

EVANGELICAL REVIEW OF THEOLOGY

VOLUME 18

Volume 18 • Number 1 • January 1994

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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Published by
PATERNOSTER PERIODICALS



for
WORLD EVANGELICAL FELLOWSHIP
Theological Commission [p. 2](#)

ISSN: 0144-8153
Vol. 18 No. 1 January-March 1994

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Manuscripts, reports and communications

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The Editor welcomes recommendations of original or published articles or book reviews that relate to forthcoming issues for inclusion in the Review. Please send clear copies of details to the above address.

Change of address, journal subscription, renewals and back numbers

should be sent to the Publisher, Peternoster Periodicals, P.O. Box 300,
Carlisle, Cumbria CA3 0QS, England

Subscriptions

For the British Isles and Commonwealth (1993) £17.60.

For the USA: \$55.77.

For the Developing Countries (nationals and institutions):

50% discount on the rates shown above.

Long-term rates on application to the publishers. [p. 3](#)

Editorial

It is a privilege to be asked to share with Bruce Nicholls in the editorial work of *Evangelical Review of Theology*. I am at present Head of Department of Mission Studies at the Bible College of New Zealand, having previously taught church history in Seminari Theoloji Malaysia and been in pastoral ministry in New Zealand. I am also involved with the International Association of Mission Studies as chair of their Documentation Archives and Bibliography Network.

This issue of *Evangelical Review of Theology* reflects on-going questions relating to Christianity and Other Faiths. Previous issues (eg January 1991) have contributed to this theme, but the concerns need to be revisited. As I write the Parliament of World Religions has been in session in Chicago, in honour of the gathering under the same title held there in 1893. How are Christians to respond?

It is a classic case of needing to know what our actions mean and who determines those meanings. Is being involved a sell-out to the idea that all religions are of equal value? Would it mean agreement with a religious or political agenda we do not share? Do the interpretations of others have to be our interpretations? Is it an opportunity to witness? Is it an opportunity to learn?

The mere fact that a gathering is of world religions does not answer either way the question of how much the integrity of one's own position or that of others will be respected, or of how much participation may be used by others and misinterpreted by some.

More than good will is required to deal with decisions about truth which are not removed simply by drawing boundaries wider. What is a religion? Are we talking about modern paganisms and ancient witchcraft as legitimate participants? There are groups with which many Christians would prefer to go on defining their relationship in terms of encounter rather than dialogue. But in a pluralistic world we have to take some risks in both dialogue and encounter and in some of the hard questions presented by our own faith.

John Roxborough p. 4

The Church's Response to Pluralism

Alister E. McGrath

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Developing a Christian Theology of Religions is one of the most urgent tasks confronting evangelicals today. The author of this wide-ranging article gives an incisive critique of the reductionist assumptions of the liberal pluralists (Hick, Knitter, Smith, Linbeck, Ruether etc.) and chides them on their arrogance and intolerance of the historical evangelical viewpoint. He suggests the insights of interreligious dialogue in developing our theology and outlines the main themes of biblical interpretation of the triune Creator-Redeemer God. The work of the Holy Spirit is one area that needs further reflection.

Editor

In an earlier paper¹ I outlined the difficulties that are raised for Christian thought and practice by the rise of a pluralist ideology. In this second contribution I propose to address some of those difficulties. I begin, however, by making a point that needs to be heard, especially in relation to religious pluralism.

The pluralist agenda has certain important theological consequences. It is a simple matter of fact that traditional Christian theology does not lend itself particularly well to the homogenizing agenda of religious pluralists. The suggestion that all religions are more or less talking about vaguely the same thing finds itself in difficulty in relation to certain essentially Christian ideas—most notably, the doctrines of the incarnation and the Trinity. Such distinctive doctrines are embarrassing to those who wish to debunk what they term the ‘myth of Christian p. 5 uniqueness’. We are invited, on the weak and lazy grounds of pragmatism, to abandon those doctrines in order that the pluralist agenda might be advanced.

In response to this pressure a number of major Christological and theological developments may be observed. Let me note two of them briefly before exploring them in more detail. (1) Doctrines such as the incarnation, which imply a high profile of identification between Jesus Christ and God, are discarded in favour of various degree Christologies, which are more amenable to the reductionist programme of liberalism. (2) The idea that God is in any sense disclosed or defined Christologically is set to one side on account of its theologically momentous implications for the identity and significance of Jesus Christ, which liberal pluralism finds an embarrassment. Let us turn to consider these two points.

First, the idea of the incarnation is rejected, often dismissively, as a myth.² Thus John Hick and his collaborators reject the incarnation on various logical and commonsense counts and yet fail to deal with the question of why Christians should have developed this doctrine in the first place.³ There is an underlying agenda to this dismissal of the incarnation, and a central part of that agenda is the elimination of the sheer distinctiveness of Christianity. A sharp distinction is thus drawn between the historical person of Jesus Christ and the principles that he is alleged to represent. Paul Knitter is but one of a small galaxy of pluralist writers concerned to drive a wedge between the ‘Jesus-event’ (unique to Christianity) and the ‘Christ-principle’ (accessible to all religious traditions and expressed in their own distinctive but equally valid ways).

It is fair, and indeed necessary, to inquire concerning the pressure for such developments, for a hidden pluralist agenda appears to govern the outcome of this Christological assault—a point made by Wolfhart Pannenberg in a highly perceptive critique of Hick’s incarnational views: ‘Hick’s proposal of religious pluralism as an option of authentically Christian theology hinges on the condition of a prior demolition of the traditional doctrine of the incarnation.’ Hick, Pannenberg notes, assumes that this demolition has already taken place, and he chides him for his excessive selectivity—not

¹ A. E. McGrath, ‘The Challenge of Pluralism for the Contemporary Christian Church’, *JETS* 35/3 (September 1992) 361–373.

² Perhaps most notably in *The Myth of God Incarnate* (ed. J. Hick; London: SCM, 1977).

³ See A. E. McGrath, ‘Resurrection and Incarnation: The Foundations of the Christian Faith’, *Different Gospels* (ed. A. Walker; London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1988) 79–96.

to mention his lack of familiarity with recent German theology—in drawing such a conclusion.⁴

It is significant that the pluralist agenda forces its advocates to adopt heretical views of Christ in order to meet its needs. In an effort to fit Jesus into the mould of the ‘great religious teachers of humanity’ p. 6 category, the Ebionite heresy has been revived and made politically correct. Jesus is one of the religious options made available by the great human teachers of religion.

Second, the idea that God is in some manner made known through Christ has been dismissed. Captivated by the image of a ‘Copernican revolution’ (probably one of the most overworked and misleading phrases in recent writings in this field), pluralists demand that Christians move away from a discussion of Christ to a discussion of God, failing to recognize that the ‘God of the Christians’ (Tertullian) might be rather different from other divinities and that the doctrine of the Trinity spells out the nature of that distinction. The loose and vague talk about ‘God’ or ‘Reality’ found in much pluralist writing is not a result of theological sloppiness or confusion. It is a considered response to the recognition that for Christians to talk about the Trinity is to speak about a specific God (not just ‘deity’ in general) who has chosen to make himself known in and through Jesus Christ. It is a deliberate rejection of authentically and distinctive Christian insights into God in order to suggest that Christianity, to rework a phrase of John Toland, is simply the republication of the religion of nature.

Yet human religious history shows that natural human ideas of the number, nature and character of the gods are notoriously vague and muddled. The Christian emphasis is upon the need to worship not gods in general (Israel’s strictures against Canaanite religion being especially important here) but a God who has chosen to make himself known. As Robert Jenson has persuasively argued, the doctrine of the Trinity is an attempt to spell out the identity of this God and to avoid confusion with rival claimants to this title.⁵ The doctrine of the Trinity defines and defends the distinctiveness—no, more than that: the uniqueness—of the ‘God of the Christians’. The NT gives a further twist to this development through its language about ‘the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ,’ locating the identity of God in the actions and passions of Jesus Christ. To put it bluntly: God is Christologically disclosed.

This point is important, given the obvious confusion within the pages of *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness* concerning the nature and identity of the god(s) or goddess(es) of the pluralists. Pluralism, it seems, to me, possesses a certain tendency to self-destruction in that there is—if I could put it like this—‘a plurality of pluralisms’. For example, a vigorously polemical defence of ‘pluralism’ (a word used frequently throughout its pages) may be found in *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness*. According to the authors of this volume, Christianity has to be seen in a ‘pluralistic context as one of the great world faiths, one of the streams of religious life through which human beings can be savingly related to that ultimate Reality Christians know as the heavenly Father’. Yet having agreed that Christianity does not provide absolute or superior knowledge of p. 7 God, the pluralist contributors to the volume proceed to display such divergence over the nature of God that it becomes far from clear that they are talking about the same thing.

But there is a more important point here. Pluralism is fatally vulnerable to the charge that it reaches an accommodation between Christianity and other religious traditions by wilfully discarding every distinctive Christian doctrine traditionally regarded as identity-

⁴ W. Pannenberg, ‘Religious Pluralism and Conflicting Truth Claims’, *Christian uniqueness reconsidered: The Myth of a Pluralistic Theology of Religions* (ed. G. D’Costa; Maryknoll: Orbis, 1990) 100.

⁵ R. Jenson, *The Triune Identity* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982) 1–20.

giving and identity-preserving (to say nothing of the reductionist liberties taken with the other religious traditions). The 'Christianity' that is declared to be homogeneous with all other 'higher religions' would not be recognizable as such to most of its adherents. It would be a theologically, Christologically and soteriologically reduced version of the real thing. It is thus not Christianity that is being related to other world faiths; it is little more than a parody and caricature of this living faith, grounded in the presuppositions and agendas of western liberalism rather than in the self-revelation of God, which is being related to theologically-reduced and homogenized versions of other living religions.⁶ Dialogue turns out to involve the sacrifice of integrity. The identity of Christianity is inextricably linked with the uniqueness of Christ.

So the question arises: Can one remain faithful to Christianity and engage positively with the challenge of pluralism? Or is the price of such engagement an abandonment of much of what is distinctively and authentically Christian? In what follows I wish to suggest that the Christian gospel possesses resources, neglected by pluralists, that allow us to address the modern pluralist situation with integrity and confidence.

I. BEING CRITICAL ABOUT DIALOGUE

Every now and then one gains the impression that a word has become overworked and increasingly incapable of bearing the strain that has been placed upon it. The word 'dialogue' has had the misfortune to be treated in this way in recent years. The literature of pluralism is saturated with this word, almost to the point of inducing an intellectual torpor on the part of its unfortunate readers. This fixation is understandable, given the presuppositions of pluralism, especially the unjustified (and in any case unjustifiable) foundational belief that 'religion' constitutes a genus. If the pluralist assumption that the various religions as members of a common genus must be understood to complement one another is correct, it follows that truth does not lie in an 'either-or' but in a 'both-and' approach. This naturally leads to the idea that dialogue between religions can lead to an enhancement of truth, in that the limited perspective of one religion can be complemented by the differing perspectives of another. As all religions are held to relate to the same reality, dialogue thus constitutes **P.8** a privileged mode of access to truth.

Yet the time has surely come to emancipate 'dialogue' from the bonds of such assumptions. It is perfectly possible for the Christian to engage in dialogue with non-Christians, whether of a religious persuasion or not, without in any way being committed to the intellectually shallow and paternalist view that 'we're all saying the same thing'.⁷ As Paul Griffiths and Delmas Lewis put it in an aptly entitled article: 'It is both logically and practically possible for us, as Christians, to respect and revere worthy representatives of other traditions while still believing—on rational grounds—that some aspects of their world-view are simply mistaken.'⁸ Contrary to Hick's homogenizing approach, John V. Taylor remarked that dialogue is 'a sustained conversation between parties who are not

⁶ See J. Milbank, 'The End of Dialogue', *Christian Uniqueness* (ed. D'Costa) 174–191, esp. 176–177. Milbank's critique of the shallow assumption that 'religion' constitutes a well-defined genus should be noted (176).

⁷ See A. Camps, *Partners in Dialogue* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1983) 30.

⁸ P. Griffiths and D. Lewis, 'On Grading Religions, Seeking Truth, and Being Nice to People: A Reply to Professor Hick', *RelS* 19 (1983) 78.

saying the same thing and who recognize and respect the differences, the contradictions, and the mutual exclusions between their various ways of thinking'.⁹

Dialogue thus implies respect, not agreement, between parties—and, at best, a willingness to take the profound risk that the other person may be right and that recognition of this fact may lead to the changing of positions. This is precisely the apologetic approach commended by Francis Schaeffer and others. Dialogue enables the apologist to explore the other person's worldview and to probe its defences. For example, all belief systems rest upon presuppositions. Schaeffer treats the manner in which dialogue enables these presuppositions to be identified and explored:

Let us remember that every person we speak to ... has a set of presuppositions, whether he or she has analyzed them or not.... It is impossible for any non-Christian individual or group to be consistent to their system in logic or in practice.... A man may try to bury the tension and you may have to help him find it, but somewhere there is a point of inconsistency. He stands in a position which he cannot pursue to the end; and this is not just an intellectual concept of tension, it is what is wrapped up in what he is as a man.¹⁰

The basic point Schaeffer makes is of considerable importance to a person-centred apologetics: Many people base their lives on a set of presuppositions that are (1) unrecognized and (2) inadequate and that gentle and patient inquiry through dialogue can bring to light. Experience suggests that such gentle explorations can sometimes be devastating, in that they expose the inner contradictions and confusions within someone's outlook on life. A crisis may result, in which faith can be born. (Schaeffer himself provides a number of examples of cases in which exposure of contradictions and tensions within worldviews has [p. 9](#) important [and negative] implications for their credibility.)

But I do not wish to suggest that Christian dialogue with non-Christians will be of benefit only to the latter. One of my interests concerns the development of Christian doctrine.¹¹ I have often noticed how significant doctrinal developments are in response to dialogue with those outside the Christian faith. I am not for one moment suggesting that this means that some Christian doctrines are a response to non-Christian pressures. Rather, I am stating as a matter of observable fact that dialogue with non-Christians can provide a stimulus to Christians to reexamine long-held views, which turn out to rest upon inadequate scriptural foundations.

To give an example: It was not so long ago that it was regarded as irresponsible and shocking for Christians to speak of God suffering or experiencing pain. Yet dialogue with non-Christians, especially those who espoused what has become known as 'protest atheism', provided a stimulus to reexamine the biblical and theological basis of the doctrine of the *apatheia* of God.¹² This stimulus led to the rediscovery of the suffering of

⁹ J. V. Taylor, 'The Theological Basis of Interfaith Dialogue', *Christianity and Other Religions* (ed. J. Hick and B. Hebblethwaite; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1981) 212.

¹⁰ F. Schaeffer, *Trilogy* (Leicester: InterVarsity, 1990) 132–133.

¹¹ See A. E. McGrath, *The Genesis of Doctrine* (Oxford/Cambridge: Blackwell, 1990).

¹² See R. B. Edwards, 'The Pagan Dogma of the Absolute Unchangeableness of God', *RelS* 14 (1975) 305–313; J. G. McLelland, *God the Anonymous: A Study in Alexandrian Philosophical Theology* (Cambridge, 1976) 37–40; J. K. Mozley, *The Impassibility of God* (Cambridge, 1926); T. E. Pollard, 'The Impassibility of God', *SJT* 8 (1955) 353–364. On the notion of a suffering God see J. Y. Lee, *God Suffers for Us? A Systematic Inquiry into a Concept of Divine Passibility* (The Hague: Nijhof, 1974); A. E. McGrath, *Luther's Theology of the Cross* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1985); W. McWilliams, 'Divine Suffering in Contemporary Theology', *SJT* 33 (1980) 35–54; J. Moltmann, *The Crucified God* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1974). On the more general question of the intrusion of secular philosophical ideas into Christian theology during the patristic period see J. S. O'Leary,

God, both in Scripture and in Christian tradition (exemplified by writers such as Martin Luther and Charles Wesley). Dialogue is a pressure to constantly reexamine our doctrinal formulations with a view to ensuring that they are as faithful as possible to what they purport to represent. Evangelicalism must be committed to the principle that the *ecclesia reformata* is an *ecclesia semper reformanda*. Dialogue is one pressure to ensure that this process of continual self-examination and reformation continues. It is a bulwark against complacency and laziness and a stimulus to return to the sources of faith rather than resting content in some currently acceptable interpretation of them.

II. THE PLURALIST BLIND SPOT: THE NEED FOR AN INTERPRETATIVE FRAMEWORK

Experience demands to be interpreted. But what interpretative framework is to be used? As George Lindbeck has so persuasively argued, **P. 10** the 'experiential-expressive' approach is fatally vulnerable. Lindbeck notes that the contemporary preoccupation with interreligious dialogue is considerably assisted by the suggestion that the various religions are diverse expression of a common core experience, such as an isolatable core of encounter or an unmediated awareness of the transcendent.¹³ The principal objection to this approach is its obvious failure to correspond with the data of observation. As Lindbeck points out, the possibility of religious experience is shaped by religious expectation so that religious experience is conceptually derivative if not vacuous. 'It is difficult or impossible to specify its distinctive features, and yet unless this is done, the assertion of commonality becomes logically and empirically vacuous.' The assertion that 'the various religions are diverse symbolizations of one and the same core experience of the Ultimate'¹⁴ is ultimately an axiom, an unverifiable hypothesis—perhaps even a dogma, in the pejorative sense of the term—not least on account of the difficulty of locating and describing the 'core experience' concerned.

As Lindbeck rightly points out, this would appear to suggest that there is 'at least the logical possibility that a buddhist and a Christian might have basically the same faith, although expressed very differently'.¹⁵ The theory can be credible only if it is possible to isolate a common core experience from religious language and behaviour and demonstrate that the latter two are articulations of or responses to the former. The notion of a common core experience that remains constant throughout the diversity of human cultures and the flux of history, while being articulated and expressed in an astonishing variety of manners, is vigorously defended (although, it seems to me, through an appeal to rhetoric and liberal values rather than any real concrete evidence) by Friedrich Heiler.¹⁶ Yet it is a notion that remains profoundly unconvincing.

Without having established a framework that allows him to identify what is being experienced, how can Heiler speak so confidently of a common core experience of the Transcendent? Experience itself requires to be interpreted as experience of something.

Questioning Back: The Overcoming of Metaphysics in Christian Tradition (Minneapolis, 1985); W. Pannenberg, 'The Appropriation of the Philosophical Concept of God as a Dogmatic Problem of Early Christian Theology', *Basic Questions in Theology* (London, 1971) 2, 119–183.

¹³ G. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984) 23.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid. 17.

¹⁶ F. Heiler, 'The History of Religion as a Preparation for the Cooperation of Religions', *The History of Religions* (ed. M. Eliade and J. Kitagawa; Chicago: University of Chicago, 1959) 142–153.

The form of pluralism adopted by Hick and his associates provides such a framework. On the basis of the unjustified (and, it seems to me, inherently unjustifiable) assumption that all religions are more or less the same, it follows that all must experience more or less the same things. The liberal framework precludes divergence at this crucial point. But where does this assumption come from? There is an inherent circularity to the argument, by which the belief that all religions are talking about the same absolute reality leads to the interpretation of all religious experience [p. 11](#) as relating to that same reality. There is a self-perpetuating circle here at a point at which theological rigour is clearly appropriate and necessary.

My argument, however, is not merely to point out the weakness of this pluralist approach. It is to stress the need to have a standpoint from which experience may be interpreted and to ask hard questions concerning the provenance and credentials of the standpoint adopted. To develop this let us consider a well-worn analogy concerning the relation of the religions, Let us allow Lesslie Newbigin to describe it and make a vitally important observation:

In the famous story of the blind men and the elephant ... the real point of the story is constantly overlooked. The story is told from the point of view of the king and his courtiers, who are not blind but can see that the blind men are unable to grasp the full reality of the elephant and are only able to get hold of part of it. The story is constantly told in order to neutralize the affirmations of the great religions, to suggest that they learn humility and recognize that none of them can have more than one aspect of the truth. But, of course, the real point of the story is exactly the opposite. If the king were also blind, there would be no story. The story is told by the king, and it is the immensely arrogant claim of one who sees the full truth, which all the world's religions are only groping after. It embodies the claim to know the full reality which relativizes all the claims of the religions.¹⁷

Newbigin brings out with clarity the arrogance of the liberal claim to be able to see all the religions from the standpoint of one who sees the full truth. On the basis of this familiar story he demonstrates the importance of the possession of an appropriate framework to interpret experience. The apparently unrelated experiences of the blind men are brought together in a greater and consistent whole by the king, who is able to interpret them in the light of the overall elephantine framework. The liberal pluralist is the king; the unfortunate evangelical is the blindfolded beggar—or so the pluralist would have us believe. Perhaps a more responsible—and considerably less arrogant—approach would be to suggest that we are all, pluralists included, blind beggars, to whom God graciously makes himself known.

But what framework is to be used for understanding the religions? Elephants have limited potential in this respect. John Hick and Wilfrid Cantwell Smith object to interpreting both the place and the contents of other religious traditions from a Christian point of view. But they seem to miss the fact that they have to be interpreted from *some* interpretative standpoint—and if they have excluded, as a matter of principle, a specifically *Christian* viewpoint they are obliged to adopt one that by definition is non-Christian. Further, Hick appears to labour under the misunderstanding that where Christian frameworks are biased, those of liberalism are neutral and disinterested. Yet one of the more significant developments within the [p. 12](#) recent sociology of knowledge has been the realization that there is no neutral point from which a religion or culture may be evaluated. All vantage points imply a valuation. Hick and Cantwell Smith naively

¹⁷ L. Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989) 9–10.

assume that their liberal pluralist approach is detached or objective, whereas it is obviously nothing of the sort.

Let us hear one of Rosemary Radford Ruether's Olympian pronouncements on the relation of the religions. She clearly does not intend to enter into dialogue with her opponents when, like Zeus huffing a thunderbolt at those far below him, she delivers her verdict that 'the idea that Christianity, or even the Biblical faiths, have a monopoly on religious truth is an outrageous and absurd religious chauvinism'.¹⁸ Yet the assumption that underlies the thinking of most of the contributors to *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness* is that a liberal pluralism does, in effect, have a monopoly of religious truth by allowing religions to be seen in their proper context. It alone provides the vantage point from which the true relation of the religions can be seen. Is this not also an 'outrageous and absurd' imperialism? Ruether effectively treats her own religious position as privileged, detached, objective and correct, whereas that of Christianity (or, at least, those forms of Christianity that she dislikes) is treated with little more than scorn and a sneer.

So why should we accept a liberal interpretative standpoint, which owes little if anything to Christian beliefs and is 'objective' only in the minds of those who espouse it? All vantage points are committed, in some way or another. There is no neutral Archimedean point. We need to expose 'the myth of a pluralist theology of religions', to quote the subtitle of a significant recent publication in this field.¹⁹ Given this observation, is there not a real need to develop an authentically Christian framework by which religious experience in general may be interpreted? This brings me to my next point. There is a real need to develop genuinely Christian approaches to other religions. The marketplace is dominated by secular or secularizing approaches, or those that rest upon the most shallow and reductionist of theological foundations.

III. DEVELOPING A CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY OF RELIGIONS

If a naive pluralism has gained the upper hand in the academic world, it is partly because evangelicals have allowed it to do so by failing to articulate a credible, coherent, convincing, Christian interpretation of the place of the world religions²⁰ and to ensure that this is heard and **P. 13** noticed in the public arena. Earlier I stressed the importance of developing a framework to make sense of and evaluate the place and ideas of other religions. Carl E. Braaten makes this point as follows:

For Christian theology, the religions cannot establish their meaning in a final way apart from the light that falls on them from the gospel: that is, we know what we know about what God is doing in them in the light of Christ; otherwise, we would not know what sense to make of them. Some definite perspective needs to guide our interpretations and appropriations.²¹

¹⁸ R. R. Ruether, 'Feminism and Jewish-Christian Dialogue', *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness* (ed. J. Hick and P. Knitter; Maryknoll: Orbis, 1987) 141.

