

The Christian and Other Religions: the Biblical Evidence

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The student of comparative religion who turns to the Bible for guidance meets his first discouragement in the fact that 'religion' is not really a biblical word at all.¹ The Bible is concerned, not with religious systems as such, but with man in his life on earth before God. All that man does, therefore, in every sphere of life, including that which he calls 'religious', is judged in the light of his response to the Creator-Redeemer God who is axiomatic to the whole sweep of Scripture. And this searching scrutiny is directed, as we shall see, as much at the religious behaviour of those who, by God's grace, are known as God's people as at the rest of mankind. We must begin our survey of the material, however, where the Bible itself begins—before that crucial distinction had arisen.

A. THE OLD TESTAMENT

1. Creation and fall

The creation narratives present us with mankind as a whole, represented in and by Adam—the generic name for man—made in the image of God and placed in the midst of the earth, there to live before God. The whole human race, therefore, has the capacity of being addressed by God and of making response to him. Man is the creature who is aware of his accountability to God. At this point there is no question of 'religion' or 'religions', as though they were something separate from man himself. Man responds to God in the totality of life within God's creation.

A man without 'religion' is a contradiction in itself. In his 'religion' man gives account of his relation to God. His religion is reaction upon the (real or pretended) revelation of God. Man is 'incurably religious' because his relation to God belongs to the very essence of man himself. Man is only man as man before God.²

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¹ *Thrēskeia* in Jas. 1:26f. refers to outward practice, not systems of belief or ritual. The nearest to our modern use of the term is in Acts 26:5 where Paul uses it of his whole background in Judaism.

² J. Blauw, 'The Biblical view of Man in his Religion', in G. H. Anderson (ed.), *The Theology of the Christian Mission* (London: SCM, 1961), p. 32.

But the same narratives also present us with mankind fallen and living in rebellion against God. So the whole human race also lives in a state of flight from God hiding from the very God on whom we depend and to whom we are inescapably answerable.

This divided nature is a fundamental point in our thinking about man and his religion. As the image of God, man still reflects his Creator, responds to him, recognizes his hand in creation and, along with the rest of the animal creation, looks to the hand of God for the very supports of life itself (Ps. 104:27ff.). God is involved in the whole life of man, for man is human only through his relationship to God. Man, therefore, cannot utterly remove God from himself without ceasing to be human. This fact about man is prior to any specifics of 'religious' belief or practice. Our fellow human being is first, foremost and essentially one in the image of God, and only secondarily a Hindu, Muslim or secular pagan. So, inasmuch as his religion is part of his humanity, whenever we meet one whom we call 'an adherent of another religion', we meet someone who, in his religion as in all else, has some relationship to the Creator God, a relationship within which he is addressable and accountable.

Nevertheless, we have to add at once that his relationship has been corrupted by sin so that in his religion, again as in all else, man lives in a state of rebellion and disobedience. Indeed, if religion is 'man giving account of his relation to God', it will be in the religious dimension of human life that we would expect to find the clearest evidence of the radical fracture of that relationship. If the immediate response of the fallen Adam in us is to hide from the presence of the living God, what more effective way could there be than through religious activity which gives us the illusion of having met and satisfied him? 'Even his religiosity is a subtle escape from the God he is afraid and ashamed to meet.'³ The fallen duplicity of man is that he simultaneously seeks after God his Maker and flees from God his Judge. Man's religions, therefore, simultaneously manifest both these human tendencies. This is what makes a simplistic verdict on other religions—whether blandly positive or wholly negative—so unsatisfactory and, indeed, unbiblical.

Nor should we fail to see in this confusion and ambiguity the fingerprints of Satan himself. The strategy of the serpent was not so much to draw man into conscious, deliberate rebellion against God by implanting totally alien desires, but rather to corrupt and pervert through doubt and disobedience a desire which was legitimate in itself. After all, what is more natural than for man to wish to be like God? Is it not the proper function and ambition of the image of God to be like the one who created him in his own image? The satanic delusion lay in the desire to be as God, 'the temptation of man to bring God and himself to a common denominator'.⁴ This satanic element in man's fallen condition and continuing religious quest is seen very clearly in the religious philosophies of the east and in western Platonism in which no ultimate distinction is retained between the human and the divine, between creation and the Creator. The obliteration of this distinction has enormous implications. It reduces the personhood of God to something inferior to some higher ultimate reality: deity and deities appear in the sullied image of fallen man. And it reduces man's concern for his proper God-given role—namely responsible life as a steward in the environment of this earth. Both arise from man's attempt to realize his own

³ J. R. W. Stott, *Christian Mission in the Modern World* (London: Falcon, 1975), p. 69.

