

# EVANGELICAL REVIEW OF THEOLOGY

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## Evangelical Review of Theology

*Articles and book reviews original and selected from  
publications worldwide for an international  
readership for the purpose of discerning the  
obedience of faith*

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# Editorial

## *Mission Between the Times*

A recent issue of the *International Review of Mission* deals with the theme 'The Future of Mission'. The articles in the issue include 'Shape of Mission for the Future', 'Should We Stop Using the Term "Mission"?', 'The Old Age of the Missionary Movement', 'Crucial Trends and Their Implications for Mission', 'Toward Multilateral Mission Strategy'.

The periodical thus raises a number of fundamental issues questioning the very future of Christian mission. Perhaps the truth was more exactly expressed by a book recently published entitled *Mission Between the Times* (C. René Padilla; Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1985). Following Padilla this issue of *Evangelical Review of Theology* assumes the inevitability of Christian mission between the two comings of Christ, and so is concerned not so much with the 'The Future of Mission' as with the form 'Mission of the Future' will take. As long as the Christian Church holds on to the finality of Jesus Christ, Christian mission will be imperative.

Our six articles deal with crucial issues for the mission of the 21st Century. The first article, by Ajith Fernando, addresses the central abiding issue of Christian mission: other religions with which Christian mission comes into direct confrontation. The following article by Norman Geisler deals with a spiritual movement which has become a quasi-religion. This is specially the case in the West. The third article by Nigel Cameron is also concerned with the content of the Christian message; as dialogue, syncretism and anonymous Christianity gain popularity, universalism remains a crucial problem. The fourth article by René Padilla has to do primarily with the Latin American context; yet the basic questions are universally relevant to ecclesiology. The last two articles, by Lesslie Newbigin and Eugene Rubingh, deal with directions Christian missions will be taking in the future.

All the articles have thorough documentation, but we regret that due to reasons of space most of the footnotes have had to be omitted; and so also most of the usual book reviews.

Accompanying the multiplication of all sorts of Christian activities there seems to be an increasing dearth of authentication of the Gospel message in personal, family and congregational life. As our Lord Jesus said, the tree is known by its fruits. What is really at stake is the very heart of the Gospel—the finality and the reality of the resurrected Lord Jesus Christ.

*Editor* p. 292

## **Truth in Other Religions**

**Ajith Fernando**

*Reprinted from the book The Christian's Attitude Toward World Religions by Ajith Fernando (Tyndale House Publishers, Wheaton, 1987) with permission.*

*Despite the rapid secularization especially endemic in so-called Christian countries, there is a tremendous resurgence of all religions, both modern and primitive, all over the world. The*

*question of other religions remains the crucial issue of mission of the future. Ajith Fernando, from his experience in the Third World context of religious pluralism, speaks to this central issue from an evangelical perspective.*

Editor

There are truths in other faiths that we could affirm, even though we know these truths do not suffice to lead a person to salvation. But what is the source of these truths? Can they be described as God's revelation in the same way that the Bible is?

### THREE SOURCES OF TRUTH

The Scriptures teach that there are three sources of truth available to man apart from the Scriptures.

*God's Original Revelation.* The first source is God's original revelation to Adam, the first man. Paul said that from 'one man he made every nation of men' ([Acts 17:26](#); see also [Romans 5:12-21](#)). This implies that Adam was the father of the whole human race. The Scriptures teach that God had a warm personal relationship with Adam. This could only have been possible if God had revealed key truths about his nature to Adam.

Yet with the Fall, man's nature was corrupted and untruths entered his mind. Paul wrote: '[Man] exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshipped and served created things rather than the Creator' ([Romans 1:25](#)). So man's religion deteriorated.

Yet that original revelation given to Adam was not entirely lost by the human race. In man there remained what has been called *reminiscent knowledge*. In this reminiscent knowledge there is found truth about God.

The idea of the deterioration or devolution of religion is not accepted today in many circles. Many people prefer to explain the history of religions in terms of evolution rather than devolution.

The evolution theory claims that religion is man's attempt to answer p. 293 certain questions and challenges he faces. From the earliest times man needed to explain how the world, with all its complexity, came into being. Man felt insecure because of his inability to control nature, so he began to look for someone bigger than himself to whom he could go for protection and blessing. He needed to attribute the misfortunes he faced to some source. Gradually man 'created' ghosts, spirits, demons, and gods to answer his questions. There were gods for different functions and protecting different localities. So polytheism emerged.

As societies advanced, the evolutionary theory holds, man realized that having a supreme ruler for a large area was politically more effective than having many local chiefs. So monarchies emerged. This idea of the supreme ruler was extended to the religious sphere, yielding the belief in a supreme god. The climax of this process was monotheism, the belief in *one* supreme god.

The Bible affirms the very opposite of the evolutionary view. The Bible states that the first man had a monotheistic belief in the supreme God that was corrupted after the Fall, resulting in polytheism and animism (spirit worship).

Carl F. H. Henry regards the evolutionary explanation of religious history as typical of the mood of this age. He says, 'In every age philosophers have sought some one explanatory principle by which to encompass and explain all things.' He points out that 'in modern times that principle has been the category of evolution.' So the development of religion is also explained in terms of evolution.

Anthropological studies carried out in this century however have given convincing evidence for the biblical view, which sees the present religious diversity in terms of the

deterioration of an original revelation. Don Richardson has made these insights from anthropology available from a nontechnical viewpoint in his book *Eternity in Their Hearts*. He shows how the idea of a supreme, good God was discovered in thousands of so-called primitive cultures that have been studied in this century.

Richardson relates how these discoveries were embarrassing to many anthropologists because they went against current opinions about the history of religions. They had expected 'unadvanced' thoughts about the divine. The so-called advanced concept of a supreme God was a most unexpected discovery because these primitive cultures were not considered to have evolved to the point of developing such an idea. Richardson reports that 'probably 90 percent or more of the folk religions of this planet contain clear acknowledgement of the existence of one Supreme God.' p. 294

When missionaries go out and proclaim the gospel to these cultures, their hearers often automatically identify the Christian God with their supreme God, a fact that has simplified the Bible translator's task. Bishop Lesslie Newbigin notes that 'in almost all cases where the Bible has been translated into languages of the non-Christian peoples of the world, the New Testament word *Theos* [Greek for "God"] has been rendered by the name given by the non-Christian peoples to the One whom they worship as Supreme Being.' Newbigin cites the great Bible translations consultant, Eugene Nida, who has pointed out that where translators tried to evade the issue by simply transliterating the Greek or Hebrew word, the converts would explain this foreign word in the text of their Bibles by using the indigenous name for God.

Here then is the first source of truth in non-Christian systems—God's original revelation. Though this revelation has been corrupted because of sin, some truth still remains, and that truth may be affirmed and used as a stepping-stone in communicating the gospel.

*The Image of God in Man.* The second source of truth available, apart from the Scriptures, is the very nature of man. Man is a religious being. The Dutch theologian, J. H. Bavinck, points out that 'this is not to say that every man has this religious trait to the same extent.' Some are more religious than others. But if we look at the human race as a whole, we must agree with Bavinck that 'it cannot be denied that religiousness is proper to man.' Bavinck says, 'Even when a man turns his back upon the religious traditions in which he has been brought up and calls himself an atheist, he still remains in the grasp of his religious predisposition. He can never wholly rid himself of it.'

Religions such as Buddhism deny the necessity of relating to any supernatural being. But most of the adherents of such religions cannot generally be made to stick to a rigid non-theism. Mahayana Buddhism is the largest branch of Buddhism. It is practiced in countries such as Japan, China, Korea, and Tibet. The Mahayana Buddhists worship the Buddha and the *Bodhisattvas* and address their prayers to them as they would to gods. Hinayana Buddhism is practiced 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. The morning newspaper on the day that I write this carries a statement by the leading executive officer of Sri Lanka's most prestigious temple. p. 295 He says that the temple lands 'are dedicated to the Buddha and the gods.' These Buddhists often resort to assistance from the gods or spirits in times of trouble.

Communism sought to eradicate religion with its strong rationalistic and materialistic emphases. But today religion thrives in communist lands in spite of the discrimination and persecution that religious adherents have had to face.

The incurable religiosity of man is a vestige of the image of God in man (see [Genesis 1:26, 27](#)). This image was tarnished as a result of the Fall so that no part of man has escaped the taint and pollution of sin. But man still has some of the God-implanted characteristics and abilities originally invested in him. These traits manifest themselves in ways that are both good and bad, which is why man thirsts after the divine. [Ecclesiastes 3:11](#) says that God has 'set eternity in the hearts of men.' That refers to the vestige of the image of God. But it goes on to say that men 'cannot fathom what God has done from beginning to end,' which is a result of the fall of man. What man knows about God because of his natural inclination toward the religious is termed by theologians 'the *intuitional knowledge* of God.'

So we find that man can think reasonably. He has a sense of the reality of the divine that expresses itself in religiousness. He has a sense of truth, of beauty, and of goodness. He has the potential for creativity. He has a sense of the eternal, which makes him want to transcend his limits of time and space. These are qualities with the potential of being used in the service of truth for the benefit of man. But they may also be used in ways that are dangerous to man. So we find accomplished art, literature, and music that are good and we also find accomplished art, literature, and music that are evil. We have beautiful ancient buildings regarded as wonders of the world that were built using slaves in a most inhuman way.

A Christian, therefore, may enjoy the music of Ravi Shankar or be challenged by the heroism of Mahatma Gandhi. We may learn from the literature of Greece. We could say that, because these are expressions of the image of God in man, the good features in these creations are derived in some sense from God. But we also know that those who created them do not know God, and this makes us unwilling to endorse the system of life to which they subscribe. As a youth I used to follow Hindu processions for hours, thrilled by the music I heard, but deeply troubled by what caused the musicians to play what they played.

*The Plan of the Universe.* A third source of knowledge, outside the [p. 296](#) revelation of God in the Scriptures, is the plan of the universe. Looking at the universe, man is able to make inferences about the One who created it. We may call this the *inferential knowledge* of God. The Psalmist said, 'The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands.' ([Psalm 19:1](#)).

Paul explained this knowledge of God more clearly: 'What may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made' ([Romans 1:19, 20](#)).

In his speeches in Lystra and Athens, Paul said that the plan of creation is a testimony to God, creating in man a desire to know more about him ([Acts 14:17; 17:26, 27](#)).

By observing the grandeur of creation, people may be led to acknowledge the greatness of the Creator. By observing the laws of nature, people may arrive at a conviction about the importance of order for a secure life. This in turn will become a base for formulating the laws of a given society.

## GENERAL REVELATION AND SPECIAL REVELATION

The three sources of truth outside the Bible are: reminiscent knowledge, based on the original revelation of God; intuitional knowledge, which comes by the use of our natural instincts; and inferential knowledge, which comes by observing creation. In theology, this type of knowledge is described under the heading of *general revelation*. It is truth, derived from God and available to all people. It is distinguished from *special revelation*, which is truth communicated by God infallibly, in the form of language. This truth is recorded in



the Bible. Whereas general revelation gives hints about the nature of reality, special revelation is a clear guide to all that is needed for salvation and for authentic living.

[Psalm 19](#) describes these two sources of truth. Verses [1-6](#) describe general revelation. This revelation is not made through 'speech or language' (v. [3](#)). But 'their voice goes out into all the earth' (v. [4](#)). Verses [7-11](#) describe special revelation. This description begins with the words, 'The law of the Lord is perfect' (v. [7](#)). It goes on to describe this revelation as 'trustworthy' (v. [7](#)), 'right', 'radiant' (v. [8](#)), 'pure' and 'altogether righteous' (v. [9](#)). This passage also describes the amazingly complete influence it exerts on believers. We affirm that only the Bible can exert such infallible authority upon man. No other writing, Christian or non-Christian, is revelation in the sense that the Bible is. [p. 297](#)

Some recent works on the Christian attitude to other faiths have disputed the Christian claim to a unique revelation. One writer says, 'What we have in the Bible are not attempts to project objective truths, but a struggle to understand, to celebrate, to witness, and to relate.' To that writer the Bible is an expression of the faith and experiences of its writers. We must not make claims that it presents 'absolute and objective' truths based on our belief that it is a unique revelation given by God, he says, 'for most religions like Islam and Hinduism, are also based on the concept of revelation; and throughout history different persons have claimed to have various revelations from God.' It is not within the scope of this book to defend our belief that the Scriptures are a unique revelation from God, containing objective and absolute truth. This has been adequately done in numerous books on revelation that have appeared recently.

## **LEARNING FROM OTHER FAITHS?**

If glimpses of truth are found in other faiths, then there may be times when Christians can learn from those other faiths. This can be explained in two ways.

First, even though the revelation of God is complete in that it gives all that is needed for salvation and authentic living, God has given us the privilege and responsibility of applying this revelation to our specific situations. In some areas, we have specific instructions that are absolutes, such as the prohibition of adultery. But in other areas, we have general principles. And it is our task to apply these principles to our specific cultural situations. An example of this is the principle of reverential worship. In applying this principle, we may learn much from the music used by the non-Christians in a given culture. Music has been called the language of the heart. By listening to non-Christian music, we may learn much about the type of music that is suitable for the people of the culture which we are considering.

Another way to learn from other faiths is a little more complex to explain. Even though God's revelation is complete, our perception of it is incomplete. So, we have a lot to learn. The Scriptures contain all that is necessary for a complete life, but because of our cultural conditioning, we may be hindered from learning some of the things clearly taught in the Scriptures. Other cultures may not have these cultural hindrances. So, even without the light of the gospel, people of other cultures may achieve heights in these areas simply by availing themselves of general revelation.

I have a dear friend, a convert from Hinduism, for whose spiritual [p. 298](#) nurture I have had some responsibility. As my relationship with him developed, I realized that there was much I could learn from him about meditation, devotion, and reverence in prayer. Many of us in Sri Lanka, who grew up in a Christian background, were weak in our understanding and practice of meditation, devotion and reverence. I sensed that his Hindu background had contributed positively to the development of his Christian prayer life.

When my friend came to Christ, he understood the true nature of prayer. He saw that prayer is a personal conversation between a child and his loving Father. To him this was a new, revolutionary, and liberating truth. He knows now that the Hindu prayers, which he had offered in some sense as a means of salvation, had no saving value. He does not use prayer hoping that it will be a way to merit salvation. Prayer is now a consequence of the salvation that he received as a gift from God, an expression of an intimate relationship he has with God, who is now his loving Father.

Into this relationship with God he brought a meditative, devotional reverence that he had acquired from his Hindu background. This reverence had expressed itself in ways that were contrary to the gospel. But the reverence itself was a good feature. We could say that it had its roots in God's general revelation and, therefore, we could learn from it.

Reverence is advocated in the Bible, too. The second statement in the Lord's Prayer, 'Hallowed be thy name,' is evidence of this. But the Christian tradition in which I grew up was so rational in its approach to truth that it had lost some of the reverential character essential to Christianity. My Christian experience in that area was biblically defective. Asian religion had preserved this reverential aspect, partly because the Asian culture is not overly rational in character. So, even though we know that Hinduism is not a way to salvation, we can learn from the Hindus about reverence. We know, however, that the fullest revelation about reverence is found in the Scriptures, but we had been blinded from seeing it because of the defective Christianity we inherited.

A good example of the defectiveness in our Christianity emerges when we look at our attitude toward nature. The Psalms tell us that the creation is daily proclaiming truths about God ([19:1-6](#)). Yet most Christians do not seem attuned to these messages. In fact, we don't know how to listen to such a voice. To us, nature is something to be used for the benefit of man. We may perhaps use its greatness to argue for the existence of God, but beyond that, we hardly see it as a source of truth. We have lost the meditative or contemplative aspect of life. p. 299

I believe this deficiency is one reason why Christianity has made minimal inroads into the societies of Asia, where the religions with a high emphasis on the contemplative are practised. Many Buddhists and Hindus, for example, have been unimpressed by Christianity. They view Christians as irreligious people because of our lack of emphasis on the meditative and contemplative aspects of life. This is unfortunate, because these two areas are clearly presented as important aspects of God's complete revelation to man.

## **UNACCEPTABLE SYSTEMS**

Though we may accept and learn from certain practices in non-Christian systems, we must reject the systems themselves. We know that Hindu devotion does not lead to salvation, for only faith in Christ does that.

We must disagree with the syncretist who says, 'Let us learn from each other and live harmoniously with each other. After all, we are headed in the same direction, even though some of our practices may differ.' The biblical Christian says, 'We are not headed in the same direction. Some of our practices may be similar. We may learn from each other, but there is a sense in which we cannot live harmoniously with each other. We seek to bring all who are outside of a relationship with Christ into such a relationship, and that necessitates the forsaking of their former religions.'

The syncretist says that we are one in the centre, though we may differ on some peripheral details. The biblical Christian says that, though we may have some peripheral similarities, we are different in the centre. Christianity revolves on a different axis from



other religion. The way of Christ leads to life. The Bible teaches that other ways lead to death.

We approach the issue of truth and goodness in other faiths from the basis of our belief in the uniqueness of Christ. If an aspect of a certain religion conforms to the complete revelation in Christ, we affirm it. But if it does not conform to this revelation, we reject it. As Lesslie Newbigin puts it: 'Jesus is for the believer the source from whom his understanding of the totality of experience is drawn and therefore the criterion by which other ways of understanding are judged.' These are implications of Christ's proclamation that he is 'the truth' ([John 14:6](#)).

The good points in a religion that have their base in general revelation, as we said, may be used by the Christian evangelist as points of contact and stepping-stones in preaching the gospel. But we [p. 300](#) need to add that these same good features in a religion can also lead people astray.

The noble ethic of Buddhism, with all its good features, gives many people the encouragement to try to save themselves. They feel satisfied that they are using their own efforts to win their salvation. But self-effort is the opposite of God's way of salvation, which is by faith. Before one exercises such faith he must first despair of his ability to save himself. The ethic of Buddhism may cause people to trust in their ability to save themselves and so blind them from the way of salvation. So, Satan can use the best in other faiths to lead people away from the truth ([2 Corinthians 4:4](#)).

## CO-OPERATING IN COMMON CAUSES

Another implication of our belief in general revelation relates to our co-operation with non-Christians in moral, social, or political causes of mutual concern. Theologian John Jefferson Davis has given a rationale for such activity. He says that even unbelievers have a God-created conscience. Because of general revelation, believers and unbelievers can overlap in their moral concerns. So we may cooperate with non-Christians in causes such as peace, ecological responsibility, social development, and opposition to abortion.

We must, however, be warned that such co-operation is fraught with numerous pitfalls. Davis says that one of the keys to avoiding problems is to define the basis of co-operation narrowly and specifically. We co-operate on some agreed-upon causes and no more. Davis also says that we must ensure that the group that is formed has a clear written statement of goals that does not conflict with Scripture.

We must remember that our supreme task, evangelism with conversion in view, is repulsive to most non-Christians. Co-operation with non-Christians must not result in a blunting of our evangelistic emphasis. Sometimes evangelistic organisations downplay their evangelistic emphasis so as to get assistance from the government or a non-Christian foundation for some social venture. This practice can be very dangerous. We must make known the fact that along with our social concern is an evangelistic concern, which we will not drop in order to get funds. Because they refused to hire homosexuals on their staff team, the Salvation Army in New York recently forfeited large sums of state assistance.

Following the recent racial riots in Sri Lanka, I participated happily in a neighbourhood peace committee chaired by a Buddhist and of [p. 301](#) which most of the members were Buddhists. I found that what I did in that committee did not conflict with my Christian principles. But I could not participate in some ventures organized by certain Christians, such as an ecumenical rally at which the chief speaker was a Buddhist chief priest. I felt I could not take part because true Christian ecumenicity cannot extend to other religions. I also could not participate in many united services of prayer for peace that were held all over the land in Christian church buildings. At these services Hindus

and Muslims joined with the Christians and offered Hindu and Muslim prayers for peace in the land along with Christian prayers.

These ecumenical rallies and united prayer services were hailed as great steps forward in the quest for interreligious understanding and harmony. But a biblical Christian, in his search for harmony with others, cannot surrender the scriptural teaching about Christ's uniqueness. Paul stated very clearly that the only acceptable way to God in prayer is through the mediation of Christ ([1 Timothy 2:1-8](#)). A Christian, therefore, cannot have a 'united' prayer service where both Christian and non-Christian prayers are offered.

Murray Harris described the principle Paul laid down in his famous passage about being unequally yoked with unbelievers ([2 Corinthians 6:14-16](#)):

Do not form any relationship, whether temporary or permanent, with unbelievers that would lead to a compromise of Christian standards or jeopardize consistency of Christian witness. And why such separation? Because the unbeliever does not share the Christian's standards, sympathies, or goals.

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**Mr. Ajith Fernando is the National Director of Youth for Christ in Sri Lanka. p. 302**

# **The New Age Movement**

**Norman L. Geisler**

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*The New Age Movement is a unique spiritual phenomenon of our time whose influence (next only to Communism) encompasses all realms of life—spiritual, social, personal, ecumenical, political, cultural, scientific. Dr. Geisler offers a thorough and systematic study of the movement, describing the background, the basic tenets and key leaders, as well as his evaluation of the movement.*

Editor

## **BACKGROUND: A SHIFT IN WORLD VIEWS**

On Mars Hill the Apostle Paul faced the Epicureans and the Stoics ([Acts 17:18](#)). The Epicureans were the atheists of the day and the Stoics were the pantheists. Today Christianity again stands between the materialist and the mystic. Present-day 'Epicureans' are secular humanists, and contemporary 'Stoics' are proponents of what has come to be known as the New Age movement.

Western society is experiencing an ideological shift from an atheistic to a pantheistic orientation. The basic difference between these two views is that atheists claim there is no God at all, but pantheists say God is all and all is God. Atheistic materialists believe all is matter, but mystics hold that all is mind.

The shift from secular humanism to New Age pantheism has occurred gradually over the past few decades. It has been a relatively smooth transition because of the

commonalities of these two world views. Both atheism and pantheism hold in common a basic naturalistic approach to the world. (1) Both deny an absolute distinction between Creator and creation. Both deny there is any God beyond the universe. (2) Both deny that a God supernaturally intervenes in the universe (by miracles). (3) And in the final analysis both believe that man is God (or Ultimate), though not all atheists admit this.

