he observes that for all he or 'any of us can know—much of what we now think of as common grace may in the end time be revealed to be saving grace'.⁷⁶

To the Lystrans (Acts 14:15-17) and the Athenians (Acts 17:24-28), the apostle Paul appealed to God's general revelation and common grace to lead them on to the higher knowledge of God as he had revealed himself in Christ. So, we may start by affirming the good features which we observe in the lives of other religious communities and seek to open their eyes to the Giver of all these goods in human experience. We can show them how their own life experience is illumined by the biblical narrative and how the longings of their souls, that are unsatisfied by even the best features of their religious system, can be satisfied by Christ.

Jeremiah's instructions to the exiles in Babylon between the first deportation and the destruction of

⁷⁵ Mouw, *He Shines*, pp. 80-82.

⁷⁶ Mouw, *He Shines*, p. 100.

Jerusalem merit our consideration in the context of religions. He urged them to 'build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce.... But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare (Jer. 29:5, 7).' 'The very practice of prayers for the foreign city and its rulers acknowledges the reign of God',⁷⁷ but it is inconceivable that similar instructions could be given to Christians living in the midst of a community which predominantly practised a different religion, *with specific reference to that religious context*.

Christians should seek and pray for the welfare of their nation and of their culture, but they can hardly do the same for the religion. Becoming Christians did not change their political status, except that they now recognize that their government is itself in subjection to God. This might necessitate disobedience at some time, if the two authorities come into conflict. But, with regard to the religion from which they have converted, their new commitment to serve God's purposes of bringing everyone into his kingdom through the spread of Christ's Lordship, immediately puts them in conflict with their former religion. They cannot pray for its welfare, except in a very limited sense, namely, that it might at least serve God's purposes of common grace. In those areas, they may even

work together with adherents of other religions. But, the survival of the religion as such is clearly threatened by the Christian mandate to evangelism which Christ uses to build his church.

It is precisely this distinction between the respective roles of governments and religions within the providence of God that puts Christians in such a difficult situation, in non-secular societies. Where a religion makes no distinction between itself and the state, it is inevitable that the leaders of such a religion will view Christians as a political threat. It is extremely difficult for Christians to convince their neighbours, in such a context, that they are loyal citizens of their nation and society but, effectively, opponents of the religion with which the state is inextricably allied. This includes a wide range of contexts, including states in which the head is considered to be divine, those in which religious law (such as Islamic *sharia*) is constituted the law of the state, or even traditional African contexts in which the Christian aversion to ancestor veneration (when viewed as 'worship') imperils the status of the chief whose power and authority derives from his relationship to those ancestors. This also puts most forms of Christianity in the catch 22 of being perceived as dangerous proponents of secularism, precisely because they insist that the government should not be preferentially related to any religious institution but should foster religious freedom.

⁷⁷ Allen Verhey, *Christian Community, Scripture, and the Moral Life* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), p. 378.

VI. Conclusion

To sum up, I understand religions to

be ambiguous responses to various forms of divine revelation, both general and special. As beings created for fellowship with God, humans are naturally religious but the religions we construct are all the result of both appropriation and suppression of divine truth. God may graciously save individuals within the context of their religions but this is not because the religions themselves are salvific. Nevertheless, we can assert that all of the religions have a role in God's providential program in human history. They have not been intentionally developed by God as stepping

stones to Christ, but within them are aspects of truth which God may graciously use in his work of drawing individuals to himself savingly. Like human governments, religions may serve the purposes of God's common grace in society but they can also fall prey to the demonic. They are rather like human cultures. In both cultures and religions we can observe and appreciate signs of the work of God's grace, but both are human constructs which must be continually critiqued and reformed by the gospel of Christ.

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Paternoster Press
PO Box 300, Carlisle, Cumbria CA3 0QS, UK