¹⁹ *Christian Uniqueness* (ed. D'Costa).

²⁰ Happily there are promising developments on offer; cf. e.g. P. V. Martinson, *A Theology of World Religions* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1987); D. Allen, *Christian Belief in a Postmodern World* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1989) 185–196; C. E. Braaten, *No Other Gospel! Christianity among the World's Religions* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992) 83–102.

²¹ Braaten, *No Other Gospel!* 71.

Let me offer a modest perspective, which stands within a consensual evangelical tradition and which is grounded in the Christian doctrines of creation and redemption. The first major insight encountered by the reader of Scripture is that God created the world. Is it therefore surprising that creation should bear witness to him? Or that the height of his creation—human nature—should carry a recognizable imprint of his nature?²² And that this imprint might have considerable value as a starting point for understanding the religious impulse of the human race? Through the grace of God the creation is able to point to its Creator. Through the generosity of God we have been left with a latent memory of him, capable of stirring us to recollect him in his fullness. Although there is a fracture, a disjuncture, between the ideal and the empirical, between the realms of fallen and redeemed creation, the memory of that connection lives on, along with the intimation of its restoration through redemption.

Yet the Christian doctrine of redemption affirms that human nature, as we now see and know it, is not human nature as God intended it to be. It forces us to draw a sharp dividing line between pristine and fallen human nature, between the ideal and the real, between the prototype and the actual. The image of God in us is marred but not destroyed. We continue to be the creatures of God, even if we are nonetheless the fallen creatures of God. We have been created for the presence of God; yet, on account of our sin, that presence is but a dream. What should have been filled with the knowledge, glory and presence of God lies empty and unfulfilled instead.

There is thus a fractured relationship with God and an unfulfilled receptivity toward God within us. Creation establishes a potentiality, while sin frustrates—and yet the hurt and pain of that frustration lives on in our experience. It is this very sense of being unfulfilled that in itself underlies the idea of a point of contact. We are aware that something is missing. We may not be able to put a name to it. We may not be able to do anything about it. But the Christian gospel is able to interpret our sense of longing, our feeling of unfulfillment, as an awareness of the absence of God, and thus to prepare the way for its fulfillment. Once we realize that we are incomplete, that we lack something, then we begin to wonder if that spiritual emptiness could be filled. It is this impulse that p. 14 underlies the human quest for religious fulfillment, a quest that the gospel turns upside down through its declaration that we have been sought out by the grace of God.

It is precisely this idea that underlies the famous words of Augustine: ‘You have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you.’²³ The doctrines of creation and redemption combine to interpret our sense of dissatisfaction and lack of fulfillment as a loss, a loss of fellowship with God, that can be restored. They yield a picture of a broken human nature that still possesses an ability to be aware of its loss and to hope that it might be restored. There is a natural point of contact for the gospel, grounded in the frustration of human nature to satisfy itself by its own devices. Augustine captured this idea perfectly when he spoke of the ‘loving memory’²⁴ of God. It is a memory of God in that it is grounded in the doctrines of creation and redemption, which affirm that we have partially lost something through sin and are somehow made aware of that loss through grace. It is a loving memory in that it is experienced as a sense of divine nostalgia, of spiritual wistfulness. There is a thirst to have more of what we already have only in part.

²² See D. Cairns, *The Image of God in Man* (London: Collins, 1973).

²³ Augustine, *Confessions* 1.1.1. See the translation of H. Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford University, 1991) 3.

²⁴ *Confessions* 7.17.23; Chadwick 126–127: ‘I carried with me only a loving memory and a desire for that of which I had the aroma but which I had not yet the capacity to eat.’

The point of contact is thus an awareness or consciousness of the past presence of God and the present impoverishment of that presence, sufficient to stir us to will to recollect it in its totality through the grace of God. It is a trigger, a stimulus, a foretaste of what is yet to come and a disclosure of the inadequacy of poverty of what we now have. To use Augustine's vocabulary, the point of contact is a latent memory of God reinforced by an encounter with his creation, which possesses the potential to point us to the source through which its sense of bittersweet longing may be satisfied.

Here, then, is a powerful interpretative framework, firmly grounded in Scripture and the Christian tradition, which aims to make sense of much of human religious experience. A fundamental impulse that seems to lie behind religious experience—the quest for the transcendent—can be accounted for within the framework of Christian theology. It is not my intention to develop this point further, simply because space does not permit. But my basic contention is that the gospel itself enables us to understand why the various religious traditions of humanity exist and why there might well be at least some degree of convergence among them in relation to a search for fulfillment. That degree of convergence can be theologically justified and must be apologetically exploited.

IV. ORIENTATION TOWARD AN EVENT, NOT AN IDEA

With the advent of pluralism, many traditional modes of Christian apologetics now find themselves in a difficult position. The idea of 'universal rationality' that could act as the basis of apologetics has been **P. 15** seriously weakened. Instead pluralism invites us to think of a variety of rationalities, each of which has a claim to be taken seriously. None can be allowed to be 'right' for all of humanity (which would constitute intolerance). They are 'right' for those who accept them.

Yet at its heart the gospel concerns an historical event—or, more accurately, a cluster of historical events culminating in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Now as every historian of Christian thought knows, there exists a plurality of interpretations of Jesus Christ.²⁵ Yet the identification of a fixed starting point—the history of Jesus as witnessed to in Scripture and the living experience of the Christian community—is of vital importance in anchoring Christian theology in the midst of a pluralist sea. Here is the centre and the starting point of all theological reflection and adoration. It is something that is historically given and theologically justifiable.

But the pluralism of interpretations of Jesus is itself radically restricted if one pays attention to the historical context in which that history is located. Wolfhart Pannenberg is but one writer to draw attention to the fact that the theological interpretation of the Christevent is fixed by the historical context in which it takes place. For Pannenberg the complex matrix of ideas found in contemporary Jewish apocalypticism provides an interpretative framework within the context of which the history of Jesus (and supremely the resurrection) may be interpreted.²⁶ Standing in the historicist tradition associated with Ernst Troeltsch, Pannenberg demonstrated the possibility of breaking free from the relativistic limitations of the former's approach while remaining firmly rooted in history. It is not my concern to defend Pannenberg's particular interpretation of history at this point. Rather, I wish to draw attention to the merits of his approach, which couples an appeal to history with suggestions for the proper interpretation of that history.

²⁵ See J. Pelikan, *Jesus through the Centuries* (New Haven: Yale University, 1985).

²⁶ W. Pannenberg, *Jesus—God and Man* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1968).

This approach underlies the rise of theological postliberalism in recent years, especially in the United States. One of the most significant developments in theology since about 1980 has been a growing scepticism over the plausibility of a liberal worldview. Accompanying the retreat from liberalism have been a number of developments, perhaps most important of which has been the repristination of more conservative viewpoints. One such development has been postliberalism, which has become especially associated with Yale Divinity School. Its central foundations are narrative approaches to theology, such as those developed by Hans Frei,²⁷ and to the p. 16 schools of social interpretation that stress the importance of culture and language in the generation and interpretation of experience and thought.

Building upon the work of philosophers such as Alasdair MacIntyre, postliberalism rejects both the traditional enlightenment appeal to a 'universal rationality' and the liberal assumption of an immediate religious experience common to all humanity. Arguing that all thought and experience is historically and socially mediated, postliberalism bases its theological programme upon a return to religious traditions whose values are inwardly appropriated. Postliberalism is thus antifoundational (in that it rejects the notion of a universal foundation of knowledge), communitarian (in that it appeals to the values, experiences and language of a community rather than prioritizing the individual), and historicist (in that it insists upon the importance of traditions and their associated historical communities in the shaping of experience and thought).²⁸

The most significant statement of the postliberal agenda remains that of George Lindbeck. Rejecting 'cognitive-propositional' approaches to doctrine as premodern and liberal 'experiential-expressive' theories as failing to take account of both human experiential diversity and the mediating role of culture in human thought and experience, Lindbeck develops a 'cultural-linguistic' approach that embodies the leading features of postliberalism.²⁹ This approach denies that there is a universal unmediated human experience that exists apart from human language and culture. Rather, it stresses that the heart of religion lies in living within a specific historical religious tradition and interiorizing its ideas and values. This tradition rests upon a historically-mediated set of ideas, for which the narrative is an especially suitable means of transmission.

While I personally have certain reservations concerning the historical and theological foundations of Lindbeck's approach,³⁰ I have no doubt that evangelicalism can find in postliberalism an important ally in the confrontation with the threat of intellectual and religious pluralism. Developing this approach, evangelicals might wish to suggest that a degree of consensus might be achieved in the midst of the pluralist intellectual and religious ocean by the following means: (1) by insisting that Jesus Christ, as he is

²⁷ For details see G. Hunsinger, 'Hans Frei as Theologian: The Quest for Generous Orthodoxy', *Modern Theology* 8 (1992) 103–128. Frei's most important work in this respect is *The Identity of Jesus Christ: The Herrneneutical Bases of Dogmatic Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975). Important early statements of Frei's distinctive approach may be found in 'Theological Reflections on the Gospel Accounts of Jesus' Death and Resurrection', *Christian Scholar* 49 (1966) 263–30:6; 'The Mystery of the Presence of Jesus Christ', *Crossroads* 17/2 (1967) 69–96.

²⁸ The most important works relating to this development include: Lindbeck, *Nature of Doctrine*; W. C. Placher, *Unapologetic Theology: A Christian Voice in a Pluralistic Conversation* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1989); R. E. Thiemann, *Revelation and Theology: The Gospel as Narrated Promise* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1985). Among earlier works that have influenced these developments cf. esp. H. W. Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative* (New Haven: Yale University, 1974).

²⁹ Lindbeck, *Nature of Doctrine* 32–41.

³⁰ I develop these points in McGrath, *Genesis of Doctrine* 14–80.

witnessed to in Scripture and the living memory of the community of faith, is the starting point and normative foundation of Christian theology; (2) by insisting that the events centering upon Jesus Christ are to be interpreted within the context of Scripture itself, interpreted within [p. 17](#) the living Christian tradition, rather than the cultural and intellectual values and norms of any other period or culture—that the Christevent is to be interpreted in a scriptural context within the living community of faith. The evangelical insistence upon the ultimate authority of Scripture, however this is interpreted,³¹ thus provides a necessary, reliable and entirely appropriate anchor point for responsible theological reflection. It identifies the starting point for such reflection and provides a framework by which it may be interpreted. Such an approach will lead to a plurality of theologies, but it is an acceptable and radically limited plurality that reflects a range of options permissible for responsible Christian theology.³² Further discussion of the resulting theologies can then take place on the basis of agreement concerning sources and norms.

V. ASKING THE TRUTH QUESTION

Pluralism discourages us from asking about truth. Political correctness suggests that the idea of truth can approach intellectual fascism on account of its authoritarian overtones. As Allan Bloom summarizes this outlook:

The danger ... is not error but intolerance. Relativism is necessary to openness; and this is the virtue, the only virtue, which all primary education for more than fifty years has dedicated itself to inculcating. Openness—and the relativism that makes it the only plausible stance in the face of various claims to truth and the various ways of life and kinds of humans beings—is the great insight of our times. The true believer is the real danger. The study of history and of culture teaches that all the world was mad in the past; men always thought they were right, and that led to wars, persecutions, slavery, xenophobia, racism and chauvinism. The point is not to correct the mistakes and really be right; rather it is not to think that you are right at all.³³

Yet we have already noted that pretensions to be ‘right’ litter the pluralist agenda. Hick clearly believes that he is correct in his perception of the world’s religions, whereas that of the 1960 Congress on World Mission is ‘ridiculous’ and wrong. But the real challenge of pluralism lies in the position outlined by Bloom: that claims to be right constitute an intolerant intellectual fascism.

The danger of all this is clear. Beneath all the rhetoric about ‘openness’ and ‘toleration’ lies a profoundly disturbing possibility—that people may base their lives upon an illusion, upon a blatant lie, or that present patterns of oppression may continue and be justified upon the basis of beliefs or outlooks that are false. Even the [p. 18](#) most tolerant pluralist has difficulties with that aspect of Hinduism that justifies the inequalities of Indian society by its insistence upon a fixed social order. As Bloom remarks, the most tolerant of

³¹ For a survey of the range of options currently available see K. R. Trembath, *Evangelical theories of Biblical Inspiration* (New York: Oxford University, 1987).

³² This has been the subject of much valuable discussion recently; cf. e.g. J. D. G. Dunn, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1977); S. Sykes, *The Identity of Christianity* (London: SPCK, 1984); McGrath, *Genesis of Doctrine* 1–13.

³³ A. Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987) 25–26.

individuals finds difficulty in justifying the Hindu practice of forcibly burning alive a widow on her late husband's funeral pyre.³⁴

Furthermore the attractiveness of a belief is all too often inversely proportional to its truth.³⁵ In the sixteenth century the radical writer and preacher Thomas Müntzer led a revolt of German peasants against their political masters. On the morning of the decisive encounter between the peasants and the armies of the German princes Müntzer promised that those who followed him would be unscathed by the weapons of their enemies. Encouraged by this attractive and meaningful belief the peasants went into battle, filled with hope.

The outcome was a catastrophe. Six thousand of their number were slaughtered in the ensuing battle, and six hundred were captured. Barely a handful escaped. Their belief in invulnerability was relevant. It was attractive. It was meaningful. It was also a crude and cruel lie, without any foundation in truth. The last hours of that pathetic group of trusting men rested on an utter illusion. It was only when the first salvoes cut some of their number to ribbons that they realized that they had been deceived.

To allow 'relevance' or 'openness' to be given greater weight than truth is, quite simply, a mark of intellectual shallowness and moral irresponsibility. The first and most fundamental of all questions must be: Is it true? Is it worthy of belief and trust? Truth is certainly no guarantee of relevance, but no one can build his personal life around a lie. A belief system, however consoling and reassuring, may prove to be false in itself or rest upon utterly spurious foundations.

If I were to insist that the American Declaration of Independence took place in 1789, despite all the evidence that unequivocally points to the year 1776, I could expect no commendations for maintaining my intellectual freedom or personal integrity, nor could I expect to receive tolerance from my fellow historians. The much-vaunted virtue of academic openness would be rendered ridiculous were it to allow me to be taken seriously. I would simply be obstinately and stubbornly wrong, incapable of responding to evidence that demanded a truthful decision. An obedient response to truth is a mark of intellectual integrity. It marks a willingness to hear what purports to be the truth, to judge it and, if it is found to be true, to accept it willingly. Truth demands to be accepted because it inherently deserves to be accepted and acted upon. Academic integrity and political responsibility alike demand a passionate commitment to discovering, telling and acting upon the truth.

And that is why it continues to be important to insist not just that truth matters but that Christianity is true. p. 19 Stanley Hauerwas wrote that 'the only reason for being a Christian ... is because Christian convictions are true'.³⁶ Princeton philosopher Diogenes Allen tells the story of the person who asked him why he should go to church when he had no religious needs. 'Because Christianity's true', was Allen's riposte.³⁷ Gordon Lewis' book *Testing Christianity's Truth Claims*³⁸ is important not simply on account of its documentation of recent developments in apologetics but because it firmly declares that

³⁴ Ibid. 26.

³⁵ I take the following example from A. E. McGrath, *Understanding Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992) 11–21.

³⁶ S. Hauerwas, *A Community of Character* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1981) 1.

³⁷ Allen, *Christian Belief* 1.

³⁸ G. R. Lewis, *Testing Christianity's Truth Claims: Approaches to Christian Apologetics* (New York: University Press of America, 1990).

truth claims are being made, that they are capable of being tested, and that as a matter of principle they ought to be tested. And if pluralism is resistant to having *its* truth claims tested, it can hardly expect to be taken seriously—save by those who for the culturally-conditioned moment share its prejudices. It will be a sad day when a claim to be telling the truth is met with the riposte that there is no truth to tell.

Let me recall an episode from another period of uncertainty about the future and viability of the gospel, when Christian confidence seemed low. At the height of the ‘New Theology’ controversy in Britain in 1907, Peter Taylor Forsyth remarked that this attempt at radical theological restatement was like ‘a bad photograph: overexposed and underdeveloped’. That summarizes my feeling about much liberal theological restatement in the face of the pluralist challenge. It has received too much attention in the media and in the Church, and it rests upon inadequate theological foundations.

In this article I have been exploring some more responsible and authentically Christian approaches to the challenge posed by the rise of pluralism. As will be clear. I have had time only to identify a few approaches, mapping out briefly what deserves to be discussed at far greater length. But my basic conviction is clear: pluralism is inherently self-destructive and owes its appeal more to the rhetoric of political correctness than to its intellectual credentials. As I have argued throughout, it seems that the credibility of a pluralist ideology rests entirely upon a willing suspension of one’s critical faculties. Pluralism has the temporary advantage that it corresponds to the spirit of our age and is thus appropriate to the committed liberal outlook of so much of American academia. But that is not a permanent feature of the world. That outlook, and the resulting cultural plausibility of a pluralist ideology, will be subject to historical erosion—and what will happen then?

I conclude with a wise comment by William Inge, formerly dean of St. Paul’s Cathedral, London: ‘He who marries the spirit of the age today will be a widower tomorrow.’ Tomorrow is not that far away, and responsible Christian theology, which I believe to be represented in the readership of this *Journal*, must speak today for that tomorrow.

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The Logic of Hell: A Response to Annihilationism

Simon Chan

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The eternal destiny of those who reject the gospel, let alone those who have never heard it, is the most agonizing issue evangelicals face today in constructing a coherent Christian theology. While, traditionally, evangelicals have limited their understanding to the literal text of Scripture, this Chinese theologian adopts the logic of philosophy in order to clarify the issue as a groundwork for better exegesis. His wide-ranging discussion includes the

integrity of human freedom in relation to the integrity of the Creator-creature relationship, hell as the choice of the self against God or as God's retributive act and the relationship of acts in finite time to punishment in eternity. The author explores the nature of punishment as understood by universalists and by several well-known evangelicals who are re-examining the concept of annihilation. Finally, the author raises the issue of the all-encompassing sovereign grace of God, but does not develop his thinking on it. Surely it is here that evangelicals must give faithful and courageous leadership if the secular and religiously pluralistic people of our time are going to be drawn to the love of God in Christ.

Editor

INTRODUCTION

Historically, there are three theories about the future of the impenitent. The first and by far the oldest is the theory of eternal punishment (EP) or the doctrine of hell. The second is the theory of universal salvation (apokatastasis) or universalism which states that all will ultimately be **P. 21** saved, including the devil.¹ The third theory is called annihilationism. Unlike the previous two, this theory has no strong Christian tradition behind it.² In modern times, its association with various cult groups like Jehovah's Witnesses and Seventh-Day Adventism has tended to make it suspect in the eyes of conservative Christians. But it is interesting to note that in recent years it has gained a number of significant advocates among evangelicals, including Stephen Travis,³ P. E. Hughes,⁴ Clark Pinnock⁵ and John Stott.⁶ There are, of course, variations in the annihilationist position. One approach is to combine it with some form of purgatorial doctrine tending towards universalism and to see annihilation as a last resort after all efforts to win the free creature over have been exhausted.⁷ But all annihilationists are agreed that their position is to be preferred over the theory of eternal punishment because it makes better sense of God's goodness and justice.

The purpose of this paper is to respond to the main arguments of annihilationism and answer its main objections to eternal punishment. It will do this by showing

1. that annihilationism falls into the same error as universalism in not taking full cognizance of human freedom, albeit in a different way.
2. that it does not overcome the alleged difficulty attendant on the theory of eternal punishment.
3. that eternal punishment is the only logical position to hold which does justice to human freedom and the Christian doctrine of creation.

¹ For a brief historical survey of universalism see Richard J. Bauckham, 'Universalism: A Historical Survey,' *Evangelical Review of Theology* 15 (June 1991), 22–35.

² See *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, eds. F. L. Cross and E. A. Livingston (Oxford: OUP, 1983), s.v. 'conditional immortality'.

³ *I Believe in the Second Coming* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 196–99.

⁴ *The True Image: The Origin and Destiny of Man in Christ* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 402–7. The section was reprinted as 'Conditional Immortality' in *Evangel* (Summer 1992), 10–12.

⁵ 'The Destruction of the Finally Impenitent,' *Criswell Theological Review* 4:2 (1990), 243–59.

⁶ *Essentials: A Liberal/Evangelical Dialogue* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1988), 313–20.

⁷ This is the view of Brian Hebblethwaite in *The Christian Hope* (London: Marshalls, 1984), 215ff.

The adequacy of any theory, given our Christian assumptions, must be measured by its ability to maintain two things: (1) the integrity of man as a free creature and (2) the integrity of the Creator-creature relationship. We hope to show that only the doctrine of hell satisfies these two criteria.

We have adopted a more philosophical approach rather than, say, a biblical approach because on this particular issue we need, first and foremost, to think clearly—and philosophy is essentially clear thinking. It is important to work through the logical implications of our basic Christian assumption about the nature of God and his creature Man. This may actually provide the groundwork for better exegesis. Advocates of each theory have often accused their opponents of succumbing to psychological and cultural p. 22 conditioning. The fact of the matter is that we cannot avoid these formative factors. They influence us unconsciously and form our basic attitudes towards certain beliefs which in turn often colour our reading of Scripture. Why is it, for instance, that since the 19th century, one of the stock arguments against hell is that the saints could not enjoy heaven if they are aware of people suffering in hell, whereas earlier theologians like Tertullian, Cyprian, Augustine and Aquinas, to name a few, argued in exactly the opposite way, that the redeemed's contemplation of the torments of hell would actually enhance their blessedness?⁸ It is not our purpose at this point to decide on who are right (or more mentally sound!), but simply to note that each view flows logically from certain implicit feelings which are held to be true. To give another example, one could not help *feeling* (note well!) the special pleading of Stott for a reconsideration of annihilationism. He spoke 'with a heavy heart' on the subject of hell:

[E]motionally, I find the concept intolerable and do not understand how people can live with it without either cauterizing their feelings or cracking under the strain.⁹

But Stott would not allow his feelings to get in the way of his belief. Ultimately, the doctrine of annihilation, according to him, must be based on Scripture rather than feeling.¹⁰ Two questions come immediately to view. First, did it occur to Stott that his inability to empathize with those who believe in hell may be the result of modern psychological conditioning? Secondly, is it probable that such deep feelings would have absolutely no bearing on the way he understood the text of Scripture?

The theory of annihilation involves issues which have been extensively discussed by others in connection with universalism. We shall therefore have to begin with a brief discussion of the latter.

I. UNIVERSALISM AND THE PROBLEM OF FREE WILL

Most of the recent arguments for eternal punishment have been in response to universalism.¹¹ Perhaps the most telling argument against universalism is that, so far, it has not been able to provide a coherent explanation of human freedom.¹² Universalists

⁸ Bauckham, *Universalism*, 28.

⁹ *Essentials*, 313, 314.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 315.

¹¹ Ronald L. Hall, 'Hell, is this really necessary?' *Journal of the Philosophy of Religion* 25 (1989), 109–116; Jerry L. Walls, *Hell: The Logic of Damnation* (U. of Notre Dame Press, 1992).

¹² By 'freedom' we have in mind what in philosophy is called libertarian freedom. It means that the person's ability to choose with respect to a certain significant action is not determined by any antecedent condition

could maintain their position only by radically compromising the idea of freedom and in the end the integrity of man.

The issue is put most succinctly by Hall:

If the choice is truly free, [hell] must p. 23 be possible, even if never actual. God finally then will not *make* us accept. If some refuse, then God has no choice but to say to them, 'Not my will, but yours be done—return to the nonbeing from which I first called you'.¹³

Walls, too, has shown that both universalism and predestinationism involve a view of divine omnipotence which logically excludes any meaningful predication of human freedom. At most both views succeed in giving to man some kind of psychological freedom: a feeling of being free which is causally determined.¹⁴ We see this emasculated freedom also in a recent article by Kerry Walters in response to Hall's earlier essay. It is a strange way to define freedom in the way Walters does:

Even though I *must* ultimately accept salvation, it is perfectly within my prerogative to attitudinally will or rebel against such an inevitability.¹⁵

In other words, God could not tolerate people walking freely in hell; he would rather have them carded kicking into heaven. But the very idea of coercion of whatever kind (physical, psychological) is a contradiction of the idea of heaven. Heaven is where man is fully and freely the man God wants him to be. Universalism can be maintained only by vitiating the integrity of human freedom.