⁴ J. Blauw, *op. cit.*, p. 33.

pretended divinity—the original, characteristically ‘serpentine’ temptations⁵—and both have socially detrimental effects on man’s life: ‘now the humanity of man is endangered (Gn. 4, 6, and 7) because the divinity of God is denied.’⁶

In view of what we have noted about God’s universal involvement with man, as his image, it seems to me an unbiblical exaggeration to assign all non-Christian religious faith and life to the work of the devil. Nevertheless it is equally unbiblical to overlook the realm of the satanic and the demonic in human religions—often most subtly at its strongest in what appears as ‘the best’ in them.

2. The patriarchs

a. *The covenant with Abraham.* The story of God’s redemptive work in history begins in Genesis 12 with the call of Abraham and the covenant with him and his descendants. But the stage and scenery are set in Genesis 10 and 11 in the depiction of the world of nations in their geographical and spiritual scatteredness. These are ‘the nations’ whose idols and rites will later be condemned or mocked, who, as enemies of Israel, will threaten and harass God’s redeemed, and who will repeatedly be placed at the sharp end of God’s words and deeds of judgment. Yet it is precisely for the sake of these nations that Abraham and Israel are chosen. In the covenant with Abraham, Israel is chosen among the nations for the nations, so that ‘all the families of the earth shall be blessed’ (Gn. 12:3).

Here it becomes clear that the whole history of Israel is nothing but the continuation of God’s dealings with the nations, and that therefore the history of Israel is only to be understood from the unsolved problem of the relation of God to the nations.⁷

The election of Israel, therefore, does not imply the rejection of the rest of humanity, but is set in close context with the prospect and promise of blessing for the nations through Israel. This is a vital point to bear in mind when we come to observe the religious exclusivism of later, Mosaic and post-Mosaic Old Testament faith.

b. *Patriarchal religion.* There is a marked difference between the religious faith and practice of the fathers of Israel in Genesis and the developed cult of Israel after

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the exodus and Sinai covenant.⁸ The most obvious contrast lies in the use of divine names. The patriarchs worshipped the Mesopotamian and west Semitic high god, El, with several additional

⁵ Cf. P. T. Chandapilla, ‘Whither the Serpent?’ (an unpublished paper on the ‘serpentine’ nature of Hinduism).

⁶ J. Blauw, *loc. cit.*

⁷ J. Blauw, *The Missionary Nature of the Church* (McGraw Hill, 1962), p. 19.

⁸ On the religion of the patriarchs, see: A. Alt, ‘God of the Fathers’ in *idem, Essays on Old Testament History and Religion* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1966), pp. 3-77; F. M. Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard UP). These and other works are assessed by G. J. Wenham, ‘The Religion of the Patriarchs’, in Millard and

epithets, most notably El Shaddai. They receive commands and promises from him directly (without prophets) and they build altars and offer sacrifices to him (without priests). Their relationship to El is one of obedience and trust and is described as a covenant which included promises of divine protection and provision of land and children (especially Gn. 15, 17).

Now the writer of Genesis clearly identifies El as he is known and responded to by the patriarchs with Yahweh, the personal name of Israel's redeeming, covenant God. However, study of the use of divine names in Genesis shows that the writer makes this identification in a carefully controlled way. Only in the narrative sections does the author use the name Yahweh on its own when referring to God, since he is telling the story from the standpoint of his faith presuppositions. But in the dialogue sections, particularly where God is the speaker, either the old El-title of God is used on its own, or Yahweh is added alongside an El-title.⁹ It appears that while the author wished to indicate that it was indeed Yahweh who addressed the patriarchs, and to whom they responded, he did not wish to violate or suppress the ancient traditions by obscuring the names by which they had in fact worshipped God.

This fits with God's words to Moses in Exodus 6:3 concerning the contrast between the revelation of the name Yahweh now being made to Moses and the patriarchs' knowledge of him as El Shaddai. 'I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob as El Shaddai, but by my name Yahweh I did not make myself known to them.' The most natural interpretation of this text is that the name Yahweh was not known to the patriarchs.¹⁰ The editor of the Pentateuch evidently saw no contradiction between such an assertion and the Genesis viewpoint that Yahweh, God of Israel, was in fact the prime mover of the patriarchal history.