Western atheism and Eastern pantheism also have a common enemy. They are both diametrically opposed to Judeo-Christian theism. As Alice Bailey clearly declared, New Agers are committed to 'The Gradual Dissolution of Orthodox Judaism.' Benjamin Creme is [p. 303](#) just as emphatically anti-Christian. 'To my way of thinking,' he says, 'the Christian Churches have released into the world a view of the Christ which is impossible for modern people to accept: as the one and only Son of God, sacrificed by a loving Father to save us from the results of our sins—a blood sacrifice, straight out of the old Jewish dispensation.'

Other New Age sources are equally emphatic in their rejection of biblical theism. Pantheism does not reject a God in nature. 'It only refuses to accept any of the gods of the so-called monotheistic religions [such as Judaism and Christianity], gods created by man in his own image and likeness, a blasphemous and sorry caricature of the ever unknowable.'

The shift from the Old Age humanism to the New Age pantheism is manifest in numerous ways in today's culture. First, there is the growth in pantheistic religions and cults. Along with Christian Science, Unity, Bahai, and Scientology, the growth in 'guruism' in the West has been phenomenal. Transcendental meditation, yoga, Hare Krishna, the Church Universal and Triumphant, and the Unification Church are only a few of the more popular cultic manifestations of New Age thought. Along with these are dozens of space cults and the more popular religion of the Force.

Second, New Age thought permeates the media. Many of the most popular movies of the past decade are pantheistic, including 'Star Wars,' 'The Empire Strikes Back,' 'Return of the Jedi,' 'Poltergeist,' 'The Exorcist,' 'Raiders of the Lost Ark,' 'Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom,' 'ET,' 'Close Encounters,' and 'The Dark Crystal' (by Jim Henson, a fairy tale of pantheism). Television too has experienced more than its share of occult, magic, and other Eastern influences, from 'I Dream of Jeannie' to 'Bewitched'. Even children's cartoons feature 'He Man,' 'Masters of the Universe,' and numerous magical manifestations of Eastern mysticism. And children's comics are literally filled with occult manifestations of New Age thought.

Third, much of pop pantheism was generated by the Beatles when they embraced the Maharishi. George Harrison expressed this in 'My Sweet Lord,' a song of praise to Krishna. This same trend continues unabated to date and has even manifested itself in outright satanic lyrics in some hard rock songs.

Fourth, pantheistic influence surfaced in the public schools through the teaching of transcendental meditation (popularly known as TM). Despite the fact that they were found by the court to be religious in nature, other forms of yoga, meditation, imaginary guides, and exploration of 'inner space' and 'confluent education' continue in [p. 304](#) public schools. Likewise the human potential movement and pantheistic forms of positive thinking methods are frequently taught in schools.

Fifth, the broader culture evidences numerous influences of pantheistic thought from EST (now FORUM) business seminars to holistic health fads (usually vegetarian), relaxation techniques, biofeedback, and biorhythms. The popularity of horoscopes and the supranormal are also indications of New Age thought. The increased belief in reincarnation is an amazing evidence of the turn to the East. A Gallup poll in 1982 showed that nearly one-fourth of all Americans believe in reincarnation, with 30 percent of college students believing it. And the most important fiction writer of the New Age is the

bestselling author Carlos Castaneda, who wrote *The Teachings of Don Juan*, *Tales of Power*, *The Ring of Power*, and others.

## **BASIC PRINCIPLES OF THE NEW AGE MOVEMENT**

Unlike most religious movements the various New Age religions have no central headquarters or organization. However, they do have a commonality of core beliefs and goals, and a common consciousness.

### **Definition of New Age Religions**

Various terms have been used to describe this rise of pantheistic thought in the West. It has been called the Aquarian Conspiracy, New Consciousness, New Orientalism, Cosmic Humanism, Cosmic Consciousness, Mystical Humanism, Human Potential Movement, and Holistic Health Movement. But the umbrella-like term that encompasses them all is the New Age Movement.

As a working definition, the New Age Movement is a broad coalition of various networking organizations that (a) believe in a new world religion (pantheism), (b) are working for a new world order, and (c) expect a New Age Christ. Of course not all who participate in the New Age movement are necessarily conscious of all these aspects.

### **New Age Jargon and Symbols**

Words common to New Age thought include awakening, centring, consciousness, cosmic energy, force, global village, holistic, human potential, initiation, interdependent, network, planetary vision, rebirth, spaceship earth, synergistic, transcendent, transformational, transpersonal, and unity.

Of course New Age belief has no franchise on these words. Not [p. 305](#) everyone who uses these words is necessarily buying into New Age pantheism. All meaning is discovered by context and usage.

A number of symbols, some old and some new, have been adopted by the New Age including the rainbow, pyramid, triangle, eye in a triangle, unicorn, pegasus, concentric circles, rays of light, swastika, yin-yang, goathead on a pentagram, and even the numerals 666 worked into art. But here again, not all who use some of these symbols belong to the New Age movement. After all the rainbow was set up by God as a sign of His promise, and no New Ager should rob a Christian of its true significance.

### **New Age Prayer**

The New Age movement has a prayer known as 'The Great Invocation,' which has been translated into over 50 languages. It is often found as a book marker in New Age literature. According to George Trevelyan, leader of the New Age movement in England, 'it expresses truths common to all major religions, and is now being used across the world by people of many differing faiths and creeds. It is a prayer which focuses the call for help from man to the Higher Worlds.' It reads as follows:

From the point of light  
    within the Mind of God  
Let light stream forth into  
    the minds of men.  
Let Light descend on Earth.

From the point of Love  
    within the Heart of God  
Let love stream forth into  
    the hearts of men.

May Christ return to Earth.

From the centre where the  
Will of God is known  
Let purpose guide the little  
wills of men—  
The purpose which the  
Masters know and serve.

From the centre which we  
call the race of men  
Let the Plan of Love and  
Light work out.  
And may it seal the door p. 306  
where Evil dwells.  
Let Light and Love and  
Power restore the Plan on Earth.

Since most of the words seem ‘innocent’ enough, the prayer needs some explaining. To the author(s) of this prayer, ‘God’ is a pantheistic God, not a theistic one. ‘Love’ is not a volitional act of compassion by a person but is an impersonal cosmic energy that unifies everything. ‘Christ’ refers not to Jesus Christ but to the universal Christ spirit, which they believe has dwelt in different great religious leaders including Buddha, Jesus, and other gurus. ‘Masters’ refer to occult leaders who give revelations. ‘The plan’ is the occult plan whereby a new world order is to be established by the co-operative participation of the masses in occult powers.

### **New Age ‘Holy Books’ and Fundamental Teachings**

Like most religious movements the New Age has books with ‘revelations’ of New Age religious thought. Some of the more important ones are these: *Isis Unveiled*, by Helena P. Blavatsky (1877); *Oahspe*, by Newbrough (1882); *The Secret Doctrine*, by Helena P. Blavatsky (1888); *The Aquarian Gospel of Jesus the Christ*, by Levi Dowling (1907); *The Urantia Book*, by Bill Sadler (1955); *Revelation: The Birth of a New Age*, by David Spangler (1976); and *Messages from Maitreya the Christ*, by Benjamin Creme (1980).

The last two writers have written many books that supposedly present revelations, prophecies and teachings of the New Age. Creme for example claims to receive telepathic messages from the Christ. David Spangler claims that the revelations now being received by New Agers like himself are every bit as important as what were given to Jesus.

There are several summaries of New Age ‘fundamentals’ by their own writers. Madame Blavatsky, the famous Russian mystic and foremother of the New Age movement, listed three basic beliefs or ‘secret doctrines’: impersonal, eternal God; eternal cycles of nature; and man’s identity with God and reincarnation.

The English follower of Blavatsky, Alice Bailey, summarized New Age teaching in four beliefs: the fact of [pantheistic] God, man’s relationship to God, the fact of immortality and of eternal persistence, and the continuity of revelation and the divine approaches.

Benjamin Creme, the self-appointed ‘John the Baptist’ of the New Age Christ, lists four fundamental teachings of New Age religion: p. 307 God’s [pantheistic] existence, man’s immortality, continuing revelations from messengers, and man’s ability to evolve into Godhood.

In an excellent book evaluating the New Age movement, Douglas Groothuis lists six basic beliefs: all is one, all is God, humanity is God, change in consciousness, all religions



are one, and cosmic evolutionary optimism. At least 14 doctrines are typical of New Age religions. While not all New Age groups hold all these beliefs, most groups embrace most of them. And all groups are characterized by the pantheistic perspective reflected in them. These beliefs are: (1) an impersonal god (force), (2) an eternal universe, (3) an illusory nature of matter, (4) a cyclical nature of life, (5) the necessity of reincarnations, (6) the evolution of man into Godhood, (7) continuing revelations from beings beyond the world, (8) the identity of man with God, (9) the need for meditation (or other consciousness-changing techniques), (10) occult practices (astrology, mediums, etc.), (11) vegetarianism and holistic health, (12) pacifism (or anti-war activities), (13) one world (global) order, and (14) syncretism (unity of all religions).

## **SOME LEADERS OF THE NEW AGE MOVEMENT**

The New Age movement has many dimensions. Its ancient pantheistic roots go back to Hindu and Greek thought. The modern Western roots reach into the last century.

### **Modern Sources**

The mystic, occultist, and co-founder of theosophy Helena Petrova Blavatsky is the grandmother of the New Age movement. She is the author of *Isis Unveiled* (1877) and *The Secret Doctrine* (1888). These books are mystical 'Bibles' of New Age thought.

Alice A. Bailey (d. 1949) was an English mystic who received telepathic communications from Tibetan occult master Djwhal Khul (known as D.K.) for 30 years about 'The Plan' for a new world order. She is the author of numerous works, including *Letters on Occult Meditation* (1922), *Discipleship in the New Age* (1944), *The Reappearance of the Christ* (1948), and *The Externalisation of the [occult] Hierarchy* (1957). Bailey contributed much of the vocabulary to the New Age movement. [p. 308](#)

### **Contemporary Spokespersons**

*General presentation.* Marilyn Ferguson's book *The Aquarian Conspiracy* (1980) is one of the best overall popular presentations of New Age thought. It is well written and interesting.

*Religious dimension.* David Spangler is one of the foremost writers of New Age religious belief. His main works include *Revelation: The Birth of a New Age* (1986) and *Reflections on the Christ* (1978). Benjamin Creme's works fit into this category as well. He wrote *The Reappearance of the Christ* (1980) and *Messages from Maitreya the Christ* (1980). Also George Trevelyan's books, *A Vision of the Aquarian Age* (1977) and *Operation Redemption* (1981), have been quite influential.

*Political Dimension.* Two names stand out here: Mark Satin, *New Age Politics: Healing Serf and Society* (1979), and Robert Muller, *New Genesis: Shaping a Global Spirituality* (1982).

*Scientific dimension.* In the area of the new physics, *The Tao of Physics*, by Fritjof Capra, is a notable New Age work, as are David Bohm's *Quantum Theory and Wholeness and the Implicate Order*. In the area of cosmology, Paul Davies's books, *God and the New Physics* and *Superforce*, are a modern pantheistic explanation of origins.

*Psychological dimension.* Abraham Maslow's work, *The Farthest Reaches of Human Nature* (1971), and *Religions, Values, and Peak Experiences* (1980), are part of the New Age phenomena. Other psychologists, such as Carl Jung, Carl Rogers, and Rollo May, have New Age themes. Barbara Brown has produced a New Age anthropology in her book *Supermind* (1983).

*Health and dietary dimensions.* Viktoras Kulvinska produced *The New Age Directory of Holistic Health Guide* (1981). There is also *Survival into the 21st Century: Planetary Healer's Manual* (1925), and Leslie Kaslof's *Wholistic Dimensions in Healing* (1978).

*Historical and cultural dimensions.* Two New Age historians and cultural apologists stand out: Theodore Roszak, *Where the Wasteland Ends* (1972) and *Unfinished Animal* (1977), and William Irwin Thompson, *From Nation to Emanation* (1982).

There are endless other New Age groups, including communes, camping programmes, music, schools, even New Age businessmen's organizations and centres (like Findhorn Community, Scotland). There are ecology groups, political action organizations, lobbying groups (such as New Directions) and even New Age publishing houses (such as Lucis Publishing Company, formerly Lucifer Publishing Company). p. 309 A complete list of these groups is included toward the back of Mark Satin's book, *New Age Politics*.

### **New Age Magazines and Journals**

Among the numerous publications with New Age themes the following should be mentioned: *East-West Journal*, *Yoga Journal*, *New Age*, *New Realities*, and *Whole Life Times*. Of course New Age articles can be found in the magazines of most of the pantheistic religions, including Buddhism, Hinduism, Christian Science, Unity, Scientology, and others. New Age articles even appear in *Science Digest* and other mainline magazines.

## **NEW AGE DOCTRINES**

A brief analysis of some New Age teachings about God, the world, man, Christ, salvation, and the future will be helpful in understanding the movement.

### **Revelation**

New Agers believe in special and continual revelations. In fact they believe that

the Word of God [is] revealed in every age and dispensation. In the days of Moses it was the Pentateuch; in the days of Jesus, the Gospel; in the days of Muhammad, the Messenger of God, the Qur'an; in this day, the Bayan; and in the Dispensation of Him Whom God will make manifest, His own Book—the Book unto which all the Books of former Dispensations must needs be referred, the Book that standeth amongst them all transcendent and supreme.

That is, there is a progression of continual revelations, with the latter superseding the former.

As for the Bible, Alice Bailey adds, 'Little as the orthodox Christian may care to admit it, the entire Gospel story in its four forms or presentations, contains little else except symbolic details about the Mysteries.'

The Hindu leader, Mahatma Gandhi, declared clearly, 'I do not regard everything said in the Bible as the final word of God or exhaustive or even acceptable from the moral stand-point.' Of the Gospels he said,

I may say that I do not accept everything in the Gospels as historical truth. And it must be remembered that he was working amongst his own people, p. 310 and he said he had not come to destroy but to fulfill. I draw a great distinction between the *Sermon on the Mount* and the *Letters of Paul*. They are a graft on Christ's teaching, his own gloss apart from Christ's own experience.

In short, New Agers pick and choose in the Bible as it fits their own purposes. Indeed, Levi Dowling rewrote the Gospels to make Christ into a pantheistic occult magician who believed in reincarnation.

Contemporary New Age writers speak of 'revelation', 'inspiration', 'overshadowing', and 'visions'. Creme described his telepathic communications this way:

It descends on me and comes down as far as the solar plexus and a kind of cone is formed, like that, in light. There is an emotional outflow as well. It is the mental overshadowing which produces the rapport so that I can hear, inwardly, the words. The astral overshadowing allows what is called the True Spirit of the Christ, the energy of the Cosmic Christ, to flow out to the audience and through the audience to the world ... I am aware of His Presence, I can sense part of His mind. It is difficult to describe, but it is there.

Likewise, Spangler tells of receiving his revelations as follows:

I found that my consciousness came into contact with a force or a presence. It could not be accurately described as a being but definitely as a point of revelation, a mirror of sorts. This resulted in six statements of vision, six communications, which were put out in little booklets from Findhorn and which inspired a number of questions. In an attempt to answer the questions I ended up writing the book called, *Revelation: The Birth of a New Age*.

In this book Spangler said,

When I sat down to write, I envisioned a publication of about twenty to thirty pages. I had no intention of writing a book. However, as I began, it was as if I were overlightened by another aspect of this presence of Limitless Love and Truth. Insights which I had gained over the years through my communions with higher levels, new information, and a deeper identification with some of the processes behind that presence all came together in a synthesis of inspiration, and I found myself writing nonstop for several days.

These 'revelations' are continual. For, as Alice Bailey put it, 'Never has Deity left Itself at any time without witness. Never has man demanded light that the light has not been forthcoming. Never has there been a time, cycle or world period when there was not the giving out of the teaching and spiritual help which human need demanded.'

Since revelations from the occult Masters are not infallible and are [p. 311](#) even contingent on human co-operation, their prophecies are not infallible. Indeed, they often conflict. In spite of this, some claim a unique role for their 'revelations'. Spangler, for example, claims:

No other revelation to equal it has been offered to humanity, but all revelations of the past have led up to it. Jesus gave the great bridge through proclaiming our kinship with God, our sonship with him. Buddha gave the great bridge in enabling us to find the balance of our own being so that the energies we receive are expressed in harmony with the whole. Through knowing wisdom and through knowing love we now should be at a point, and we are at a point, where God can reasonably say to us, 'All right, I have given you the keys. I have given you the tools. Now build with me.'

## God

The New Age view of God is pantheistic. God is all and all is God. God is an impersonal force or energy. The most popular presentation of such a God is in George Lucas's 'Star Wars' movie series. Lucas wrote, 'When you are born, you have an energy field around you. You could call it an aura. An archaic description would be a halo ... When you die, your energy field joins all other energy fields in the universe, and while you're still living that larger energy field is sympathetic to your own energy field.' Or as Creme put it, 'God

is the sum total of all that exists in the whole of the manifested and unmanifested universe.' God is 'Limitless Love'. By love some New Agers mean 'a great cosmic energy' that streams from the centre of the universe.

But yet God, according to New Agers, is literally indefinable. He is beyond all thought and speech, and is literally 'unspeakable, incomparable, beyond description ... what is that? It is impossible to say!'

Thus the pantheistic God is not a definite person but a presence that transcends all individual beings. As Spangler claimed, 'Am I God? Am I Christ? Am I a Being come to you from the dwelling places of the Infinite? I am all these things, yet more.' What is more than God? In Spangler's words, it is a 'presence' that transcends all concepts of God, an infinite reality. Thus 'that central Reality can be called by any name that man may choose according to his mental or emotional bent, racial tradition and heritage, for it cannot be defined or conditioned by names.' Indeed God is called both good and evil. He has a 'light side' and a 'dark side'.

Spangler even went so far as to say that the ultimate force in the universe has two sides—the 'Christ' side and the 'Lucifer' side. [p. 312](#)

Christ is the same force as Lucifer but moving in seemingly the opposite direction. Lucifer moves in to create the light within through the pressure of experience. Christ moves out to release that light, that wisdom, that love into creation so what has been forged in the furnace of creation can become a light unto the world and not simply stagnate within the being.

### **Jesus Christ**

The New Age view of Jesus Christ involves a separation of the human Jesus from the divine Christ spirit (or office), which New Agers believe dwelt in Him and other great religious teachers. According to Benjamin Creme, 'Christ' said, 'I am your Friend and Brother, not a God.' Again, 'The Christ is not God.' When a woman knelt to worship Jesus, He supposedly replied, 'Good woman, stay; take heed to what you do; you may not worship man; this is idolatry.'

Jesus is divine 'in exactly the sense that we are divine.' That is, 'He is Divine, having perfected Himself and manifested the Divinity potential in each of us.' For according to some New Agers, 'Christ was the most advanced human ever to walk on this planet.' But this same Christ spirit dwelt in 'Hercules, Hermes, Rama, Mithra ... Krishna, Buddha, and the Christ.' All these were 'perfect men in their time, all sons of men who become Sons of God, for having revealed their innate Divinity.' So, as Creme admits, 'in the esoteric [occult] tradition the Christ is not the name of an individual but of an office in the Hierarchy' (of occult masters). That is, Christ is a master occult magician who, according to Dowling, solved 'the problem of the ages' by showing that 'human flesh can be transmitted into flesh divine.'

Actually many pantheists believe that Jesus did not die. As Dowling affirms, 'Jesus did not sleep within the tomb.' He was alive, though unmanifest. In His resurrection He simply transmuted from 'carnal flesh and blood to flesh of God.' Jesus took on a body of a 'higher tone', that is, a spiritual one. Even this is not unique, for the pantheistic Christ said, 'What I have done, all men will do; and what I am, all men will be.' Occultists relate all this to degrees of initiation. Jesus was a third-degree 'initiate' when He entered the world. He became a fourth-degree 'initiate' at His crucifixion and a fifth-degree 'initiate' at the resurrection. The same process is open to all men.

### **Man**

According to New Age thinkers man is basically a spiritual being, not a material one. That is, he is 'energy'. 'Man is a thought of God; all thoughts of God are infinite; they are not measured by time; for things that are concerned with time begin and end.' Man is a soul force. 'It is **p. 313** a subatomic force, the intelligent energy that organizes life. It is ... everywhere—[it] is that [which] we call "God" '.

Man is the 'Breath made flesh'. 'The spiritual being, Man, descended from a subtler plane to assume a body, the necessary sheath in which to live amid earth vibrations.' But his 'body' is not real. 'It is a manifest; is the result of force; it is but naught; is an illusion, nothing more.'

Man is basically spirit, and he is essentially good. As Shirley MacLaine put it, 'mankind and all life, is basically good.' Thus 'we ascend until we reach the pinnacle of that which life is spent to build—the Temple of Perfected Man.' For 'at the Transfiguration Christ revealed the glory which is innate in all men.' Thus Dowling's Jesus said, 'What I can do all men can do. Go preach the gospel of the omnipotence of Man.'

Since man is infinite and omnipotent, his main task is to discover his own divinity. As one writer stated, 'One of the major teachings of the Christ [is] the fact of God immanent, immanent in all creation, in mankind and all creation, that there is nothing else but God; that we are all part of a great Being.' Marilyn Ferguson illustrates this as she vividly describes the story of a man watching his sister drink milk: 'All of a sudden I saw that she was God and the milk was God. I mean, all she was doing was pouring God into God.'

A New Age 'Christ' (known as Lord Maitreya) supposedly gave this message: 'My purpose is to show man that he need fear no more, that all of Light and Truth rests within his heart, that when this simple fact is known man will become God.' So 'man is an emerging God and thus requires the formation of modes of loving which will allow this God to flourish.' Accordingly 'the tragedy of the human race was that we had forgotten we were each Divine.'

But if man is God, to whom does man pray? Creme gives a forthright answer:

One doesn't pray to oneself, one prays to the God within. The thing is to learn to invoke that energy which is the energy of God. Prayer and worship as we know it today will gradually die out and men will be trained to invoke the power of Deity. This is one reason why the Great Invocation was given out—to enable us to learn the technique of invocation.

Actually New Agers believe in 'prayer' not as intercession but as meditation. They believe in consciousness-altering techniques such as yoga, hypnotism, biofeedback, peak experiences, psychotherapies, and psychotechnologies. The goal of prayer is 'attunement' or 'at-one-ment' **p.314** with God. It is the modern version of Plotinus's mystical union with God.

Not only is man infinite, omnipotent, and immaterial; he is also essentially immortal, according to New Age thinkers. 'Man cannot die; the spirit is one with God, and while God lives man cannot die.' So eventually 'man will come to know himself as the Divine Being he is.'