Universalists like Hick, however, understand the problem that freedom poses. He therefore attempts to develop a universalism that would give full play to that freedom vis-a-vis God's eternal love. Hick's basic premise is the Augustinian dictum 'You have created us for yourself'; that is to say, God created man with a predisposition towards himself.¹⁶ As the 'divine therapist', God has unlimited resources and time to deal with his 'patient'.¹⁷ So it seems that the cards are stacked in favour of the sinner's salvation. God is eternally patient and will continue to woo until man eventually freely yields his will to him. Hick recognizes that it is logically possible for man to continue to resist, but the probability that he will not 'amounts ... to a practical certainty'.¹⁸ Two things must be said about Hick's argument. First, Hick does not really solve the problem of freedom even with his p. 24 Augustinian conception of human nature once it is admitted that, notwithstanding his

or cause. It is only with such freedom that there can be true moral responsibility. For a defence of this concept of freedom see Alvin C. Plantinga, *God, Freedom and Evil* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 29–34.

¹³ Op. cit., 116.

¹⁴ As in Anthony Flew, 'Divine Omnipotence and Human Freedom' in *New Essays in Philosophical Theology*, eds. A. Flew and A. MacIntyre (London: SCM, 1955), 150–53. Noted by Walls, 'Can God Save Anyone He Will?' *Scottish Journal of Theology*, vol. 38, 167. It must be noted that Flew is no universalist. His point is to show that God does not exist. The argument runs as follows: Since it is possible for God to create free creatures who are causally determined to do only good, and since it would make a better world than the present one, there is no God who made the present world.

For a recent predestinarian understanding of freedom, see John Feinberg's contribution in *Predestination and Free Will*, eds. David Basinger and Randall Basinger (Downers Grove).

¹⁵ 'Hell, this isn't necessary after all,' *Journal for the Philosophy of Religion* 29 (June 1991), 180.

¹⁶ *Death and Eternal Life* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1976), 251.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 253–4.

¹⁸ John Hick, *Evil and the God of Love* (London: Macmillan, 1966), 381. Noted by Jerry Walls, 'Can God Save Anyone He Will?' *Scottish Journal of Theology* 32:2 (1985), 160.

predisposition, man is still capable of resisting God's will. Hick asks whether or not God is 'seeking actively to bring all men truly to himself'.¹⁹ Free will defenders could still agree with him that God does, but what God makes *possible* is logically different from what he makes *certain*. In the end Hick is forced to make the quantum leap from what *could* or we hope *would* happen to what *must* happen.²⁰ Secondly, Hick's confidence that the sinner could be changed by increasing two factors, love (L) and time (T), does not sufficiently take into account another kind of problem. One of the most basic principles of moral theology concerning the nature of sin is that it grows and increasingly hardens the heart with time. The longer one persists in sin the more difficult it will be not to sin. If a sinner keeps rejecting, the chances of his accepting will correspondingly get smaller through time.²¹ The possibility of conversion would eventually become so small as to be negligible. Human freedom (F) when rightly exercised (R) leads to greater freedom (F+), but freedom exercised in the wrong direction (W) leads to bondage (non-F) or a self-destructive freedom. The range of *actual* choices becomes more and more limited through time until the soul chooses only one thing: himself. His condition has become, in Luther's words, *incurvatus in se*. Thus,

F(R) + (L + T) [rarr] F+

F(W) + (L + T) [rarr] non-F²²

Hick's argument would hold if we assume an actual increase of God's love towards the unredeemed, like increasing the dosage of a medicine until it works. But Christian theology tells us that God has given all he could have given for the sinner. He could not have given more. Even where 'grace did much more abound' in the presence of abounding sin, there must come a point where the 'optimal grace' is given.²³

The only factor which could be increased, then, is time. But, again, if our moral theology is right, time does not work for the sinner. If he makes the first choice against God the next choice will be, all things being equal, more difficult. The likelihood p. 25 of his choosing against God will be greater.²⁴ There will come a time when the choice for God will be so improbable as to become practically impossible. That time is when the creature

¹⁹ *Death*, 257.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 259.

²¹ Cf. Soren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling and The Sickness unto Death*, trans. Walter Lowrie (New York: Doubleday, 1954), 236–62.

²² F is a created, natural and as yet unactualized freedom whereas F+ and non-F are qualified freedoms moving in opposite directions. It is the contention of moral theology that the freedom of the redeemed and the freedom of the damned do not have the same logical status. F+ is still in principle open to the knowledge of evil; it *could* (but would not) choose evil. But non-F is incapable of understanding the good.

²³ The idea of optimal grace suggested by Jerry Walls is helpful in overcoming the severe problem posed by a strong view of divine sovereignty: the belief that God possesses 'middle knowledge', that is, God knows what free creatures *would do* in a given circumstance. What they would do may not be actualized, in which case it is a counterfactual of freedom. The idea of middle knowledge raises serious questions about divine goodness: Why would God create such creatures who would eventually be damned if he had knowledge of what they would freely choose? Hick, of course, denies middle knowledge, and therefore could posit 'eternal wooing'. Walls, *Hell: The Logic of Damnation*, 37–40, 85–93.

²⁴ We say 'all things being equal' because it is possible that God may actually increase grace to overcome the resistance. But then, it is also possible that that grace will be further resisted, thus leading to greater hardness. This point of moral theology is not to suggest that the slippery down slide is inevitable, but that given the way things are in the moral universe, this is the way it *would* work.

freely rejects 'optimal grace'. Universalists, of course, would deny such a possibility. As one universalist put it recently,

Perhaps one should be content to speak of the indefinite (and so, nondefinite!) persistence or endurance of a flee 'no' to God, but not of its finality or eternity. As long as human freedom tries to refuse God, it fails to reach the finality for which it is created, for this finality comes not from human freedom in itself, but from and in God.²⁵

It is true that hell is not part of God's purpose of creation. God never intended man to be in hell. But that is quite different from saying that he could not be there. For to say that man could not have *decisively* chosen hell implies that God must have created him in such a way that he *must* ultimately believe. The freedom 'from and in God' is precisely the freedom to say 'no'. We are back to a compromised freedom. But if we recognize the full force of freedom, it means that ultimately hell is man's creation.

The view of Hick and Sachs seems to presuppose freedom (F) as a constant while the positive factors influencing F such as love and time increase. But F is not a constant. The very nature of moral choice is such that one is either becoming more free or less free. One is moving either towards F+ or non-F. And if this be the nature of freedom, then there is not a single factor left which induces belief in the inevitability of universal salvation.

If we are to give full play to the concept of divine justice and human freedom—which is what Christian theology would seem to require—then the question of purgatory will have to become an important factor in the whole debate. It is a reasonable construct on *prima facie* evidences. The present world is obviously an unequal world. Not every one has an opportunity to hear the gospel. Even when the gospel is heard, not everyone has the same degree of exposure to it. It is also obvious that death overtakes people at different stages of life and (we may reasonably surmise) in different spiritual conditions. To suppose that their final destiny would be decisively fixed at death would seem, at least logically, to be an injustice, unless one assumes that every person just before death is given their 'optimal grace'. But if God does it just before death, then why not after death? Most evangelicals, however, would balk at the very idea of a 'second chance'. It is anathema to both the annihilationist and advocate of EP not only on the p. 26 ground that it contradicts the alleged teaching of the Bible that the final destiny of man is decisively settled at death,²⁶ but also that it will take away all motivation for evangelizing the world.²⁷ Our belief is that the finality of death has been given much more weight than it deserves. The real issue is the nature of freedom. If man is morally free, then no number of second chances will lead him to salvation if he refuses it. By the same token, the possibility of his continual resistance after death does not make the doctrine of the second chance a serious threat to the present preaching of the gospel. In point of fact, our missionary task will still be as urgent considering that the sooner a person hears the gospel the more likely he is to receive it. The longer he waits the more difficult it gets. The possibility or nonpossibility of second chances is not really the decisive issue.

II. THE PROBLEMS OF ANNIHILATIONISM

²⁵ John R. Sachs, S. J., 'Current Eschatology: Universal Salvation and the Problem of Hell,' *Theological Studies* 52 (1991), 252.

²⁶ Harold O. J. Brown, 'Will the Lost Suffer Forever?' *Criswell Theological Review* 4 (Spring 1990), 277; Stott, *Essentials*, 314.

²⁷ Brown, *ibid.*

If the basic problem of universalism is the failure to take seriously the concept of freedom, the same could be said of annihilationism. Yet, advocates of the latter who reject universalism on the ground that it fails to take full cognizance of human freedom fail to see that their own position suffers from the same logical flaw. This will become obvious when we examine some of the arguments used by annihilationists for their rejection of the idea of hell.

A. Annihilation and Future Bliss

One common argument used against EP runs as follows: How could the saints be happy in heaven if they know full well that there are sinners in hell? But annihilationism does not overcome the psychological difficulty which is supposed to be present in a doctrine of hell. In order to make the saints truly happy, annihilationists must be prepared to defend the idea that the annihilation of unredeemed souls must be accompanied by the annihilation of certain memories in the saints; otherwise mere elimination of their being would be of no help if the saints in heaven could still remember them.

B. Annihilation and Divine Sovereignty

A second argument is from divine sovereignty. How could God be all in all if throughout all eternity there will always exist a blight in his creation? Would it not spoil the perfection that we have come to expect of the new creation? But does the existence of hell impugn divine sovereignty? No, because God could have eliminated it. But the moment he freely chose to create this world of free agents, he had already actualized a world in which evil could be present. Such a world is compatible with the Christian doctrine of divine omnipotence.²⁸ We p.27 may say that God took a risk; we do not know why. Thus creation is always regarded by Christians as a 'free act' of God.

But the real problem for annihilationism is whether it could make any meaningful predication of divine goodness. Annihilation means the unmaking of free, created agents. It means the taking away of that freedom which defines the structure of the moral relationship between God and man. It brings into question the integrity of creation. It is more likely that God will continue to maintain the created in their freedom and responsibility (even if it is a freedom purely for self) since he has already shown us how he has chosen to relate to his creation when he created man as a free agent. In short, it is reasonable to assume that God plays fair with his creation. He keeps to the ground rules. At least universalism expresses a hope which is *hypothetically* realizable (though perhaps not *actually* realizable). Universalism *could* be true without impugning the integrity of creation, whereas annihilationism could not be true without bringing into question the moral integrity of the Creator-creature relationship.

Annihilation is necessary only if we conceive of creation as existing under some kind of divine necessity, either under the principle of diffusiveness (PD) or the principle of plentitude (PP). The principle of diffusiveness states that goodness has a way of sharing, multiplying itself. If God is perfectly good, then a contingent universe *must* be the result. The principle of plentitude states that perfect goodness necessarily expresses itself in as

²⁸ Plantinga has convincingly shown that the 'free will defence' makes it possible to believe in *both* the existence of evil and the omnipotence of God. For the actualizing of such a world in which creatures are free precludes the actualization of other possible worlds in which creatures could do no wrong. Thus the fact that another seemingly better world could have existed does not mean that God is not able to create it. [*God, Freedom, and Evil*, 29–44.]

many ways as are possible, and produces as many kinds of good as it can.²⁹ If our doctrine of creation is predicated on PP or PD, then a situation which reduces one or the other will, of necessity, have to be eliminated. If so the presence of hell would be a threat to divine goodness. The furtherance of PD or PP (as in universalism) or the elimination of factors reducing PD or PP (as in annihilationism) would become necessary. But orthodoxy has maintained that creation is a free act. God is not under any necessity to create because he is a self-sufficient trinity. So, even if creation, as a result of sin, suffers from a reduction of diffusiveness and plentitude, it does not make God any less perfectly good. In short, the Christian doctrine of creation as a free act makes it philosophically tenable to maintain both perfect divine goodness and the existence of hell. It is because creation is a free act that we can agree with Morris that 'the full cost of creating free persons may be far beyond our power to imagine'.³⁰

C. Annihilation and Divine Punishment

The third objection of annihilationism to EP is, simply put, this: How **p. 28** could sin committed by finite beings within finite time be punished forever? But the problem for annihilationism is that it bases its objection on a concept of eternal punishment which is largely rejected by most of its modern defenders themselves. They would be just as much against the idea of God tormenting sinners against their will. Thus Hall distinguishes between (active) 'punishing' and (self-imposed) 'punishment',³¹ while Packer prefers 'retribution' rather than 'punishment'.³² In both cases, what is highlighted in the punishment is not so much what God does against the sinner as what the sinner does to himself. As C. S. Lewis so rightly puts it, 'the doors of hell are locked on the *inside*'.³³

That hell is essentially the choice of self against God and, therefore, a radical evil because against the highest good, is an idea that we need to explore further because it is only on such an idea that the doctrine of EP can be effectively defended. The first thing to be said about it is that it is not a sort of *theologia ex eventu*, but is probably derived from the depth of Christian consciousness reflecting upon the totality of revelation. We have, first, the testimony of Scripture about those whom God 'gave ... over' to 'the sinful desires of their hearts' ([Rom. 1:24](#)), 'to shameful lusts' (v. [26](#)) and 'to a depraved mind' (v. [28](#)). In effect, God is saying, 'If you want your way, you can have it.' Such is the nature of sin of which hell is its logical extension. Sin, according to Barth, is 'a brute fact', 'man's impossible possibility'.³⁴ His description of the 'man of sin' makes for very sombre reading: He changes 'truth into untruth' and falsities what God has actually done for him in Christ.³⁵

²⁹ See Thomas V. Morris, 'The Metaphysical Doctrine of Creation,' *The Asbury Theological Journal* 46:1 (Spring 1991), 95–112.

³⁰ *ibid.*, 104.

³¹ *Op. cit.*, 116.

³² J. I. Packer, 'The Problem of Eternal Punishment,' *Evangel* (Summer 1992), 16.

³³ Noted by Packer, 19.

³⁴ *Church Dogmatics*, IV.3.1, trans. G. W. Bromiley (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1961), 463.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 464–7. Barth, however, sees the threat of final condemnation as real but hopes for final deliverance (478).

We encounter the same understanding in the *Theologia Germanica* an early 14th Century work:

If anyone there [in heaven] took upon him to call anything his own, he would straightway be thrust out into hell, and would become an evil spirit. But in hell every one will have self-will, therefore there is all manner of misery and wretchedness ... But if there were one in hell who should get quit of his self-will and call nothing his own, he would come out of hell into heaven.³⁶

Literary artists like John Milton, Soren Kierkegaard and C. S. Lewis³⁷ have shown us that it is just such a hell which is compellingly serious because it alone makes best sense of a moral universe. Freedom, as Lewis puts it through his great teacher George MacDonald, is 'the gift whereby ye most resemble your Maker and are yourselves parts of p. 29 eternal reality'.³⁸ It is such a freedom bent completely toward self which leads Satan in *Paradise Lost* to declare:

Here we may reign secure, and in my choice
To reign is worth ambition though in Hell:
Better to reign in Hell, than serve in Heav'n.³⁹

The frightful reality of self-will is vividly portrayed in Kierkegaard in his analysis of despair which he calls 'the sickness unto death'.

That self which he despairingly wills to be is a self which he is not (for to will to be that self which one truly is, is indeed the opposite of despair); what he really wills is to tear his self away from the Power which constituted it. But not withstanding all his despair, this he is unable to do ... that Power is stronger, and it compells [sic] him to be the self he does not will to be. But for all that he wills to be rid of himself ... in order to be the self he himself has chanced to choose.⁴⁰

Kierkegaard further notes that the sin of self-will is such that it is 'within itself a consistency', that is, a substitute for the 'Power' that constituted it; 'and in this consistency of evil within itself it possesses a certain power' such that the self-willed 'demoniac' would even beg not to be 'tempted' by the good offered it.⁴¹ Such is the damned soul in hell, according to Lewis, using words reminiscent of Kierkegaard:

The damned soul is nearly nothing: it is shrunk, shut up in itself. Good beats upon the damned incessantly as sound waves beat on the ears of the deaf, but they cannot receive it. Their fists are clenched, their teeth are clenched, their eyes are shut. First they will not,

³⁶ *Theologia Germanica*, trans. Susanna Winkworth (London: Stuart and Watkins, 1966), 124–5.

³⁷ John Milton, *Paradise Lost and Paradise Regained*, ed. Christopher Ricks (New York: Signet Books, 1968); Soren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness unto Death*; C. S. Lewis, *The Great Divorce* (London: Fount, 1977).

³⁸ *Great Divorce*, 115.

³⁹ *Paradise Lost*, Bk. I, 11. 261–3. Even Jean Sarte comes nearer the truth about hell in his concept of freedom. His idealization of existence which excludes others ('Hell is other people') is what the Christian would call hell. See his *Being and Becoming*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Citadel Press, 1965), 409–532.

⁴⁰ *Sickness unto Death*, 153.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 238, 239.

in the end they cannot, open their hands for gifts, or their mouths for food, or their eyes to see.⁴²

But can such a view of hell be appropriately described as punishment? This is a pivotal question which we must now take up. Pinnock, for example, accuses EP advocates of ‘softening’ the metaphor of punishment when it is conceived in this way.⁴³ Herein lies the crucial difference between annihilationism and EP. Is punishment essentially a divine act against the sinner or is it a condition brought upon the sinner by his persistent self-will? Annihilationists would insist that their view is more in keeping with Scripture. p. 30 What they actually mean is that their own ‘literalistic’ interpretation of the punishment metaphor is more true to the fact. This is an assumption we must challenge. In the first place, what they regard as the ‘more natural’ understanding of the tenn (and so, more ‘literal’) is no less metaphorical, especially when the subject is a supra-sensible reality. It is, perhaps, only more conventional. But being more conventional is not necessarily to have the correct interpretation. It could well be that the less conventional (i.e., less ‘literal’) is actually nearer the truth. Perhaps an example at this point would help. Marcia Falk in her study of the Song of Songs⁴⁴ brings out an interesting phenomenon among many of its commentators. They were simply baffled by the ‘bizarre’ and ‘grotesque’ metaphors for beauty found in the Song. Did the ancients have a completely different sense of beauty when the neck of the beloved was compared to ‘the tower of David built for an armoury’ (4:4) and her nose to ‘the tower of Lebanon which looketh toward Damascus’ (7:5, 6)? But the problem lies not with the ancients’ sense of beauty (or lack of it!) but with the modems’ own lack of understanding the function of those metaphors for beauty. They have simply assumed what they regard to be the ‘more usual’ way of understanding. Falk, getting her cue from the Arabic *wasf*, is able to show that by knowing the part of the picture which is being compared with reality, the metaphors make extremely good sense. What Falk has demonstrated is that understanding metaphors is a much more complex undertaking and not simply a matter of assuming the ‘more natural’ meaning.

All this is to say that the annihilationist’s more literalistic reading of the metaphor for punishment is not necessarily nearer the real nature of things. He may well have been, to use a Lewisian expression, ‘victim of a metaphor’. Neither, of course, does it mean that our understanding is the more correct. But in this respect, I am more inclined to trust the poetic sensitivity of a Lewis or a Milton than the straitjacketed theologian. For it is the former who have painted for us a picture of punishment which gives a better fit.

Pinnock and Stott may well argue that if people choose to go to hell, they could not properly be said to be punished. Can a prisoner be said to be punished if he enjoys being in prison? But this confuses the psychological state which accompanies punishment with the objectivity of the penalty itself. To be shut out of the totally real is an objective punishment, even when the shutting out is freely chosen. Reality will judge that person as

⁴² *The Great Divorce*, 113–4. It should be noted that the concept of radical evil does not preclude different kinds of evil. Walls has made a helpful distinction between the ‘weak evil men’ and the ‘strong evil men’ (op. cit., 125ff.). The former are consumed by their first order desires (e.g., lust) and make their second order desires (e.g., fame) serve the first. The Tragedian in *The Great Divorce* is an example of this kind. The ‘strong evil men,’ on the other hand, made their first order desires serve their second order desires. The Bishop-Ghost who is compelled by ‘free inquiry’ rather than truth, is perhaps an example of this type (ibid., 35–44).

⁴³ *Op. cit.*, 245.

⁴⁴ *Love Lyrics from the Bible: A Translation and Literary Study of the Song of Songs* (Sheffield: Almond Press, 1982), 80–87.

existing in a pathetic state even if he may not think so. Also, such a person cannot be said to be psychologically indifferent. To hark back to Kierkegaard, the sinner's despair over his sin 'is an attempt to maintain oneself by sinking still deeper'; and he sinks deeper 'by casting from him the good'.⁴⁵ He 'enjoys' darkness only in the sense [p. 31](#) that he hates light more. Perhaps another picture, this time from Lewis' Narnian Chronicles, could help. In *The Last Battle* (ch. [13](#)), there is the scene of the dwarfs who sat huddled together, refusing all forms of help because they could not see beyond themselves: 'The Dwarfs are for the Dwarfs.' But these were the final words of Aslan:

They have chosen cunning instead of belief. Their prison is only in their own minds, yet they are in that prison; and so afraid of being taken in that they cannot be taken out.

One could not have thought of a more 'appropriate' condition in which the word punishment fits: They were in an objectively pathetic state, yet not such that we feel sorry for them as we would toward an underdog. Of such condition we could not have said any more or less than what is spoken by the mysterious voice in the Apocalypse: 'Yes, Lord God Almighty, true and just are your judgments' ([Rev. 16:7](#))—and felt that they are just the right words.

The annihilationists' argument would be valid if we grant their concept of punishment. Sins committed in finite time cannot be punished eternally if by punishment we mean God's direct punitive action against sinners. It would have been more just of God to let the sinners simply slip into non-being at the point of death. Let us call this the 'weak' annihilationist view. Advocates of this view (e.g., Hughes and Travis) see human beings as naturally mortal beings and immortality as a superadded gift to those who believe. But there is a 'strong' annihilationist view advocated by Stott which sees annihilation as involving some form of direct action from God. This view is no doubt necessitated by some such biblical considerations as the intermediate state and the resurrection of the wicked. The wicked must be raised to be punished for a period of time commensurate with their sins before being finally annihilated. This 'strong' view, however, raises more problems about divine justice than it solves. One must ask: What is the point of the intermediate state and the resurrection of the wicked? Why must they be subject to a period of torment when the intended end is their extinction? It seems unnecessarily cruel to raise them up only to destroy them again.

But the 'weak' view is not without its own difficulty. If our concept of self-imposed punishment is correct, then even such annihilationism will still be unjust because the sinner has no choice but to be annihilated. What if he refuses to? The annihilationist may well counter: 'But why would anyone not want to be annihilated given the misery of his condition?' But would he? The very act of despairing, as Kierkegaard notes, is to shut out 'every assault of the good' and to shut himself in deeper despair.⁴⁶ He may just not want to be destroyed, preferring his own self-enclosed freedom:

Free, and to none accountable, preferring
Hard liberty before the easy yoke
Of servile Pomp.⁴⁷ [p. 32](#)

⁴⁵ *The Sickness unto Death*, 241.

⁴⁶ *Op. cit.*, 240.

⁴⁷ *Paradise Lost*, Bk. II, 11. 256–8.

He may even derive a certain perverse satisfaction in existing in continual defiance, or in the vain hope of heaven's ultimate defeat—

... him to unthrone we then
May hope, when everlasting Fate shall yield
To fickle Chance, and Chaos judge the strife.⁴⁸

But let us say that the sinner is willing to be annihilated. Even this entails difficulty for the annihilationist. For that would imply that there must still be a chink in his armour which still lets in some light for him to agree with his Maker that annihilation is in his best interest, or God must have succeeded in making him so. In either case, annihilation would be unjust. But if it is the latter, the question arises: If God succeeded in making him willing to be annihilated, why didn't God make him willing to be saved? Universalism would have been the preferred option.