What we have here, then, is a situation where the living God is known, worshipped, believed and obeyed, but under divine titles which were common to the rest of contemporary semitic culture, and some of which at least, according to some scholars, may originally have belonged to separate deities or localizations of El. This raises two questions germane to our enquiry. First, are we then to regard the faith of Israel as syncretistic in its origins and early development, and if so, does this constitute biblical support for a syncretistic stance by the Christian *vis-à-vis* contemporary world faiths? Secondly, can we infer from the Genesis story that men may worship and relate personally to the true, living God, but under the name or names of some 'local' deity and without knowledge of God's saving name and action in Christ?

Wenham (eds.), *Essays on the Patriarchal Narratives* (Leicester: IVP, 1980), pp. 157-188. [Now online at http://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/eptn_6_wenham.html]

⁹ For detailed study of this feature of Genesis, see G. J. Wenham, *op. cit.*

¹⁰ It is possible that the verse means that the meaning of the name Yahweh was not yet revealed, though the patriarchs knew the name itself. This exegesis has been offered by Jewish and Christian scholars, e.g. J. A. Motyer, *The Revelation of the Divine Name* (London: Tyndale, 1959 [Article now online at: http://www.theologicalstudies.org.uk/article_revelation_motyer.html]). Wenham (*op. cit.*, pp. 177ff.), in discussing this and other ways of handling Ex. 6:3, has shown that it is unnecessary to see a contradiction between its natural meaning and the conviction of the writer of Genesis that the God known to the patriarchs as El Shaddai was in fact Yahweh. So that it was indeed Yahweh whom they worshipped ('called on the name of') and obeyed - whether or not they knew and used that specific name.

To answer the first question requires that we first of all define carefully what is meant by 'syncretism'. Syncretism is a conscious or unconscious attempt to combine divergent religious elements (beliefs, rites, vocabulary) in such a way that a new religious mixture evolves which goes beyond the contributing elements. It presupposes that none of the contributing elements can be regarded as final or sufficient in itself. It must be distinguished from the modes by which God has communicated his self-revelation using existing concepts and religious forms, but then transcending and transforming them with a new theology. The latter process is usually called accommodation or assimilation. It is quite different from syncretism inasmuch as it recognizes the reality of unique divine revelation in history, whereas syncretism excludes such a category *a priori*.

To describe early Israel's faith as syncretistic one would have to take the view that religious beliefs associated with a god named Yahweh happened to merge with and eventually displaced beliefs associated with a god, or gods, named El (*etc.*), and that this was a purely human process—simply part of the phenomena of the history of religions. But this could not be represented as the Bible's own view of the matter. The Pentateuchal tradition is better described as a case of accommodation or assimilation. The living God who would later reveal the fullness of his redemptive name, power and purpose, prepared for that fuller revelation by relating to historical individuals and their families in terms of religious rites, symbols and divine titles with which they were already culturally familiar—*i.e.* accommodating his self-revelation to their existing religious framework, but then bursting through that framework with new and richer promises and acts.

So the patriarchal narratives lend no support to the prevalent modern syncretistic approach which asks us to regard all religions as equally valid ways to God. That kind of syncretism, as Visser 't Hooft so trenchantly exposes, is 'essentially a revolt against the uniqueness of revelation in history.'¹¹

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To answer the second question we need to note carefully the particularity of God's relationship to the patriarchs. The fact that the living God addressed Abraham and entered into covenant with him in terms of divine names Abraham would already have known, in no way implies that all Abraham's contemporaries who worshipped El in his various manifestations, and with the seamier side of his mythology, thereby knew and worshipped the living God. It does not even imply that Abraham's own religious belief and practice constituted worship of the living God or was acceptable to him before the point where God addressed him and he responded in obedient faith. The relationship between God and Abraham was based on God's initiative in grace and self-revelation, not on the name of the deity Abraham already knew, by itself, nor on the quality or sincerity of Abraham's previous worship (about which we are told nothing anyway). And the purpose of God's self-revelation was not to validate the religion of El and his pantheon, but to

¹¹ W. A. Visser't Hooft, *No Other Name: The Choice between Syncretism and Christian Universalism* (London: SCM, 1963), p. 48. This is one of the best books I have come across for a clear definition and exposure of syncretism and its dangers, in ancient times, in the NT struggle with it, and in its many modern guises.

lead Abraham and his descendants beyond it into a personal relationship with God in preparation for the full experience of redemption and thereby for full knowledge of his true name and character.

So the patriarchal experience certainly allows us to believe that God does address and relate to men in terms of their existing concept of deity (as, *e.g.*, in the case of Cornelius). But we must presume that such initiative is preparatory to bringing them to a knowledge of his historic revelation and redemptive acts (which, in our era, means knowledge of Christ). It does not allow us to assert that worship of other gods is in fact unconscious worship of the true God, nor to escape from the task of bringing knowledge of the saving name of God in Jesus Christ to men of other faiths.