### **Sin and Salvation**

New Age thought has no place for sin. Man is basically good. 'Evil' is not moral guilt but spiritual imbalance. As Spangler put it, 'Man holds the ultimate responsibility for the redemption of what we have come to call "evil energies", which are simply energies that have been used out of timing or out of place, or not suited to the needs of evolution.'

In *The Aquarian Gospel* one reads that 'evil is the inharmonious blending of the colours, tones, or forms of good.' 'Evil' exists only on the lower level. As the Zen masters claim, for a man of 'character', 'the notions of right and wrong and the praise and blame of others



do not disturb him.' New Ager Mark Satin agrees, saying, 'In a spiritual state, morality is impossible', So for New Agers, as 'for Hindu thought there is no problem of Evil.' As Mary Baker Eddy claimed, evil is an illusion, an error of mortal mind.

Belief in good and bad is a form of dualism rejected by the monistic views of New Agers. New Age ethics 'is not based on ... dualistic concepts of "good" or "bad". New Age religion does not share the Western view that there is a moral law, enjoined by God or by nature, which it is man's duty to obey.'

This is not to say New Agers are without moral values, but only that the ones they have are *chosen* by man, not *revealed* by God. As Satin put it, 'We recognize that we're responsible for choosing everything—our parents, our personalities, everything. We even experience events as if we've created or willed them in some way.'

Rather than believing in opposites like good and evil, right and wrong, New Age proponents hold to one all-embracing cosmic force called 'love'. This 'love' is 'a totally impersonal but *all inclusive* cohesive, binding force which draws all men and all things together, and holds them together. It is the energy which makes humanity One.'

Since there is no sin (such as breaking of moral law), there is no need for a payment for sin. Thus New Agers do not believe Christ died for man's sin. In fact the 'Jesus' of *The Aquarian Gospel* opposed the concept of a Passover lamb. Dowling records these words:  
p. 315

I am disturbed about this service of the paschal feast. I thought the temple was the house of God where love and kindness dwell. Do you not hear the bleating of those lambs, the pleading of those doves that men are killing over there? Do you not smell that awful stench that comes from burning flesh? Can man be kind and just, and still be filled with cruelty? A God that takes delight in sacrifice, in blood and burning flesh, is not my Father-God. I want to find a God of love, and you, my master, you are wise, and surely you can tell me where to find the God of love.

Creme rejects orthodox Christianity because it presents 'a picture of the Christ impossible for the majority of thinking people today to accept—as the One and Only Son of God, sacrificed by His Loving Father to save Humanity from the results of its sins; as a Blood Sacrifice straight out of the old and outworn Jewish Dispensation.' Bailey adds, 'It is impossible to believe that they [New Agers] are interested in the views of the Fundamentalists or in the theories of the theologians upon the Virgin Birth, the Vicarious Atonement.'

How then can a person be saved? According to New Age religions, 'salvation' is not redemption from sin; it is reunification with God. It is overcoming the inexorable law of karma, which condemns one to suffer in the next life for things done in this one. As Shirley MacLaine, movie star and 'pop' theologian of the New Age, stated, 'If you are good and faithful in your struggle in this life, the next one will be easier.' So in Spangler's words, 'man is his own Satan just as man is his own salvation.' This salvation is achieved by some form of consciousness changing or meditation by which one overcomes duality, multiplicity, and inharmony and becomes one with the One (God). This then is the 'attunement' or at-one-ment that constitutes New Age 'salvation'.

According to the New Age 'prophet' David Spangler it is Lucifer who helps bring unity or wholeness into one's life. 'Lucifer works within each of us to bring us to wholeness, and as we move into a new age, which is the age of man's wholeness, each of us in some way is brought to that point which I term the Luciferic initiation.' Spangler further says,

Lucifer, like Christ, stands at the door of man's consciousness and knocks. If man says, 'Go away because I do not like what you represent, I am afraid of you,' Lucifer will play tricks on that fellow. If man says, 'Come in, and I will give to you the treat of my love and



understanding and I will uplift you in the light and presence of the Christ, my outflow,' then Lucifer becomes something else again. He becomes the being who carries that great treat, the ultimate treat, the light of wisdom.

Lucifer guides all men through a series of experiences geared to [p. 316](#) awaken in them a sense of awareness of their inner divinity. This guidance continues until a 'new light' comes into being (within them) that is capable of manifesting the 'One Light' (God). After this light has come into being, the Christ then works to draw that same light out of each man so that there will be an outward manifestation of the newly recognized inner divinity. As Spangler explains. 'Lucifer moves in to create the light within through the pressure of experience. Christ moves out to release that light, that wisdom, that love into creation so what has been forged in the furnace of creation can become a light unto the world and not simply stagnate within the being.' Thus Lucifer and the Christ are seen as partners in this endeavour. It is because of Lucifer's benevolent role that Spangler calls him 'an agent of God's love.'

The goal of the whole process is 'Luciferic Initiation', which refers to a transformation of consciousness. This consciousness is one that recognizes that all past experiences were part of a plan (led by Lucifer) that ultimately led to the recognition and manifestation of one's inner divinity. This is largely what esoteric salvation is. In light of this it is wrong to fear and reject Lucifer. For the person with this type of attitude Lucifer 'plays tricks'.

Eventually, according to New Age belief, everyone will be saved. 'The Exponents and the Representatives of all the world faiths are there waiting—under His [the Christ's] guidance—to reveal to all those who today struggle in the maelstrom of world affairs, and who seek to solve the world crisis, that *they are not alone*. God Transcendent is working through the Christ and the spiritual Hierarchy to bring relief.' Or, as Robert Short sees it, the 'gospel' of the New Age film series 'Star Wars' declares that 'eventually everyone—even Darth Vader and the Devil—will thankfully serve Christ and worship him.'

There are many ways to salvation, according to New Agers. 'There are a number of paths that can help us return to that experience of unity, that can help us feel at home again in the spiritual and religious states of consciousness. In *Unfinished Animal* Theodore Roszak lists over 150 such paths!' In fact New Agers believe there is unity in all religions. This is why Baha'ism is so popular among New Agers. As Bailey commented,

God works in many ways, through many faiths and religious agencies; this is one reason for the elimination of non-essential doctrines. By the emphasizing of the essential doctrines and in their union will the fullness of truth be revealed. This, the new world religion will do and its implementation will proceed apace, after the reappearance of the Christ. [p. 317](#)

### **Future Things**

Most New Agers are working for a new world order and unity-in-diversity of all cultures, religions, and countries. Some (e.g. Spangler and Trevelyan) have only a general eschatology, in which Christ 'returns' in all humanity. Others have a rather clearly defined doctrine of last things. Bailey gives three basic assumptions of New Age belief about the future.

1. That the reappearance of the Christ is inevitable and assured.
2. That He is today and has been actively working—through the medium of the spiritual Hierarchy of our planet, of which He is the Head—for the welfare of humanity.
3. That certain teachings will be given and certain energies will be released by Him in the routine of His work and coming.'

Creme claims that 'the Christ' said He would return in June 1945. This 'Christ' laid down four conditions:

- (1) That a measure of peace should be restored in the world;
- (2) That the principle of Sharing should be in process of controlling economic affairs;
- (3) That the energy of goodwill should be manifesting, and leading to the implementation of right human relationships;
- (4) That the political and religious organizations throughout the world should be releasing their followers from authoritarian supervision over their beliefs and thinking.

Actually the pantheistic 'Christ' was not to return but only to *reappear* since, according to Creme, 'the Christ' reappeared on July 8, 1977.

He came into the world by aeroplane and so fulfilled the prophecy of 'coming in the clouds'. On July 8th, 1977 He descended from the Himalayas into the Indian sub-continent and went to one of the chief cities there. He had an acclimatisation period between July 8th and 18th, and then on July 19th, entered a certain modern country by aeroplane. He is now an ordinary man in the world—an extraordinary, ordinary man.

Following this a full-page ad appeared in major newspapers around the world with the headline, 'The Christ is Now Here'.

Creme believes that 'one day soon, men and women all over the world will gather round their radio and television sets to hear and see the Christ: to see His face, and to hear His words dropping silently into their minds—in their own language.' 'In this way they will know that He is truly the Christ, the World Teacher ... Also in this way, the Christ will demonstrate the future ability of the race as a whole to [p. 318](#) communicate mentally, telepathically, over vast distances and at will.' Bailey was frank to admit that 'the Christ Who will return will not be like the Christ Who (apparently) departed.'

Furthermore, 'The Christ is not God. When I say, "the coming of Christ", I don't mean the coming of God, I mean the coming of a divine man, a man who has manifested His divinity by the same process that we are going through—the incarnational process, gradually perfecting Himself.'

According to Creme, the present 'Christ' is a reincarnation of the Christ spirit in an occult master who has lived in the Himalayas for the past 2,000 years. Jesus (of Nazareth), on the other hand, 'now lives in a Syrian body which is some 600 years old, and has His base in Palestine.'

In the last 2,000 years [Jesus has] worked in the closest relation to the Christ, saving His time and energy where possible, and has special work to do with the Christian churches. He is one of the Masters Who will very shortly return to outer work in the world, taking over the Throne of St. Peter, in Rome. He will seek to transform the Christian Churches, in so far as they are flexible enough to respond correctly to the new reality which the return of the Christ and the Masters will create.

This New Age occult 'Christ' will soon manifest Himself 'creating and vitalizing the new world religion.' He 'will emphasize our inner connectedness as souls, identical with the one soul [God].' This New Age 'Christ' will set up a new world order. This will 'involve the reconstruction of the world financial and economic order.' By his 'presence in the world, He seeks to save millions from death and misery through starvation, and to release from bondage those now languishing in the prisons of the world for the "crime" of independent thought.'

World government will not be imposed on mankind but will be the result of the manifested brotherhood. The sharing and the co-operation of all mankind, the redistribution of the produce of the world, will result in world government. Any attempt to achieve or impose world government without the acceptance of sharing is doomed to failure.

Of course the 'Christ's' manifestation is conditional. It depends on human effort to bring about the 'kingdom'. For 'the Christ and the Masters are not going to do anything but show the way. They are not going to build the new age. We have to build it. We have still to make the inner changes. We have still to make the decisions of accepting the Plan.' As Spangler says, we are 'co-creators' of the New Age. In short, [p. 319](#) just as secular humanism is a form of postmillennial atheism, the New Age movement is an expression of postmillennial pantheism.

## COMPARISONS AND CONTRASTS

One reason professing Christians are being deceived by New Age beliefs is that they look mainly at the *similarities* between New Age and Christian beliefs. These are numerous: both believe in God, Christ, prayer, life after death, and many moral values. They also use terms such as revelation, cross, redemption, resurrection, and second coming.

However, like counterfeit currency, counterfeit religions are not detected by noting their similarities to the genuine, but by taking note of their *differences*. After all, a counterfeit \$10 bill has many similarities to a real one. Hence it behooves believers to 'test the spirits' ([1 John 4:1](#)), knowing that many false prophets have gone out into the world.

The following chart contrasts major teachings of biblical Christianity and New Age pantheism.

	<i>Biblical Christianity</i>	<i>New Age Pantheism</i>
<b>God</b>	Father	Force
	Personal	Impersonal
	Only Good	Good and evil
	Created all things	Is all things
<b>Man</b>	Made like God	Is God
	Is evil	Is good
	Spirit/body	Spirit only
	Resurrection	Reincarnation
<b>Jesus Christ</b>	Same Person	Different persons ('Jesus' and 'Christ')

	God-Man	God Spirit in man
	Death/resurrection	Death/reincarnations
<b>Salvation</b>	From moral guilt	From disharmony
	By grace	By human effort
	Victory over sin	Victory over fear
<b>Faith</b>	In divine power	In human potential
	Objective focus	Subjective focus
	To see God's will done	To see man's will done <a href="#">p. 320</a>
<b>Miracle</b>	Done at God's command	Done at man's command
	Supernatural power (of the Creator)	Supranormal power (of creatures)
	Associated with good	Associated with evil

Failure to make such crucial differences led the well-known author of *The Gospel according to Peanuts*, Robert Short, to claim mistakenly that the God of the Bible and of 'Star Wars' are one and the same God.

Careful examination reveals that the Christian theistic view and New Age pantheistic view of God are diametrically opposed. The God of the Bible is not an impersonal force; He is a personal Father. The true God is not a combination of good and evil; He is absolutely perfect ([Matt. 5:48](#)); He is so holy that He cannot look approvingly on evil ([Hab. 1:13](#)). Furthermore He is not identical with all things; He created all things ([Gen. 1:1](#); [Col. 1:15-16](#)). These contrasts show the difference between the true, living God and the false god of the New Age religions. The same kind of stark contrast exists between the God-incarnate Lord Jesus Christ of Scripture and the reincarnate occult master known as 'Christ' in New Age thought.

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# Universalism and the Logic of Revelation

Nigel M. de S. Cameron

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*This was the opening paper of the 1986 Conference of the Fellowship of European Evangelical Theologians, held at Wolmersen, West Germany. The theme of the Conference was 'Modern Universalism and the Universality of the Gospel'. If the gospel does not include the finality of Jesus Christ as its essential part there is no need for Christian Mission—for then the churches would be guilty of proclaiming a transitory truth. The article shows how any acceptance of Universalism—meaning a denial of final separation—is also a denial of the normatives of revelation in Jesus and through Holy Scripture.*

Editor

## INTRODUCTION

The subject before us is one which is largely ignored. However important we acknowledge it to be, it has long tended to be left out of our active theological consideration; and the reason for that may be thought to lie in the close relations which must always exist between any discussion of Universalism and that doctrine which, above all other, Universalism denies, the doctrine of hell—a subject which is considered only rarely in orthodox circles: and that despite the vital connections which run between the fate of the lost and seemingly every theological *locus*, including at least the church, mission and redemption, and also, putatively, the nature of God himself.

To say this is immediately to set the Universalist thesis in the context of its significance. It would be hard to aver of any doctrine that it could be abandoned, or subject to radical re-interpretation, without implications for other aspects of the Christian faith. That is part of the problem with the piece-meal approach to the revision of Christian doctrine with which much of the church has been preoccupied for too long. But that principle applies to this doctrine more than to most, and as much as to any. For Universalism is an attack on that nexus of doctrines which lie at the heart of the faith, on questions of revelation, redemption, mission, the doctrine of the church, and we have still not named the Last Things themselves. The claim of universal salvation is not congruent with any of these, in any form in which they are recognized [p. 322](#) by Holy Scripture and the Christian tradition. As we shall see, the distortions which are required in order to accommodate Universalism are fundamental.

So a second reason why Universalism has tended to be denounced rather than discussed lies in the far-reaching ramifications of the undertaking. It partakes of an altogether different character to the preferred subjects of evangelical apologetic. Once we take seriously the challenge which it poses, we find that the foundations are being shaken and we are forced into a re-assessment of large areas of Christian doctrine. The Universalist challenge proves not so much a threat to the doctrine of judgement and hell as a threat to the faith as an integrated whole. It is perhaps for this reason that the major Christian denominations, in which the notion of damnation is so distinctly unpopular, have fought shy of the formal adoption of its alternative.

One of the fruits of neglect lies in the area of terminology, and in the interests of clarity, for the purposes of this paper at least, a word is needed to identify that which Universalism opposes. Its antonym 'Particularism' is also, of course, a theological term

already, freighted with the connotations of another debate. That one thing which the Universalists deny is the fact of a final separation, which provides a better indicator of the minimal requirement of orthodoxy. What Universalism denies let Separationism assert: that *some* men (to leave angels out of account!) will finally not be saved. The central conflict with Universalism is not about how many they shall be, nor the kind of retribution which awaits them. In this context it appears that Conditionalism and Annihilationism are deviations from orthodoxy rather than denials of it. For the key question is not 'what awaits the lost?' but 'are there those who will be lost?'. Which is not to suggest that the destiny of the lost is unimportant, but that its importance is secondary, and must not obscure the first-order significance of the final separation. It is this that Universalism, in asserting the final salvation of all men, denies. Conditionalism and Annihilationism are definitely Separationist rather than Universalist in character.

Despite its connections with Christian doctrines other than that of damnation, the assessment of Universalism within an evangelical framework has an appearance of simplicity. Is it only Christians who will be saved, or everyone else too?, we are asked. That is a valid statement of the question, and if it is thus posed the only valid answer is, of course, 'only Christians'. But it is also a potentially misleading statement of the question, and can therefore lead to a potentially misleading answer. The individualistic tendency of modern evangelicalism, partly, perhaps largely, the fruit of practical emphasis on the p. 323 conversion of the individual to the exclusion of other ways of understanding the membership of the church of God, leads to a preference for asking questions about 'Christians' over questions about the church. This is encouraged by another evangelical convention. Out of a commendable, but perhaps short-sighted, concern for practical unity, there is a disinclination to confront disagreements over ecclesiology, and it has led to a neglect of this crucial subject and its effective downgrading almost into insignificance. It is hard to see how, without a fresh perception of its importance, the questions which the Universalist thesis raises for us will be finally resolved. For the point at which Universalism impinges most plainly upon Separationist orthodoxy is that at which our perception of the church begins to extend beyond the company of gathered believers who have entered it by what we may reasonably see as the normal means.

## MODERN UNIVERSALISM

Our concern here is with what has been called 'modern universalism', and it is important to identify the particular character of the Universalism which we face today. There have been Universalisms before. There was the Origenist doctrine of *apokatastasis* which introduced a stream of Universalist thinking into the church from its very early days. Here as elsewhere, the church generally departed from Origen's thinking; and though it was possible for others to revive it, only a sparse tradition may be traced through the middle ages into post-Reformation times.

But the flowering of Universalist thinking before our own day is to be found in the nineteenth century, and particularly in England. It took its cue from the broad moral revolt against the God of the Bible which sought to convert him into one more acceptable to contemporary *mores*, and was less an espousal of universal salvation than a growing unease about its alternative, hell. It was of a piece with the widespread revulsion at the more gruesome Old Testament passages which reveals itself in the commentaries of the period. At the same time, the orthodox doctrine was maintained by many and asserted by some with vigour; with much less self-consciousness than their orthodox successors today. The detractors of orthodoxy, working in the very conservative theological context provided by English Christianity, found it necessary to be circumspect in their assertion



of universal salvation, and to treat the relevant biblical texts with particular caution. Typical discussions contain lengthy excursions into exegesis which are generally considered of the essence of the argument. p. 324

There are two principal differences between the Universalism of the nineteenth century (and the early twentieth) and that of our own time. First, it is differently established. In a characteristically helpful taxonomy of Universalist arguments, Richard Bauckham draws our attention to the fact that, in the twentieth century, 'exegesis has turned decisively against the universalist case'.<sup>1</sup> As in other areas, the effect of this has not been to bring the argument to an end. But it has made it increasingly necessary for consistent Universalists to make their case outside the pale of the authority of Holy Scripture. Yet as those who claim to work within the Christian tradition they cannot simply abandon its teaching. On the one hand they

disagree with the NT writers' teaching about a final division of mankind, which can be said to be merely taken over from their contemporary Jewish environment, while the texts which could be held to support universalism represent a deeper insight into the meaning of God's revelation in Christ.<sup>2</sup>

That is to say, contemporary Universalists have generally ceased to claim that their doctrine rather than the traditional one is that which is taught in Holy Scripture. It has become necessary (and also possible) for them to argue in a different fashion.

The second distinction between Universalism today and that of the last century lies in the scope and significance of what is 'universal'. The concept of 'universality' has broadened, and the challenge to Christian orthodoxy become at one and the same time more distant from its original and more coherent as an alternative scheme. That is to say, the traditional Universalist doctrine was almost exclusively concerned with salvation *post mortem*. It took its character from the general revolt against hell and damnation, and it sought to offer in its place a general blessedness, whether come to by some purgatorial process or immediately after death. Eternal life was to be universal rather than particular, available to all and not merely to some. But the general structure of Christian theology, and in particular the uniqueness of the Christian revelation, were left intact; or such, at least, was the Universalists' declared intention.

For a number of reasons this position has been altered. For one thing, the general abandonment of anything other than a notional assent to life after death has removed much of the original drive of *post mortem* Universalism. With few exceptions, not even the orthodox preach about hell and damnation, and none but the orthodox retain an p. 325 interest (and that often only passing) in eternal blessedness. The centre of attention has moved from the world to come to the world of today. Again, the general new interest in non-Christian religion has burgeoned and significantly affected thinking within the churches, forcing Christians to give an account of themselves in the wider religious context and in an atmosphere of *laissez-faire*. Most important, perhaps, the impossibility of arguing the universality of salvation from Holy Scripture (along with the other *shibboleths* of twentieth-century theology) has led to an increasingly frank abandonment of the Christian tradition as the context in which fundamental religious thinking is to be done. That is, the insurmountably Separationist character of not simply *post mortem* soteriology but every other element in the biblical region has led to a general relativizing not simply of its teaching on the final separation but of its character as a particular

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<sup>1</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 52.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

revelation with inherent universal claims. To put it another way: the Universalism of an earlier day sought to live in harmony with the universality of the Gospel. The new Universalism seeks rather to dispense with it. In especial it has therefore to relativize its character as a purported revelation with universal, normative validity. In this process of metamorphosis in the Universalist tradition much has become evident that was previously implicit. What passed as a disagreement about one doctrine has been revealed as a challenge to the integrity of the faith itself.

## THE UNIVERSALISM OF JOHN HICK

This is nowhere more evident than in the work of John Hick, who has used the doctrine of universal salvation *post mortem* as a tool for the re-fashioning of the Christian (and with it every other) religion. He has turned it into his fundamental interpretative principle of religious truth. In so doing he has, we may feel, correctly perceived its significance for the Christian tradition, as a pivotal doctrine, a crucial element in that nexus of doctrines which make up orthodox Christianity. It is interesting to note his candid acknowledgement that his approach to the validity of non-Christian religion arose out of his concern for universal *post mortem* salvation; and that this in turn derived from his interest in the question of theodicy. In both these moves Hick is acting in many ways more as a thinker of the nineteenth century than of the twentieth. He acknowledges the general abandonment of theological interest in the after-life, but is less obviously aware of the degree to which his interest in theodicy as, in effect, a regulative principle in theology has a ready context in the profoundly moral character of P. 326 nineteenth-century re-interpretation of Christianity. Hick's conservatism in this and other matters is curious, and it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that part of its explanation lies in the acknowledged origin of his own faith in a conversion to evangelicalism. It is hard to see how anyone could come to his present position *de novo*. More than that of many other liberal thinkers, it bears the vestiges of its derivation from orthodoxy.