III. SOVEREIGN GRACE

I grant that the annihilationist's picture of the future world is the neater one, swept clean of all the unsightly, filthy spots. But the cleaning process is carried out at the expense of changing the ground rules of creation. God will certainly be sovereign, but what sterile sovereignty! On the other hand, the world in which there is a hell is admittedly messy. But then what is ultimately revealed is the triumph of another kind of sovereignty: the sovereignty of grace.

Hell is man's creation, yet in a more ultimate sense it is with God's permission and by his grace. The damned—or those who damned themselves—are able to exercise their puny wills against God only because he maintains them in freedom by grace. It is in this sense that Donald Bloesch describes hell as 'the last refuge for the sinner'.⁴⁹ It is also in this light that we can now understand why the ancient theologians consider the contemplation of hell as serving to promote the blessedness of the saints in heaven. (There is no evidence to suggest that such a thought is the product of a perverse mind or a vindictive will.) For one cannot think of hell without thinking of the all-encompassing grace of God.

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The Logic of Hell: A Brief Rejoinder

John Start

I have a warm personal regard for my younger friend and brother, Simon Chan. I am thankful for his Christian integrity and his commitment to Christian scholarship, and I have

⁴⁸ Ibid., Bk. II, 11. 231–3.

⁴⁹ *Essentials of Evangelical Theology*, II (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1978), 227.

read his essay with care and respect. I am also grateful to the Editor of ERT for giving me the opportunity to make a brief rejoinder.

(1) I welcome the public discussion of this solemn even ‘agonising’ (as Dr Chan rightly calls it) issue. It is a mark of evangelical maturity if we are able to debate with one another on the mutually agreed basis of Scripture, without misrepresenting, vilifying or disenfranchising one another. In Dr Chan’s article I think his paragraph on ‘understanding metaphor’ may offer the most fruitful way forward in our continuing interevangelical dialogue.

(2) I fully agree with Dr Chan that all of us come to Scripture with our own presuppositions. A totally open, objective and presuppositionless approach is impossible. But if he wonders whether it has occurred to me that I may be psychologically conditioned, I wonder whether it has occurred to him that he may be *philosophically* conditioned! He seems to me to make assumptions about ‘freedom’ and its ‘logic’ whose biblical basis still needs to be verified.

(3) I hope that nobody will jump to conclusions about my own position after reading Dr Chan’s article, without also reading what I wrote in 1988 on pages 312–320 of *Essentials* (Hodder, UK) or *Evangelical Essentials* (IVP, USA). I have been disappointed by brothers who have spread rumours about me, or given credence to them, without first taking the trouble to check the facts (as Dr Chan has). That is not the way to promote genuine evangelical dialogue.

(4) I am sorry that in his essay Dr Chart characterizes the concept of ultimate annihilation as an *alternative* to ‘the theory of eternal punishment or the doctrine of hell’. For this is not the case. Speaking for myself, I believe in hell and in eternal punishment ([Mt. 25:46](#)). The debate [p. 34](#) concerns not the eternity but the nature of this punishment, whether the wicked will endure conscious torment for ever or be destroyed/ annihilated for ever. I find it confusing that Dr Chan writes in his Introduction of *three* theories about the future of the impenitent. It would surely be more accurate, and more conducive to mutual respect, to say that there are *two*. On the one hand there is the eternal salvation of all (universalism) and on the other the eternal damnation of the impenitent (in the form either of torment or of annihilation).

(5) One evangelical scholar has referred to me as ‘that erstwhile evangelical’. But no, the hallmark of authentic evangelicalism is not that we repeat traditional beliefs, however ancient, but rather that we are always willing to re-examine them, and to subject them to fresh biblical scrutiny. This is not adjusting to liberalism, but being open to Scripture. And it *can* be argued that the *natural* interpretation both of the language of ‘destruction’ (e.g. [Mt. 10:28](#)) and of the imagery of fire (which ‘consumes’, e.g. [Mal. 4:1](#); [Mt. 3:12](#)) suggest annihilation rather than torment.

(6) Belief in the ultimate annihilation of the unsaved does not cut the nerve of missionary commitment, as some claim. As far as I know, my hesitant acceptance of it has not affected my own zeal for evangelism. The greatest incentive to world evangelization is concern for the glory of Christ.

(7) Dr Chan describes me as an ‘advocate’ of annihilation. But I am not pleading a cause, which is what advocates do. I wrote in *Essentials*: ‘I do not dogmatize about the position to which I have come. I hold it tentatively’. My belief is that there is no ‘knockdown’ biblical argument on either side which effectively settles this issue. Both sides are faced with difficult texts. I am disturbed by the excessive dogmatism of those who claim that only one view is biblical, and that those who are not committed to it forfeit the designation ‘evangelical’. If I am an advocate at all, I am pleading for greater humility of judgment. We evangelical believers need to give one another liberty wherever Scripture is not absolutely plain. We already do in other areas of eschatology (rapture,

tribulation, millenium etc.); why not in this area too? The late Professor F. F. Bruce wrote to me in 1989 that ‘annihilation is certainly an acceptable interpretation of the relevant New Testament passages’. He added: ‘For myself I remain agnostic’. My position is similar.

6 September 1993 p. 35

Confessing the One Faith: An Evangelical Response by W.E.F. Theological Task Force on Ecumenical Issues

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The Confessing the One Faith document by the Commission of Faith and Order of the World Council of Churches is an explication of the Niceno-Constantinopolitan creed. Churches are being asked whether they can recognize in it the faith of the apostles and on that basis can recognize one another as churches of Jesus Christ. The earlier study document by Faith and Order, ‘Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry’ (1982), had a similar goal of manifesting the unity of the churches. In this evaluation and response the Theological Commission seeks to test this document against the normative testimony of the Apostolic writings—the Scriptures. The response was sent to the Faith and Order Commission for consideration at their international meeting in August 1993. It is also addressed to the W.E.F. Constituency for their responses. The Task Force will welcome responses from the readers of E.R.T. Write to The Convenor, Dr. Paul G. Shrotenboer, 1677 Gentian Dr. S.E., Grand Rapids, MI 49508, USA.

Editor

INTRODUCTION

In a world in which the central affirmations of the Christian faith are being assailed from all sides—even its core and foundation, namely, Christ Jesus as the truth—we welcome the attempt at clarifying key aspects of the Christian faith in the document *Confessing the One Faith*, (Faith and Order Paper No. 153, World Council of Churches).

Observing the World Council of Churches (WCC), Evangelicals have had concerns: that the quest for visible unity would be pursued at the expense of truth; that the scandal of disunity would propel ecumenists towards a lowest-common denominator p. 36 approach to Christian doctrine; that the urgency of the sociopolitical ills of our time would lead to impatience with truth, captured in the adage, ‘Doctrine divides, service unites’; and finally, that certain approaches to dialogue with people of other living faiths would lead to relativism and syncretism.

In that climate, we welcome the study project on the Apostolic Faith and specifically this explication of the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed, commonly known as the Nicene Creed (hereafter NC). It evidences a seriousness and insight concerning the core of the Christian faith. In the following response we will outline our positive appreciation, as well as areas of concern.

At this point, we wish to say that the success of this Apostolic Faith venture within the Commission on Faith and Order and the WCC as a whole could become an important step towards bridging the gap between Evangelicals and the WCC.

In preparing this response we wish to be loyal to the faith, the body of truth that was once for all time entrusted to the people of God ([Jude 3](#)). Our prayer is that of the apostle Paul, that God will give us all a spirit of unity among ourselves as we follow Jesus Christ so that with one mind and heart we may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ ([Rom. 15:5, 6](#)).

The Steps in the Apostolic Faith Project

Confessing the One Faith (hereafter COF) is a part of the search for visible unity undertaken by WCC. WCC has identified 'three essential conditions and elements of visible unity: the common confession of the apostolic faith; the mutual recognition of baptism, eucharist and ministry; common structures for witness and service as well as for decision-making and teaching authoritatively' (Intro 1).

The WCC has taken the NC as the means to express the apostolic teaching since it has been the most widely accepted statement of faith through the centuries (Intro 12–16). Nothing like that has been undertaken before in the history of the Christian church: to come to a common expression of the apostolic faith on the basis of a creed that is 1600 years old.

For this project, the WCC has adopted a three-stage process: *explication*, *recognition* and *confession*. Explication was chosen as the starting point because 'it is the presupposition for reaching the goal of a common recognition and confession of the apostolic faith in our time' (Intro 10; see also Intro 22). The document before us now represents the first stage, explication.

Before examining the significance of these stages, it may be helpful to give a summary of the Document's description of each.

Explication 'seeks to uncover the relevance of the Christian faith in the face of some practical challenges of our time and world' (Intro. 11).

The Document describes the second stage, recognition, in this way: 'The process of *recognition* implies that each church is called to recognize:

- the apostolic faith in its own life and practice;
- the need for repentance (*metanoia*) and renewal as a consequence of [p. 37](#) seeing where they are not faithful to the apostolic faith;
- other churches as churches where the apostolic faith is proclaimed and confessed' (Intro 18).

This threefold recognition is the path along which the churches can arrive at a common *confession* of the apostolic faith. It is directed first to the churches themselves, so that they may examine whether they are in the faith of the apostles and undergo renewal where they have not fully attained it, and then turn to the other churches as churches that are true to the apostolic faith.

Though the third stage, *confession*, is the goal of the previous two stages, it is not clearly described. The aim of the Apostolic Faith project 'is not to formulate a new ecumenical creed' (Intro 4). Rather, the confession it seeks to facilitate appears to be an *act* of confessing the apostolic faith. The precise nature and implications of this act need to be clarified.

COF is not to be seen as a consensus document or even a convergence statement (Intro 19); it is a study document. This means that it should not be put on a par with the earlier Faith and Order Document, *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*. What status it may receive after the World Conference on Faith and Order in August 1993 remains to be seen. This

document is intended is an '*instrument of recognition*' (page 7, emphasis added): The purpose of the common explication of the NC is to increase mutual confidence so that all churches may be helped to recognize the apostolic faith in each other (Intro 20).

The COF study book is structured as follows: after introductory material, it deals with each of the three main articles of the NC (belief in God, belief in the Lord Jesus Christ, and belief in the Spirit, the Church and the life of the world to come). In each case, it sets out 'The Creed and its biblical witness' and then offers an 'Explication for today'.

REFLECTION ON THE PROCESS

We applaud this effort to put an end to the divisions in the church and to 'call the church to the goal of visible unity in one faith' (Intro 1). We affirm that unity cannot be found, as some in the past have thought possible, by ignoring the doctrinal issues that divide. We agree that the apostolic testimony is essential. We recognize that the NC is a useful place with which to begin to find agreement and arrive at a common expression of the apostolic faith.

But is it sufficient? The NC was written in a specific time and addresses specific problems of the church, but it leaves untouched the vast majority of problems that have vexed the church throughout its history. It does not treat in any direct way the issues that caused the greatest division of all, namely, the one that took place in the 16th century (involving such doctrines as *sola gratia* and *sola scriptura*). Some issues which flow directly from the NC, such as the incarnation and resurrection, are not dealt with extensively in the Explications. Others, which are not mentioned and could not have entered the minds of the ancient church fathers, such as secularism and neo-paganism, are given p. 38 treatment. The selection seems to be somewhat arbitrary.

Evangelicals also have a problem with what might be called 'confessionalism': when a creed becomes the sole means through which the apostolic testimony is filtered, the creed tends to detract from the normative testimony of the apostles which, as all recognize, is much broader than what can be summarized in any single creed.

In the fervent hope that this Faith and Order study project will move us all closer to the apostolic faith and thereby closer to one another, we offer the following observations which we trust will be helpful in our common understanding of the one faith and will equip us to confront the ungodly forces in the world today.

In our response, we have sought to concentrate on the following general areas.

1. The Authority of Scripture
2. Universalism and Religious Pluralism
3. The Church
4. Secularism

EVALUATION

The Authority of Scripture

Any truly ecumenical explication of the apostolic faith for today must not only affirm the authority of Holy Scripture; it must also be clear, especially in the light of persisting errors and misconceptions, concerning the source and nature of that authority.

Analysis

Indications of the Bible as an authority are present throughout COF, most evidently in the format by which the effort is regularly made to show that the formulations of the NC

reflect the 'biblical witness'. The affirmations of the NC 'are rooted in the witness of the Holy Scripture and must be tested against them and explicated, in their light, within the context of the tradition of the Church (Intro 17). We appreciate this endeavour to root the Explication in the Scriptures and its success in doing that in many instances.

The NC has no explicit statement of biblical authority. Yet unmistakable indications are present in at least three places: in the second article, in the phrase 'in accordance with the scriptures; and in the third article, in the affirmations that the Holy Spirit 'has spoken through the prophets', and that the Church is 'apostolic'.

We observe that the Document does not explicate, or even mention, the phrase 'in accordance with the scriptures'. This is the only element in the NC completely passed over in this way.

In explicating the first of the two affirmations in the third article ('*The Spirit and the prophets*', 213–215), plainly the concern of COF is to stress *continuity*—continuity in the presence and speaking of the inspiring, prophesying Spirit, beginning with the Old Covenant and continuing on during the New Covenant until the present. The affirmation of the NC is not to be taken to deny that 'the *gifts of prophecy* are still bestowed today' (215); the accent is on proclaiming 'a specific word of God' today (215). In the crucial matter of finding criteria for distinguishing p. 39 genuine prophecy from what is not, 'the biblical witness and the tradition and confession of the Church' are apparently placed on the same level (215).

Similarly, COF declares that the apostolicity of the Church is 'manifested in its faithfulness to the Word of God, lived out and witnessed to in the apostolic Tradition, guided by the Holy Spirit throughout the centuries, and expressed in the ecumenical Creed' (241; cf. Intro 2: '... the apostolic faith as witnessed to by the Holy Scriptures and summarized in the creeds of the early Church'. (Intro 17): '... the apostolic faith as witnessed to by the Holy Scriptures, proclaimed in the Tradition of the Church, and expressed in the Creed, ...'). Earlier, in the Introduction (7), the apostolic faith is called a 'dynamic reality'. Further, this reality is not only said to be 'grounded ... in the normative testimony, reflected in the New Testament', of the apostles and those associated with them in proclaiming the gospel; it is 'grounded' more broadly as well, 'in the prophetic witness of the people of the Old Testament' and of the larger Christian community in the apostolic age.

Evaluation

Such statements are ambiguous and beg important questions about biblical authority. What makes Scripture normative? What gives the witness of the prophets and apostles its uniqueness, if any, in distinction from the testimony of the rest of God's people? Is Scripture God's word and, if so, in what sense? What authority does 'the Tradition of the Church' have in relation to that of Scripture? Most centrally and crucially for COF as a whole, what is the relationship of Scripture to the apostolic faith as a content to be believed (cf. [Jude 3](#))? COF does not face such questions directly and the answers implied are unsatisfactory.

There is a variety of positions among Evangelicals about the gift of prophecy. But, with few exceptions, they are agreed that such prophecy as may take place today does not function alongside of Scripture, on the same plane, but must be subject to its authority as final. Scripture and the subsequent witness of the church, including confessions like the NC, are not on the same continuum of the Spirit's activity. These embody the church's ongoing response to and appropriation of the former as God's inspired word. To employ an old but still useful formula, our creeds and confessions, at their best, are 'normed norms'; Scripture, seen in its totality as the Spirit speaking, is the 'norming norm'.

The lack of a clear articulation of the nature and role of Scripture severely hampers the Document. Only one statement suggests the unique authority of the Scriptures (Intro 17). They are never clearly affirmed as the word of God, nor are they recognized as standing above the church.

Such a view of Scripture and its authority we believe to be deficient. Certainly, we recognize, the Scriptures may be properly categorized as witness. But they are more; not just as witnesses to God's word, they are as well themselves God's word. The [p. 40](#) word of God is not a content or subject matter more or less adequately expressed or witnessed to by the biblical writers, so that what they have written and how they have expressed themselves are matters always open, subsequently, to question and even correction. Rather, Scripture is God's word because the words of the human authors are at the same time and as such his very own.

This view we believe to be faithful to the intention of the NC and, much more importantly, to the biblical witness itself (e.g., [Acts 1:16; 4:25](#); 2 Tim, [3; 16](#); [Heb. 3:7; 10:15-17](#); [2 Pet. 1:20-21](#)). in continuity with the church in all ages we find this conviction expressed in exemplary fashion in the words of another creed:

The authority of the Holy Scripture, for which it ought to be believed, and obeyed, dependeth not upon the testimony of any man, or Church; but wholly upon God (who is truth itself) the author thereof: and therefore it is to be received, because it is the Word of God (Westminster Confession of Faith, [1:4](#)).

This confession of biblical authority, which we find to be missing from COF, we consider essential to any explication of the apostolic faith today.

In addition to this basic reservation, the teaching authority of Scripture does not function decisively in several of the *Commentary* sections (according to Intro 34, these commentaries 'contain either additional historical background information or theological details or continuing controversial themes'): the impression is given that the virgin birth, as an historical event, may not be taught in Scripture and is not a necessary element of the apostolic faith (124); the bodily reality of Christ's resurrection is rendered uncertain (176), as is his return as a future, bodily event (187); matters like prayers for the dead and belief in purgatory and the intercession of the saints appear to be acceptable to COF (267).

The matter of biblical authority is a crucial one. In fact, because most, if not all, Evangelical churches will find CO to be unclear in this respect, they will be prevented from recognizing it as an adequate explication of their faith.

2. Universalism and Religious Pluralism

The question of Christianity's relation to other religions is a critical issue today in light of the resurgence of other world religions as well as the increasing tendency in many churches either to teach or to hold open the possibility of universal salvation.

COF addresses the issue of universal salvation explicitly (268, *Commentary*). It denies that 'the time for restoring all things' in [Acts 3:21](#) is to be understood in the sense of universal salvation and rejects the notion that [1 Timothy 2:4](#) provides 'a guarantee of universal salvation for those who reject the call to conversion'. The following paragraph underlines the fact that 'Christian doctrine has to do justice not only to the unlimited intention of God's saving love but also to the many New Testament warnings that eternal damnation is possible'.

Evangelicals agree that 'the saving [p. 41](#) will of God remains an ultimate mystery' (268). There is an insuperable difficulty in trying to harmonize passages in Scripture that speak of God's loving desire for the salvation of all humanity and those that clearly state

that according to his electing purpose only some will be saved. Since we do not want to reason away the one set of passages to make it conform to, or not appear to contradict, the other set, we willingly accept them both, awaiting further enlightenment as we are led by the Spirit in studying the Scripture.

In its references to salvation, the work of Christ, and the purposes of God as Father, COF itself tends to use language, which left unqualified, leaves a universalistic impression: for instance, 'the providence of the Father extends to all creatures and aims at re-uniting them in the community of his kingdom' (56); Christ's suffering, death, and resurrection are 'the fulfillment of God's saving purpose for all people'; he [God] 'took away the guilt from humanity' (143).

Such language, though in itself acceptable and defensible biblically, is used in a way that obscures the special, even exclusive way in which God is the Father of all who believe in Jesus Christ. Nor does it make clear that intrinsic to the gospel is the call that all people must repent and trust in Christ.

Evangelicals would also call attention to the many passages that state that eternal damnation is a dreadful fact for those who reject Christ, not just a possibility (e.g., [Dan. 12:2](#); [Matt. 18:8](#); [25:41](#), [46](#); [Mark 3:29](#); [John 5:28-29](#); [Heb. 6:2](#); [10:29-31](#); [Rev. 14:11](#); [20:10](#), [15](#)).

COF addresses the relationship of Christianity to the other world religions at some length (31-35). Throughout it shows sensitivity and even sympathy for them, at the same time warning against the ever-present tendency to idolatry in all religions (30). In the face of challenges from other religions, the Document affirms the concreteness of the revelation of the One, Triune God (34) and maintains that God's revelation in Jesus Christ 'is the only true way' (35). (We note with regret that the statement in the previous edition of COF [Faith and Order Paper No. 140], 'No creature can fulfil its being without communion with him [Jesus Christ]', has been significantly weakened to read: 'No creature can attain fulfillment without him' [119]).

We fully agree that the relationship of Christianity to other religions naturally leads to the issue of religious dialogue. One reason is that other religions *may* contain 'important elements of truth' (35). Whether elements of truth can be found in a particular religion and what these elements are cannot be established in advance but only by comparing the truth claims of other religions with 'the only true way' of salvation (35), Jesus Christ. The Document unfortunately does not state this explicitly. There is another reason for dialogue. Because of our common, universal human need, as sinners, for salvation, we must be concerned genuinely to understand, and to represent fairly, the positions of other religions. We would suggest, [p. 42](#) then, that true respect for partners in interreligious dialogue requires the recognition of the uniqueness of their religion as well as that of Christianity. Only as we are open to recognize the central differences as well as whatever similarities there are, can the dialogue be truly fruitful.

Evangelicals affirm that God's saving revelation in Jesus Christ is unique and authoritative. We also maintain that in Christ God has provided the only way of human salvation (e.g., [Acts 4:12](#)). This conviction determines how we view other religions and claims that God has also spoken through them, as well as what content and value we attribute to dialogue with people of other faiths.

Dialogue may never become a substitute for gospel proclamation or Christian witness but must rather be an authentic avenue to present Jesus Christ as the only Saviour of the world. Dialogue should therefore not conceal the singularity and supremacy of God's revelation in Christ. Nor in dialogue should we merely compare one religious experience with another. On that basis, for one party to claim exclusive knowledge would be a display of arrogance. But dialogue should aim primarily at sharing the gospel with people of other

faiths; those who by God's grace are saved share with those who are still lost the good news of the redemptive events in salvation history centred in the person and work of Christ.

3. The Church

Both WCC and WEF have studied particular aspects of the church and produced important studies and documents (on the WCC side, see in particular, 'The Church, the Churches and the World Council of Churches' in *A Documentary History of the Faith and Order Movement, 1927–1963*, Toronto 1950; *The New Delhi Report*, 1961, 'Unity', especially par 2; on the WEF side, see 'The Evangelical Response of BEM Document' in *AETEI Journal* Jan–Jun 1990; 'The World Evangelical Statement of Faith' especially par 5: [We believe] 'The united of the Spirit, of all true believers, the Church, the Body of Christ'). Further study of the nature of the church is needed by both bodies, in particular, study of the nature of the unity of the church (the relationship between local and universal church, visible and invisible church, and the role of ordained ministers with respect to the unity of the church). Here

The Nature of the Church

We appreciate the initial steps COF makes in explicating the nature of the church. Particularly significant is the persuasion which underlies the whole ecclesiological reflection in the document that 'the life and unity of the Church are grounded in the communion of the Trinity' (225).

Together with the framer of COF, Evangelicals hold to the attributes of the church as these are expressed in the NC: one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church—though they tend to understand these attributes in a different way.

Both believe that this church is the people of God, the body of Christ, and the communion of the Spirit. The church of the NT 'is linked to the beginning and model of the p. 43 people of God in the *qahal* of the old. The Church is called to declare the "wonderful deeds of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light" ([1 Pet 2:9](#))' (223). The body of Christ describes 'the intimate, organic relationship which exists between the Risen Lord and all those who receive the new life through communion with him' (221). 'The Church is such a communion because all those who believe in Christ are in one true fellowship with the Father and his Son, Jesus Christ, and by partaking of the same divine gift are united together in the Holy Spirit ([1 John 1:3](#))' (231).

The Mission of the Church

The mission of the church, according to COF, flows from the lordship of Christ (181). He has sent out his followers in missionary outreach to sow the good seed of the word and bring Christ's love to all people (236). 'The gospel it [the church] proclaims and the witness it renders invites all people to accept the Good News of the kingdom' (233).

Like most creeds, the NC lacks a statement reflecting Christ's mandate, 'As the Father has sent me, so send I you' ([John 21:20](#)). The Document does, however, speak about the apostolicity of the church in connection with mission and explicates this word extensively.

According to the NC, the church is apostolic. This designation indicates a two-fold relation to the apostles. 'The *apostolicity* of the Church is manifested in its faithfulness to the word of God, lived out and witnessed to in the apostolic tradition, guided by the Holy Spirit throughout the centuries, and expressed in the ecumenical Creed' (241). 'The apostolicity of the Church expresses its obligation and commitment to the norm of the apostolic gospel, of God's action in the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ' (220).