Hick's essentially moral approach to theology, and to this question in particular, may be shown with reference to a sermon which he takes to be typical of the old approach to the final separation and the doctrine of hell. Interestingly, his citation is not of an evangelical but of Edward Bouverie Pusey, the Tractarian leader, in illustration of the fact that this was the general mid-Victorian approach to the question. 'Between', Hick writes, 'the moral outlook' of Pusey's sermon on hell,

and the general ethical outlook of today, both inside and outside the christian church, there is a great gulf fixed. On Pusey's side of the gulf theology was exempted from moral criticism and the theologian could with a good conscience attribute to God an unappeasable vindictiveness and insatiable cruelty which would be regarded as demonic if applied analogously to a human being; whereas today theological ideas are subject to an ethical and rational criticism which forbids [this] kind of moral perversity ...<sup>3</sup>

As a result,

contemporary theologians who do not accept the doctrine of universal salvation usually speak of the finally lost as passing out of existence rather than as endlessly enduring the torments of hellfire.

So his moral criticism of the doctrine of hell, itself a product of his concern for theodicy, leads Hick to repudiate the Separationism of orthodoxy.

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<sup>3</sup> John Hick, *Death and Eternal Life*, p. 200.

On the broader question of revelation, Hick sets out his position in this typical fashion. A 'major challenge to religious faith' is

posed by the diversity of apparent revelations. If what Christianity says is true, must not what all the other world religions say be in varying degrees false? But this would mean that the large majority of mankind, consisting of everyone except the adherents of one particular religion, are walking in darkness. Such a conclusion would be acceptable within a Calvinist theology, according to which much, perhaps most, of the human race is already doomed to eternal damnation (*Westminster Confession*, III.7). But p. 327 in wrestling with the problem of evil I had concluded that any viable Christian theodicy must affirm the ultimate salvation of all God's creatures. How then to reconcile the notion of their being one, and only one, true religion with a belief in God's universal saving activity?<sup>4</sup>

Hick's theological method is characterized by two related principles which together enable him to work out his theology, although it should be noted that his theology is essentially shaped—as he says in this passage—by the requirements of his theodicy. He is eclectic toward Christianity, and syncretistic toward religions in general. His eclecticism enables him to work from a Christianity suitably emasculated of the Separationism which would make it an unwilling partner in the syncretist venture. His syncretism enables him to treat other unwilling partners similarly and to exploit in the widest possible context the principle inherent in his rejection of the universality of the Gospel. We can look at these in turn. First, his eclecticism.

This is evident especially in the manner in which he seeks to show that his repudiation of the Separationism generally associated with the teaching of Holy Scripture can in fact find some support in Holy Scripture itself. What is unclear is the nature of the standing which he will give to a putative biblical position once it is isolated, although it is hard not to conclude that Hick's use of Scripture is essentially syncretistic also. That is, he expects to find in Holy Scripture a variety of views on a given matter (in this case the extent of salvation), and to seek within them by his own dialectic the view which he will take up. So in his major work *Death and Eternal Life* there is only a passing discussion of the teaching of the New Testament on the subject. He suggests, unconvincingly, that most of our Lord's references are to a judgement which is not final and eternal. He asks whether those that are specific may not be later and therefore not dominical.<sup>5</sup> It is important to note that this attempt to whittle away at the Separationism of our Lord's teaching implicitly acknowledges that the gospels as we have them are incapable of a Universalist reading. Of Paul he writes:

I would not in fact claim with confidence that he was a universalist; though I suggest that sometimes as he wrote of the saving activity of God the inner logic of that about which he wrote inevitably unfolded itself into the thought of universal salvation.<sup>6</sup>

Thus in both the gospels and the Pauline corpus there are general p. 328 statements which, taken alone, could be interpreted on Universalist lines; and more specific statements, which demand a Separationist interpretation. Hick claims that he can 'harmonize' these two sets of statements, and attempts such harmony by means of the 'unfulfilled threat' hypothesis:

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<sup>4</sup> John Hick, *God has Many Names*, pp. 4, 5.

<sup>5</sup> *Death and Eternal Life*, pp. 243–7.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 248.

It may well be true at a given point within the temporal process that unless you repent you will surely perish, and yet also true as a statement arrived at on other grounds, about human existence as a whole, that in the end all will turn from their wickedness and live. The two truths are formally compatible with one another because the one asserts that something will happen if a certain condition is fulfilled (namely, permanent non-repentance) while the other asserts that this same thing will not happen because that condition will not in fact be fulfilled.<sup>7</sup>

This exercise in argument bears an air of ingenuousness, since Hick is himself the author of the problem he is setting out to solve. The general statements which he cites are only capable of a Universalist construction when they are sundered from their context of specific statements about judgement and separation. Left where they are found (chiefly in the mind of Paul) they are qualified and interpreted otherwise. Hick makes out that he has solved a problem, but it has been specifically devised to give the impression of a double tradition within Scripture. The problem he cannot solve is that of the irreducibly Separationist character of, at worse, *some* of the biblical material. Moreover, Hick's argument is not really about eternal separation at all. It is with the claim of the New Testament writers that they bear an unique and final revelation from God, and in this most fundamental matter Hick attempts no facile harmony of his own view with theirs. The small place which biblical interpretation occupies in his discussions is a truer indicator of the relative importance of these arguments when they are compared with his general purpose. There is no necessity for Holy Scripture to back up his theological proposals. Is he perhaps, here as elsewhere, betraying the conservative roots of his theology? It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that his excursions into biblical exegesis are at heart no more than a palliative offered with affection to a Christian tradition from which he has departed. After all, this is the man who holds, among other things, a doctrine of purgatorial re-incarnation.

So what is his fundamental approach to the teaching of the New Testament? By selecting certain statements from Paul, and then p. 329 arranging the rest of Paul's own sayings and others around them, he stands in the eclectic tradition of Procrustes.

The second methodological principle which we find in Hick is in his approach to different religious-theological systems. In this case he is more candid. His fundamental conviction is of the equivalent validity of all religions.

To realize that God is being worshipped, through different but overlapping mental images of him, not only in churches and chapels but also in synagogues and mosques, temples and gurdwaras, is to realize in a new way that he is the God of all mankind and not only of our own familiar tribe.<sup>8</sup>

Does this mean that a single world religion is in prospect, or indeed is desirable? Hick does not think so:

the different religious traditions, with their complex internal differentiations, have developed to meet the needs of the range of mentalities expressed in the different human cultures ... there will be different traditions of religious faith ... The concrete particularities forming a spiritual home in which people can live—the revered scriptures, the familiar liturgical words and actions, the stirring music, the framework of credal belief, the much-loved stories of founder, saints and heroes—must continue in their separate streams of

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<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 249.

<sup>8</sup> *God has Many Names*, pp. vii, viii.

living tradition: for in losing their particularity they would lose their life and their power to nourish.<sup>9</sup>

But at the level of theology Hick's perception of the validity of the variety of religious revelations can be put to use:

whilst there cannot be a world religion, there can be approaches to a world theology ... a global theology would consist of theories or hypotheses designed to interpret the religious experience of mankind, as it occurs not only within Christianity, but also within the other great streams of religious life, and indeed in the great non-religious faiths also, Marxism and Maoism and perhaps—according to one's definition of 'religion'—Confucianism and certain forms of Buddhism.

Hick's work on *Death and Eternal Life* is intended as a pioneering venture in this field, though he has himself already made more limited use of particular ideas from non-Christian religions in other works.

We do not have opportunity here to engage in a full discussion of this book or the theological method which underlies it. Suffice it to say that Hick has openly taken the path of syncretism as the way to theological truth. His statement just quoted about 'theories or p. 330 hypotheses designed to interpret the religious experience of mankind' (with its odd automatic inclusion of communism and uncertainty about some non-theistic eastern religion) is a manifesto for what looks uncommonly like the old 'comparative religion' approach which has been largely abandoned *adopted as the way to religious truth*. The speculative and arbitrary character of the exercise on which Hick has embarked can be readily and reasonably imagined. The combination of an eclectic approach to his own religion and syncretism in his handling of others leads Hick to the formulation of what he calls 'theories and hypotheses' which are effectively isolated from evaluation within any particular religious tradition. It is difficult not to conclude that his original approach to theological method has led him into a logical quagmire out of which he will be unable to escape onto the dry land which would be afforded by either the Christian theology which he has left behind, or for that matter by any one of the alternative religious-theological systems in whose general direction he has set off.

It is difficult not to conclude that Hick has journeyed from the premises supplied by his theodicy to an ultimate Universalism which, by accepting every claim to religious (and non-religious) experience and every reflection upon it as 'revelation', is the *reductio ad absurdum* of its kind.

## THE LOGIC OF AUTHORITY

This brief sketch of Hick's Universalism provides a useful starting-point for reflection on the logic of authority which underlies the Universalist case. Since Hick is willing to press further than many others in reassessment of the uniqueness of the Christian revelation he well illustrates the direction of all Universalist thinking. In his move away from the Christian tradition toward the use of other religious materials in the construction of a 'global theology' Hick is also particularly candid, certainly more than the generality of modern Christian thinkers who are nevertheless Universalists *de facto*, and who implicitly share his essential position.

The crucial question which is raised is one which may be held to lie behind much of the theological debate of today. It is the question of authority, which may be seen as the

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<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 7, 8.



obverse of that of theological method. Specifically, it is the question of the competence of the human mind to make the judgements which are required for the eclecticism which Hick evidences in his use of Holy Scripture, and the cognate syncretism by means of which he has begun to construct his p. 331 'global theology'. The fact that few have ventured as far as he in this direction does not detract from the general importance of these principles for Universalist thinking as a whole. As will emerge in the following discussion, it is impossible for any consistent or dogmatic Universalism to resort to any other method than eclectic use of biblical data and, implicitly or otherwise, a synthetic approach to other pretended revelations.

Whether or not this is a coherent possibility for Christian theology was penetratingly and lucidly assessed in a volume which, though celebrated in its day, has since been largely ignored. This is partly because it had the misfortune to be published in 1858, one year before Darwin's *Origin of Species* and (in some ways more significantly in English theology) two years before *Essays and Reviews*, which together radically altered the terms of theological debate in England and marked the death-knell of the consensus conservatism of the English churches.

Henry Longueville Mansel's Bampton Lectures, delivered and also published in the year 1958, bore the inauspicious title *The Limits of Religious Thought*. His starting-point is contained in the question, Is the revelation of God open to assessment and evaluation by man? This can be so only insofar as it is possible for the unaided human reason to construct its own philosophical knowledge of God, apart from his revelation. It is unreasonable to believe, on the one hand, that a comprehensive knowledge of God apart from his revelation is impossible, and on the other to consider it appropriate for the human mind to criticize particular elements within the revelation itself. In Mansel's words,

If Revelation is a communication from an infinite to a finite intelligence, the conditions of a criticism of Revelation on philosophical grounds must be identical with those which are required for constructing a Philosophy of the Infinite ... Whatever impediments, therefore, exist to prevent the formation of such a Philosophy, the same impediments must likewise prevent the accomplishment of a complete Criticism of Revelation.<sup>10</sup>

So:

If the teaching of Christ is in any one thing not the teaching of God, it is in p. 332 all things the teaching of man: its doctrines are subject to all the imperfections inseparable from man's sinfulness and ignorance ...<sup>11</sup>

That is to say, the human mind is not equipped to 'divide God's Revelation'. Indeed, Mansel writes,

Many who would shrink with horror from the idea of rejecting Christ altogether, will yet speak and act as if they were at liberty to set up for themselves an eclectic Christianity.

Conversely,

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<sup>10</sup> H. L. Mansel, *The Limits of Religious Thought*, London, 1958, pp. 27, 8. The present writer has also discussed the significance of Mansel's argument for the evangelical understanding of Scripture in 'The Logic of Biblical Authority' in *The Challenge of Evangelical Theology*, edited by himself, Edinburgh, 1987, pp. 1ff; and *On the Interpretation of Scripture*, pp. 283ff.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 246, 7.



Many a man who rejects isolated portions of Christian doctrine, on the ground that they are repugnant to his reason, would hesitate to avow broadly and unconditionally that reason is the supreme arbiter of all religious truth; though at the same time he would find it hard to point out any particular in which the position of reason, in relation to the truths which he still retains, differs from that which it occupies in relation to those which he rejects.<sup>12</sup>

Since a 'direct intuition of the infinite is unattainable by human consciousness'<sup>13</sup> the human mind is incompetent to make any such distinctions within the body of revelation itself.

The conclusion, which an examination of the conditions of human thought unavoidably forces upon us, is this: There can be no such thing as a positive science of Speculative Theology; for such a science must necessarily be based on an apprehension of the Infinite; and the Infinite ... cannot be positively apprehended in any mode of the human Consciousness ... We can test the progress of knowledge, only by comparing its successive representations with the objects which they profess to represent: and as the object in this case is inaccessible to human faculties, we have no criterion [by which to judge.... Such a criterion] can obviously have no place in relation to those truths, if such there be, which human reason is incapable of discovering for itself.<sup>14</sup>

## AN ASSESSMENT

Hick's eclectic approach to the teaching of Holy Scripture is required for two distinct, though related, reasons. First, his maintenance of *post mortem* universal salvation, if it is to stand within the Christian tradition from which he works, must be shown to have some **P. 333** connection with Holy Scripture. As David H. Kelsey has shown,<sup>15</sup> and indeed as is our common experience, every strand of Christian theology seeks authorization of its theological proposals in Scripture. So it is with Hick and the Universalists, and since the consistent teaching of Scripture is against them they resort to the attempted use of some texts as a basis for the criticism of others. The Separationist character of biblical theology leaves them with no option. We may note in passing that this approach to Scripture is the converse of that which assumes the analogy of faith.

The second reason is only indirectly connected with the question of *post mortem* Universalism, since it is the consequence of Hick's general view of the status of the Christian and other revelations. Syncretism as theological method must always be eclectic in the use that it makes of the particular religious revelations which are being drawn together into harmony. If more than one seemingly distinct revelation is authentic, and unless some kind of analogy of faith may be presumed to operate among them all, there are choices to be made. The choices that Hick makes in his divide-and-rule approach to Holy Scripture are therefore inherent in his approach to all 'revelations'. That is, an eclectic approach to particular 'revelations' is a requirement of the wider Universalism (whose focus of interest is universal *validity* before it is universal *salvation*) to which Hick has come.

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<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p.1.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xxvi, introduction to fourth edition, 1859.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 258.

<sup>15</sup> David H. Kelsey, *The Uses of Scripture in Recent Theology*, London, 1975.

But such an approach to revelation is only possible on the assumption that the human reason is competent to judge the adequacy of the particulars of divine revelation. As Mansel argues, a general competency of this kind can only be predicated of a reason capable without the aid of revelation of arriving at its own comprehensive knowledge of God. Of course, such a view of human reason would render revelation superfluous, unless, of course, in Mansel's nineteenth-century reference to earlier debate, 'Revelation *cannot be* any thing more than a republication of Natural Religion'.<sup>16</sup> That is to say, the eclectic handling of revelation rests on the assumptions of natural religion. Only if a merely natural knowledge of God is possible, and insofar as his revelation comprises its 'republication', can such an approach to revelation be justified. Revealed religion which is necessarily revealed—that is, which is anything other than the 'republication' of natural religion—entails both coherence and integrity p. 334 within the compass of its revelation, since its premise is that human reason is incompetent to construct what Mansel calls 'Speculative Theology', and therefore, by extension, to engage in critical evaluation of theology that has been revealed.

This criticism applies, of course, not simply to Hick's Universalism, but to any Universalism which goes beyond the question of *post mortem* salvation to the prior question of the validity of competing revelations or, as it might better be put, to the question of the universality of any single revelation. The idea of revelation in religion which we have outlined entails not simply the inability of human reason to sit as its judge, but, with that inability and to meet it, its own universality. That is to say, universality is not simply an accident of the particular character of the biblical revelation, it is a necessary feature of the character of any possible revelation. No revelation which fails to carry a claim, explicit or not, to unique and universal significance, is suited to the condition of the human reason. The Universalist approach to religion in general must depend upon an altogether distinct concept in which religion is inherently natural rather than revealed. But thereby the myth of 'revelation' as the foundation of 'global theology' is exploded. The Universalistic, 'global theologian' has abandoned revealed religion and returned to man's ancient natural quest for God by way of alternative.

The question remains of Universalisms which are less thoroughgoing than that of John Hick. Their adherents' chief interest remains the question of man's destiny *post mortem*, and their conviction that there will be no final separation is formally independent of any interest in the validity of other pretended divine revelations, whether in Islam, Hinduism or even (where Hick seems to find one) the writings of Mao. Yet the same critique can be shown to apply, for every repudiation of the teaching of Holy Scripture entails the self-same assumption of the competence of the human reason in matters of religion which, were it justified, would not simply enable critical assessment of revelation to take place; it would in fact make any such revelation redundant and superfluous to the exercise of reason itself. Which is another way of saying that in venturing to disagree with what Scripture says one is implicitly and perhaps unknowingly adopting another religion, inherently Universalist in the broader sense, and natural rather than revealed. As Mansel writes, in his highest ascription of authority to Holy Scripture, which sets its teaching finally beyond the pale of human assessment:

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<sup>16</sup> Mansel, *op. cit.*, p. 258.

If there is sufficient evidence, on other grounds, to show that the Scripture, in which this doctrine is received, is a Revelation from God, the doctrine p. 335 itself must be unconditionally received, not as reasonable, nor as unreasonable, but as scriptural.<sup>17</sup>

## THE EVANGELICAL POSITION

Finally, we may briefly delineate the minimum which is required for the maintenance of the universality of the Gospel. The doctrine of a final separation is cognate with the normative status of the revelation in Jesus Christ and Holy Scripture. Any denial of the one undermines the other. There is scope for more and less positive assessments of the degree to which non-Christian religion perceives the truth, and also for considerable difference (some of it related to the assessment of non-Christian religion and the possibility of 'anonymous Christianity' of some kind, some not) as to the classes of person who will be found on each side of the final divide. And, of course, there is particular scope for disagreement as to the comparative numbers involved. Our contention is that these and others are entirely 'proper' questions, indeed that they are questions we have no option but to ask. Our arbiter, of course, must be Holy Scripture. What is crucial is to maintain the integrity and the uniqueness of the Christian revelation, since it is this which is in doubt; and not to forget that the religion which is seeking to take its place is ultimately that of natural man. We know that such religion is 'natural' not merely in repudiating the supernatural, but in repudiating the spiritual too, and with it the very principle of a revelation to man from God as its foundation. And it is not finally a religion which comes from man, but from elsewhere.

'Has God said?', asked the serpent, initiating this self-same debate in which we are currently engaged; and as he has persisted his question has gained him a hearing.

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# The New Ecclesiology in Latin America

C. René Padilla

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*This paper was presented by its author to the WEF Theological Commission's triennial meetings held at Singapore in 1986. It describes and assesses the peculiar Latin American phenomenon. Though not much known, the 'BEC' is at least as revolutionary and significant a development as its complementary part, the Theology of Liberation. In conclusion the author also brings out certain implications for the evangelicals of BEC—social, ministerial and missional.*

—Editor.

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<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 118, fourth edition.

The changes that have taken place in the Roman Catholic Church in Latin America in the last two decades are amazing. To persons of my age, familiar with the problems of traditional Catholicism in this part of the world, the difference between the Catholic Church they knew in their youth and the Catholic Church they see today is so great that it is almost beyond comprehension. To be sure, the old Church, sadly hampered by its heavy hierarchical structure, is still there, and one wonders sometimes whether all the changes will not in the end be neutralized by it. The fact remains, however, that a new Church is taking shape in the womb of the old and that this may rightly be regarded as the most promising development within Roman Catholicism today. According to Leonardo Boll, the distinguished Brazilian theologian, 'A true "ecclesiogenesis" is in progress throughout the world, a Church being born from the faith of the poor' (1985: 9). In the present paper we will examine the ecclesiology that underlies that development, in an attempt to see what we need to learn from it. In the first section we will look at the new ecclesiology from a historical perspective, in the second section we will outline its basic tenets, and in the third section we will consider its challenge to Protestant Christians.

## **THE EMERGENCE OF THE NEW ECCLESIOLOGY**

The new ecclesiology in Latin America is clearly related to the so-called 'comunidades eclesiales de base' (grassroots ecclesial communities)<sup>1</sup> **P. 337** that have emerged as the new model for the Church in several countries, especially in Brazil. It is the ecclesiology of liberation theology. Its function is to articulate the communal experience of a growing number of Christians, most of them Roman Catholic, who are rediscovering the meaning of the Christian faith for practical life in a context of oppression and poverty.

The origin of the grassroots community movement may be traced back to the early fifties, to a time when a number of priests and nuns started experimenting with a new approach to popular catechesis, mainly in response to the challenge of Protestantism and the challenge of the socioeconomic situation.

### **The Protestant Challenge**

Already at the turn of the last century, when the first plenary Latin American Council held in Rome in 1899 analyzed the dangers threatening the Roman Catholic Church, Protestantism was listed together with Masonry, superstition, paganism, liberalism, and secularism. Evidently, the seed planted by Protestant missionaries during the nineteenth century was bearing fruit; despite the great opposition on the part of the established Church, Protestant churches were rapidly gaining ground and could not be ignored. By 1955, Protestantism had become a matter of such a great concern to Roman Catholic clergy that the first Latin American Episcopal Conference (CELAM) meeting in Rio de Janeiro regarded it as one of the main hostile forces that made it necessary to request the help of missionaries from Europe and North America.

The kind of challenge that Protestantism posed to Roman Catholicism is clearly illustrated by an experiment that took place in Barra do Pirai, in Northeastern Brazil, in 1956, described by JoséMarins in the following terms:

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<sup>1</sup> 'Basic' does not adequately translate the Spanish and Portuguese expression 'de base'. *Base* is used to refer to the grassroots of a social group and in the phrase 'comunidades eclesiales de base', it has social, political, economic, cultural, and theological connotations. It points to the 'popular classes', powerless, poor, uneducated who constitute the large majority of the laity in the Roman Catholic Church in Latin America.

It began when an old woman said to the bishop during a pastoral visitation of her area, 'In Natal the three Protestant churches are lit up and crowded. We hear their hymn-singing ... and our Catholic church, closed, is in darkness ... because we don't get a priest.' This challenge prompted some fundamental questions such as: If there aren't any priests, does everything p. 338 have to stop? Cannot anyone else do anything for the life of the Church community? (1979: 237).