The church is apostolic also in that it is sent by God to carry out his mission. Thus, ‘the church is apostolic by following the example of the apostles in continuing their mission to proclaim the gospel which is confirmed by the action and the gift of the Holy Spirit’ (241). This means that the appearances of Jesus after his resurrection ‘function as an invitation to the apostles to spread the good news of the resurrection’ (170). The confession of the lordship of Christ supports and strengthens our confidence in carrying out the missionary task of the church to announce the lordship of Christ to all the world (182). The gospel is the joyous message of the resurrection that enables Christians to cross all human frontiers and break the barriers that divide us—of class, caste, race, sex, religion and ideology (177).

Evangelicals can only rejoice in this clear affirmation of the evangelistic mission of the church. In our understanding, to evangelize is not only to proclaim the good news in Christ Jesus but also ‘to act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God’ ([Mic 6:8](#)). All the churches are challenged to more vigorous and innovative involvement in the mission of God in the world: they need to call people to repentance, faith and discipleship, and to promote peace and justice. [p. 44](#)

4. Secularism

COF’s treatment of secularism is highly commendable, especially in the delineation of the structural-societal embodiment of secularization (28). This systemic secularism indeed declares social, economic, and political life to be ‘self-sufficient’. Because religion is relegated to the private sphere, God becomes largely irrelevant to the shape and direction of life in the public arena. Secularism shapes this vast area of God’s world as if it is not God’s world, thus, as the Document puts it, denying ‘any accountability of the public realm to God’ (28).

The Document rightly points to the deepest cause, as well as the concomitant condition, of secularism, namely the idolatry of absolutizing the secular world (30). Accordingly, in searching for an antidote the Document affirms that finite things and societal life ‘lack ultimate meaning and purpose without a transcendent reality as their basis’ (29). Greater clarity regarding this confession and its practical consequences for the shape and direction of the socio-political order is badly needed and poses a challenge to us all.

The Document makes a beginning by affirming that God is the source of ‘moral values’ and of hope in face of the limitations of all human efforts (29). What is needed is a further articulation of the relationship between ‘moral values’ and the urgent task of shaping the sociopolitical order in such a way that human life and the life of the entire creation can flourish. ‘Moral values’ are usually construed as the realm of personal ethical behaviour. This understanding is re-enforced when in the Document these values are closely linked to God’s ‘voice ... in the human conscience’ (29). Morality and conscience are obviously indispensable. Yet, in a secularized society this ‘personal’ and ‘confessional-religious’ emphasis engenders an approach in which societal structures operate relatively ‘autonomously’ (i.e., literally as a law unto themselves), while ‘moral values’ and ‘religious conscience’ come into play to deal with the often deleterious *consequences* of systemic secularism. In other words, ‘moral values’ and religious ‘conscience’ are not equal to the task at hand, and, moreover, arrive too late to deal with the root problems.

Sorely needed is a deeper penetration into, and ‘mediating’ elaboration of, the ‘Lordship of Christ’ (183) in its significance for all of creaturely life—including the ‘secular world’. The Document contains seminal confessional statements that, with further tending, could germinate into a more comprehensive approach to secularism. We have in mind, in addition to the profound confession of Jesus Christ as ‘Lord and master of this

world' (183), the statements regarding the role of the Spirit in effecting the work of the Father and Son in the fulfillment of the destiny of the creation (78), the affirmation that 'the order of creation has its foundation in Jesus Christ' (73), and in the call for an 'ethics of creation' (88–89) in the context of God's summons to stewardly care for creation (84–87).

What is needed is deeper reflection [p. 45](#) both in Evangelical and WCC circles on how the confession of the triune God's redeeming and renewing rule over the cosmos provides norms for all of life. The doors are opened wide to such reflection when the unity of the work of the Father and the Son is pointedly described in terms of the kingdom: 'This precisely is his [the Son's] kingdom: to persuade and lead everyone and *everything into submission to the Father*' (191, emphasis added). Moving from, but going beyond, the confession of the ultimate meaning of created existence in God, we need to search for the directives that this confession and experience of God entail for the pervasive structural 'thing' called the socio-political-cultural order.

CONCLUSION

The first question the Commission of Faith and Order has submitted to the churches as they evaluate COF is; 'Would your church find the explication of the Nicene Creed contained in *Confessing the One Faith* in basic agreement with the "faith once for all delivered to the saints" as confessed and lived in your ecclesial community?'

Before responding to this question we want to make two comments about the way in which it is phrased. First, WEF is not an ecclesial community but a fellowship of ecclesial communities and parachurch organizations. WEF's answer to the above question will therefore by necessity be more general than are the answers of particular churches. Second, as evangelicals, we think that the most crucial question to ask is whether the Document is in basic agreement with the 'faith once for all delivered to the saints', *as contained in the Holy Scripture*. It is the Scripture itself, not the way our respective communities interpret the Scripture, that is the norm of what is the faith once for all delivered to the saints. The authority of the Scripture over the traditions of the churches is for us an important methodological principle on which the progress of the dialogue between Christian churches depends greatly.

We rejoice at how much COF expresses the faith as we see it taught by the Scripture. In particular, we are in *agreement* with the clear doctrine of the Trinity, the stress on the humanity and divinity of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the perspectives on creation and its relation to the future kingdom of God. We applaud both the importance attached to the doctrine of the church and stress on drawing practical implications from them for the life of the church in the world.

At the same time, we have to express our strong *reservations*: among other things, the lack of a clear statement about Scripture as the final basis for authority in matters of faith and practice; the lack of a clear commitment to some important doctrines of the Bible that the church throughout the ages has held dear (e.g., the virgin birth of Jesus Christ, the bodily nature of the resurrection).

The Document *challenges* as to reflect on the nature of visible expressions of unity that as believers we have in Jesus Christ and to learn how to dialogue better with [p. 46](#) another as we strive to be true to the teaching of the Scripture and loving toward one another. We need further to reflect on the doctrinal basis for recognition of ecclesial communities as churches. What doctrines are so central that their denial renders the church that denies them apostate? COF speaks of the need to 'recognize in the other the fullness of the apostolic faith' but denies at the same time that this means 'complete

identity of interpretation of the apostolic faith' (Intro 6). We are challenged to explore, both within the WEF constituency and with other conciliar bodies, what precisely is the 'degree of unanimity ... required for the mutual recognition of the apostolic faith' and what is the 'measure of difference in the interpretation of that faith' (Intro 6).

The Theological Commission of the World Evangelical Fellowship adopted the following recommendations:

1. To adopt the response.
2. To request the Commission on Faith and Order of the WCC to react to our response to *Confessing the One Faith*.
3. To convey to the Faith and Order Commission our willingness to participate further in the discussions as opportunity presents itself.
4. To suggest to the Faith and order Commission that it invite the WEF Theological Commission to send a participant to the fifth World Conference on Faith and Order in Spain in August, 1993.
5. To urge WEF member fellowships and their churches to study the Document *Confessing the One faith* and the WEF response to it.

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A Credible Response to Secular Europe

Peter Kusmič.

Reprinted with permission from Themelios and Towards Century 21 in Christian Mission, eds. James M. Phillips and Robert T. Coote (Grand Rapids, Win. B. Eerdmans, 1993)

The author gives a disturbing but realistic appraisal of the spiritual crises in both Western and Eastern Europe and the old and new forms of the secular challenge. In the midst of new opportunities for the gospel he warns against the dangerous resurgence of new national-religious totalitarianisms with the shift to 'tribalism'. In the new complexities of Europe he calls the churches to reclaim the reliability, truthfulness and relevance of the gospel, to demonstrate a credible lifestyle and unity and to recover a mission-centred ecclesiology.

Our problem is, therefore, how to get in touch again with the masses of the 'unfaithful faithful'.

The life and death question for Europe is, then, whether it can rediscover its own specific mission.

Dr. W. A. Visser't Hooft

FROM CORPUS CHRISTIANUM TO A NEW EUROPE

There was a time when 'Europe' and 'Christendom' were almost synonymous terms. The symbiosis of the two is summed up in H. Belloc's epigram, 'The faith is Europe, and Europe is the faith' (Will 1981:6). A contemporary of Martin Luther, the geographer Wachelus published in 1537 a woodcut map of Europe called 'The Queen Virgin'. It was to illustrate the unity and integrity of 'Christian Europe' as conceived by medieval Catholic totalitarianism. Wachelus' map shows Spain as the head of the virgin, Italy as the right arm and Denmark the left; Germany, France and Switzerland are the breast; Poland, Hungary, 'Illyricum', P. 48 Albania, Greece, Lithuania, Romania, Bulgaria and others are all identified on the virgin's illustrious gown.

Already at that time, however, the transition from the monolithic, religious 'Christendom' to the secular 'Europe' was in progress. Though the rise of Islam initially strengthened the idea of Christendom, the 15th-century Ottoman Islamic push westward almost broke it when some Christian powers, for selfish reasons, aligned with the enemy against other Christian nations. When Erasmus made his appeal for the crusade against the Turks, he did not appeal to the members of Christendom but, noticeably, to 'the nations of Europe'. The Reformation and the following developments only speeded up the process of transition. In the 17th and 18th centuries, science came into its own and the secular state established itself. In the 19th and 20th centuries, the industrial revolution and the birth of Marxist socialism completed the process of the disintegration of Corpus Christianum. The post-Enlightenment culture became a major European 'missionary problem' (Newbiggin 1986).

The European map today is in a state of political and economic, as well as cultural and religious, flux. This chapter is written at a time of rapid changes and an intensive search for a 'new Europe'. Presently, Europe lives in the intensive period 'between 1989 and 1992', the year 1989 marking the beginning of the wholesale collapse of Communism and 1992 the beginning of a 'United States of Europe', initially a West European economic and political integration. The European Community's (EC) move toward a closer union has been accelerated recently in response to dramatic events in Eastern Europe. The demand for change in the East European countries has been promoted and strengthened by the political freedoms and economic success of Western Europe, which have acted as a magnet drawing the East toward the West.

Today, Europe seems to be fully alive and bursting with visions, programmes and activities which make it again 'the most important theatre of contemporary world events' (Burstein 1991:11). Western Europe is in the process of dismantling its frontiers and gearing itself for new economic growth, energetically engaged in overcoming the two interrelated diseases of the early 1980s—'Eurosclerosis' and 'Europessimism'. For a while, these often-lamented twin ills threatened to make Europe a largely unimportant, uninteresting and conceivably even an irrelevant continent. Europe was for a while playing only a minor and increasingly diminishing role in the global geopolitical game. The constant complaints that Europe is an 'economic giant and political pygmy' and 'merely the chessboard over which American and Soviet masters made their strategic moves' (Burstein 1991:37) became somewhat obsolete when the oil-shocked 1970s and the alarming growth of unemployment resulted in economic collapse along with political impotence.

Where did the new vision and will come from? Are there analogies to be drawn and lessons to be learned p. 49 due to a somewhat similarly discouraging religious situation in Europe? Many diagnose the European churches as suffering from similar conditions of 'sclerosis' (stagnation) and 'pessimism' (loss of will and power to stem the tide of decline).

The turning point in the transition from the 'old' to the 'new' Europe was an almost 'spiritual' event. Jacques Delors, the incoming president of the European Community's executive commission, acted as a visionary prophet when in December 1984 he summoned other commissioners to Royaumont Abbey (outside Paris) for a crucial contemplative retreat. Delors analyzed the crisis of Europe and the failed dream of a new, united Europe with analytic precision, brutal frankness and prophetic vision. He warned his fellow commissioners that if Europe did not recognize its *kairos*-time (this author's expression) and failed to seize the historic moment, it could anticipate a 21st century in which it would be little more than a 'museum to be visited by American and Japanese tourists who like our cuisine and culture'.

'Europe's choice is between survival and decline' was the challenge of Delors as he called the EC to undertake a 'solemn commitment' to a strategic plan for recovery (Burstein 1991:36). The facts of a structural crisis had to be faced squarely and basic structures remade so as to become an efficient servant of the new Europe. Lessons were to be learned from others—even from ideological opponents!—especially in the area of removing government barriers for free trade. There was also to be a willingness to forget and forgive the animosities of the past (see the amazing 'metanoia' from Franco-German enmity to Franco-German amity!) in order to pave the way for a more viable future.

Does this brief survey contain any lessons and discernible seeds for change in the European spiritual climate? While relying on centuries of Christian history and benefiting from inherited traditions and institutions, the future of the European church should not become a hostage of its glorious past. Neither should the present lack of spiritual vitality, denominational divisions, religious indifference and other 'Christian ills' allow the church to reconcile itself to a *status quo* position and thus incapacitate itself for its God-given mission in and on behalf of the new spiritually revitalized Europe.

THE SPIRITUAL CRISIS OF EUROPE

In his introduction to a popular and largely pessimistic assessment of Europe's Christianity, a North American evangelical missiologist writes: 'Europe appears to be a continent on the verge of moral collapse. Decades of anaemic Christianity and humanistic philosophies have eaten the spiritual interior of this continent and Europe now stands at crossroads. Can it be saved?' (Henley 1978:9). This sounds very similar to the question, 'Can the West be converted?', asked by Lesslie Newbigin (1987:2), an author known for his perceptive analysis of post-Enlightenment Western culture as a P. 50 specific missionary challenge. A European missiologist begins his survey 'The Church in Europe' with the sentence: 'There is a general agreement that the Church in Europe is in a poor state of health'. He corroborates this diagnosis with, among other things, the statistical statement that 'some 1.8 million people in Europe leave the Church each year' (Cotterell 1989:37). The late Bishop Stephen Neill, writing at the time when he was a professor of ecumenics and missions at the University of Hamburg, was equally pessimistic: 'Church attendance in Europe is everywhere declining; the lack of ordained ministers is grave in every country, whether Roman Catholic or Protestant. The secularization of life proceeds apace. We seem to be watching a steady diminution of the spiritual capital of Europe, the disappearance of the old synthesis of religion and culture, and a desiccation of the human

spirit, as a result of which men not merely are not religious, but can see no reason why they should concern themselves beyond the world of the senses.' In 1970 (2 April), *TIME* magazine wrote of the progressive paralysis of European religious life and of 'a secular-minded culture that suggests eclipse rather than the presence of God' (cf. Detzler 1979). Addressing the West European Consultation on Evangelism in 1977, Dr Visser't Hooft pointed out, 'European culture has become a debate between three forces; Christianity, scientific rationalism and neo-pagan vitalism (1977:355). For a long time, the impression was created that scientific rationalism was victorious. Recent decades with the negative results of the technocratic civilization, nuclear threat, and ecological devastation have, however, changed the picture and given rise to a growth of a new irrationalism, Europe's neopaganism. Visser't Hooft seems to agree with Gustav C. Jung, who claimed that the Christian message has neither reached nor transformed the soul of the European man and that Christianity in Europe is like a cathedral built on the foundation of a pagan temple. His conclusion: 'Now there is surely need for evangelism, revival and renewal. There are millions of lapsed Christians who need to hear anew what the Gospel has to offer them. But there are today in Europe even more millions who are not adequately described as lapsed Christians, because they have in fact turned to another religion' (1977:350).

The real status and strength of the Christian faith in Europe today cannot be ascertained by review of its historical role nor by present-day statistics of church membership. Europe is far less 'Christian' than its history, religious institutions and statistical figures seem to indicate. There is now a growing realization among churches in Western Europe that a baptized person or a person who pays church taxes is not necessarily a Christian. Nominal Christians among the Protestants in central and northern Europe, the Catholics in France and southern Europe, as well as among the orthodox in southeastern Europe and the USSR, are increasingly seen, not only by evangelical mission activists from North America, but in many cases by their [p.51](#) own concerned bishops, as 'unreached people groups' in need of evangelism. In that very context, the questions about the role of baptism in the appropriation of salvation and about the assurance of salvation are increasingly pushing themselves onto the agenda of theological debates and ecclesiastical practices.

Any discussion of the future of Christian mission in Europe must take into account a growing indifference to anything religious such as is found in no other continent in the world. Bishop Harms Lilje (at the time the presiding bishop of Germany's Lutherans and president of the European Council of Churches), in his *Christianity in a Divided Europe*, distinguishes between three types of atheism: *atheismus militans* (militant atheism, especially of the communist type associated with Eastern Europe), *atheismus subtilis sive philosophicus* (subtle or philosophical atheism of rationalistic intellectuals), and *atheismus practicus* (practical atheism). The last term is borrowed from the well-known biblical scholar, Johann Albrecht Bengel, who in his famous commentary, *Gnomon Novi Testamenti*, points out that the rich man in the Lord's parable ([Lk. 16:19-31](#)) was not condemned for wrong belief or heresy but because he lived by a certain *atheismus practicus*, ignoring God and eternity. Lilje is convinced that though this formula is more than 200 years old, it is 'an excellent description of the most difficult, spiritual phenomenon in the Western world today. For it suggests what it says: not an explicit antitheistic theory but the actual and practised disregard of God. Here is not apostasy but weakness, not an open revolt but the silent paganization' (1965:32-33). This is a biblical picture of modern Europe which seems to see no need for God or any theistic concepts. This widespread phenomenon echoes the attitude expressed in Jean Paul Sartre's philosophy: 'What man needs is to find himself again and to understand that nothing can save him from himself, not even a valid proof of the existence of God' (1956:311). Whether

god exists or not does not matter any longer, for it seems to make no difference to the average European, who may be a culturally conditioned 'nominal Christian' but is actually a 'practising atheist'. By this European majority, God is completely disregarded and the Christian church largely ignored.

For most West European Christians, faith does not make much difference in life. Sunday is not a day of worship (as it still seems to be in North America) but only a welcome break between two working weeks. The process of secularization was the breeding ground of Christian nominalism, which was in turn followed by a marked shift from nominal Christianity to varying degrees of pragmatic atheism throughout Europe. As a result, the church is now largely disregarded and seems to have no significant influence on individuals, families and public life. 'Despite the various degrees of influence presiding in different countries, at no point can it be said that Christian conviction—divorced from political pretension—is giving decisive direction to the trends of events in p.52 Europe' (Herman 1953:198). There is a general lack of clarity about what Christianity stands for, and widespread ignorance of the most basic facts and values of Christian faith.

The workshop on 'Nominalism Today' at the Lausanne Congress on World Evangelization in Manila estimated that 75–80 per cent of professing Christians—at least 1 billion—are nominal. The conclusion was that this is 'the largest religious group in need of evangelization today' (Douglas 1990:446). The workshop divided nominal Christians into four categories: 'ethnic-religious identity' nominal, second-generation nominal, ritualistic nominal, and syncretistic nominal. The Catholic, Protestant and Orthodox churches in Europe are in themselves a complex mission field in which all four types of nominals exist and should become priority concern for intentional and comprehensive programmes of evangelization. Awakening the religiously indifferent and those who have found false security in a superficially sacramentalistic, cultural and/or nationalistic and yet only nominal Christianity is a very complex challenge. Evangelism in Europe must also take into account large numbers of those who have been 'disappointed by Christianity or have remained at a level of a merely psychological piety or legal morality' (Weber 1979:78).

In 1978, the Lutheran World Federation sponsored a Regional Consultation (for North America, the Nordic countries of Europe and Germany) on Mission and Evangelism. The consultation was a significant step beyond the traditional understanding that mission is something the churches and missionary organizations in Europe and North America, which are relatively rich in qualified personnel and financial resources, do in the poorer countries of the southern hemisphere in the Third World, considering them as their sole mission fields. It concluded, as did other recent gatherings, that 'mission is indivisible', and began grappling seriously with the thesis that 'mission begins on our doorstep. And for the superficially large churches it is precisely here that there is a vital need for mission' (Lutheran World Federation 1979:vi). The West European churches need to take a hard look at themselves and face the realities of their spiritual crisis in order to realize that they themselves have become a mission field. 'Folk and state churches are conscious of the paradox of their empty churches on the one hand, and their solid church institutions on the other; the evidence of secularization; religious frustration; materialism with all its ramifications in western societies; the invasion of new religions and pseudo-religions; ...' (*ibid.*). These realities are descriptive not only of the more secularized protestant West European countries but also of their Catholic counterparts, as evident from the recent Vatican encyclicals and repeated calls of Pope John II for 're-evangelization' of Europe.

THE CHALLENGES OF A NEW EASTERN EUROPE

Whatever is written about the future of Eastern Europe at this time must be written in pencil. All across **P. 53** Eastern Europe, and in the Soviet Union, monumental changes are taking place at a breath-taking speed and in most dramatic and unpredictable ways. The impact of *glasnost* and *perestroika* has put into reverse process the revolutionary events of 1917 and post-World War II European developments. The massive collapse of communism in Eastern Europe at the end of 1989 and in the Soviet Union in August 1991 have removed from the European scene the most impressive competitor to Christian faith and its most powerful opponent.

It is a well-known fact that wherever Communists came to power, their long-term goal was not only a classless, but also a religionless, society. Christian faith was viewed as a superstitious, obscurantist, obsolete, pre-scientific and thus totally irrelevant way of thinking. Christian institutions were treated as a reactionary remnant of the old order and a hindrance to the progress of the new society and full human liberation of their citizens. Since Communists had monopoly on both power (which they abused) and truth (which they distorted), they developed comprehensive strategies and powerful instruments for the eventual elimination of religion. This included restrictive legislation, total atheization of educational institutions and media, control of selection and activity of church leaderships, *etc.* Policies and methods have differed from country to country and in different periods even within the same countries, depending on what was politically expedient during various historical periods and in different regions. Generalizations are impossible, for Eastern Europe has never been totally monolithic in the treatment of religion due to the complexity of its national, cultural and religious history of different nations and depending on international relationships and considerations. At best, however, Christian faith was barely tolerated and Christians marginalized and discriminated against as 'second-class citizens', and at worst, they were brutally persecuted. In Albania, for example, all visible expressions of religion were totally eradicated from 1967 onwards as that small country prided itself on becoming the 'first atheistic state in the world'. The story of Christian persecution under Stalin in the Soviet Union and during the Khrushchev era is well known (Hill 1991:69ff.) and does not need to be retold.

With the collapse of communism, a new spirit of hope has filled the widened horizons of new freedom. Today we are witnesses of the historical fact of the title of the latest book by Michael Bourdeaux—*The Gospel's Triumph Over Communism* (1991). Though the dramatic changes contain many elements of unpredictability, followers of Christ all across Eastern Europe are aware that this is the work of the Lord of history who has seen their suffering and longing for freedom, answered their prayers and provided them with a special *kairos* period to call their nations back to God and to the spiritual foundation for a free and truly 'new society'.

The general euphoria of East Europeans with a newly found freedom **p. 54** is, however, very quickly giving place to a sober encounter with the grim realities that threaten the prospects of a free, peaceful and prosperous future society. Eastern Europe is presently going through a very difficult political transition, moving away from one-party totalitarian regimes toward some kind of multi-party parliamentary democracy. Mistakes are being made as the ABCs of democracy first have to be learned, and new institutions and traditions of democracy have yet to be established. The transition is equally painful economically as Eastern Europe moves away from the centrally planned 'command' economy toward some kind of a viable free-market economy. Economic recovery will be slow as the huge bureaucratic apparatuses have to be dismantled, many statesubsidized factories closed (causing potentially massive social unrests and thus bringing instability to the society) and the mindset of the people changed. Re-education for formerly stifled

creativity and initiative, so important for the free-market economy, may take considerable time. Social unrest, disillusionment of the impoverished masses and the general mentality of dependence may create environments conducive to new dictatorships, or at least tempt politicians to control the economy in similar ways to those of the Communist period.

The major problem for the Christian church and its mission may be the temptation to return to a quasi-Constantinian model of churchstate co-operation. In the process of replacement of Communist ideology by nationalistic ideologies there is an intense and valid rediscovery of national-religious identity. The churches are given the rightful recognition for having historically preserved the sense of nationhood, language and culture, especially in the Balkans under the centuries of the Islamic Ottoman-Turkish imposition. They are also rightfully credited for their opposition to the Communist system and for keeping alive certain endangered national and spiritual values. On the negative side, however, the discernible shifts 'from totalitarianism to tribalism' (issuing in inter-ethnic conflicts and wars) and 'from rights to roots' threaten the democratic processes in most of the East European countries. They also present a dangerous resurgence of new national-religious totalitarianisms. National churches (especially Orthodox in several republics of the Soviet Union, Romania, Bulgaria and Serbia, and Catholic in Poland, Hungary and Croatia) reassert their claims of monopoly on religious life and activity in their nations. In these countries, belonging to the national church is becoming less a question of theological persuasion and allegiance to Christ and more a question of patriotism and bona fide citizenship.

Protestantism in general is looked upon with great suspicion as that radical movement which in the past has divided Christendom and as a modernized, Western faith and thus a foreign intrusion which in the present in its various fragmented forms threatens the national and religious identity and unity of the people. Democratically and ecumenically p. 55 illiterate clergy, and militant fanatics among laity, are frequently opposed to protestant evangelicals as disruptive sectarians involved in dangerous proselytizing and unpatriotic activities. It is not inconceivable that some evangelical and other leaders of religious minorities could become the new 'dissidents' of the post-Communist era in Eastern Europe.

THE NEW EUROPE: WHAT IS TO BE DONE?

The religious situation in Europe is a peculiarly complex one and generalizations are hardly possible since situations and status of the church(es) differ from country to country and there are significant variations between different parts of the same countries. Christian institutions play a prominent part in some countries, while in others they are virtually ignored. The following proposals are in no way exhaustive and need to be both expanded and further elaborated if the gospel is to make a significant impact in post-Christian Western and post-Communist Eastern Europe.

First, the church must *reclaim the historical reliability and truthfulness of the Christian gospel*. The spiritual crisis of Europe is also an intellectual crisis, a crisis of truth which is in the very centre of the 'modern eclipse of God'. In our age of relativity, atheism, agnosticism and denial of all absolutes, when the very truth of any truth is under suspicion, the validity of the gospel truth is either outrightly denied or largely ignored. All across Europe, the proclamation of the gospel has to become once again communication of knowledge of the foundational facts of Christian faith as revealed in the Holy Scriptures and centred in the life, teaching, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ: 'By this gospel you are saved, that Christ died for our sins, according to the Scriptures, that he was buried,

that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared' ([1 Cor. 15:2-5](#)). The faithful, brave and creative proclamation of the gospel must be grounded in these foundational facts of the universally valid truth, for truth is foundational for trust. Or, as Stephen Neill puts it in his *Call to Mission*, 'The only reason for being a Christian is the overpowering conviction that the Christian faith is true' (1970:10). Whether it is in the context of a Western relativity of all religions or in the encounter with the Marxist-type 'scientific atheism', it is necessary to remember William Temple's dictum; 'The Gospel is true for all, if it is true at all' (1937:82). This gospel must be unashamedly proclaimed all across the lands of Europe as not only the truth about God and our own lost condition apart from Christ but also as 'the power of God for salvation for everyone who believes' ([Rom. 1:16](#)).

Secondly, we must *renew the credibility of the Christian witness*. Missions and evangelism are not primarily a question of methodology, money, management and numbers, but rather a question of authenticity, credibility and spiritual power. For a significant impact of the Christian gospel in Europe, both West and East, the question of world [p. 56](#) evangelization, 'How shall they hear?', can be rightly answered only after we have answered, 'What shall they see?'. The biblical logic demands for *being* to precede *doing*. Newbigin is right when he concludes his *Foolishness to the Greeks* with the chapter 'The Call to the Church' focused on the question, 'What must we be?' (1986:124ff.). In Eastern Europe we have learned that Marxist criticism of religion is not always wrong, for the Christian religion has a long and heavy historical ballast that presents a serious hindrance to the re-evangelization of our continent. The rise and spread of both Western and Marxist atheism seems to be proportionally related to the shrinking credibility of the Christian church. In going out to evangelize in Yugoslavia, I frequently tell our seminary students that our main task may be simply to 'wash the face of Jesus', for it has been dirtied and distorted by both the compromises of institutional Christianity through the centuries and the antagonistic propaganda of atheistic communism in recent decades. The mission and the message of the Christian church have no credibility apart from their visibility as expressed in the quality of new life, mature and responsible relationships in the believing community and a loving concern and sacrificial service on behalf of the needy in society. The renewal of the credibility of the Christian witness goes hand in hand with the recovery of the whole gospel, which implies a joyful celebration of God's gift of salvation and continuous openness to the Holy Spirit to authenticate the Word of God. As I have stated elsewhere, 'The whole Gospel covers proclamation of truth and exhibition of love, manifestation of power and integrity of life. In the task of world evangelization, it will also require less competition and more cooperation, less self-sufficiency and more self-denial, less ambition to lead and more willingness to serve, less of a drive to dominate and more of the desire to develop' (Kuzmič 1990:201).

Thirdly, one of the central and most urgent tasks for both Western and Eastern European churches is to *recover a practical missionary ecclesiology, the missionary character of the believing community* (Newbigin 1989). European churches have to recognize that faith is not automatically inherited from generation to generation and that the main task of the church is not its institutional and mechanistically sacramental self-perpetuation. The church's mission in the world should not be reduced to isolated political statements and good deeds, as if the church were just a religio-social agency. Neither should the ministry of the clergy be reduced to the serving of baptisms, weddings and funerals. The churches need to be internally renewed by the Holy Spirit in order to become recognizable as 'the spontaneous overflow of a community of praise ... the radiance of a supernatural reality ... a place of joy, of praise, of surprises, and of laughter—a place where there is a foretaste of the endless surprises of heaven' (Newbigin

1986:149). This will also require, as Newbigin puts it, 'the energetic fostering of a declericalised lay theology' (1986:142), the rediscovery [p. 57](#) of the priesthood of all believers along with the discovery of the gifts of the Holy Spirit and the related idea of Christian stewardship. The recognition that the congregation is the proper agent for missionary and evangelistic activities and that the task should not be relegated to outside agencies, specialized ministries and zealous, evangelistically minded individuals is an imperative. The post-Reformation institutional divorce between church and mission which made the voluntary groups rather than the churches responsible for mission has to be overcome by new theological and structural developments. In conjunction with this, one of the crucial questions to be studied is, 'Are parish and congregational structures in Europe sufficiently flexible to be missionary congregations?' (Senft 1978:96).

Fourthly, the recovery of historical reliability and truthfulness has to be accompanied by an effort to *renew the intelligibility and relevance of the Christian faith* for contemporary secularized and religiously indifferent Europeans. The gospel of Jesus Christ 'is not something that man made up', for it was received by 'revelation from Jesus Christ' ([Gal. 1:11-12](#)). This is why the NT never uses the word 'gospel' in the plural. It is important to recognize, however, that Jesus and other NT evangelists portray considerable flexibility and creative freedom in adapting, translating and variously communicating the gospel in different political and cultural settings. While the basic content of the message is always recognizable and unchanging, the presentations are never the same. There are no pre-packaged, universally applicable formulations of the gospel given for either indoctrination or as if there was some magic power in the language itself. The missionary vocation of the church is to build bridges across the wide gap between the ancient world of the true and powerful biblical story and the modern secularized, technological age which is biblically illiterate. Helmut Thielicke, that rare example of a German theologian who was also an effective preacher and creative communicator, reminds us that 'the Gospel must be preached afresh and told in new ways to every generation, since every generation has its own unique questions. This is why the Gospel must be constantly forwarded to a new address, because the recipient is repeatedly changing his place of residence' (1970:10). The potential recipients of the gospel in Europe, both East and West, have been 'changing their address' ideologically, philosophically and culturally in this century more frequently and drastically than in any other area of the world. The radical, ideologically inspired secularization of Eastern Europe and the similar cultural developments in the pluralist and materialistic West European countries have produced new generations of biblically illiterate Europeans. The message of the cross and salvation have very little meaning for the relativistic and pluralist, consumer-orientated Western societies and even less meaningful significance for those who grew up in a system which denied that Jesus ever existed and 'scientifically' argued that any belief in God and spiritual realities is [p. 58](#) superstition. The Soviet government, for example, claimed only a few years ago that one of the successes of its educational system and atheistic propaganda was evident in the fact that around 90 per cent of their young people aged 16-19 adhered to atheism as their world-view. Though these figures need to be relativized and conclusions qualified, they remain indicative of a major missionary challenge in the new Europe.

Missionary outreach to these spiritually impoverished and disorientated generations will require an ability to understand their beliefs and prejudices and to translate the gospel in to their thought categories with intelligence, clarity and relevance. In this process of incarnating the gospel in the new European culture, the pitfalls of some of the Western Protestant 'apostles of modernity' must be avoided, for in their almost neurotic anxiety about the relevance of Christianity they have frequently amputated, rather than

adapted, the biblical message and thus rendered it powerless. Transcendenceless 'this-worldliness', with a concern for relevance and modernity (a liberal Protestant and, to a lesser extent, a modern Catholic temptation), must be avoided. Equally, totally theological and communicative rigidity and over-pious 'other worldliness' in the name of historical faithfulness (the temptation of the Eastern Orthodox and evangelical fundamentalists) is not the way ahead for Christian mission in contemporary Europe. Both betray the gospel of Jesus Christ: the first, in its attempt to make it more attractive and palatable to secularized minds, renders it powerless, and the second renders it meaningless in its refusal to enter into dialogue with the world and its inability to translate contextually the message of salvation to its secularized contemporaries.

Fifthly, in spite of relative failures of the 20th-century ecumenical dreams and efforts, *the quest for Christian unity remains an imperative* in the light of both biblical and contemporary missionary requirements. Churches need to continue to ask themselves the painful question: 'How can a sinful and divided church announce to the world the gospel of salvation and reconciliation?' The mainstream Christian churches in Western Europe, but especially in Eastern Europe with the recent political openness and the 'attractiveness' of that 'mission field', will increasingly face competition from new groups and denominations, both the indigenous and the imported kind. The unco-ordinated and, at times, culturally and religiously ill-prepared and insensitive missionary activities from North America will create confusion, unnecessary duplication and growth of new denominations and independent groups with various theological emphases, ecclesiological models and missionary practices. Sects and cults will also flourish, taking full advantage of the spiritual void, political freedom and the abysmal ignorance of the basic tenets of the Christian faith by so many Europeans. In light of the cultural and ecclesiastical history of East European nations, the creation of a competitive, free religious market p. 59 will not be without pain and conflict. If the questions of biblical unity, cooperation, mutual trust and integrity—all under the biblical umbrella of the Lordship of Jesus Christ—are not properly addressed, this process can become counter-productive and result in discrediting the message and the mission of the church at the time of their greatest opportunity and need.

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AIDS and the Heretical Imperative: The Outbreak of Truth

Valson Thampu

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Ethics are inseparable from a theology of religions. In this chapter of his book the author seeks to address the root causes and not merely the symptoms of this dreaded global scourge. What appears to be heretic is in truth prophetic.

Editor

Centuries ago, a Man died. He died rejected and condemned. He was crucified outside the city, the tent of man. He died a heretic. Some said his heresy was blasphemy. Others thought it was treason. Either as the Son of God or as the King of the Jews he was heretical to the current systems of belief. But some, like the woman of Samaria, thought he was a prophet ([John 4:19](#); [Matt. 16:14](#)).

A Christian is obliged to respond to the AIDS crisis. Equally, he is obliged to be a prophet-priest within this crisis. Not only to champion damage control and provision of care in the present, but also to point to the realm beyond the crisis is his mandate. That is the 'Well of Samaria' model. If Jesus were to be an ideal Christian social worker of our times, he would have drawn water from the well himself and offered the woman a drink. Not that the prophet should scorn the immediate needs of man. But he would be very foolish if he were, in the process, to forget that he is called to be a prophet. His task, first and foremost, is to help the woman to a truthful, ultimately valid understanding of what her real needs are, also how those needs can be met. The noble, charitable goal of drawing water for her from this well is a potential alternative to that prophecy. The basic need of that woman was to understand why she was unendingly thirsty, why she was unfulfilled. Five men already. Now a sixth. What [p. 61](#) chance does she have along this way? She might get infected from the seventh ... Even if she does not, this way of life is an outrage to the human being that she is. Her humanity is drowning in the very water that she thought would quench her thirst. She must move on to another level of existence ... There and there alone will she be safe ... So the Prophet spoke.

The occupational misfortune of the prophet lies in his relationship to the total culture of his time. He is under a heretical imperative. He cannot but disagree with its ideology. That is because the prophet stands at the conjunction of two orientations of life in a state of coexistent conflict. He is the spark resulting from the short circuit. The power-line of the Kingdom of God and that of the kingdom of man—the domain of culture—have made contact within him. One who is entirely within the Kingdom of God and is apathetic to the life of man immersed in contemporary culture, will not experience the prophetic fire. He is our mystic. One who is entirely naturalized within the kingdom of man, is hermetically sealed from the prophetic urge. He is our secularist. The prophet is a boundary-being. At the boundary he is not an 'on-the-fence phenomenon'. He is, rather, the ground swell under the boundary wall so that those who are walled out may be called in.

What about the domain of culture, then?¹ How does it appear from the prophetic standpoint? Culture is the realm of contingent creations. Man is the creator there. A garden, for example, is located in the sphere of culture; whereas a forest is in the domain of nature. Human creativity is both an expression of the Fall and a protest against it. But it is a protest that only expresses the Fall. Hence culture is an embodiment of contradiction. This, however, man refuses to confess. In the excitement over the size and scope of his creations, he pretends to be *the* Creator. He plays god. As the new god, he must delight in his creations. Even God did the same. He beheld his creation stage by stage and kept on exclaiming: 'Good ... Good ... Good' ([Gen. 1:4](#), [10](#), [12](#), [18](#), [25](#)). But no man can have pretensions to pure creativity; he can create only on the foundations of what God has already accomplished.

Soon after his Fall, Adam felt the *need* to create. He was *compelled* to create. So the fig-tree lost some of its leaves. (Since then trees have been losing leaves very rapidly. That is the history of our Green-issues. Literary critics may please note that the tree in Beckett's play, *Waiting for Godot*, has no leaves). Man was, thus, taking his first, faltering steps

¹ For a stimulating discussion on this theme see H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (London: Faber & Faber, 1949), pp. 46–53.

towards the domain of culture. So the very first thing that Cain does after killing his brother Abel is to found a *city* ([Gen. 4:17](#)). But man is himself a part of creation. He can never be an end in himself. So God abides with man even in his exile. The tunic of skin that God makes for Adam is its first reassuring expression. God clothes physical man ... God envelops the spiritual man. This is part of the [p. 62](#) universal intuition of man. It is this truth that St. Paul proclaims in his Sermon on the Mars Hill at Athens: a true cross-cultural proclamation:

From one man God made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live. God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us. *For in him we live and move and have our being. As some of your own poets have said, 'We are his offspring'* ([Acts 17:26–28](#)).

Faith cannot locate itself entirely within the domain of culture. Religion is faith socialized and institutionalized. But religion imperils itself by coinciding totally with culture in vision and values. Faith as religion must exist in a socio-cultural matrix. But it must be vigilant against a purely cultural definition of its human vocation. Prophetic Faith judges culture. It does so by standing on a specific understanding of the nature and orientation of the culture-creating man. That is the prophetic vocation in a Faith. If Faith is totally socialized as religion, that religion becomes an appendix of the prevailing culture.²

Why should Faith judge culture? Freud offers a flash of insight when he observes that the neurotic man has a need to be the *builder of cities*. He builds institutions and infrastructures. They are, at best, only *necessary evils*. We create the State, says Freud, to oppress us. That is the irony of the domain of culture as man walks into nature as his new chosen home. Man hiding himself in the bush ([Gen. 3:7](#)) is a symbol of this. Culture is a sequel to this altered orientation. Every advance in culture tends to blur man's memory of his original home. Every step further along this road is a further degree by which man sinks into nature. With the ascent of the man of advanced culture, Adam's bush becomes a mighty forest. That forest is an improvement on the bush as a hiding place from God. That is so at least from the standpoint of human logic. Of course we have a problem if God is omnipresent. Then the wild forest could be, to him, a little bush. So we persuade ourselves to believe either that God does not care or that he does not exist. Our word for that forest is secularism.

The prophet addresses himself to the wilful self-delusions of this forest: our dream achievement of this secular-materialistic culture. That is the ultimate heresy. This message is worth proclaiming even at the risk of one's life. For it is life that is at stake, anyway. Even culture itself is at stake; for it could lose itself within its self-contradictions. Without its inner [p. 63](#) religiousness, Spengler points out, a culture 'loses its spiritual fruitfulness for ever; and *building* takes the place of begetting.'³

THE HERESY OF PROPHECY

² It was this aspect that was lost in the sociological approach to Christianity. Ernest Troeltsch effected a virtual equation between Christianity and the Western culture. That, unfortunately, paved the way for the demoralization of the missionary movement. If Christ is now realizable only in and through the genius of the Western culture, as it is represented by the European missionary, how can there be missions that do not constitute an aggression on other cultures? That, in a different way, is also the basis presupposition in Max Weber (See *The Protestant Ethics and the Spirit of Capitalism*, London: George Allen and Unwin, 1930).

³ Oswald Spengler, *The Decline of the West*, vol. I (New York: 1932), p. 359.

Now, the prophetic message sounds heretical mainly in two ways. The message of the prophet, in the first place, questions the presuppositions of the age. The prophet exposes the fallacies of all man-made goals and ideologies that stand in the way of man fulfilling his vocation as man. His vocation, that is, as a creature called upon to glorify the Creator. The prophet thus clashes, necessarily, with the creed of the times. At a time when Judaism is absolutely convinced that Sabbath is more important than man, he comes along and upsets the applecart ([Mark 2:27](#)). When the Pharisees have persuaded themselves that they are the visible saviours, he comes along and calls them 'whited sepulchres' ([Matt. 23:27](#)). And so on. That is the anti-Establishment heresy.⁴ This he does, not to thrive on it; for he knows that no prophet will be acceptable to his own people ([Matt. 13:57](#)). But he risks himself, being gripped by truth.

The second source of prophetic shock is because of the total irrelevance, as it would seem to the pragmatists, of the prophet's response to the felt need of the hour. Surely the woman of Samaria did not go to Jacob's well to be lectured. From the utilitarian point of view, the empty, abandoned pot beside the well looks like the debris of a subverted mission. Jesus 'pulled a fast one' on her, if you like. Water, not words, is what a thirsty person needs. You can't, moreover, cook your rice or wash your clothes with words. The preference for words over water was the preacher's prejudice. The woman was the victim. Is anyone safe from these Christian preachers?

Take a similar situation in [Mark 2:1-12](#).⁵ It appears to be the height of impertinence for Jesus to say to the paralytic: 'Son, your sins are forgiven you' (verse 5). Is there any transparent connection, as far as anybody can see, between the objective need of the man and the response of the prophet? Within the established logic of the situation, the prophet is acting as a heretic. (Ask any doctor, if you are not convinced.) But the impertinence of the prophet, his incurable heretical disposition, is due to his saving insight that there is a subjective, hidden reality behind this objective, apparent disability. The practical man, the shallow mind, insists on a divorce between the objective and the subjective. Having fled from the crucial sphere of his own subjectivity, the p. 64 realm of his freedom and fellowship with God, he champions the sole relevance and reality of the objective, empirical realm. That is the journey from the sacred to the profane. We move from the sanctuary, the tabernacle of God, to the social and the secular. We then have to persuade ourselves that God and our subjectivity do not exist; or that outside the small niches we have allocated, God is not real. Then the secular man is born and he claims the word minus the temples. The world-conquering secularist is then carried to the temple on a pallet. He has lost the capacity to be. All he can say now is: 'I can't help it'!

A SLAVE OF TRUTH

The prophet is not a 'free man'. He cannot oblige you with pleasant fiction. If you went to him with ears itching for popular myths he would refer you, even discourteously, to the secular man. He may even recommend an AIDS conference! The prophet has a definitive message. (He is, from your point of view, *very* dogmatic.) His order of priorities will offend you. 'Son, your sins are forgiven you.' Then only, 'take up your bed and walk'. (Does not

⁴ Cf. Rabbi 'Joseph Klausnerr's thesis in his book *Jesus of Nazareth* that Jesus imperilled the Jewish civilization, by looking for the establishment by the divine power of a 'Kingdom not of this world'. If he had attempted only to reform the religious and national culture, there would have been no problem. 'Jesus ignored everything concerned with material civilisation; in this sense he does not belong to civilisation'—as quoted by R. Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, pp. 19–20.

⁵ See Appendix II.2, for the full text of this passage.

even bother to lend a hand, this hard-hearted man!) The Christian prophet-propagandist will do well to make a note of this. First things first.

All this is sure to sound like the very heartbeat of heresy, especially to a culture fleeing from responsibility and moral freedom. But this heresy is the minimum awareness programme from the biblical perspective. The Christian finds himself in an unenviable situation of unavoidable heresy in the AIDS scenario of secular understanding and strategy.

THE CULTURAL INVASION

The global response to AIDS has so far been entirely dominated by the North American and European assumptions and goals. The prescriptions and remedies recommended to the rest of the world must be assessed in this light. It is not often realized that they need not sound as plausible and helpful in Asian and African situations as they do elsewhere. And if the cultural and ethical offence has not been sufficiently resented yet, it should not be concluded on that basis that the inclusions and conclusions of the current AIDS discourse are acceptable *in toto* to the whole world. It is true, however, that the voice of protest is not heard enough.

And that not without any reason. The professional and cultural elite in the developing countries have exercised an absolute monopoly over the so-called scientific and professional responses to this crisis. It is an open secret that a great majority of them, if not all, are the co-opted members of the Western club in their vision and intellectual discipline. The growing internationalism of the elite in these countries has weakened their cultural roots and religious persuasions. It should not surprise us if they find all the dominant, secular assumptions about life totally acceptable. This is a socio-anthropological problem of grave consequence and merits closer scrutiny. The practical implications of this fact for the developing Afro-Asian nations vis-a-vis p. 65 the AIDS control strategy are what concern us here. It is a matter of considerable irony that the present situation of global panic and anxiety has provided the ideal opportunity *for furthering the cultural paradigm of the Western world throughout the world*. It is very likely that this was not the primary or even peripheral goal, but is a purely accidental one. But that does not minimize the devastation in this ethico-cultural carnage.

This is not to ascribe ulterior motive to anybody. This is only to recognize the reality that the HIV/AIDS crisis is hitting us at several points. We have come under this accidental infiltration of alien values and assumptions at a critical stage in our socio-cultural self-definition. We are a society in flux. The modern secular-materialistic culture, with all its genius for invasive dominance, has begun to inject its energies into our society. Our old ethical and cultural way of life is now under siege. Despite the rapid rise of the urban culture, with all that goes with it, our traditional strengths of the family and interpersonal relationship have survived. In all this, the hated words, 'inhibitions' and 'morality', have played, so far, a sustaining role. Now some are beginning to feel that all this is so much useless bother; an infringement on their personal freedom.

CONSULTATION VS. DIALOGUE

There is, unfortunately, no cross-cultural dialogue in the HIV/AIDS context. That must seem surprising, given the plethora of international consultations and workshops. The fact that 'experts' from Asia and Africa are 'participating' in a particular consultation does not contradict this observation. That is because these 'experts' are the roofless coopted elite from these countries. By training and experience they are part of an international

network that is dominated by the ideology and world view of a particular bloc. The scope of the experts from developing countries often amounts to their role, unwittingly perhaps, as salesmen of the programmes and approaches of the dominant ideological bloc. It is strange, but understandable, that Indian experts have a missionary zeal for implementing the AIDs strategies as fashioned in the West. Most of them exhibit the same indignation that their Western counterparts would, when the assumptions underlying these strategies are questioned, and that, in spite of the most glaring disparities between societies in question. To put it bluntly, *some of our awareness programmes would appear to attack our sense of modesty, and public sensitivity, more than they attack the virus itself!*

NOT CONFIDENT ABOUT CONFIDENTIALITY

One of the major ethical debates in the AIDS scenario has been on the issue of confidentiality. The postulate that 'unlinked, anonymous testing' is the basic right of the individual, is a good example of it. It is more or less clear to us that in a society with a highly developed culture of the primacy of individual rights, this goal makes good sense. But in societies that have traditionally **P. 66** subordinated individual rights to corporate rights, the unmodified insistence on the same principle becomes an alienating factor. Surely we cannot arbitrarily assume that the goals of individualism alone are valid and civilized; and that a community-orientated culture that must curb the absolute claims of the individual is primitive and unjust. The two are distinct cultural paradigms that create their own orbits of values and goals. The goals from within one paradigm may seem cruel or quixotic to the other. The summary ridicule and rejection of these goals and sensitivities is a form of aggression.