Bishop Angelo Rossi was thus encouraged to start a movement of lay catechists who acted as co-ordinators in 'natural communities' and got people together to read the Bible, to pray, to hold 'Mass without a priest', and to discuss matters of common interest. Traditional chapels gave way to community meeting halls which were used not only for catechetical instruction but also for other purposes (ibid.: 237-8).

As can be inferred from this experiment, it is obvious that at the basis of the grassroots community movement was the challenge of Protestantism with its emphasis on lay leadership. This is not surprising in light of the problems of a church chronically affected by a serious shortage of priests. Another aspect of that challenge was the Protestant (and especially congregational) emphasis on the local church. In line with the best evangelical congregational tradition, singing, praying and studying the Bible together, sharing problems and resources with one another, and taking decisions and serving in a small community became essential aspects of the Christian experience of people who had previously known the body of Christ only as a dogma—'the Mystical Body of Christ'—or as a hierarchical society in which they were passive members. The religious aspect of the life of the grassroots communities is so important that according to Cardinal Ams, Archbishop of Sao Paulo,

People do not come to the BCC [basic Christian communities] when there is no praying and singing. They may come four or five times to organize practical things, but nothing further will come out of it. When, however, people pray and sing, when they feel themselves together, when the Gospel is read and, on this basis, concrete actions are organized and the national situation is analyzed, then the groups remain united. Along with the Gospels, this religiosity is the most valuable element in the BCCs. (Shaull 1984: 122).

### **The Socioeconomic Challenge**

In his important study on the grassroots ecclesial communities, Guillermo Cook has characterized the masses of Latin American poor in terms of cultural alienation, socio-cultural marginalization and religious vitality (1985: 34). 'Herein,' says he, 'we find the roots of the CEBs.' As a matter of fact, it is among the poor, powerless and uneducated, whose experience of Christianity has oftentimes been reduced to participation in the rites and processions encouraged by popular Catholic religiosity, that the grassroots communities have emerged. p. 339

Concern for the formation of a powerful and educated elite to exercise political control has always been part and parcel of Roman Catholicism in Latin America. Beginning in 1929, the Catholic Action movement, inspired by the French philosopher Jacques Maritain and promoted by Pope Pius XI, was used as a means to shape a new social consciousness, especially among the upper class. It became the organizational core of several labour groups working on development projects and co-operatives to improve the situation of the poor. On the political level, the effort to produce a 'revolution in freedom' was channelled through the Christian Democratic parties, which were organized in several countries. Social injustice was to be solved through 'development'.

This desire to provide a way to minimize the effects of poverty on the masses was coupled with the fear that the working class may turn to Communism. Yet, contrary to



predictions, the development projects did very little to reduce the gap between the rich and the poor and an important sector of the Roman Catholic clergy and laity became politically radical.

Another important development took place in the early sixties: thousands of North American missionaries, priests, nuns, and lay people went to Latin America in answer to Pope John's call to 're-evangelize' the continent. Gerald M. Costello has described this 'modern crusade' unlike anything else in the history of the U.S. Roman Catholic Church, and the way in which most of the missionaries went back home leaving behind 'the problems of Latin America [which seemed] no less staggering than they did before the missionaries [had] arrived' (1979: 1). They had found that building U.S.-style churches was far easier than getting people to participate in the life of the Church. Only a few of these missionaries stayed ... 'a stubborn few of those non-professionals who had found their place in ministering to the tormented of this vast land ... people who had spent generations as victims of one oppressor or another' (ibid.: 4–5). Then, Costello adds,

A new mission approach began to emerge, radically new. It sprang, significantly, from Latin Americans themselves, and it was the haunting spectre of oppression that had spawned it. Making people aware of the oppression was part of it; another part was in encouraging to develop ideas on how to fight it. The missionaries who remained began to learn instead of to teach, to serve instead of to lead. And, somehow, that became the operative mission approach, and it goes on—tested, hardened, imperfect, searching, committed. It has been that way in hundreds of U.S.-staffed missions in Latin America. (Ibid.: 5) p. 340

Living among the poor to make them aware of their oppression—*conscientization*—and to encourage them to find a way out of it—*liberation*—had thus been adopted as the approach to the 're-evangelization' of a Roman Catholic continent where the official Church had always identified itself with the rich and powerful. By the time the second CELAM General Conference met in Medellín, Colombia, in 1968, this approach had become so widely accepted that the 130 prelates present condemned the 'institutionalized violence' fostered by capitalism and neo-colonialism, encouraged the promotion of popular education and organizations (especially through grassroots communities), and supported a definite 'preferential option for the poor'. The Medellín Conclusions became the basis for social activism and the sections dealing with justice, peace and poverty provided the framework for the development of liberation theology and the new ecclesiology. The third CELAM General Conference, held in Puebla in 1979, ratified the preferential option for the poor and described the grassroots communities as 'one of the causes for joy and hope in the church' because of their potential as 'centres of evangelization and moving forces for liberation and development' (*Pastoral de conjunto*, No. 10). The Puebla Document did warn against the danger that the grassroots communities grow out of control of the hierarchy and become 'sectarian', but at the same time it stated that:

In particular we have found that small communities, especially the CEBs, create more personal inter-relations, acceptance of God's Word, reexamination of one's life, and reflection on reality in the light of the Gospel. They accentuate committed involvement in the family, one's work, the neighbourhood, and the local community. We are happy to single out the multiplication of small communities as an important ecclesial event that is peculiarly ours, and as 'the hope of the Church.' (*Puebla Document*: 629).

In the grassroots communities the rejects of society are discovering their own worth. They are learning that the evils of poverty and marginalization are not their God-given fate, and that they have power to change their situation through solidarity and mutual



help, local initiatives and a common struggle for justice. The power of oppression is thus broken and hope of a better future is born because the basis is laid for power to be exercised *from the bottom up*, not only in the Church but also in society.

Clearly the grassroots community movement has become a concrete Christian response to the socioeconomic challenge posed by the situation of the masses in Latin America. Many would agree with p. 341 Shaull's estimate that 'this vital religious movement is fast becoming *the most powerful political force working for change in Latin America* ... often to the surprise of its own members' (1984: 126). It is not surprising that during the last two decades the grassroots communities have oftentimes become the object of violent government repression in several countries. Beyond doubt, even the poorest of the poor become a threat to a system built on injustice, when they organize themselves and try to have a say on matters that affect their own lives.

## BASIC TENETS OF THE NEW ECCLESIOLOGY

There are pastoralists and theologians who claim that the new ecclesiology in Latin America is the theological expression of the experience of the grassroots ecclesial communities. Leonardo Boff, for instance, says: 'True ecclesiology is not the result of textbook analysis or theoretical hypotheses; it comes about as a result of ecclesial practices within the institution' (1985: 1). It must be recognized that the grassroots communities do not represent a unified experience, but rather follow at least two different lines, one emphasizing the community life in small groups and another one stressing the theological and political importance of the fact that the communities are constituted by the poor (Escobar 1986: 3). According to Michael Dodson the variety of types of communities is largely due to different social contacts and political histories (1986: 88). It would therefore be more correct to say that the new ecclesiology is the ecclesiology that views the Latin American grassroots communities as the ideal model of the church, and then add that every concrete grassroots community will reflect certain characteristics of the model in varying degrees, depending on a number of factors. As a 'model', the existing grassroots communities provide reference points for theology but do not necessarily reflect all the features of the paradigm. The new ecclesiology synthesizes the most salient characteristics of the grassroots communities and at the same time fulfills an exploratory function by giving a vision of the Church as God intends it to be.<sup>2</sup> P. 342

The new ecclesiology may also be regarded as the Latin American expression of the Vatican Council II dominant model of the Church as the People of God, which saw the Church as a network of interpersonal relationships—a community. If it is true that the People of God image caused an 'ecclesiological revolution' (Dulles 1974:35), could it be that the grassroots community model is radicalizing that revolution to such an extent that nothing less than a New Church is being brought into existence, as some liberation theologians have claimed? We must heed Dulles' warning against the danger of

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<sup>2</sup> I am here indebted to Avery Dulles (1974: 28–29) who makes a distinction between the explanatory and the exploratory uses of models in theology. According to him, 'Because their correspondence with the mystery of the Church is only partial and functional, models are necessarily inadequate. They illuminate certain phenomena but not others ... Pursued alone, any single model will lead to distortions. It will misplace the accent, and thus entail consequences that are not valid' (ibid.: 32). One wonders sometimes if liberation theologians are aware of the possible distortions resulting from their model of the Church as grassroots communities.

absolutizing some one model of the Church as the definitive one (ibid.: 36).<sup>3</sup> Even so, the great prophetic power of an ecclesiology that views the grassroots community movement as 'a call to the whole church to be more evangelical, more at service, and more of the sign of that salvation that penetrates the human condition' (Boff 1985: 11) has to be fully acknowledged. The need for that will become obvious after we briefly examine the basic tenets of the new ecclesiology.

The basic question that this new ecclesiology seeks to answer is how to be the Church of Jesus Christ in the midst of poverty and oppression? More specifically, what is the mission of the Church in the Latin American situation, where the large majority of people are deprived of their humanity under a system of injustice? Quite definitely, it is a *missiological* question that emerges out of immersion in a concrete historical situation. The search is not for a new ecclesiology as a matter of academic interest, but for a way to be the Church in a world where sin has taken the shape of institutionalized violence, exploitation and marginalization. The answer to that question is spelled out in terms of a church that is, in Boff's words, 'the encounter of the community of the faithful, an encounter prompted by Christ and the Spirit to celebrate, deepen faith, and to discuss the questions of the community in the light of the Gospel' (ibid.: 155).

The basic tenets of the new ecclesiology may be synthesized under three headings: (1) the Church of the poor and from the poor; (2) the priesthood of all believers; and (3) the prophetic mission of the Church. p. 343

### **The Church of the Poor and from the Poor**

One can hardly exaggerate the importance that the category of 'the poor' has for the new ecclesiology. Indeed, it may be said that it is the basis on which the whole ecclesial edifice rests. According to Quiroz (1983: 67–71) liberation theology views the poor as the subject or agent on three levels: historical praxis, the renewal of the Church, and theological reflection. With regard to historical praxis, says he, it has become clear that the construction of a new society can only be carried out by the oppressed themselves, starting from their values. This is not wishful thinking or a conclusion based on a socio-historical analysis, but an inference from what is actually happening: those who were 'absent from history' have come to occupy the very centre of both society and the Church. Furthermore, it makes reference to a concrete historical project having to do with a more just and fraternal society which will be a mediation of the Kingdom (ibid.: 68).

With regard to the renewal of the Church, Quiroz points out that the experience in Latin America has shown that solidarity with the poor in the struggle for liberation leads to a new way of being the Church; that from the people ('desde el pueblo') is born a Church of the people ('del pueblo'), a 'popular Church'. 'Taking root among the oppressed and marginalized classes there emerges a people of God that is a true Church of the people which enables all men to hear the gospel and becomes a sign of the liberation by the Lord of history' (ibid.: 69–70).

With regard to theological reflection, according to Quiroz, liberation theology has discovered a new hermeneutic which consists in reading Scripture 'from below', from the perspective of the poor; it has discovered that 'the poor are a privileged mediation of the

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<sup>3</sup> Boff is definitely aware of the dangers when he writes: 'The limitations of this tendency are due to its strong insistence on the structural character of social sin and on the need for an equally social and institutional grace. It runs the risk of ignoring the need for personal conversion and the search for perfection in Christian life. There is also the risk that its politics may completely hide the horizon of faith. Faith does have a political dimension and it would seem that this is the Spirit's challenge to the Church today. However, the political dimension does not cover the entire wealth of faith that must also find other expressions such as the mystical, the liturgical, and the personal within the process of integral salvation' (1985: 21).

Lord's presence' (ibid.: 70) and a means to meet him in a deeper way. For the first time in the history of the (Roman Catholic) Church in Latin America, common people are claiming their right to think and to speak, and showing that the gospel has a different sound when it is heard from 'the underside of history'.

Perhaps the best illustration of how seriously the Roman Catholic clergy in Brazil are taking the poor and the oppressed as the key to the shaping of the Church as the People of God is the 'Assembly of the People of God' in which a whole diocese meets to evaluate its progress and to make plans for the future (Libanio: 1986). Liberation theologians see that as a sign that a new day has dawned for the Church in Latin America. The basic communities are demonstrating that if the Church is to function as the People of God in a concrete way, it has to be the Church of the poor and from the poor. [p. 344](#)

Muñoz considers that it is by being among the poor and marginalized of the earth that the Church shows that Jesus Christ is its centre, for 'that is where Jesus Christ himself once became incarnate and fulfilled his ministry' (1981: 153). That means that in Latin America the Church has to change sides; it has to shift its social centre from the side of the powerful to the side of the poor, so that the latter may find their own true home in it. Does that, then, mean that the Kingdom excludes oppressors and wealthy people? It does not, says Muñoz, but 'only on the condition that they detach themselves from their wealth, stop oppressing their fellow human beings, and [quoting the *Puebla Document*, 1156] "accept and take the cause of the poor as if they were accepting and taking up their own cause, the cause of Christ himself"' (ibid.: 154–55).

It is from its concentration on the poor and the oppressed that the new ecclesiology derives its prophetic force. At the same time, however, in this emphasis lies also its greatest weakness. Why so?

The answer is that the new ecclesiology is built on the Roman Catholic assumption that the masses in Latin America are simultaneously poor and Christian. Because of that, it does not view the grassroots communities as Christian organizations functioning side by side with other popular organizations involved in the struggle for justice. Instead, it views them as Christian communities rooted in the people's movement, as ecclesial communities in which the lower classes organize themselves to be the 'historical sacrament of liberation' through which the Kingdom of God is being built (Quiroz 1983: 117–120). Quiroz goes even further and says that 'the Church which is meant to incorporate all the human race into the body of Christ, knows that it already, in a way, includes the largest part of humanity, for through their suffering and rejection the poor are actively incorporated into a universal history of salvation that has historical realizations' (ibid.: 226). Quite clearly, 'the poor' here has become a category with salvific connotations. The following questions would be in place:

In the first place, it is very difficult to avoid the suspicion that behind this way of looking at the Church there are presuppositions that belong to the 'Christian West'. Before Constantine, Christians were a minority committed to Jesus Christ, characterized by faith, hope and love. Since Constantine, all of society has been incorporated into the Church (and thus into Christ), and salvation is possible without the 'means of grace' such as the proclamation of the Gospel and Christian communion. In this context it is possible to state, as does Gutiérrez, 'that man is saved who opens himself to God and to others, even without having a [p. 345](#) clear realization of it' (1972: 196). Because, 'since God became man, humanity, every man, all of history, is the living temple of the living God' (ibid.: 250), the apostolic word according to which the explicit confession of Jesus as Lord and faith in the God who raised Him from the dead are necessary for salvation ([Rom. 10:9](#)) has ceased to be relevant. The place of faith is now occupied by historical praxis, the building of a more just society. 'To work, to transform this world,' says Guérrez, 'is to become man and to

forge the human community is also now to save' (ibid.: 210). If to this it is added that the poor are those who are making the new world, taking human destiny in history on themselves, a basis has been established to state that 'the majority of humanity' is included in salvation history. We have here what Juan R. Stumme has described as an 'inflated' concept of salvation that leaves much to be desired from an evangelical perspective (1985: 64–83).

In the second place, according to the gospel records Jesus showed special concern for the poor and conceived his mission as the ushering in of a new era in which justice would be done to them (Padilla 1985: 173–78). But, can that ever be taken to mean that God's salvation belongs to the poor, in such a way that repentance and faith are either optional or unnecessary in their case? If the poor automatically have a share in God's salvation by virtue of their poverty, does not the struggle for justice turn out to be a struggle to remove the basis for their salvation? A much more consistently biblical approach to the way in which the salvation of the Kingdom relates to the poor is needed if Jesus' call, 'Repent and believe the good news!'—a call addressed to all, rich and poor, in light of the coming of the Kingdom—is to be given full import.

In the third place, no justice is done to the teaching of the New Testament unless it is fully granted that one of the signs of the coming of the Kingdom in Jesus Christ is that 'the good news is preached to the poor' ([Lk 7:22](#), cf. 4:18). To use Raymond Fung's terminology, the gospel relates not only to human sin, but also to 'human sinned-againstness'; it 'should not only call on the people to repent of their sins, but also must call on them to resist the forces which sin against them' (1980: 332). But does that, then, mean that concern for 'human sinned-againstness' should totally replace concern for sin? If those who are 'sinned against' are by virtue of their suffering and oppression incorporated into the body of Christ, does not the struggle for justice turn out to be a struggle to remove the basis for their inclusion in the Church? A much more consistently biblical approach to the way in which the Church relates to the 'sinned against' is needed if the [p. 346](#) Church is to be the community of forgiven sinners as well as of the poor, the family of God as well as from the poor.

### **The Priesthood of All Believers**

Of all the emphases of the new ecclesiology, perhaps none has such far reaching consequences for the life and mission of the Church as the emphasis on the priesthood of all believers. At the same time, such a development has become the most difficult problem that the Vatican has to face in relation to the so-called 'popular church', as evidenced by the discipline measures taken in 1985 against Leonardo Boff, the author of *Church, Charisma and Power*.

Already at the second General Assembly of the Latin American Episcopal Conference in 1968 the intention had been expressed 'to renew and to create new church structures in order to institutionalize dialogue and to channel co-operation between bishops, priests and lay persons' (*Mensaje a los pueblos*). This interest in lay persons had been encouraged by the ecclesiology of Vatican II, which, in contrast with traditional doctrine, had underlined the communal and charismatic rather than the hierarchical and institutional aspects of the Church. It is now generally agreed, however, that Vatican II failed to draw the practical consequences of this ecclesiology, especially with regard to the distribution of power within the Church. If all Christians are equal members in the body of Christ, how should the Church be structured so that all its members exercise their ministries and have a share in the authority of the Church?

This question that Vatican II left unanswered has been taken up by the new ecclesiology in Latin America as one of its main concerns over against a Church in which

the clergy has monopolized the power while the laity has no significant role to fulfill. And the results are indeed revolutionary.

Shortly before Leonardo Boff was called to Rome to respond to the charges made against him by the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, this organism—the successor of the Inquisition—published its *Instruction on Some Aspects of the Theology of Liberation*, in which certain aspects of this theology, especially its use of Marxist categories in the analysis of socioeconomic and political reality were specifically rejected. The Instruction was merely the last link in a chain of measures taken to repress this polemical ‘new way of doing theology’ that has developed in Latin America. There are, however, weighty reasons to believe that the real issue that led the Vatican to punish Boff p. 347 was his position with regard to the matter at hand, which he has summarized as follows:

The mission of the People of God is not entrusted only to a few but is given to all, sacred power is, initially, held by everyone and only later is held by sacred ministers. All are sent out to proclaim the good news about the bright future of history and about the meaning of the world already won and anticipated by the resurrection that makes Jesus’ utopia about the Kingdom real and concrete. (1985: 155)

In the opening chapter of his book (‘Models and Pastoral Practices of the Church’) Boff criticizes the ‘essentially clerical’ view of the Church, according to which ‘without the clergy nothing decisive can happen within the community’ (ibid.: 3); the view of the Church as ‘mater and magistra’ (mother and teacher) ‘founded upon priestly and magisterial power as well as the sacred authority of the hierarchy’ (ibid.: 5), and the view of the Church as ‘sacramentum salutis’ (sacrament of salvation) of Vatican II, which was reformist for it failed to demand ‘another type of society but rather sought greater participation of all in the modern liberal system of advanced technological capitalism’ (ibid.: 6). In contrast with these models he proposes a new one: the Church of the poor and with the poor that allows ‘new ministries and a new style of religious life incarnated in the life of the people’ (ibid.: 10). To Boff this Church model opens a new path for the Church, in which the poor themselves ‘will decide the shape of future society’ (ibid.: 11); it is, therefore, the way for the Church to respond to the demands of history.

In the succeeding chapters Boff elaborates further this vision of the Church as a fraternal community in which human dignity is respected regardless of social class, authoritarianism is eliminated, and every member of the Church counts. To him the Church is not primarily a hierarchical institution. It is, rather, ‘a sacrament of the Holy Spirit’ founded by Christ and his apostles and led by the Holy Spirit to be the People of God, ‘a Church that ministers’ and ‘fosters unity from its mission of liberation’, a Church where the gifts of the Spirit, given to all the members become ‘the organizing principle’ (ibid.: 117–23). In this Church, there is a recovery of the true meaning of *potestas sacra* within the Church; the hierarchy ceases to be an ontological stratum—an elite that holds all the sacred power and marginalizes the large majority of members, who are lay persons—and becomes servant to the needs of the community. Boff believes that the model of the Church as a ‘power institution’ is outdated; that a new reading of Scripture is needed, not one based on criteria dictated by power, but p. 348 one that takes love as its starting point and assumes that those who represent Christ and his authority must be servants, even as he himself was.

What we have here is nothing less than a ‘Copernican revolution’ that, if allowed to continue, could totally transform the Roman Catholic Church from a power structure centred in Rome into a network of local communities centred in the Lord Jesus Christ, the



powerless One who gave his life for the salvation of the world. Over four centuries ago, Martin Luther wrote:

All Christians belong to the priesthood and there is no difference among them except in terms of ministry. As Paul says, we all are one body, but each member has his own function with which he serves the rest. This is due to the fact that we have one baptism, one gospel, one faith and are all equal Christians, since baptism, the gospel and faith are sufficient to make Christians a nation of priests.<sup>4</sup>

The new ecclesiology in Latin America is discovering the transforming power of this biblical insight that lay at the basis of the sixteenth-century Protestant Reformation: the priesthood of all believers. The big question is whether Rome will allow Charisma to follow its course, or whether it will, once again, choose Power.

### **The Prophetic Mission of the Church**

Closely connected with the two previous emphases in the new ecclesiology is its stress on the prophetic mission of the Church. If the Church is of the poor and from the poor, and if all its members have been given gifts for a variety of ministries, then it is only natural to expect that in its mission the Church will seek to relate faith to such problems as injustice and poverty, oppression and marginalization. According to Boff, the Church institutions and officials are of service to the Church and world if they favour the fulfilment of this prophetic mission; otherwise they become a fortress for conservative politics and instruments of the oppressive powers.

In line with this emphasis on the prophetic mission of the Church, the new ecclesiology encourages (1) the study of Scripture 'from below' for the purpose of socioeconomic and political conscientization, and (2) the development of links between the grassroots communities and the popular movements and organizations. In Libanio's words, p. 349

The BECs (Basic Ecclesial Communities) can be born from a spiritual, or even a traditional activity, or from community action or popular struggle. But 'their fundamental characteristic is that they never lose either one of the two dimensions.' They are both linked in a profound unity.

The BECs are the Word of God linked to life, to work. They are evangelization and social reality; faith and the popular struggle. (1986: 9).

At a meeting of local pastoral practitioners from grassroots communities in a sector of Sao Paulo, Brazil, some time ago three types of Church activity in the region were identified, each of them with a distinct outlook on the relationship between faith and politics: the conservative Church (for which faith and politics are in competition with each other), the renewed Church (for which faith and politics follow parallel lines) and the socially-committed Church (for which faith and politics are inseparable realities) (O'Gorman 1986: 15). Needless to say, the grassroots communities are seen as belonging to the third category. They take it for granted that 'the ecclesial life embraces a commitment to movements of the marginalized poor' and therefore, helps people in their organization within the neighbourhood, the school, the trade union and so on. Mission is wherever there is need to re-create relationship within the structures that make up society, through 'prophetic denunciation and justice guided construction' (ibid.).

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<sup>4</sup> This is a free translation from the Spanish version of Luther's essay *To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation Regarding the Betterment of the Christian Estate* (1520).



This view of the mission of the Church is possible because the Church is seen against the background of the Kingdom of God and all humanity. As Rolando Muñoz has put it, 'The Church is essentially eccentric, in the sense that it does not exist for itself ... The Church exists for the world, for service to human beings. More specifically, the Church exists to serve human beings for the sake of the kingdom of God' (1981: 151). When the Church finds its centre in the Kingdom, it is delivered from itself and released for service to people in their concrete situation. It is free for mission.

The concern to keep faith and life together in the grassroots communities is translated into sociopolitical involvement 'from bottom up'. The effects that this kind of involvement may have on the macro-structures must not be over-estimated, but they have been significant enough to prod the conscience of those who have institutional power and to make a difference for life at the local level.

A question raised by the sociopolitical involvement of the grassroots communities is whether that involvement does not entail a politicization of the faith which undermines the Christian witness. The liberation theologians co-operating with the grassroots communities seem to be aware of the problem. Libanio, for instance, writes: [p. 350](#)

A truly pastoral concern will attempt to avoid two extremes which are harmful for the life of the Church: a conservative resistance to political things and the tendency to politicize everything ... We cannot shy away from a political commitment. But, at the same time, we should hold back from such a total involvement in politics that we lose our religious and ecclesial identity. (1986: 10; see also note 3)

Without denying the great potential that the grassroots community movement has as a political force working for change, the fact remains that at least in Latin America its effectiveness in the future will to a great extent depend on how well they succeed in maintaining their ecclesiality rooted in Scripture, without being co-opted either by the power structures of the Church or by a political ideology.

## **THE CHALLENGE OF THE NEW ECCLESIOLOGY**

That a new Church is taking shape in the grassroots ecclesial communities can hardly be denied. Rooted in it, the new ecclesiology has become the most powerful challenge to Protestant Christians in this region of the world, and it may well become the most powerful challenge to the Church of Jesus Christ everywhere else in the next few years. The challenge is threefold: social, ministerial and missional.

### **The Social Challenge**

Anyone familiar with Protestantism in Latin America knows that a very high percentage of Protestant Christians in this continent are poor people. As Sywulka has put it, 'Evangelicals have been "base" and abased from the beginning. They have been historically, and vast numbers still are, the poor and powerless, the alienated and marginalized' (1986: 29). Does it follow that Protestants have no reason to get excited about 'a preferential option for the poor' for they are poor? One cannot answer this question positively without ignoring the problems that the values of the consumer society poses to the Church in Latin America and everywhere else today. Sad to say, a high percentage of Protestant churches made up of poor and oppressed people are locked into a value system which conditions them to be far more interested in social respectability and influence than in faithfulness to the gospel. Christianity is thus turned into a means to accommodate to the status quo, the biblical message is domesticated, and the Church becomes a fortress of conservative politics, oblivious of the needs of the poor and the

oppressed. As Cook has shown, most Protestant churches today fear the kind of movement that gave them **p. 351** birth or revitalized them along the way; the grassroots communities challenge them to go back to their own historical roots (1985:230–1).

The new ecclesiology is a call for us to take the poor seriously. That does not mean that we are to neglect the proclamation of forgiveness of sin through the atoning death of Jesus Christ. It does mean that we have to acknowledge that the poor are not only sinners but also sinned-against, deprived of basic material needs and human rights. As Fung has put it, 'The most dwelt-upon methods of evangelism today—personal evangelism and mass evangelism—are futile among the poor because, among many other reasons, both presuppose a receiving community which is not available to the poor in most of our existing churches today' (1980: 336). The challenge is to be the kind of Church community which is so loving, open and available to the poor that no-one ever feels neglected or marginalized. 'Anyone who does not love the alienated and the abandoned with an operative liberating love does not, in fact, believe in the gospel of God's love and does not love God' (Barreiro 1982: 33–34).

No one can tell what may happen to a traditional church when it makes itself available to the poor and marginalized in society. My own church was turned inside out a few years ago as a result of the incoming of a group of young men and women affected by drug addiction. Their presence in our midst forced us to re-examine our life and mission as we had never done before. We were a denominational, rather small church in a middle-class suburb of Buenos Aires. Then the unexpected took place—an influx of drug addicts looking for restoration and help. What were we to do? One of the leaders of the church suggested that the help given them should be restricted to holding a special weekly meeting for them, so they could hear the gospel and 'get saved'. By God's grace, we chose the way of the cross and little by little learned that the Church is for sinners and the sinned-against. And that was the beginning of radical change in our attitudes and values and priorities as well as in our structures and methods and programmes. In a true sense, the drug addicts—the poor the God had put in our midst—became God's call to conversion to the gospel of the Kingdom which is a gospel of holistic transformation. Perhaps this is what is meant when it is said that the poor evangelize the Church.

### **The Ministerial Challenge**

One of the secrets of the fantastic numerical growth of Pentecostal churches in Latin America is undoubtedly their emphasis on lay leadership. With little or no theological training, Pentecostal men and **p. 352** women are ordained as church ministers. The priesthood of all believers is thus not an abstract principle but a living reality without which Pentecostalism can hardly be explained.

From the perspective of the new ecclesiology, however, the priesthood of all believers takes on a wider and deeper meaning than in Pentecostalism, for it looks at the Church in light of the Kingdom of God. As Quiroz has put it, 'The aim of the ministries and charismas that emerge because the Church exists is that the Church may continue to serve the Kingdom' (1983: 280). If the Church is to serve the Kingdom, and if the Kingdom includes the totality of life, then the Spirit has to equip the Church with a multiplicity of gifts related to all dimensions of life. This he does, according to the new ecclesiology, and is being experienced within the grassroots communities in their struggle for liberation and justice. The grassroots communities have lifted up the lay person as 'a bearer of ecclesial values, either as a coordinator or monitor of the community, or as one engaged in several community services' (Boff 1979: 49).

The rediscovery of the priesthood of all the members of the People of God challenges us at least on three levels. On the ecclesiastical level, the new ecclesiology calls our

attention to the dangers of the clericalism that is affecting many Protestant churches on our continent. While the traditional dichotomy between the *status clericalis* and the *status laicalis* of the Canon Law of the Catholic Church is losing strength in the base communities, in these Protestant churches there is increasing emphasis on the idea that evangelization is the task of evangelists and other communicators who specialize in the use of radio and television, not the responsibility of all believers. While charismatic gifts are adopted as the basis of organization in the base communities and priority is given to the fulfilment of the mission in the world, in these churches the institutionalization of the 'ordained ministry' is promoted and the ministry of 'lay people' increasingly restricted. The rediscovery of the missionary character of the whole Church is urgently needed.

On the hermeneutical level, the new ecclesiology invites us to read the Bible 'from below' (if we can!) and re-examine the role of the grassroots members of our congregations in discerning the link between faith and life in their concrete historical situation. If the Gospel is going to be firmly rooted among the poorest sectors of the population, we cannot be satisfied with the numerical expansion of Protestant churches in these sectors. As the final document on *New Alternatives for Theological Education* by the Latin American Theological Fraternity states: [p. 353](#)

All members of the Church need an integrated understanding of its mission and the motivation for actively participating in it. All have received gifts and ministries which they ought to discover and develop in service to God and to their neighbours. Everyone needs theological education and the possibility of being involved in theological work. From this perspective, churches will complete their teaching task to the measure that, on their own or in co-operation with others in the same area or city, they establish programmes that help all their members to discover and exercise their gifts in the development of different ministries. (Padilla 1986:132)

On the vocational level, the new ecclesiology challenges us to broaden our concept of ministry to include the whole range of activities that the People of God carry out by the power of the Spirit in their service to Christ. Something is wrong when the only ministries recognized as such are the pastorate and preaching! God can be served also in the shop, the office, the university, the factory, the labour union, the laboratory ... In Protestant circles it is necessary to recover the ministerial significance of professions and trades in every area of human activity.

### **The Missional Challenge**

In the last twenty years there has been a real awakening of a social conscience among evangelicals all over the world. To many of us, there is no question that the spiritual and the material, the personal and the social, word and deed, the proclamation of justification by faith and the struggle for justice belong together. And yet, how much do our churches really know in their concrete experience the meaning of the kingly, priestly and prophetic ministries that we have received from Christ? As Cook has put it, summarizing a section of his doctoral dissertation,

Turning upside down the logic of Temple Judaism and of the present-day institutionalized Church, Jesus showed us that to be kingly is to serve ([Mk. 10:42-45](#)), to be priestly is to give away one's life for others ([Heb. 7:26-27](#)), and to be prophetic is to become incarnate in the world to which we have been sent as God's witnesses ([Jn. 1:14](#)). (1986: 6)

The new ecclesiology in Latin America challenges us to leave the strongholds of our institutions and become involved in the adventure of Jesus' kingly, priestly and prophetic mission in solidarity with the poor.

The task that we have before us is not one that we can carry out in isolation from our local churches. It has to do with God's purpose to unify the human race and to restore his domination in all dimensions p.354 of life and over the totality of creation. In other words, it has to do with his Kingdom. The new ecclesiology, rooted in the experience of the grassroots ecclesial communities, reminds us that the place to begin is the local church, a community of priests called to a prophetic mission.

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# Can the West be Converted?

Lesslie Newbigin

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*It is now a truism to assert the neo-paganism of the West. Newbigin analyzes the fundamental characteristics of Western culture; in conclusion he gives a very practical six-step suggestion as to how the West be re-Christianized.*

Editor

Let me begin by confessing that my title is a borrowed one. A dozen years ago, at the Bangkok Conference on 'Salvation Today', I happened to be sitting next to General Simatupang, that doughty Indonesian Christian who, having driven the Dutch out of his islands, turned to theology as the most agreeable field for the exercise of the arts of war. We were in plenary debate, and Simatupang had just made an intervention. As he returned to his seat beside me, I heard him say under his breath: 'Of course, the Number One question is, Can the West be converted?'

In the following years I have become more and more sure that he was right. If one looks at the world scene from a missionary point of view, surely the most striking fact is that, while in great areas of Asia and Africa the church is growing, often growing rapidly, in the lands which were once called Christendom it is in decline; and, moreover, wherever the culture of the West, under the name of 'modernization', penetrates, it carries with it what Lippmann called 'the acids of modernity', dissolving the most enduring of religious beliefs including the beliefs of Christians. Surely there can be no more crucial question for the world mission of the church than the one I have posed. Can there be an effective missionary encounter with *this* culture—this so powerful, persuasive, and confident culture which (at least until very recently) simply regarded itself as 'the coming world civilization'. Can the West be converted?

I am posing this question at a time when, especially in evangelical circles, great attention is being paid to the question of gospel and culture, to the question of the contextualization of the gospel in different cultures. Recent missionary literature is full of the subject. 'Contextualization' is an ugly word but a useful one. It is better than the word long used by Protestants—'indigenization'—which always tended to direct attention to

the past of a culture rather than to its present and future. And it is better than the traditional Catholic term ‘adaptation’, which suggested that the missionary was the bearer of a [p. 356](#) pure, culture-free gospel which had then to be adapted to the receptor culture, and thus concealed the fact that every statement of the gospel from the New Testament onwards is already culturally conditioned. ‘Contextualization’ directs attention to the actual context, shaped by the past and open to the future, in which the gospel has to be embodied now. But why is it that we have a plethora of missionary studies on the contextualization of the gospel in all the cultures of the world from China to Peru, but nothing comparable directed to the culture which we call ‘the modern world’?

I say ‘nothing comparable’. There have of course been great theologians who have dealt with the question of gospel and culture from within the parameters of this modern world—men like Paul Tillich and H. Richard Niebuhr. But these have not had the perspective which the experience of cross-cultural missions provides. Where can we find a cross-cultural perspective for the communication of the gospel to modern societies? Can the experience of cross-cultural missions to the many pre-modern cultures of our world in the last two centuries illuminate the task of mission to this modern world? I am not forgetting the important experience of dialogue between Christians of the first and third worlds, and between Christians and people of other world faiths. But this experience has a limited relevance because all of it is conducted in the European languages and therefore within the terms which our modern Western culture provides. No one takes part in them who has not been qualified to do so by a modern-style education in a European language. This kind of dialogue, with perhaps some exceptions, is too dependent on the language and thought-forms of the West to provide a radical challenge in the power of the gospel to the West.

One of the most persuasive writers seeking to articulate a Christian affirmation in the terms of our culture is Peter Berger. As a sociologist, he has developed a way of using the sociology of knowledge not (as so often) to undermine but to undergird the Christian claim. In his book *The Heretical Imperative* he has argued that the distinctive fact about modern Western culture, as distinct from all pre-modern cultures, is that there is no generally acknowledged ‘plausibility structure’, acceptance of which is taken for granted without argument, and dissent from which is heresy. A ‘plausibility structure’, as Berger uses the term, is a social structure of ideas and practices which creates the conditions which determine whether or not a belief is plausible. To hold beliefs which fall outside this plausibility structure is to be a heretic in the original sense of the word *haeresis*, that is to say, one who makes his own decisions. In pre-modern cultures there is a stable [p. 357](#) plausibility structure and only the rare individual questions it. It is just ‘how things are and have always been’. In modern societies, by contrast, we are required to make our own decisions, for there is no accepted plausibility structure. Each one—as we often say—has to have a faith of his own. We all have to make our own decisions. We all have to be, in the original sense, heretics.

In this situation Berger describes three possibilities for Christian affirmation, which he calls (not very happily) deductive, reductive, and inductive. The first simply selects one of the religious traditions and affirms it—preferably in such a loud voice that other voices are reduced to silence. Of this strategy he takes Karl Barth to be the most notable exponent. But, after a few respectful genuflections towards the great Swiss theologian, he rules him out of the debate. Even thirteen thick volumes of dogmatics are not enough if you cannot show rational grounds for choosing this starting point rather than another. It will not do simply to say, ‘The Bible tells me so’ if you cannot show reasons for choosing the Bible rather than the Qur’an, the Gita, or *Das Kapital*.



The second, or reductive, strategy is typified in the Bultmann programme of demythologization. Here the fact that the 'plausibility structures' of traditional religion simply collapse in the atmosphere of modern secular society is fully recognized. In effect, says Berger, Bultmann takes the beliefs of the modern secular town-dweller as the criterion of what can be believed. When, in a famous phrase, Bultmann says, 'one cannot use electric light and radio and call upon modern medicine in case of illness, and at the same time believe in the world of spirits and miracles of the New Testament', he is in effect taking the modern worldview as ultimate, and this must in the end mean the abandonment of even those parts of the Christian tradition which Bultmann seeks to safeguard. One does not need Jesus in order to endorse an existentialist view of life.

Berger therefore opts for the third alternative, which he calls the inductive. This is to take the universal human experience of what, in another book, Berger calls 'signals of transcendence', the religious experience which is the presupposition of all theologies whether of Barth or of Bultmann, of the Hindu, the Muslim, or the Buddhist, as the basis for religious affirmation. The paradigmatic figure here, of course, is Schleiermacher. The way he pointed is, according to Berger, the only way forward in the conditions of our modern secular world. The movement associated with the name of Barth is, in Berger's view, a temporary excursion into a blind alley, and we are now returning to the main road. To the obvious question, 'How, amid the many different signals of transcendence, does one distinguish the true from p. 358 the false?' Berger answers with the words of the Muslim theologian Al-Ghazali that they must all be weighed in 'the scale of reason'. He insists that in giving this answer he is not surrendering to a rationalism of the style of Enlightenment. He defends what he calls 'sober rational assessment' as the only way of distinguishing between true and false religious experience, but he does not attempt to describe the criteria for assessment or the grounds upon which these criteria rest. Perhaps the adjective 'sober' has more than ordinary importance here, for the original context of Al-Ghazali's image of the 'scale of reason' is a passage in which he likens the actual religious experience to a kind of inebriation and goes on, 'The words of lovers when in a state of drunkenness must be hidden away and not broadcast', but later, 'their drunkenness abates and the sovereignty of their reason is restored: and reason is God's scale on earth'. This accords with Berger's own statement that religious certainty is 'located only within the enclave of religious experience itself', and cannot be had except 'precariously in recollection' in the ordinary life of the world.

It seems clear that the 'sober rationality' with which we are to assess the value of different religious experiences does not belong to the enclave but to the public world outside. It is not a rationality which rests upon the religious experience but one which judges it. And it is not difficult to see that it is the rationality which rests upon the assumptions of our culture.

I believe that Berger is correct in his diagnosis of our culture in terms of the 'heretical imperative'. In contrast to all preceding cultures, ours has enormously extended the range of matters on which each individual has to make his own choices. A vast amount of what previous ages and cultures have regarded as given facts which must be accepted are now matters for personal decision. With the aid of modern technology, if he is wealthy enough, modern man chooses where he will live, whom he will meet, how he will behave and what style of life he will adopt. He can, if he has mastered the arts of 'modern living', change at will his job, his home, his company, his entertainment, and his spouse. The patterns of belief and behaviour which ruled because they were not questioned have largely dissolved. Each person makes his own decisions about what to believe and how to behave. It is therefore entirely natural that religion too is drawn into this way of understanding



the human situation. It is natural that religion too becomes a matter of personal choice. We are all now required to be—in the original sense—heretics.

But what are the implications of this? What are the implications of a division of human experience into two parts—the enclave where alone p. 359 religious certainty can be had, and the public world where religious experience is to be ‘weighed in the scale of reason’? We come here to what is perhaps the most distinctive and crucial feature of the modern worldview, namely the division of human affairs into two realms—the private and the public, a private realm of values where pluralism reigns and a public world of what our culture calls ‘facts’. This dichotomy of the public and the private is something which is absent from traditional cultures. We shall have to look at it more closely. But let us accept it for the moment. Let us accept Berger’s statement that in respect of what goes on in the enclave of religious experience we are all subject to the heretical imperative. But what about the public world where we all meet and where all things are weighed in the scale of reason? It is this world that we must examine if we are to understand modern culture. In this world pluralism does *not* operate. It is the world of what are called ‘facts’ (we shall have to examine that word in a moment; meanwhile let it stand in its ordinary meaning). In respect of what we call ‘facts’ pluralism does not operate. Here statements are either true or false. If statements of alleged facts are in mutual contradiction, we do not take it as an occasion for celebrating our faithfulness to the principles of pluralism and freedom of thought. We argue, we experiment, we carry out tests until we reach agreement about what are the facts, and then we expect all reasonable people to accept them. The one who does not accept them is the real heretic. Of course, he will not be burned at the stake, but his views will not be published in the scientific journals or in the university lecture rooms. In respect of what are called ‘facts’, a statement is either true or false, right or wrong. But in respect of what are called ‘values’, and supremely in respect of religious beliefs on which these values are believed to rest, one does not use this kind of language. Value systems are not right or wrong, true or false. They are matters for personal choice. Here the operative principle is pluralism, respect for the freedom of each person to choose the values that he or she will live by.

Here, plainly, is the real plausibility structure which controls our culture and within which Berger himself operates, and which he takes for granted. His choice of the inductive method for dealing with religious truth-claims belongs to this plausibility structure. His ‘sober rationality’, in contrast to the inebriation of religious experience, is the rationality of this worldview. The inductive method which he espouses has been basic to the whole development of the modern scientific worldview from the time of Bacon and Galileo. Looked at from the point of view of the gospel its value is both real and limited. It is a valid way of coming to the truth because the created world is both rational p. 360 and contingent—rational as the creation of God who is light and not darkness, contingent because it is not an emanation of God but the creation of God who has endowed it with a measure of autonomy. Because this is so, a Christian would argue, the study of things and happenings in the created world can give us true understanding of them. That is the foundation upon which science rests. But the inductive method has a validity which is limited in that it cannot decide the question by whom and for what purpose the world was created. The answer to that question cannot be reached by any method of induction until the history of the universe has reached its terminus; short of that point, the data for a valid induction are not available.

Within the worldview of modern science it is perfectly possible and proper to insist, as Berger does, that the phenomena of religious experience should be studied along with all the other facts that are available for our inspection, and that conclusions should be drawn by induction from these studies. In this way it is proper to challenge the kind of

narrow positivism which has sought to deny cultural acceptance to the phenomena of religion. Berger is a true follower of Schleiermacher in commending religion to its cultured despisers, in seeking to show that there is a place for religious affirmation *within* the 'plausibility structure' of the modern scientific worldview. But this whole procedure leaves that worldview unchallenged. The whole method simply excludes the possibility that it might actually be the case that the one who is creator and sustainer and sovereign of the universe has personally made himself known at a certain point in the human story. Any such claim is simply bracketed with other claims to be included in a syllabus for the comparative study of religion. It has been silenced by co-option into the modern scientific worldview. The gospel is treated as an account of something which happened in one of those many enclaves in which religious experience takes place. It has to be brought out of the enclave into the public world to be weighed in the scale of reason along with all the other varieties of religious experience, and on the basis of all the facts.