Also, no cultural goal or principle can ever be absolute. The right to confidentiality is a case in point. It is a contingent and circumscribed value. And that is so, both in the East and West. But can it be an absolute goal in either? Should not the absoluteness of the man's right to confidentiality be circumscribed by his wife's right to life? Right to confidentiality is, ironically, even more crucial in an orthodox and taboo-oriented society. There the infected individual is at greater risk of socio-economic hurts. That is so at least in principle. But Eastern societies, that happen to be under far greater resource constraints and survival struggles, cannot afford to run risks in the interest of individual rights. These societies that are already overstretched in the struggle for survival cannot afford to take on additional burdens imposed by individualistic claims. Nor do they have the resource resilience to absorb the strain to themselves, in case the individuals happen to precipitate crises in the course of exercising their rights. These are the ground realities that claims of relative superiority must take cognisance of.

NEEDLING A STERILE IDEA

A word about the idea of distributing sterile syringes and needles among the drug-addicted may be in order. This idea too is beset with similar contradictions. It is seldom taken into account that—

1. The concept is not economically viable.

Separate allocation of substantial funds would be called for. Even if that is done, such positive discrimination in favour of the drug addicts will stand out rather awkwardly in a country where the basic health-needs of millions of people are not met. It is not just a single wave of distribution that is involved. The supply has to be sustained over time.

2. It is not pragmatic.

Assuming that the economic hurdle is overcome, we shall still be left with the impracticality of this scheme as a mass-based solution. The problems are twofold. First, the mere distribution of the syringes and needles will not do. The crucial factor will be the inculcation of the required motivation to maintain ideal standards of sterility or safety. Such motivation is, essentially, a pro-life motivation; whereas drug addiction is an anti-life activity. It would be simplistic to underestimate the difficulties involved in overcoming the basic pull of the addiction in order to establish a force [p. 67](#) counter to its direction. If a mechanical illustration is permissible, one would say, it is like changing a fast, forward moving vehicle into reverse gear. Yet, if the motivational factor is not taken care of sufficiently, it is not unlikely that the needles and syringes thus distributed will all be sold so as to make some quick money which the addicts need at all times.

Secondly, sharing the needles among members of the same group is of ritualistic significance. The same equipment is used, in other words, not simply because additional syringes and needles cannot be bought. If poverty were the one and only cause for the sharing of needles, the proposed idea would have some chance. We need to take into account the fact that it is not merely the drug that the addicts of a well-defined group inject. Each time the drug is injected, a small quantity of blood is withdrawn from the drug user. That is then mixed with the drug and pushed into the next person. This is essentially a cultic practice that covenants the cohesion and oneness of the group. The commingling of blood has strong emotional significance. Given the deep psychological needs of the addicts for the creation of an intimate and committed community, the awareness campaign is unlikely to alter this practice among the addicts. If that is so, it would not matter whether or not sterile equipment is distributed to them.

3. It has legal contradictions.

Legally, the very concept is absurd. It laughs at us most cynically. The peddling, possession and consumption of these drugs are all serious offences. But the virus will be allowed to infect law also. The substance and its use will be criminal; the means to use it will be legal and legitimate! It is almost like saying: having an unlicensed gun is illegal; killing also is: but you will be trained by the State in sharp shooting. Can we provide the means without legitimizing both the substance and the consumption of it? Shall we officially distribute sterile syringes and needles with the left hand and arrest the prospective users with the right hand, as the law requires us to do, for drug-related offences or shall we amend the penal code and make drug abuse licit? Shall we drop the expression 'drug abuse'?

Or shall we also ask why we are not making enough progress in the drive against drug addiction? Viewed in complete isolation, the idea of sterile syringes and needles appears to be a feasible one. It is certainly an improvement on having to take on the drug mafia. Surely it appeals more to the bureaucratic imagination than the prospect of grappling with unemployment, boredom and drift among the youth. We are concerned only with HIV; other issues of life and death don't matter to us. We shall target the HIV and hit the bull's eye with the sterile needle. Never mind, if in the process the killer drugs are publicly baptized into legitimacy!

So much for the wisdom that is peddled in these AIDS conferences and campaigns. So much also for the saving wisdom that is being imported into this society by the keepers of its sanity! [p. 68](#)

The Eastern societies too, like Western societies, have salient features and characteristic strengths. They have their underlying assumptions and overt values. The life of a person is home-centred. Home and relationships are sacred. There are inhibitions

about intimate behaviour. There are don't's, that is. One is held responsible for what one does. Sometimes a whole village is held responsible, if the offender does not own up. Faithfulness in relationships, and self-sacrifice to make them work, are great values. Human urges can be mastered. Gandhiji's vows of abstinence and purity in the context of the struggle for independence, for example, inspired the entire people of India? All this is brushed aside by the AIDS education and awareness campaign.

THE SECULAR LIE

Christians, and all those who believe in the dignity and moral freedom of man, must not be intimidated by the seeming plausibility of the present AIDS polemic. They should believe in their freedom and duty to humanity and recognize that in the name of progress and survival, life is being vulgarized and trivialized. A false image of man as a crude biological mechanism, a sensual animal, is being institutionalized. This must be protested against even if it is only an accidental byproduct. They should uncompromisingly insist on the minimum saving hypocrisy obtained in other sectors of public life. Cigarettes, for example, can be sold only with the statutory warning 'Smoking is injurious to health'. Pharmaceutical drugs too come with 'warnings'. How come condoms and sterile syringes can be distributed for AIDS control without any message or warning?⁶ Shall we return to a life in nature at the cost of our moral freedom, or human dignity? And that, without a word of protest? This warning is unlikely to be issued by the purblind secular world. It can be pronounced, if at all, as the prophecy of the Church to man at the present time.

The Christian, thus, finds himself under an urgent and hazardous obligation—an obligation comprehended under the duty enjoined on prophet Ezekiel:

Son of man, I have made you a *watchman for the house of Israel*; so hear the word I speak and *give them warning* from me. When I say to a wicked man, 'You will surely die', and you do not warn him or speak out to dissuade him from his evil ways in order to save his life, that wicked man will die for his sin, and *I will hold you accountable* for his blood ([Ezek. 3:17–18](#)).

ETHICAL EXHAUSTION

The pathos of the current secular-scientific 'ethical realism' is that it is the product of our ethical exhaustion. It is a kind of idealism grown senile; idealism that has given up on **P. 69** itself. Its true name is cynicism, which is the confession of personal, and generic, inadequacy in relation to an ideal. That confusion should awaken in us infinite compassion. But compassion is not indulgence or pandering. It is love and truth in a state of dynamic embrace. It is dynamic because it urges us to specific tasks. But energy needs to be truth-directed, held in shape and meaning and beauty. Truth without love produces abstractions. Love without truth is at best fecundity or at worst, demonic sex.

Human experiences make sense within an organic whole. There is no self-contained, autotelic activity in the human sphere. The part cannot pretend to be the whole, but derives its meaning and value from its participation in the whole. The moment the part attempts to be self-contained, it becomes subversive. That is the pitfall of individualism.

⁶ I would propose the following message for the condom. 'Casual sex is risky. Both for body and soul. You CAN abstain from it and be safe. But if you are too weak to withstand—why should you?—use this. But there is *no absolute guarantee*. This may minimize the risk.' (Brevity may be the soul of wit, but it does not serve the cause of 'safer sex'. The more our indulgent generation reads—or develops some serious interests—the stronger it becomes against this weakness!)

Can sex be indulged in for its own sake? We need not leap to the simplification that reproduction is the only biblical goal of human sexuality. That would be very untrue. But as Christians, we are concerned no doubt at the exclusively physical and chemical interpretation of human sexuality.

A WIFE IN THE DEVIL'S NAME?

Let us take an illustration from that 'blasphemous, atheistical' man Christopher Marlowe, the sixteenth-century playwright. His character, Dr. Faustus, was man enough to abjure God and renounce the moralisms, if you like, that inhibited his personal freedom. One instance of such freedom was the right to have a wife at will. Mephistopheles brings him a 'wife, in the name of the devil'. She turns out to be a 'hot whore'. And why not? If love is a matter only of amoral physicality, of bio-chemical sensations, why should the ethical stature of the object of love matter? At the level of the value-neutral impulse-release alone, the prostitute is a one-night wife, or the wife a long-term dependable prostitute. Dr. Faustus discovers that a wife can be had only 'in God's name'. It is a discovery that secular man needs to rediscover today. There are signs that he would. That is, if he approaches constructively and radically, the anxiety that is welling up within him.

The denizens of developing countries have a great advantage in this respect. By separating fact from fiction in the predicament of their counterparts in the developed world, by appropriating the wisdom and moral of modern man's journey through secular history, they can identify the road they should *not* take. Western man, in later times, can give the excuse of having been taken for a ride; of having been promised fish and given a serpent, ([Matt. 7:10](#)). It may sound fairly convincing. If those in Africa or Asia walk the same road and fall into the same fatal manholes, they would stand condemned by history for wilful blindness. The same would apply also to a Christian anywhere in the world, who makes light of the 'still small voice' in the Bible and within his conscience that goes on saying, 'This is not the way'. Or, to put it positively, Jesus said, 'I am the Way' ([John 14:6](#)).

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Book Reviews

DISSONANT VOICES: RELIGIOUS PLURALISM AND THE QUESTION OF TRUTH

by Harold A. Netland

(Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1991, 323 pp.)

(Reviewed by Ramesh Richard)

Harold Netland, missionary to Japan and assistant professor of religious studies at Tokyo Christian University substantively addresses a most pivotal issue for evangelicalism. Indeed, the very denotation of the word 'evangelical' hinges around a biblically faithful, logically consistent and sociologically relevant reading of the topic of religious pluralism.

Any one who desires to pursue an evangelical exploration and evaluation of contemporary theories of religious pluralism must come to terms with this text book on the topic.

This solid work consists of 7 chapters. Chapter 1 contains simulated scenarios pertaining to the fact of pluralism along with statistics to prove that contemporary fact. The three perspectives of exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism are described along with a brief history of the stance of the Christian church towards non-christian religions. Reasons for the undermining of exclusivism by contemporary pluralists include awareness of exemplary non-christian personages, the sceptical influence of higher criticism and logical positivism, the growth of epistemological and moral relativism, the dichotomy between public truth and private values, a pragmatic view of religion, exclusivist arrogance and intolerance in an interdependent global community, and the growing acceptance of soteriological universalism. The position of Christian exclusivism is then defined along with the comment that in a broad sense all religious traditions are exclusivist, since they maintain that their own central affirmations are true. 'So Christian exclusivism is by no means an oddity when considered in the broader context of the global religious traditions' (p. 35).

Chapters 2 & 3 attempt to answer the three main religious questions—the nature of the ultimate, of the human predicament and of salvation/ enlightenment/liberation from the four major traditions. While his intent is to 'show that the various p. 71 traditions are making very different, and at times what appear to be actually incompatible, claims about humankind and his place in the cosmos,' (p. 41), these chapters become little more than delineations of the major concepts of these religions. The section has little profit for those with some background in religions. It would have been more beneficial to have replaced this lengthy segment with actual instances, illustrations and explanations of incompatible fundamental tenets between the world's religions. That the author has done in a six page synopsis.

In perhaps the strongest chapter (IV) of the book an epistemology of religion and the philosophical question of 'truth' is tackled. The first part examines and critiques the legitimacy of the notions of propositional and personal truth in the following manner. The distinction between propositional and personal truth, as proposed by W. C. Smith, is philosophically illegitimate and religiously inadequate. Further, the distinction is largely irrelevant. Shifting the focus from religions to the religious faith of believers will not alleviate the question of truth 'for we would still have individuals who accept and propagate certain beliefs, dogmas, and teachings, all presumably accepted by believers as true' (p. 127). Pluralists have confused the question of truth with that of the believer's response to the truth (p. 131). The second part deals with the issue of ineffability based on Rudolf Otto's description of the numinous. How may we preserve the transcendence of the ultimate while preserving the possibility of genuine knowledge of this ultimate? He suggests the Thomistic answer on religious language/knowledge: *via negativa* on the assumption of positive knowledge. For some reason, he neglects 'analogous predication' which separates the nature of the ultimate while providing conceptual content to the ultimate. The third section treats the two-level view of truth—a distinction mainly rooted in the suspicion of logical precision in religious matters. Paul Knitter's and Frithjof Schuon's exclusion of exclusive truth is critiqued:

Advocates of the doctrine of two truths thus face a dilemma: any attempt to provide reasons for accepting the testimony of someone claiming to have had the experience will make appeal to criteria and principles which are said to be applicable only on the lower level of reality and truth (p. 150).

Chapter V on 'Evaluating Religious Traditions' is also a forceful one dealing with the desirability, possibility, and existence of objective, non-arbitrary criteria for evaluating religious traditions. Pluralists minimize religious differences to a 'lowest common denominator' soteriology (p. 160) on functionalist and pragmatic criteria for religious truth. Cultural relativism cannot evaluate truth since its premise is incoherent and unjustifiable. Also, 'once it is admitted that different people within a society believe different things, or that over a period of time they have believed different things, truth cannot be defined in terms of what is accepted in that society' (p. 177). He borrows from Keith Yandell in [p. 72](#) articulating criteria for religious evaluation: (1) basic logical principles; (2) absence of self-defeating statements; (3) coherence; (4) adequacy within range of reference; (5) consistency with other fields of knowledge; (6) basic moral values. Of course, 'one is justified in accepting the Christian faith as true because it is the only worldview that satisfies the requirements of all the above criteria' (p. 193).

John Hick's bold theory of religious pluralism based on the nature of religious experience is surveyed and scrutinized in 'All Roads Lead to ..' (Chapter VI). Major criticism revolves around Hick's theory that all experience is 'experiencing as', encompassing all religious experiences of the same reality. Netland asserts: 'it is not just a question of whether the Real can be experienced as personal and nonpersonal; it is a question of whether its ontological status is such that it can correctly be described as both personal and impersonal' (p. 213) and whether this description is in any sense informative at all. He admirably and critically reflects on various aspects of Hick's comprehensive theory that is tantamount to reductionism since 'each tradition ascribes ultimacy to its own particular conceptions of the religious ultimate' (p. 222).

In 'No Other Name: The Question of Jesus' (Chapter VII), Netland explores the implications of a classical, exclusive, Christology for John Hick's Inspiration Christology and Paul Knitter's Theocentric Christology. Neither of these holds the Christian Christ or the Christian Scriptures in any epistemologically determinative way.

The dynamic of the book suddenly vacates when Netland approaches the question of 'those who have never heard' from the evangelical, *Lausanne Covenant* point of view. He says: 'Significantly, the Lausanne Covenant was framed in such a manner as to allow for some diversity of opinion on this point ...' (p. 265) and gives 4 'evangelical' views on the subject. One wonders why Netland does not apply the rigorous criteria, by which he evaluated and excluded religious claims to this particular issue. Since these 'evangelical' views are incompatible, why does he not reject one or more or all? Why does he not express his own position on the matter of how people will spend an eternity apart from God? Perhaps, he is inconsistent in embracing the exclusivist-pluralist tension at the intra-world view level, but disallowing the same tension that pluralists have faced at the inter-world view level.

The final chapter deals with the missiology of exclusivism—evangelism, dialogue and tolerance. Priority is given to evangelism which 'can and does occur even when no conversion results' (p. 282). The kinds and purposes of religious dialogue (cf. Eric Sharpe) are delineated and differentiated. He proposes kinds of informal and formal dialogues that are not incompatible with a commitment to evangelism. On tolerance, he fittingly notes that toleration 'has an element of disapproval [p. 73](#) built into its meaning' (p. 307). Christians can still regard others' beliefs as false while accepting the right of the non-Christians to believe that falsity. The question of social tolerance while making moral judgments on non-Christian neighbours needs to be more convincing. Also an interaction with the biblical (especially OT) view of religious tolerance in relationship to other religions would have been helpful.

The book evidences thoughtful reflection and experiential interaction with people of other faiths. One could ask for more precision at the theological (he notes that divine revelation will include both propositional and nonpropositional revelation, p. 126), logical (he ambiguously explains the law of noncontradiction as maintaining that ‘a proposition cannot be both true and false,’ p. 145), philosophical (he did not entertain the possibility that *all* religious claims are false), religious (in application, pluralism is ‘closet’ exclusivism), and biblical (serious exegetical support for evangelical exclusivism is lacking) levels. Exclusivists have minimized the similarities between religions; pluralists have minimized the differences between religions. It is still necessary for Netland to suggest the levels at which these minimizing tendencies could be eliminated in an evangelical theory of religions and a sociology of their adherents. Perhaps, the maturation of Netland’s proposals would lie in affirming both functional similarities and ontological/epistemological dissimilarities between the religions of the world.

A WIDENESS IN GOD’S MERCY: THE FINALITY OF CHRIST IN A WORLD OF RELIGIONS

by Clark H. Pinnock

(Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992.)

(Reviewed by Ramesh Richard)

Clark Pinnock’s (McMaster Divinity College) response to religious pluralism is an attempt to construct a competent evangelical theology of religions based on two evangelical axioms.

The first axiom finds an ‘optimism of salvation’ in the gracious, universal, love of God. This optimism is set over and against the ‘fewness’ doctrine of restrictivists which accepts that only few will be saved. This ‘hermeneutic of hopefulness’ is derived from the universal orientation of the early chapters of Genesis. There are the ‘global covenants’ with Noah and Abraham. Melchizedek, Abimelech (and others) are ‘pagan saints’ who prove that ‘God works outside so-called salvation history’ (p. 27). The election of Israel through Abraham was to serve God’s global reach. Unfortunately, in the history of theology, vocational election has been made into a soteriological category. Pinnock then tracks ‘God’s dialogue with the nations’ in the rest of the Old Testament. In the Gospels, even though Jesus was sent primarily to Israel, ‘one should not confuse penultimate means with ultimate ends’ (p. 31). The Epistles and Revelation too show God’s generosity.

‘Restrictivism’ is a hardened Augustinian development attributed to historical factors (‘the enemies of the state automatically became enemies [p. 74](#) of Christianity as well,’ p. 37) and theological factors (‘the bitter Pelagian controversy,’ p. 38). But ‘God is correcting a mistake in historical theology by means of historical factors, combined with a fresh reading of Scripture’ (p. 42).

The second chapter deals with a Christological axiom—‘the finality of Jesus as the decisive manifestation and ground of God’s grace toward sinners’ (p. 49). In a tight and clear apologetic he argues for a high Christology without forgetting that the uniqueness of Jesus derives from Israel’s God (p. 53). This derivative uniqueness is seen also in Jesus’ claims and his audience’s responses to him. He concludes with ‘it is propositionally the case that Jesus is definitively and unsurpassably the Lord of the universe’ (p. 63).

How then does Pinnock relate a high Christology and an optimism of salvation? He commends ‘the spirit and the wisdom of the Second Vatican Council’. ‘There is no salvation except through Christ but it is not necessary for everybody to possess a conscious knowledge of Christ in order to benefit from redemption through him’ (p. 75).

‘God has more going on by way of redemption than what happened in first century Palestine, decisive though that was for the salvation of the whole world’ (p. 77).

Chapter III deals with the religions as they relate to the outworking of redemption. ‘Both Scripture and experience tell us that there are pagan saints outside the church due to the work of the triune God in the world’ (p. 93). Now, full-strength salvation is found only in Jesus. These will be Christians or messianic believers. ‘But responding to pre-messianic revelation can make them [non-Christians] right with God’ (p. 105).

‘Truth seeking dialogue’ is legitimate (Chapter IV) because everything, including religions, is changing and ‘God has designs on them’ (p. 116). So, we may look forward to God’s historical transformation of these religions. The *Christus Victor* theme is asserted to prove that God may be at work changing religions as one of the powers over which Christ won his victory (pp. 119–22). So, there can be a good syncretism. Christianity forces Buddhism to take this world more seriously. ‘On the other hand, Christians in the West need to become less materialistic and more spiritually Buddha-like’ (p. 140). Truth-seeking dialogue is epistemologically and ecclesologically modest.

The problem of ‘Hope for the Unevangelized’ (Chapter V) closes out the book. Pinnock rules out universalism. And for those who hold to conditional immortality the problem does not arise. But if ‘God really loves the whole world and desires everyone to be saved, it follows logically that everyone must have access to salvation’ (p. 157). Salvation comes within the reach of the evangelized by the ‘faith principle’—the basis of universal accessibility. The Bible shows that ‘many varieties of unevangelized will attain salvation’ (p. 168). Further, post-mortem salvation is available for those who could not make the decision before death. This position does not necessarily stultify missions because we p. 75 should not narrow the motivation for missions to just deliverance from wrath (p. 177).

A full length interaction is most appropriate for such a topic. There is much that may be appreciated in the book, but space limits the reviewer to pursue a few random criticisms:

Residual Provincialism: ‘For two millennia the church has proclaimed the finality of Jesus Christ as the Saviour of the world, but recently people have been asking exactly how this works’ (p. 7). The word ‘recently’ smacks of a residual theological colonialism which does not allow many to admit that non-Western thinkers have had to wrestle with the theological and existential aspects of the problem for centuries. Could there be some respect given to why those *evangelicals* have not propounded a ‘wider-hope’ theory in evangelization and contextualization?

Cultural A Priori: An attitude of ‘optimism of salvation’ is what ‘we need if we are to deal with the challenge of other religions’ (p. 13). The need for optimism is not so much an argument as it is a preference. Culturally, optimism is preferred to pessimism; moderation to harshness; inclusivism to exclusivism; and positive thinking to negative thinking. The challenge of the religions drives him to an optimistic conclusion and he attempts to find biblical material to fortify the cultural preferences. There is no serious treatment of the harsh, severe and negative passages of Scripture. Hermeneutical adjustments are made to fit *a priori* preferences.

Christological Revisionism: The following statements controvert Pinnock’s desire for a high Christology. ‘Uniqueness and finality belong to God. If they belong to Jesus, they belong to him only derivatively’ (p. 53). ‘Incarnation is not the normative category for Christology in the New Testament’ (p. 62). ‘The second Person of the trinity was incarnate in Jesus, but is not totally limited to Palestine ... We need to realize that our insisting that God is embodied and defined by Christ does not mean that God is exhausted by Christ or totally confined to Christ’ (p. 77). These statements reduce an unabridged incarnation model—Jesus as eternal Son, the definitive enfleshed-word, the exclusive way to the

Father, etc.,—and may easily be subscribed to by some Christian cults. Perhaps, Pinnock unwittingly builds a good case for OT Judaism as an option for adherence even though he has critical questions for Jews (p. 143).

Optimism toward Religions: The optimism of salvation view ‘does not ... yield a lot of specific details’ (p. 47). So, he attempts to fill in the details in the context of the religions. He affirms a helpful, but descriptive, distinction between objective and subjective religion, while recognizing that the ‘objective’ sets the framework for the subjective experience (p. 112). However, adherents do not necessarily make the distinction. They see their ‘objective’ religion as true, and their ‘subjective’ responses as valid and real responses to their truth. To imply that subjective ‘heart responses’ to the true God may demonstrate salvific p. 76 faith, in any religious context, is naive.

Pinnock also desires to make a distinction between religion and culture. But that does not account for the pervasive nature of religion in these cultures. Many religious world views are not even theoretical in nature, they are pretheoretical solutions to ultimate questions dealing with the totality of reality. And for the true God to be active outside religion and yet inside culture, is to foist convenient categories which only observers make and understand.

Also, inter-religious, truth-seeking encounters are not specified. Twelve-year old Jesus in the temple may be a model of inter-religious dialogue but can hardly be used as a model for ‘truth-seeking’ encounter (p. 139). Though positive aspects may be learned from our non-Christian neighbours, the uniqueness and exclusiveness of redemptive truth in Christ is not a truth to be sought.

The optimism towards religions is seen in several places. For instance, ‘how does one come away after encountering Buddhism and deny that it is in touch with God *in its way*?’ (p. 100, emphasis added). A broad faith principle becomes the least common denominator which minimizes doctrinal dissimilarities and unifies mankind. Later he notes, ‘... Christians in the West need to become less materialistic and more spiritually Buddha-like’ (p. 140). Really, do Christians need to go to Buddha to become less materialistic? We do not want to become more Buddha-like. We want to be more Christ-like. To the extent that Buddha looked like Christ, we may look like Buddha, but it is not because we need to become Buddha-like.

Emergent Pluralism. Pinnock chides pluralists for reading ‘the New Testament without coming up with a Christ who has to be normative for everybody in the world. They need a way for Jesus to be unique for his followers, but not necessarily for others’ (p. 64). With very little adjustment, the statement can be applied to Pinnock. For Pinnock, Jesus is epistemologically normative only for his followers, but not necessarily for others. He also points out the pluralist problem with uniqueness: ‘It would be unfair for truth not to be equally and simultaneously present to everyone’ (p. 70). But is this not the assumption that Pinnock needs to write the book?

Much more can be said about his views on the holy pagans, Cornelius, personal and corporate election, premissianic believers and Christians, the need and results of missions, the Second Vatican Council, etc., but they have to be reserved for longer comment. Pinnock’s constant efforts at getting evangelicals to open closed doors of understanding are appreciated. In this case, nevertheless, there is the hazard of jeopardizing the once-and-for-all (time and people), self-disclosure of God in Jesus whom all people must believe in order to be saved.

It is difficult to reconcile his concluding call to missions: ‘Premissianic believers, along with many others, need to be challenged to seek *God*, because they have not yet done so’ (p. 179), when the whole book p. 77 argued that premissianic believers had already sought and found God in their own ways. His strong efforts at a solution do not do much

really to alleviate the problem of the masses—who still face an exclusive, monotheistic, personal God (though other than Jesus)—unless God saves them without their knowledge of him. His words about Warfield may be recalled in this connection: ‘... it still leaves large numbers eternally lost in absolute terms, even though the overall percentage is lowered’ (p. 42).

NO OTHER NAME: AN INVESTIGATION INTO THE DESTINY OF THE UNEVANGELIZED

by John Sanders
(Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992.)

(Reviewed by Ramesh Richard)

John Sanders of Oak Hills Bible College provides a calm and lucid survey of a nettlesome issue in late twentieth century evangelical theology. With this publication, the sizzling topic is forced into the centre of evangelical discussion and will refuse to be relegated to brief comments in remote comers of theological books. The sheer numerical vastness of serious adherents of non-Christian religions in a pluralistic human situation calls for thinking and articulation of an authentic and consistent evangelical view of the final destiny of the evangelized.

The splendid organization of the book is instantly evident by the five pages given to the ‘Contents’ section. Each of the main views is treated in the following order: key biblical texts, theological considerations for the position, leading defenders, evaluation, and a historical bibliography. Sanders’ introduction identifies two non-negotiable truths on this fundamental matter—the finality of Jesus Christ and God’s universal salvific will—on which each of six views would be evaluated.

The need for a theologically satisfying answer is generated by a most lofty motivation: the majority of the human race who have not heard the gospel and therefore are damned by traditional evangelical views. Part One formulates dissatisfaction with these views by way of a conversation between a traditional evangelical and a questioner. The present status of the topic within evangelicalism is briefly presented. Sanders then declares his allegiance to evangelical ‘control beliefs’ such as the Bible’s final authority for faith and practice.

Part Two expounds and evaluates two ‘extremes’: ‘Restrictivism’ which holds that all the unevangelized are damned; and ‘Universalism’ which holds that all unevangelized are saved. Neither extreme ‘adequately holds together the two essential evangelical truths’ (p. 4). A short and excellent critique of radical pluralism closes the chapter.

Part Three articulates and appraises the ‘wider hope’ views that salvation is ‘universally accessible’ to every human being. ‘Before Death’ theories allow three means of universal evangelization—God will send the message to positive responders, death-bed encounter with [p. 78](#) Christ, and the ‘middle knowledge’ position of God’s omniscience allowing discretion based on ‘had they had the opportunity’—but are deficient. The ‘After Death’ theory (eschatological evangelization) is also surveyed and scrutinized.

The rest of the book deals with the author’s own position of ‘Inclusivism—Universally Accessible Salvation apart from Evangelization’. Inclusivists believe that ‘appropriation of salvific grace is mediated through general revelation and God’s providential workings in human history ... but deny that knowledge of his (Christ’s) work is necessary for salvation’ (p. 215). Christ is ontologically but not epistemologically necessary for salvation. The universal passages of the New Testament and non-Jewish believers of the OT are seen to support inclusivism. Theological support for the position includes a distinction between

believers and Christians; general revelation as mediating God's salvific grace; and a logos christology. There is 'No Other Name,' but there is 'one other way'.

The conclusion of the book summarizes the differences between the wider-hope theories and again emphasizes the need for Christian missions within the wider view. An admirable discussion of infant salvation and damnation gives the four opinions on the topic. The emergence of the 'all infants who die are saved' view is primarily attributed to the 'current attitudes toward children in Western civilization [which] make the prospect of infant damnation unbearable' [p. 303].

While a detailed critique cannot be engaged in a book review, a sample of complications may be pointed out.

First, we need to ask why Sanders chooses only two essential truths for the salvation discussion? Why could there not be one, three or more? Also, we are not given the criteria by which these two are chosen. Could the two essential truths be one half of the equation which determines evangelical conclusions on the matter? What about incorporating the rougher side of God's attributes like wrath and justice?

Second, the concept of the universal salvific will of God as based on phrases like, 'God desires all to be saved' ([1 Tim. 2:4](#)) is difficult to sustain. If 'desires' is to be given the strong (restrictivist elective?) sense, then so should 'all,' leading to bare universalism. Also, he does not deal with the parallel portion of that verse: 'God desires all men to come to a knowledge of *the* (an articular, technical, Pauline noun) truth.' What is this exclusive truth?

Third, his separation between believers and Christians is theologically ingenious but biblically fragile. The extent of human distinction in one of his favourite verses ([1 Tim. 4:10](#)) is between 'all people' and 'believers'. The verse would have to be rewritten ('God the Saviour of all men, especially of believers, and particularly of Christians?') to facilitate his pillar distinction.

Fourth, the distinction between the 'ontological' and 'epistemological' necessity of Christ must be evaluated on the basis of whether the apostles recognized such a distinction [p. 79](#) in proclaiming the exclusiveness of Jesus (cf. [Acts 4](#): v. [2](#), *en to Jesou*; v. [7](#): *en poio onomati*; v. [10](#): *en to onomati & en touto*). [Acts 4:12](#) notes that salvation is 'in' (*en*) and 'by' (*en ho*) Jesus alone. The first prepositional indicator permits the ontological force. But, the latter indicator points to the necessary (*dei*) means (*en*) and content (*ho*) of human salvation. The leaders (v. [8](#)), all Israelites (v. [10](#)), and all humans (v. [12](#)) faced the *epistemological* issue of Jesus' name (cf. 'made known,' v. [10](#)).

Fifth, he assumes an universal, theistic archetype to build his conclusion of man's ability to respond in faith to the true God. Unfortunately, the billions (the Indian and Chinese masses), that we are pained about, are found in pantheistic, panentheistic, and non-theistic world-view contexts. Their alternate idea of 'God' is conceptually antithetical and thematically inimical to the God and Father of the Lord Jesus Christ. Will this hue God, in his boundless generosity, save believers regardless of the content or adequacy of the object of their sincere faith? The cognitive components of salvation are minimized.

The book reveals Christological reductionism and exegetical inadequacies which are being explored in a forthcoming interaction by the reviewer. It confuses God's wide heart (as evident throughout Scripture) with a wider hope. Perhaps, the author fails a prey to his own observation of current Western attitudes patronizing favourable theological positions (cf. p. 303).

THROUGH NO FAULT OF THEIR OWN: THE FATE OF THOSE WHO HAVE NEVER HEARD

Edited by William V. Crockett & James G. Sigountos

(Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991)

Perhaps there is no other contemporary topic that calls for the integration of theological, biblical, and missiological thinking as much as the one addressed in this book. Any Christian who is interested in the destiny of those who have not heard the gospel will find this a useful book concerning the major issues that arise from a traditionally evangelical position. Nineteen of the 21 bitesized chapters are written by seminary professors. Six of these are connected with Alliance; four with Trinity; two with Asbury and Bethel; and one each from Dallas, Fuller, Gordon-Conwell, McMaster, Westminster, and Wheaton. The immediate issue and its parent topic of Christianity's relationship to World Religions are discussed in evangelically reliable ways. The editors have done an outstanding job in gamering excellent minds to address the topic. They have also taken every effort to show that the chapters are inter-related by cross-referencing them in footnotes.

This medium-level reader is divided into three sections—theological, biblical, and missiological. In this reviewer's opinion, the missiological section (even though it, like the other sections of the book, consists of uneven contributions) clearly emerges as the strongest, since the experience of actual contact with non-Christian neighbours enriches and integrates theological insight at [p. 80](#) the level of Christian relationship and responsibility. Historical angles on the question are also appreciated (cf. Sigountos, 'Did Early Christians Believe Pagan Religions Could Save?'). However, the exegetical studies, especially in articulating the *implications* of the pertinent passages to the question, left much to be desired. For instance, Charles Van Engen's treatment of the Book of Romans in the missiology section (the chapter is somewhat mistitled as 'The Effect of Universalism on Mission Effort') was preferred over the handling of the early chapters of Romans in the biblical section. The theological prefaces surfaced the various dimensions of the question and are helpful in setting the stage for the rest of the book.

Several observations are in order. First, several authors expressed the urgent need for an evangelical theology of religions (cf. 'Concluding Remarks' by the editors, p. 262, and Harvie Conn, 'Do Other Religions Save?', p. 207.) Already, the initial outline of a course on the subject may be elicited from this book.

Secondly, the book shows a dire need for multiple contributions from those who have been dealing with this exact issue for centuries. Here I refer to scholars in parts of the world where evangelical Christianity as a minority religion has constantly had to face the majority culture/religion with firm answers. In such an attempt, grass-root evangelists actually engaged in popular apologetics along with evangelism. There can be no evangelical theology of religions without a concrete contribution from these thinkers and doers. Tite Tienou's chapter is an attempt of this nature.

Thirdly, the incorporation of Clark Pinnock's exegetical treatment of [Acts 4:12](#) legitimizes his view as an evangelical option even though most (all the rest?) of the authors disagree with his conclusions. Should not a fuller interaction with the judgements of this sensitive theologian have been included? (Darrell Bock, 'Athenians Who Have Never Heard,' responds to Pinnock's view in a footnote, p. 128, n. 8). Supposedly, for Pinnock, [Acts 4:12](#) does not address the eschatological fate of the unevangelized (p. 110). 'Why' it may be asked, 'does he take saved here to be holistic but will not include eschatological considerations in this holistic salvation?' Also, [Acts 4:12](#) is not seen as a dissenting judgement on the status of other religions, unless one asks those in other religions to read Peter's pronouncement. They certainly see it as a negative judgement on their religious adherence. The means to permanent and complete salvation of any person regardless of his salvific and devotional preference, is in focus in the verse.

Fourth, John Stott's views are examined in much greater detail than Pinnock's in the book. Scott McKnight ('Eternal Consequences or Eternal Consciousness') and Timothy R.

Phillips ('Hell: A Christological Reflection') discuss and reject Stott's annihilationism and conditional immortality. Their approaches serve as a subtle invitation to this stalwart evangelical leader to reconsider his position and return to the conclusions drawn from his own [p. 81](#) premise of accepting what God says (cf. David L. Edwards and John R. W. Stott, *Evangelical Essentials A Liberal Evangelical Dialogue*, Downers Grove, IVP, 1989, p. 315).

In spite of assertions to the contrary, (cf. Supralapsarian Calvinists who theoretically claim that a strong, elective, salvific, predestination does not inhibit active evangelism, but don't deny that it actually does), giving up the biblical notion of hell adversely affects evangelistic endeavour. If Jesus and Paul used the eschatological disadvantage of an eternal hell as core motivations for missions, their followers cannot be excused from its significance. This publication will have served the Body of Christ well if it recovers rigorous biblical thinking on the subjects of the salvific status of non-Christian religions and the eternal destiny of those who have not trusted in Christ in their earthly life.

ONE GOD ONE LORD: IN A WORLD OF RELIGIOUS PLURALISM

Eds. A. D. Clarke and B. M. Winter

(Carlisle: The Paternoster Press; Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 256 pp., £9.99.)

(Reviewed by Simon Humphrey)

This book is a collection of ten essays edited by Andrew D. Clarke and Bruce W. Winter which address the issue of religious pluralism. The archaeological, biblical and theological essays are revisions of papers given at the Tyndale Fellowship Conference on Religious Pluralism, held at Oak Hill Theological College, London, in July, 1991.

The book contains a wide range of approaches to the issue of religious pluralism. Two papers examine Old Testament attitudes to other religions. There are three exegetical New Testament papers. Another describes the varied and colourful state of local religions in the Roman Empire. There are three theological papers: Bruce A. Demarest attempts a biblically based theology of religious plurality based on the perspective of how God reveals himself and is known; David Wright examines Roman Catholic attitudes toward other religions following Vatican II; Tim Bradshaw discusses protestant approaches to religious pluralism. In the final paper E. David Cook takes to task John Hick and others who deny the 'unique definitiveness, absoluteness, normativeness and superiority of Christianity'. The effect of the whole is impressive for a small book.

Most of the papers are very readable, except perhaps the first, a more technical essay by Richard S. Hess who undertakes an investigation of archaeological inscriptions from the period of the Monarchy. Hess concludes that these recent archaeological finds corroborate three of the four different attitudes toward other religions he discerns in the Old Testament.

John E. Goldingay and Christopher J. H. Wright examine Old Testament material relating to creation, the patriarchs, exodus and Sinai, Israel's life inside Canaan, and books relating to the Babylonian, Persian and Greek periods. Foreign [p. 82](#) religions are sometimes seen as reflecting truth about God from which Israel itself may learn, but this is always in need of the illumination which can come only from knowing what Yahweh has done with Israel. The significance of Israelite religion lies in its status as a *witness* to God's actions, not merely as a communicator of truth about God.

David M. Ball examines the 'I am' sayings in John. His thesis is that these refer to similar passages in Isaiah, the contexts of which may be used to fill out their significance. Thus when Jesus says 'I am he who bears witness of self' ([In 8:18](#)) he takes on the role of the 'Servant of the LORD' ([Isa. 43:10](#)). He notes that the witness of the Servant concerned the

claim of Yahweh to be the only God and the exclusive Saviour. A knowledge of Greek is helpful in following his line of argument. An important implication Ball draws from his observations concerns Jesus' identity with God. This Christology conflicts directly with John Hick.

David J. Gill's fascinating survey of Egyptian deities, Mystery cults, healing and other cults from Asia Minor and Syria calls into question the common assumption that the present situation of the world is of such a different order from that faced in the New Testament as to require a vastly different approach to pluralism.

Thorsten Moritz claims Ephesians was addressed to converts from the pervasive cult of Artemis in Western Asia Minor. It is valuable in determining Paul's strategy in such a syncretistic environment. Some of the addressees were tempted to view Christ as a spiritual mechanism with which to manipulate the powers of the heavenly realms. He notes several instances where the terminology of the visionary—mystical thought world is taken up and applied to Christ. Moritz sees two major concerns in Ephesians: one is the maintenance of unity between Jew and Gentile believers, the other is the presentation of an exclusive soteriology that demands complete renunciation of cultic links with other spiritual forces.

Bruce W. Winter observes a similar phenomenon in the public speeches of Paul in Lystra and Athens ([Acts 14](#) and [17](#)). Paul uses concepts familiar to both Stoicism and Epicureanism in order to reject any compromise with local superstitious or religious belief.

B. A. Demarest starts with the premise that how God reveals himself is foundational to the question of pluralism. He examines many of the standard texts ([Ps. 19](#); [Acts 10, 14, 17](#); [Rom. 1](#)) and concurs with the historic Christian consensus that general revelation is ineffectual due to spiritual sluggishness. D. Wright however cautions against resorting to, 'such scripturally thin concepts as general revelation and common grace.' He sees this approach as inadequate as a theological response in light of the expanded awareness of the territory outside of Christ (p. 170). Demarest contests Clark Pinnock's views, and rejects the possibility that either general revelation or common grace apart from special revelation might be salvific. Religious plurality is 'a p. 83 global manifestation of sinful humanity's flawed response to general revelation ...' To my mind Demarest fails to demonstrate that the manner in which God reveals himself is more foundational to the question of religious pluralism than is, for example, Karl Rahner's emphasis on God's universal salvific will.

David Wright considers Roman Catholic attitudes to pluralism within and following the Vatican II council of 1962–65. He notes that the 'Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions' is a far cry from the dogmatic fundamental 'outside the Church there is no salvation' that informed the Catholic Church's attitudes for centuries. Vatican II does not state explicitly that other religions are 'means of salvation' although many scholars maintain that this is implied. Nevertheless Wright commends the effort to maintain a Christocentric and ecclesiocentric perspective on other religions.

[1 Tim 2:3–4](#), '... in the sight of God our Saviour, who desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth' forms a major plank in the pro-pluralism argument. Wright protests that the particularistic context of this verse is not taken into account: 'For there is one God, and one mediator also between God and humankind, the man Christ Jesus' (vs. [5](#)). It might be argued that this is covered in Rahner's Christo-inclusivist concept of 'anonymous Christians' who are saved, albeit unawares, on the basis of Christ. However, we may ask whether Rahner's scheme does justice to Paul's resulting appointment as a preacher and apostle to the Gentiles in faith and truth (vs. [7](#)).

Tim Bradshaw considers the perspectives of Moltmann, Barth, Pannenberg and Tillich regarding other religions. He assumes the reader has a good understanding of their views, which may not be justified. He concludes that an increasingly immanentist doctrine of God in the world has produced a more accepting view of religions in modern protestant theology generally. He identifies revelation, Christology, and the issue of salvation and the cross as areas needing closer attention.

E. D. Cook takes John Hick and others to task over their denial of the absolute and normative uniqueness of Christ. Hick, seeking a pluralistic theology, argues for the independent validity of other religions. Cook points out several inconsistencies. For example, Hick's argument of 'Historical consciousness' means that no truth that is outside a culture or religion can legitimately speak to or judge that culture. The superiority of a religion is to be determined by how well that religion serves the interests of humanity. This is self-contradictory however, in that justice, or 'the ability to promote the welfare of humanity' is made to be the (absolute!) criterion for discrimination between genuine and false religion.

Cook also refutes P. F. Knitter's claim that the infinite nature of God demands religious pluralism. His argument that this perspective confuses the difference between what is true, and what is exhaustively p. 84 known, is sound and is an answer to the undue emphasizing of the mystery of God. He also suggests this emphasis on the infinite nature of God must lead to silence, and even to solipsism.

The essays are not without diversity, but the overall consensus is that religious pluralism in the sense of accepting all religions as equally valid ways of salvation is not acceptable. However as T. Bradshaw points out, this does not mean that the theological labour of reflecting on the significance of other religions is irrelevant. If the theological tide has indeed turned toward an emphasis on the immanence of God, the question of religious pluralism will become more pressing, not less.

YOUR WORK MATTERS TO GOD

by Doug Sherman and William Hendricks
(Naypress: Colorado Springs, 1990.)

(Reviewed by David Parker)

Unemployment is one of the most serious social issues facing Australia and other industrialized countries at the present time. But evangelicals do not seem to have much that is distinctive to say on the matter, except to join in the general chorus of calls for social justice. Admittedly, it is such a complex problem that there is a great temptation to leave the solution to the experts such as economists, politicians, trade unions and employers. But surely there is something that can be said from a biblical perspective?

A positive place to start is with work itself, rather than with unemployment. *Your Work Matters to God* is a useful guide, although it was not written to deal with unemployment directly. Its authors are Doug Sherman, president of Career Impact Ministries, an organization devoted to helping people integrate faith and their careers, and William Hendricks, a communications consultant.

First of all, the book identifies the weaknesses of secular views of work. The authors show how work is mostly idolized, and how it is often the dominating factor in giving people self-identity, a sense of acceptance and success. While the book does not mention it, this is one major reason why it is so devastating to be out of paid work in today's society.

The main thrust of the book is to demonstrate how work has intrinsic value and is of importance to God as an extension of his work. According to Scripture, God works, and he created people to be his co-workers; what he wants done in the world, he does through

our work. Thus, legitimate daily work (directly or indirectly) carries out God's purposes, and is not merely neutral in value, or a means to some other end, like raising money to support gospel witness.

Sherman and Hendricks also attack the view that work is itself sinful and has no eternal value, a quality reserved for 'spiritual' work such as preaching or prayer. This 'two storey' view of work gives rise to the common view that full-time Christian work is superior to secular work as a life's occupation, which can create a sense of guilt and futility p. 85 in lay people and demeans their daily work. The authors acknowledge that the fall into sin certainly made work hard and futile—which is another reason why a holistic view of redemption is needed—but work itself has validity and value because it was instituted by God before the fall as part of the general cultural mandate given to human-kind.

This book also exposes what is called the 'mainstream' Christian attitude to work—it is of value in God's sight because it is a means by which Christians have access to other people for the purpose of witness and evangelism—the 'strategic soapbox' view. The authors show that this and other sub-Christian views distort the nature of work and God's creative and redemptive purposes.

On the basis of these fundamental principles, the latter part of the book goes on to deal comprehensively with important related matters such as attitudes to work, career selection, facing evil in the workplace, the weekend and leisure. It alludes to ethical problems in the workplace, but cannot deal with them in any detail. However this is a particularly helpful part of the book.

But it does get off the track in the concluding chapters by devoting too much space to witness in the workplace. In fact, it ends up by virtually adopting the 'strategic soapbox' view rejected earlier. This is a pity because on the basis of its own theology, the book could easily have shown the scandal of a society which tolerates high levels of unemployment—denying people the opportunity to do God's work!

In failing to deal with unemployment, the book also ignores structural causes of unemployment. It also fails to exploit its view of the intrinsic value of work and the negative effect of sin to advocate efforts to reform the workplace and to counteract unemployment on the grounds that these would be the work of God. Instead, the book is content to adopt the old evangelical view that God changes only the inner qualities and attitudes of the worker, but not work or the workplace!

It also fails to make any positive proposals to deal with the realities of the contemporary situation, such as the value of non-paid work or the consequences of the new balance between work, leisure and welfare brought about by changes in types of work, increased productivity and longevity.

But despite these limitations, *Your Work Matters to God* does offer a helpful view of strategic value of Christian layperson in the workplace and thus provides a good basis for evangelical thought and action. It could well be supplemented, however, by books from people like Robert Banks, Os Guinness and those who belong to the 'Theology of Everyday Life' movement. p. 87

Journal and Book Information

Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society

Published quarterly. Subscription \$20

Address: Simon J. Kistemaker, Reformed Theological Seminary, 5422 Clinton Boulevard,
Jackson, MS 39209, USA

Themelios

Published 3 times a year jointly by British Theological Students Fellowship and the
International Fellowship of Evangelical Students. Subscription Pds

Address: Themelios, 38 De Montford Street, Leicester LE1 7GP TSF, 6400 Schroeder Road,
P.O. Box 7895, Madison, WI 53707-7895, USA

TRACI Publications

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Wm. B. Eerdmans

255 Jefferson Avenue, SE, Grand Rapids, Mich 49503 USA