At this point we come to the crux of the matter. What, in our culture, is the meaning of the word 'fact'? In its earliest use in the English language it is simply the Latin *factum*, the past participle of the verb 'to do', something which has been done. But plainly it has acquired a much richer meaning. In ordinary use 'fact' is contrasted with belief, opinion, value. Value-free facts are the most highly prized commodities in our culture. It is upon them that we think we can build with confidence. 'Fact,' says Alasdair MacIntyre, 'is in modern western p.361 culture a folk-concept with an aristocratic ancestry.' The aristocrat in question is Lord Bacon who advised his contemporaries to abjure speculation and collect facts. By 'speculation' he referred primarily to the Aristotelian belief that things were to be understood in terms of their purpose. But in advising his contemporaries to collect facts, he was not launching a programme for magpies collecting any odds and ends that might be lying about. That is not how modern science was born. The new activity was shaped, as every rational activity must be shaped, by another speculative framework—namely the belief that things should be understood in terms not of their purpose but of their cause, of how they work. Facts thus became value-free, because value is a concept related to the purpose for which a thing either is or is not well fitted. Here is the origin of what MacIntyre called the 'folk-concept' of 'facts' which dominates the consciousness of modern man. There is, in this view, a world of facts which is the real world, an austere world in which human hopes, desires, and purposes have no place. The facts are facts and they are neither good nor bad; they are just facts.

It follows that the scientist uses a different kind of language from the religious person. Religious statements are normally prefaced by the words 'I believe', or 'we believe'. In textbooks of science no such preface is used. The writer simply states the facts. And it is this world of facts which is our shared public world. Our values, our views of what is good and bad, are a matter of personal opinion, and everyone is free to have his own opinions. But on the facts we must all agree. Here is the core of our culture, the plausibility structure in relation to which we cannot be heretics and remain part of society, the area where pluralism does not reign. Facts are facts.

But are they? If we go back to Bacon and the beginning of modern science we can see that what happened was that different questions were being asked about the things with which people had always been familiar. The Greeks had asked the question 'Why?' and had tried to explain (for example) motion in terms of purpose. Modern science asks 'How?' and tries to explain things in terms of cause and effect. Both questions are—of course—proper, but neither by itself is enough to bring full understanding. You can set out to understand the working of a machine in terms of the laws of physics and chemistry, and you can give a complete account of its working in these terms. But it would be foolish to say that you 'understand' the machine if you have no idea of the purpose for which this

assembly of bits of metal was put together in this way. And it is certain that, if you have no idea of its purpose, there is no meaning in calling it good or bad. It just is. If, on the other hand, [p.362](#) you know what it is for, you can and must judge it either good or bad according to whether or not it achieves its purpose.

Alasdair MacIntyre in his book *After Virtue* has chronicled the attempts which have been made in the past 200 years to find a rational basis for ethics within the modern scientific worldview. He demonstrates two things; first, that the morality for which a basis was sought was one carried over from the pre-scientific age; and second, that all attempts to ground ethical precepts in the 'facts' as science understands them have failed. As Kant and others have insisted, from statements of fact, 'This is so', you cannot move logically to statements of value or obligation: 'This is good', or 'This ought to be done'. But this is only so if 'facts' have already been defined in such a way as to exclude purpose. To take one of MacIntyre's examples: from the factual statement, 'This watch has not lost five seconds in two years', you may immediately conclude, 'This is a good watch'—provided that 'watch' is already understood as an instrument for keeping time. If 'watch' means only a collection of bits of metal which can be used according to the personal preference of its owner for decorating the sitting room or for throwing at the cat, then no such conclusion follows. If 'watch' is understood only in terms of the physics and chemistry of its parts, no such conclusion follows and everyone is free to have his or her own opinion as to whether it is a good watch or not.

This simple illustration takes us, I think, to the heart of the matter. 'Facts', as our culture understands them, are interpretations of our experience in terms of the questions 'What?' and 'How?' without asking the question 'Why?' And facts are the material of our public, shared culture, the culture into which we expect every child to be inducted through the system of public education. That human nature is governed by the programme encoded in the DNA molecule is a fact which every child is expected to understand and accept. It will be part of the school curriculum. That human beings exist to glorify God and enjoy him forever is not a fact. It is an opinion held by some people. It belongs to the private sector, not the public. Those who hold it are free to communicate it to their children in home and church; it has no place in the curriculum of the public schools and universities. And since the publicly accepted definition of a human being excludes any statement of the purpose for which human beings exist, it follows necessarily that (in the ordinary meaning of the word 'fact'), no factual statement can be made about what kinds of behaviour are good or bad. These can only be private opinions. Pluralism reigns.

Here, I submit, is the intellectual core of that culture which, at least from the mid-eighteenth century has been the public culture of [p.363](#) Europe, and has—under the name of 'modernization'—extended its power into every part of the world. Two hundred years ago it was hailed in Europe as, quite simply, the dawning of light in the darkness: The Enlightenment. And it still bears that glow about it. For millions of people all over the world what we call the modern scientific worldview is accepted quite simply as the true account of how things in fact are, in contrast to the dogmas, myths, and superstitions of traditional religion.

And we must gratefully acknowledge the immense achievements of these past two centuries. Who can deny to the men of the Enlightenment and their successors the credit for liberating the human spirit from many ancient fetters, for penetrating the secrets of nature and harnessing nature's power for human purposes? Surely this has been the most brilliant period in human history thus far, and we are—with all our weaknesses and perplexities—its heirs. It would be easy at this point to throw in some remarks about the signs of disintegration which our culture is showing—the loss of faith in science, the scepticism about our ability to solve our problems, the disappearance of belief in

progress, and the widespread phenomena of anomie, boredom, and the sense of meaninglessness. But let us, for our present purposes, ignore all this. Let us rather ask what is involved in a real encounter between the gospel and this culture of ours at its best and strongest. Let us attempt something quite different from what Berger proposes. Instead of weighing the Christian religious experience (along with others) in the scale of reason as our culture understands reason, let us suppose that the gospel is true, that in the story of the Bible and in the life and death and resurrection of Jesus, the creator and lord of the universe has actually manifested himself to declare and effect his purpose, and that therefore everything else, including all the axioms and assumptions of our culture, have to be assessed and can only be validly assessed in the scales which this revelation provides. What would it mean if, instead of trying to understand the gospel from the point of view of our culture, we tried to understand our culture from the point of view of the gospel?

Obviously to ask that question is to suggest a programme for many decades. Let me simply suggest four points as prolegomena to the answering of the question.

1. The first point to be made is that modern science rests upon a faith which is the fruit of the long schooling of Europe in the worldview of the Bible. Historians of science have devoted much thought to the question why the marvellous intellectual powers of the Greeks, the Chinese, the Indians, and the Egyptians, in spite of their achievements p. 364 in science and mathematics, did not give rise to the self-sustaining science which has dominated our culture for the past 200 years. Briefly the answer seems to be that modern science rests upon the faith (which of course can never be proved) that the universe is both rational and contingent. If the universe were not rational, if different instrument readings at different times and places had no necessary relation with each other but were simply random facts, then science would be impossible. Scientists are sustained in their long and arduous labours by the faith that apparent contradictions will eventually be resolved because the universe is rational. But if that were all, science would not be necessary. If there were no element of contingency, if all that exists necessarily existed as the outward expression of pure rationality, then all the experimenting, exploring, and testing work of science would be unnecessary. If—as India has tended to think—all that exists is emanation from primal being, then pure contemplative reason alone is enough for making contact with reality. If the world were not rational, science would be impossible; if the world were not contingent, science would be unnecessary. Because it is a rational world, but not the only possible world, we both can and must bestir ourselves to find out what kind of world it is. Science rests upon a faith which cannot be demonstrated but is simply presupposed, and the roots of this faith are in the biblical story which shaped the life of Europe for the 1,000 years before modern science was born.

2. The second point is this. Modern science achieved its great breakthrough in the seventeenth century by setting aside the question ‘Why?’ and concentrating on the question ‘How?’ It left the question of purpose to what Bacon called the speculation of philosophers and theologians and concentrated on the question of cause. It asked of everything not ‘What is its purpose?’ but ‘How does it work?’ That question gave unlimited scope for probing, dissecting, exploring, and experimenting. Purpose is a personal word. It implies a mind which has a purpose real in the mind though not yet realized in the world of objects; it can be known only by listening to the person whose purpose it is. But for understanding cause we have to examine what is already there in the world of objects. This is a different kind of enterprise, as different as dissecting a brain to find out how it works is from listening to a person to find out what he means. Both are proper activities in their proper place. But clearly the elimination of the question of purpose can only be a methodological strategy; if there were no such thing as purpose

then the scientist could have no purpose in adopting this strategy. The scientist acts purposefully when, as a decision on method, he investigates cause and ignores purpose. Plainly it is an [p. 365](#) error to move from this section on method to the conclusion that there are no purposes at work in nature other than the investigative purpose of the scientist.

3. The third point is as follows. Human beings are also part of nature and can be investigated by the methods of modern science. For this purpose they are treated as objects whose behaviour can be understood in terms of cause and effect and without reference to their alleged purposes. The practitioners of what are called the behavioural sciences seek to formulate laws of human behaviour analagous to the laws of physics and chemistry. On the basis of these laws the administrator, the civil servant, and the advertising consultant seek to direct or influence human behaviour. In doing so, they are crediting themselves with a capacity for purposeful activity directed to rationally chosen ends, a capacity which the method denies to those who are investigated. We are familiar with the spectre of the ultimate achievement of this kind of scientific management of human affairs in the various scenarios for genetic engineering. At this point we are bound to ask the question: What will direct the behaviour of those who use the methods of science to direct human behaviour? Science itself cannot provide the answer to this question because its method eliminates purpose as a category of explanation. If there is a purpose to which in fact all human life ought to be directed, this purpose cannot be discovered by the methods of science. The scientist has his own purposes, but they have no basis in the world of 'facts'. They are his personal choice. Science acknowledges no objective world of values in the light of which his purposes could be judged right or wrong. And since the scientist, like every human being, has different purposes at different times, and since his method excludes the possibility of an objective criterion for judging between these purposes, he is left under the control of whichever is the strongest impulse of his nature. He becomes, in fact, an agent of nature. Man's mastery of nature turns out in the end to be nature's mastery of man. We have been conned by the oldest trick in the book. Marching triumphantly forward we failed to notice the jaws of the trap closing behind.

4. Fourth, this way of understanding things which we call the modern scientific worldview has now achieved global dominance. There is, of course, no way in which it can be proved to be the truth about things from outside of its own presuppositions. When, as those who have served as missionaries know, it meets older traditional views, such as those of India and Africa, which are equally coherent and equally compelling to those who dwell in them, the decisive argument has usually been: Look! Our view works. It delivers the [p. 366](#) goods. Look at our machines, our medicines, our technology. It works! Today we are not able to give that answer with the same confidence. We acknowledge the enormous achievements of the modern scientific worldview, but its failures are becoming apparent. It is not opening for us a rational view of the future. We can no longer say, as we did a generation ago, 'This is just how things are'. And more to our present purpose, it will no longer do for Christianity to accept, as Berger invites us to do, a position in one of the enclaves of this culture, even as one of its privileged old-age pensioners. It will no longer do to say that the Christian faith is one among the possible private options available within the parameters of this culture. It will no longer do to confuse the fact of plurality with the ideology of pluralism—the view that since no one can really know the truth we must be content with a multiplicity of opinions. It will no longer do to accept the dichotomy between a public world of so-called 'facts' and a private world of so-called 'values'. We shall have to be bold enough to confront our public world with the reality of Jesus Christ, the word made flesh, the one in whom the eternal purpose of almighty God has been publicly set forth in the midst of our human history, and therefore to affirm that



no facts are truly understood except in the light of him through whom and for whom they exist. We shall have to face, as the early church faced, an encounter with the public world, the worlds of politics and economics, and the world of science which is its heart. It will not do to accept a peaceful coexistence between science and theology on the basis that they are simply two ways of looking at the same thing—one appropriate for the private sector and one for the public. We have to insist that the question, ‘What is really true?’ is asked and answered.

I confess that when I say these things I feel alarmed, for I can hardly imagine all that they will entail. And yet I cannot avoid believing that they are true. Nearly 150 years ago W. E. Gladstone wrote these solemn and prophetic words:

Rome, the mistress of state-craft, and beyond all other nations in the politic employment of religion, added without stint or scruple to her list of gods and goddesses, and consolidated her military empire by a skilful medley of all the religions of the world. Thus it continued while the worship of the Deity was but a conjecture or a contrivance; but when the rising of the Sun of Righteousness had given reality to the subjective forms of faith, and had made actual and solid truth the common inheritance of all men, then the religion of Christ became, unlike other new creeds, an object of jealousy and of cruel persecution, because it would not consent to become a partner in this heterogeneous device, and planted itself upon truth and not in the [p. 367](#) quicksand of opinion ... Should the Christian faith ever become but one among many co-equal pensioners of a government, it will be a proof that subjective religion has again lost its God-given hold upon objective reality; or when, under the thin shelter of its name a multitude of discordant schemes shall have been put upon a footing of essential parity, and shall together receive the bounty of the legislature, this will prove that we are once more in a transition state—that we are travelling back again from the region to which the Gospel brought us to that in which it found us.

What Gladstone foresaw is essentially what has been happening in the years since he wrote. The end result is not—as we imagined twenty-five years ago—a secular society, a society which has no public beliefs but is a kind of neutral world in which we can all freely pursue our self-chosen purposes. We see that now for the mirage that it was. What we have is, as Gladstone foretold, a pagan society whose public life is ruled by beliefs which are false. And because it is not a pre-Christian paganism, but a paganism born out of the rejection of Christianity, it is far tougher and more resistant to the gospel than the pre-Christian paganisms with which foreign missionaries have been in contact during the past 200 years. Here, without possibility of question, is the most challenging missionary frontier of our time.

Can the West be converted? God alone knows the answer to that question. I do not see except in the dimmest way what would be involved in a serious response to this challenge. I can only see that it must mean great changes in the way we see the task of the church. There is no space at the end of this essay to do more than suggest the headings of an agenda that will take decades rather than years to undertake.

1. I would put first the declericalizing of theology so that it may become an enterprise done not within the enclave, in that corner of the private sector which our culture labels ‘religion’, but rather in the public sector where God’s will as declared in Jesus Christ is either done or not done in the daily business of nations and societies, in the councils of governments, the boardrooms of transnational corporations, the trade unions, the universities, and the schools.

2. Second, I would place the recovery of that apocalyptic strand of the New Testament teaching without which Christian hope becomes merely hope for the survival of the individual and there is no hope for the world. The silencing of the apocalyptic notes of the



gospel is simply part of the privatization of religion by which modern culture has emasculated the biblical message.

3. Third, I would put the need for a doctrine of freedom which rests not on the ideology of the Enlightenment but on the gospel itself. The p. 368 world will rightly distrust any claim by the church to a voice in public affairs, remembering that the freedom of thought and of conscience which the Enlightenment won was won against the resistance of the church. But the freedom which the Enlightenment won rests upon an illusion—the illusion of autonomy—and it therefore ends in new forms of bondage. Yet we have no right to say this until we can show that we have learned our lesson: that we understand the difference between bearing witness to the truth and pretending to possess the truth; that we understand that witness (*marturia*) means not dominance and control but suffering.

4. Fourth, I would affirm the need for a radical break with that form of Christianity which is called the denomination. Sociologists have rightly pointed out that the denomination (essentially a product of North American religious experience in the past 200 years) is simply the institutional form of a privatized religion. The denomination is the outward and visible form of an inward and spiritual surrender to the ideology of our culture. Neither separately nor together can the denominations become the base for a genuinely missionary encounter with our culture.

5. Fifth, there will be the need to listen to the witness of Christians from other cultures. The great new asset which we have for our missionary task is the presence among us of communities of Christians nourished in the cultures of Asia, Africa, and the West Indies. We need their eyes to see our culture afresh.

6. But finally, and this is fundamental, there will be the need for courage. Our wrestling is not against flesh and blood but against the principalities and powers—realities to the existence of which our privatized culture has been blind. To ask, ‘Can the West be converted?’ is to align ourselves with the apostle when he speaks of ‘taking every thought captive to Christ’, and for that—as he tells us—we need more than the weapons of the world.

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## Mission in an Urban World

Eugene Rubingh

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*The following article is an attempt at the theology of the city. It not only gives a brief summary of the growth of the megapolis of our time but also shows how the city was the centre of attention in Old Testament as well as New Testament times. In conclusion it scrutinizes certain peculiar characteristics of modern urban life and lists basic steps for any urban Christian mission.*

Editor.

The world is moving to the city. While the numbers of mankind are said to be exploding, this explosion may be experienced most fully in the mushrooming of cities. The awesome trek of humanity to metropolis presents the city as an inescapable missionary frontier. For the Christian, the city is not a mere agglomeration of people and buildings, but a place where the Kingdom comes. The mission 'field' becomes a grid of city blocks.

The church of Christ is set in the world, not in some splendid isolation as a haven for those who might care to seek her out. Rather, the New Testament images are those of yeast and salt; her odyssey transpires precisely where people are found. God's people were always the apple of his eye, but the particular splendour of the New Testament church is displayed in the assembling and diversity of people. No longer are the tapestries and temples the significant treasures of the Kingdom, nor cushioned pews or weighty vestments. The treasures are *people*, and so the lot of the church is cast where people are. Increasingly in our days, they are in the city.

The church has not yet responded well to this imperative. Her mission overseas usually began in the countryside, and was almost always an overwhelmingly rural or village operation. Rural people seemed to be the needy ones, forgotten by governments intent upon making their cities into showpieces. The Gospel found more receptivity, too, among the rural poor, the despised and disdained. And it was cheaper for the mission to operate in the countryside; there seemed to be so much more clout per pound or dollar.

Nor has the mindset of the sending church been cordial to the city. She celebrates the idyllic rather than the urban and thinks of the city with antipathy as the most virulent locus of wickedness. Her face is [p. 370](#) often turned with nostalgia toward the garden (where man's journey began) rather than toward the City, the New Jerusalem (the Christian destiny, the eschatological focus of man's journey). It is time to get in step with the drumbeat of God's unfolding plan.

## RACING TO METROPOLIS

For all the centuries, except one, of man's life on this planet, his habitat has been overwhelmingly rural. Though he clustered somewhat for protection and commerce, his settlements could not grow very large because he needed access to the soil. The only metropolis in the ancient world ever to reach one million people was Rome, about the time that Paul lived there. Yet Rome, too, decreased drastically in the Middle Ages and was decimated by the Black Death around 1350. It was probably only a small town after that and did not reach one million again until 1930.

In 1800, a mere 1.7% of the population lived in cities of more than 100,000. In fact, only 3% lived in places exceeding 5,000. At that time there was only one city in the world with more than one million people, and that was Beijing. The first city in the Western world to reach this *megacity* status (i.e. one million inhabitants) was London, in the year 1806. By 1870 it reached four million; it had become what is now termed the *supercity*.

It is in the twentieth century that the rush to the cities has become a flood. At the opening of the century, 14% of mankind had become urban; by 1950 this percentage had doubled to 28%—an almost unbelievable transfer of population. Today well over two billion people, or 43% of us, are urban dwellers, and before the end of this century over half of all people will live in cities. In a single century mankind will have changed from being rural to being homo urbanis.

Until 1975 most of the world's urban dwellers were found in what are often termed the 'developed' countries. By the year 2000, however, the urban populations of the developing nations will comprise two-thirds of all the urban dwellers in the world. Hence

these cities are faced with the superhuman task of compressing into a few decades the same growth that was spread over a century in the cities of the developed nations. These third world cities are obviously not equipped to receive such masses of new settlers in such a short time. Thus there arises the phenomenon of huge belts of squatters surrounding many third world cities.

Mexico City, soon to be if not already the largest city in the world with 18 million people, now houses more people than half of Canada. [p. 371](#) From now until the turn of the century likely 1500 new residents will flock into Mexico City *each day*! And half the inhabitants of Mexico City are under fourteen years of age: it is literally a city of children. Mexico City also illustrates what urbanologists call the push/pull effect. To the rural farmer life has often become a grim struggle to eke out a subsistence on a diminishing amount of land with fewer markets and signs of hope for himself and his family. These dire prospects symbolize the *push* effect, thrusting the hopeful into the city. The capital also offers the allure of success and excitement and *pulls like a magnet*.

Today there are 286 megacities on planet earth.

## AN URBAN FAITH

In the face of all the dire warnings about cities and the negative imagery Christians often carry regarding cities, the surprising fact is that Christianity is very much an urban religion. Already in 1900, when only 14% of mankind lived in cities, 29% of the Christians were urban dwellers, while *only 5% of non-Christians lived in cities*. World urbanization has risen today, as we noted, to 43%, but now fully 62% of Christians are urban, while only 24% of non-Christians live in cities. (These are percentages; in terms of sheer numbers there are obviously more non-Christians both in cities and everywhere else.)

At the same time it is true that world population growth today outstrips the growth of Christianity, and so urbanization is moving *away* from any previous identification it may have had with the Christian faith. But this is the challenge we face! We are, in fact, an urban faith, a mostly urban people. The city offers to us enormous and unprecedented resources for evangelization. The opportunities to show the love and justice of Christ are greater than ever before. Love shines most greatly in the narrowest of streets.

## SCRIPTURAL PERSPECTIVES

The Bible mentions some 119 cities and makes 1227 references to cities from varied perspectives. Strands of God's purpose appear in these references, and as these are interwoven, a tapestry takes shape. Yet urban missionaries have long had to contend with an anti-urban bias in the church, and this only now is the tapestry being seen in all its beauty. The Bible, it was said, exhorts us to beware of the city and to flee from it. [Psalm 55:9-11](#) is cited as an example: [P. 372](#)

Confuse the wicked, O Lord, confound their speech,  
For I see violence and strife in the city.  
Day and night they prowl about on its walls;  
Malice and abuse are within it.  
Destructive forces are at work in the city;  
Threats and lies never leave its streets.

The accounts of Cain, Babel, and Babylon all contribute to the negative view many Christians entertain concerning God's perspective on the city. Jacques Ellul, in a brilliant overview, *The Meaning of the City*, finds in the city the epitome of human rebellion against

God, the apex of man's proud defiance of God's will. In Cain we already see the prototype of all who build cities. Ellul writes, 'The city is the direct consequence of Cain's murderous act and his refusal to accept God's protection.'

Thus historically, hermeneutically, and in their own experience, urban missionaries appear to be out of step. But let us take another look.

The Bible opens with man's creation in the countryside. As the pulsebeat of recorded history begins, it is clear that development and progression is in God's purpose with his creation. The potential for this unfolding is marvellously built into the creation, so that history will not be mere cyclic repetition, but will display an advancing rhythm, not a simple revolving, but in the term of Jurgen Moltmann, a *provolution*, a rhythm that shows newness and destiny. Thus, man was created to have relationships, to God and family, but also to others as their numbers increased. Furthermore, man was endowed with a creativity that enables him to use resources in complex interdependencies. His talents can be pooled to achieve great communal purposes. The cultural mandate in its unfolding and development would require the founding of cities. Thus while man began in a garden, his destiny is the urban New Jerusalem. The whole Bible from beginning to end is a record of this tending toward the city.

As Ellul observes so well, instead of becoming the epitome of man's obedient response to God's gifting, the city became a symbol of man's self-deification and arrogance. In the city sin can be worked out to the most terrible depths of degradation and mutual rebellion against God's sovereignty. But what do these accounts of human horror tell us? That God is negative regarding the city as such? Much scholarly writing so contends. No, the city remains in God's glorious plan! It is the fallenness of the city, and not the city itself, which is the dolorous result of sin. The curses rained down by the prophets on evil cities do not happen because they are cities, but because they are evil. [p. 373](#)

## ANOTHER LOOK AT ISRAEL

Let us apply this perspective to Israel. We are often presented with Israel as God's chosen (and rural) people. Her life was supposedly supremely agrarian; her sacrifices, ceremonies, feasts, tabernacle, were all non-urban. The building of cities was seen as a lack of trust in God and his protection. Ezekiel ([7:23](#), [9:9](#)) and other prophets berate the cities for the violence and injustice found there and often exult in pastoral settings. Thus the love of God for his special people is also easily interpreted as his special affection for her rural habitat.

Such reasoning is fallacious. God's people have no special claim on God's favour, then or now, because of their place of residence. Indeed, far from being called to be a desert people, the nomadic sojourn of Israel was in fact her punishment. The prophets do not present the desert wandering as ideal. Rather, they extolled the good of the city where the Lord dwells and spoke of it as the ideal. Ezekiel's last chapter, for example, is a paean of praise for the blessings of the city where dwells the Lord. This beautiful doxology confirms that God's anger at the sin of the city is not his only or final word. The marvellous name of the city will be: THE LORD IS THERE ([Ezek. 48:35](#)).

Thus God's perspective regarding the city as such is one of favour. This may be seen already in his establishment of 'cities of refuge' ([Joshua 20](#)), where both mercy and justice will be found as precursors of his everlasting rule. In the same vein the Psalmist waxes eloquent regarding Jerusalem ([Ps. 48](#)), 'Great is the Lord, and most worthy of praise, in the city of our God ...' Isaiah reaches for the highest name for the restored people of God and proclaims, 'They shall call you the City of the Lord, the Zion of the Holy One of Israel' ([60:14](#)). For God's people the city is their glorious patrimony.

## NEW TESTAMENT MOMENTUM

The New Testament church is born of Israel and fulfills her as the unfolding of God's purpose continues. The movement is centrifugal; God's people are to go out to where the unsaved and needy are found. They are to penetrate every citadel claimed by the enemy. The greater the need and the more numerous the unsaved, the more compelling is the sending entrusted to the church. The sent ones do not identify with the evils of the city where they are sent, but they are the very signs of the presence of God's kingdom in the heart of the city, the living evidence of God's claims upon the city. **P. 374**

Pentecost clearly signals this centrifugal imperative, the imperative of permeation, of yeast and salt. The spiritual physicians are to move out among the wounded. And where the wounded are most heavily congregated, there their services are the most desperately needed.

Thus the strategy of the new age is that of incorporation: the sent ones enter the secular city and call upon it to obey. In this place of concentrated human encounter, they are at the cutting edge of God's plan. In their mind's eye, people are as beautiful as gardens, for *people* are the treasures of the new age.

The New Testament is replete with this urban momentum. It is instructive, for example, to see how urban is the writer to the Hebrews. He speaks to these troubled Christian Jews as to those who have now finally arrived at their destination: 'You have come to Mount Zion, to the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God' ([12:22](#)). He can reach back to speak of Abraham, who left distant Ur. He lived in tents then, but even in that far-off rural past 'he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God' ([Heb. 11:10](#)).

For us there is also a vision, clearer now, for the contours of the City have been painted in the revelation. Nothing yet matches the vision, but we struggle to bring to the city the life-changing shalom of God's kingdom. 'For here we do not have an enduring city, but we are looking for the city that is to come' ([Heb. 13:14](#)).

## THE URBAN HABITAT

Unfortunately at this point in time most of the literature on cities is Western and reflects Western categories and frameworks. For example, Western cities are generally ringed by fashionable suburbs and have a decaying 'inner city'. (The very centre of the Western city is currently resurgent and high-rent). In the case of non-western cities, however, the favellas, villas miserias, 'rabbit hutches', and slums ring the *outskirts* of the cities, and such cities function in a far different manner.

Also note that the militant champions of the poor are simply not allowed to speak and agitate with such impunity as in the West. Concern for 'human rights' is not accorded free rein. Poverty and authority are more deeply entrenched and a high degree of dissent is impermissible.

This situation is not due merely to the desire of tyrants to amass wealth and power. Ancient worldviews have contributed not only a sense of fatalism and resignation, but even a fear of change itself. Harmony and order in society is felt to be a reflection of the cosmic **p. 375** harmony and should not be much disturbed. The cosmic equilibrium is an ancient heritage, and innovation is dangerous and even sacrilegious. These beliefs are engrained in millions, perhaps billions of people and so change comes slowly. But as this worldview is eroded by modernity, change is coming with a crescendo. In that sense, as well as many others, cities the world over resemble one another more and more.



From the perspective of the social sciences, there are four major attributes of life in cities:

1. *Proximity*. However, while people and artifacts may be close at hand, they may be quite unavailable and hence still remote. The consequences are enormous. The privacy needed for personal reflection may be unavailable. Competition increases on every level. In close quarters there are limits on physical and psychic space and tempers flare as the ego runs into other egos.

At the same time, proximity means that there are resources and people nearby, with great potential for good. The greatest era of mission opportunity in terms of accessibility is certainly now at hand!

2. *Multiplicity*. In the city the clamour of stimuli and choices is multiplied. The number of changing images, contradictions, and unexpected occurrences increases. However, the city may also provide more monotony and sameness. For example, the assembly line may demand nothing more than mindless repetition. Life may be rigidly channelled by time-clocks, yellow lines, and officials who diminish or deny choice. But still there is a multiplicity all around.

An overload of stimuli and choices leads either to withdrawal on the one hand or superficiality on the other. There is just too much for one to savour properly. Crime flourishes where people are experienced shallowly. At the same time, we should remember that multiplicity means that the number and choices of avenues for mission is also vastly increased in the city. We should celebrate and utilize this abundance.

3. *Complexity*. In the city face-to-face relationships often give way to secondary relationships with agents and bureaux. Relationships become incredibly varied and each person makes contact with many unrelated circles. This feature of 'segmental roles' means that control over the wholeness of life dissipates. The sense of meaningful participation in life's issues is diminished when these contacts are fleeting and with unknown persons.

Furthermore, the bombardment of many styles and values has the [p. 376](#) effect of breaking down traditions and encouraging questioning. Distinctives are gradually eroded; sociologists speak of the homogenizing effect of city life. The consequence of all of this is the creation of a vast interdependency. A host of people now influence and control our lives; police and firemen, vandals and bureaucrats, clerks and beggars. We experienced them all far less in the country.

Yet here again we note that interdependency is a gateway to service for the Christian. Avenues abound in the city, and Paul's picture of the body as mutually dependent becomes particularly real and incarnate in the city.

4. *Concentration*. The urbanite is at the bottom of a pyramid of people. The mayor may speak to the bishop, and the hospital director to the newspaper editor, and there the power is concentrated. The other individuals in the city lose personal power over their lives. Out of this distance arises the impersonality of institutions. Personal interaction becomes impossible; caring and time-consuming involvement must be sacrificed. In the impersonality of structures the temptation to yield to greed, to exploit, seems irresistible, especially if the victim is faceless and unknown.

But concentration is also a necessity. Structures in fact allow gifts to blossom and expertise to flourish. Without structures the city would face chaos and anarchy. The church, often itself splintered, has not developed well those skills of networking which deal most effectively with structures. And we must remember that it is in the church that



the care and love so lacking elsewhere may at last be found. In an impersonal world, the urban missionary carries into the city the potent force of Christ's love shown in his people.

## **BASICS FOR URBAN MISSION METHODOLOGY**

Choices regarding method spring from basic missiological commitments. For the Reformed urban evangelist, the following are essential:

1. *Holistic ministry.* It is not enough to say that the Reformed evangelist utilizes a word/deed outreach. There are parameters on both the left and right:

a. The programme must clearly show verticality. There is a sense in which every humanitarian effort strikes a blow at Satan's kingdom. Every call for justice evokes a satanic shudder. Yet for the Reformed evangelist such endeavours are incomplete unless somehow the name and purpose of Jesus Christ in it all is clearly articulated. [p. 377](#)

b. On the other hand, it cannot be confined to church planting. When Donald McGavran writes that 'though men may be healed and kindly deeds done ... these never form the purpose of the mission', then we have passed the boundary on the right. People need to know that Christ is Lord and that his purpose embraces all of life. The new Christian and the emerging community live in a void unless they understand how their new commitment informs and manages all of their life. The spectre of Christian ghettos is real enough, those separate enclaves of Christians who talk only to themselves.

2. *Circumscribing the target population.* Is working according to the 'homogeneous unit principle' then a valid method for the urban evangelist? McGavran reminds us that people accept Christ more readily when there are few linguistic, ethnic, or cultural boundaries to cross. People simply like to be Christians with people like themselves. But is this a Christian methodology? Does not Christ enjoin us to repudiate every barrier and break down every wall that separates people? Is the tribal or minority ethnic church appropriate for the ministry of the urban evangelist?

McGavran has been criticized for elevating description ('people prefer this') to prescription ('it is therefore acceptable'). Surely the church in the city, of all places, should be ready to embrace everyone. This is certainly true for the dominant white culture of the West and for the dominant tribal or cultural church in other parts of the world. But still every congregation has its character: some are high church, some casual, some charismatic.

And what then of the minority ethnic churches everywhere? Are they wrong to provide a haven for their own kind in terms of their language, customs, music, and style? Of course not! These existing patterns of human relationships are indeed God-given bridges for communicating the Gospel. The homogeneous unit principle may indeed be *provisionally accepted for minority ethnic churches*. The ultimate aim of the ethnic church is also that some day she will embrace everyone. But a valid aim en route is self-discovery. When minority ethnic Christians have found that in Christ they do have respect and freedom, when they have faced the power structures and found acceptance, then one more barrier will indeed come down. Meanwhile these Christians find that their life in Christ is indeed meaningful in terms of their language and culture. Indeed, but for that, they would not be in the church at all!

3. *Incarnation.* The urban evangelist must become incarnate in the [p. 378](#) city. The churches have too often abandoned the city, and the sin reeks to heaven. Only by physical presence with the target population can the urban evangelist be credible. Thus for both

domestic and cross-cultural missionaries, there are heavy lifestyle questions to be faced. There is risk to health and safety, and domiciling must be faced individually before God.

Every model must be tested incarnationally. At every point it asks how the church (in me individually and in the churches together) is present in the city. Servanthood is a constant dimension of the incarnational model and a crucial feature of urban mission methodology. Lordship and pretentiousness are the styles of the enemy kingdom, but the style of the incarnational model is service.

4. *Networking*. The scourge of the Christian mission is its fragmentation. Nowhere is this more emasculating than in the city where massive entities order life. The Christians could easily greatly influence these systems, but we are weakened by our divisions and parochialism. No one mission or church contains the resources or base for dealing with these large systems. Only through networking can these urban systems be made to listen and respond.

Not every facet of ministry requires networking, to be sure, but only in this way can most massive urban problems be approached. Since the powers really do belong to Christ ([Col. 1:15–17](#)), they must be put into his service. The best in structures can be put into that service through being in harness together.

Sometimes networking poses problems to missions that are reluctant to be joined with others of questionable orthodoxy. This is a legitimate concern for the testimony that will be given. Nonetheless, working together in cities is so crucial that it must be effected when possible. Our witness to the unity of Christ's body demands it. And we need it to get the job done.

5. *Prayer*. Surely, spontaneous and unorchestrated prayer must not be curtailed, but it is theologically unwarranted as well as shortsighted to keep prayer out of the mission strategy. The finest planning can be foiled by Satan's kingdom. Team members must put in effort in concerted prayer. It must be *written* right into the strategy. The sending church, too, must be involved. A regular listing of items for praise and intercession must go out to each supporting congregation. Let God's people join together for spiritual power in this great endeavour!

## CONCLUSION

The cityscape, with all its heaped-up problems, is not a dismal grey, [P. 379](#) but for the Christian, a panorama of colour and possibility. Satan's urban fortresses are being stormed as urban mission really gets underway at last, and as the church senses that the city, too, is God's turf. Let us count some of the ways:

1. The discovery of urban biblical themes is flourishing. We have today the revelations and theological base on which to found and build urban ministries. The goal of the history God is shaping for us is not the repristinization of earth to become Paradise again, but the goal is a city, a city of blessed community.

2. The social sciences, once replete with sombre statistics of urban misery, now uncover mines of rich cultural values and possibilities, treasures which may be possessed for the church and kingdom, and which explode hoary myths about the unremitting misery of urban life.

3. Urban mission is no longer simply a frightening frontier, but a force to be reckoned with in church and mission forums. Perhaps no challenge so greatly captures the imagination of mission thinkers today as that of our urban imperative.

4. The emergence of educated leadership in the churches of the two-thirds world suggests that an increasing role will be played by urban churches, for these educated ones are overwhelmingly urban. In the West, the ecclesiastical march to the suburbs and

countryside is apparently at an end. The depletion of resources for urban church work has halted and may be reversing.

5. There is light from the future, too. In the coming of the New Jerusalem, God again resides with man: 'he will *dwell* with them' ([Rev. 21:3–4](#)). This city will incarnate love as a bride adorned for her husband. The Holy Spirit is there, too, in the river of life. The divine symbolism is that of perfect community.

Though this is light from the future, already now the Spirit resolves the non-communication of Babel. Already now, Pentecost incarnates us as the bride, a tiny church, but a sign of salvation. With the empowerment of the Holy Spirit, we can proclaim and live out the message that in the cities, too, OUR GOD REIGNS!

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## Book Reviews

### **INTEGRATIVE THEOLOGY—VOLUME ONE**

by Gordon R. Lewis & Bruce A. Demarest  
(Zondervan Publishing House, Grand Rapids: 1987)  
394 pp. N.P.

Reviewed by Sunand Sumithra

Nowadays new theological books are a dime a dozen. In an era when ethics has replaced dogmatics and biblical theology systematics, it is well nigh impossible for any book on systematic theology to get the attention of theologians beyond the raising of an evangelical eyebrow. The stigma that theology divides has gripped particularly evangelical leaders the world over. That being the case the authors of this volume ought to be congratulated not only for their courage in attempting a well-argued defence of systematics but also for giving us—at last—an epoch-making, definitive work.

Ours is the age of the “How”, rather than of the “What” or the “Why”. The earthquake brought about by liberation theology has done permanent damage to the traditional way of doing theology. Though there have been beside liberation theology several other ways of doing theology, such as action-reflection method, inter-contextual method, method of correlation etc., evangelicals have been far behind in producing a viable alternative in theological methodology. “Integrative Theology” comes as fresh air in a suffocating atmosphere. In fact, the book is, as the authors claim, a response to Bernard Ramm’s challenge to evangelicals to develop a new paradigm of doing theology: Ramm asserts that evangelicals “have not developed a theological method that enables them to be consistently evangelical in their theology and to be people of modern learning. That is why a new paradigm is necessary.” Lewis and Demarest’s offer is precisely what the doctor ordered for evangelicals.

The present volume is the first of the three-volume work on “Integrative Theology.” Each volume deals with two themes: Volume 1 on “Knowing Ultimate Reality” and “The Living God”, Volume 2 on “Our Primary Need” and “Christ’s Atoning Provisions,” and

Volume 3 on “Spirit-given Life” and “God’s People, Present and Future.” Rather a scheme, with the source, the support and the end of *man* as the subject-matter of the three volumes respectively.

The first volume which is under review has eight chapters dealing with the above two themes: 1. Theology’s Challenging Task 2. Divine Revelation to All People of All Times 3. Divine Revelation Through Christ, Prophets, and Apostles 4. The Bible as Given by Inspiration and Received by Illumination 5. God: An Active, Personal Spirit 6. God’s p. 381 Many-Splendored Character 7. God’s Unity Includes Three Persons 8. God’s Grand Design for Human History.

Even a cursory glance at the contents shows that the outline of the volume is a revision of Gordon Lewis’s earlier books, ‘Decide for Yourself’, which is being extensively used in many theological institutions. As the sub-title reveals each of these eight questions or chapters are dealt with in five fields: the historical development of a given doctrine, its biblical foundations, its systematic formulation, apologetic interaction and practical application.

This new way is described in the first chapter, “Theology’s Challenging Task”, which is in fact the heart of the work. The authors’ aim in ‘integrative theology’ is to correct the weaknesses of the other theologies—confessional, fideistic and systematic. Integrative Theology, the authors rightly claim, is biblically grounded, historically related, culturally sensitive, person centred and profoundly related to life in a more adequate manner than the above theologies. In their own words, “Integrative Theology utilises a distinctive verificational method of decision making, as it defines a major topic, surveys influential alternative answers in the church, amasses relevant biblical data and their chronological development, formulates a comprehensive conclusion, defends it against competing alternatives and exhibits its relevance for life and ministry.” This way of doing theology consists of six steps which are briefly summarised as 1. the problem—defining and distinguishing a distinct problem or topic of inquiry, 2. historical hypothesis—learning alternative approaches to the problem or topic from a survey of scholars, 3. biblical teaching—discovering and articulating a coherent summary of Old Testament and New Testament teaching, 4. systematic formulation—formulating a cohesive doctrine and relating it without contradiction to other biblically founded doctrines and other knowledge, 5. apologetic interaction—defending the formulation to reveal truth in interaction with contradictory option, 6. relevance for life and ministry—applying these conditions to Christian life and ministry. The primary purpose of this integrative work is to construct a more synthetic “big picture”, as such it is both a science as well as an art. The approach is definitely evangelical since the authors say, “The only non-negotiable authority in theology is scripture, quoted in an appropriate context from a reliable text or translation.” Each of the 8 chapters are divided into six sections to deal with the six steps, and at the conclusion of each chapter two more steps are added, “review questions” and “ministry projects”, both of which the reader is expected to *do*.

By way of evaluation: The author’s presuppositions that the goal of p. 382 theology is to bring all thought and action under the Lordship of Christ, and their unhesitating appeal to the scriptures as the supreme authority are indeed praiseworthy. The argumentation is fine and very convincing with a wealth of insights and knowledge. Questions and statements are very compactly and precisely formulated, easy to remember, and seem likely to endure for a long time to come. Such precision and analytical powers of expression are to be attributed to years of teaching experience of the authors. The eight chapters are fresh, scholarly, and persuasive. Hundreds of theologians are considered or quoted from throughout church history—it seems nearly impossible to add to the list!

The words 'coherence' and 'relevance' are repeated like a refrain throughout the book, which is to show that logical consistency and existential applicability are the primary criteria for the authors' theological method. But the question arises: Is their way of systematisation universally applicable or coherent? What is coherent from the point of view of one culture, may be chaos from another. The same argument holds for the principle of relevance on which also the authors heavily depend. In countries like India where every other man is God no one questions the deity of Christ; while in the post-enlightenment cultures of Europe and North America the deity of Christ is the heart of many theological debates. As such, we have to ask as the first step of our method: Who is the investigator? The authors do readily admit that none of us comes to do theology in a vacuum, all of us have our own prejudices and presuppositions. On similar lines, it may be hard to find problems which are universally relevant.

Also the authors have not attempted to explain why in the history of the Church there are so many solutions offered to a particular problem. Is it because of the sin present in the theologisers or is it culture or scientific methodology which is to be blamed? Can truth have pluralistic results?

Another weakness of this book (like Gordon Lewis's earlier volume "Decide For Yourself") is that doing theology becomes a private enterprise. To be sure, the authors do not claim to have prepared a fool-proof method but are only moving "toward" a universally acceptable theology. If doctrines are accepted on the basis of personal decision and are moving "toward" an ideal formulation in the future, can they be adequate as convictions to live by? The role of community, of the Church in one's convictions seems to be diluted.

The authors' very extensive and even Thomistic use of Aristotelianism (the law of contradiction) does not do full justice to the use of paradoxes of Christian theology in spite of their attempt to develop a [p. 383](#) holistic "big picture." For example, paradoxes such as the simultaneous manhood and godhead of Christ, God being one and at the same time in some manner three, the Bible being at the same time both God's and man's word, Martin Luther's *simul justus et peccator* etc., in spite of any synthesizing process remain paradoxes, and give a serious blow to the use of Aristotelianism.

Unfortunately since the authors have the normal theological students as primary readers of the book, the book is an academic work, in spite of its relevance and ministry. The choice of the word 'Integrative' either smells of compromise, or seems to push the book into a multitude of theologies as merely one alternative; but perhaps there is no better term available too.

In spite of all the 'carping' I have done above, in all honesty I have no hesitation whatsoever in recommending this book for serious theological study, both for professors and students, churches, leaders as well as lay people. To repeat what is said earlier, the book is a minor revolution in evangelical theological practice.

The format produced by Zondervan is excellent. The double column style is more readable than otherwise, though the foot notes at the end of the book are less useful than at the end of each chapter. The repetition of the last two sections of each chapter, "Review Questions" and "Ministry Project" are monotonous and may not achieve what the authors seem to expect.

Here at last we have an evangelical way of doing theology and I suspect the book will become a necessity in our theological studies and institutions. I eagerly look forward to the next two volumes! [p. 384](#)

# **Journal Information**

## *Publications Referred to in this Issue*

### **International Bulletin of Missionary Research**

Published quarterly by Overseas Ministries, Study Centre, 6315 Ocean Avenue, Ventnor, New Jersey 08406, USA. Subscriptions: \$14.00 per year, \$26.00 for 2 years and \$37.00 for 3 years. Postage worldwide. Individual copies \$5.00.

### **The Reformed Ecumenical Synod Mission Bulletin**

Published by Reformed Ecumenical Synod, 1677 Gentian Drive, S.E., Grand Rapids, Michigan 49508, USA.

### **Bibliotheca Sacra**

Published quarterly by Dallas Theological Seminary, 3909 Swiss Avenue, Dallas, Texas 75204, USA. Subscriptions: \$12.00 per year, \$20.00 for 2 years and \$45.00 for 5 years.