A final point on the patriarchs arises from the brief reference to them in Joshua 24:14f. Joshua, seeking to renew the covenant and having recounted the mighty redemptive acts of Yahweh, challenges the people to get rid of all other gods, and serve Yahweh alone in accordance with the covenant. Among the examples of such 'other gods', Joshua cites not only the gods of Canaan and Egypt, but 'the gods your forefathers worshipped beyond the River'. The inference here is that however God may have initially accommodated his relationship with the patriarchs to their previous worship and concepts of deity, as was necessary in the period historically prior to the exodus, now that their descendants have an unambiguous knowledge of Yahweh in the light of the exodus, Sinai and the conquest, such concepts are inadequate and indeed incompatible with covenant loyalty. This text shows something of the strains in practice arising from Israel's polytheistic environment and pre-history. But the answer was not a tolerant syncretism but a radical rejection of all but the God known through his acts of revelation and redemption up to that point in history. How much more is this the case for us who stand on 'this side' of the completion of both revelation and redemption in Christ?

3. Israel and the gods of the nations

a. '*No other gods*'. There is certainly a change of atmosphere from the 'ecumenical bonhomie' (Wenham) of the patriarchal religion in Genesis to the clarity and unambiguous exclusiveness of the first commandment: 'I am Yahweh ... You shall have no other gods beside me.' From this point on, the faith of Israel was dogmatically mono-Yahwistic, whether or not the monotheistic implications of that faith were as yet consciously understood. Israel was forbidden either to worship other gods or to attempt to worship Yahweh in the way those gods were worshipped (Dt. 12:30f.). The facts of this matter are quite unmistakable and need not be tediously listed in detail. In the law (*e.g.* Dt. 7, 13, etc.), in the prophets (*e.g.* Je. 2), in the narratives (*e.g.* 2 Ki. 17), in the psalms (*e.g.* Ps. 106), even in the Wisdom tradition (*e.g.* Jb. 31:26ff.) the overwhelming message is of the exclusiveness of Israel's faith—Yahweh alone. This is not just a peripheral trait or the by-product of national pride. It is of the essence of that covenant relationship to which alone Israel owed their nationhood and from which they derived their reason for existence.

However, it is precisely as we feel the full force of this particularism and exclusivism of the historical faith of Israel that we need to recall the universal purpose that lies behind it—*theologically and chronologically*. The preservation of a pure worship of the living God in Israel

and of the revelation entrusted to them was not to spite the rest of humanity but was ultimately for their sake. It was not a matter of Israel flaunting their privilege in an attitude of 'Our religion is better than yours'—as if Israel's faith was one among many brands of a commodity, 'human religion'. Rather what was at stake, what was so threatened by Israel compromising with the gods and worship of other nations, was the continuity of the redemptive work of the Creator God of all mankind within the unique historical and social context which he himself had chosen. And that choice of Israel was for reasons finally known only to himself, reasons which certainly did not include any national or religious superiority on Israel's part, as they were bluntly informed (*cf.* Dt. 7:7; 9:5f.).

This is a point which is missed by some who try to soften the sharp edges of Israel's religious exclusivism by a misreading or false comparison of Old Testament texts. Thus, *e.g.*, S. J. Samartha:

Among the Priestly writers there is the tendency to consider other nations from the standpoint of Yahweh's relation to Israel. There is a feeling of exclusiveness, of being the only 'chosen people of God'. The prophets constantly challenge this assumption. Instead of looking at other nations from Mt. Zion, they demand that Israel should look at itself from the standpoint of other nations. Mt. Sinai should look at the river Ganga; and the River Ganga at Mt. Sinai. There is no reason to claim that the religion developed in the desert around Mt. Sinai is superior to the religion developed on the banks of the river Ganga.¹²

He goes on to quote Isaiah 19:24f., which is entirely

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eschatological in its reference, and Amos 9:7, which in no way equates the faith of Israel with that of other nations, but challenges Israel that if she abandons her faith and its socio-ethical demands, she will have no other claim to uniqueness among the world of nations with migratory origins.

In any case, as A. F. Glasser pointed out in his reply (in the same volume, p. 42), it is not a question of superiority but of truth. And, we might add, it was not a question of 'a religion being developed' at Mt. Sinai, but of a revelation being received. And along with that revelation, Israel received the mission of being a holy (distinctive) and priestly (representing God) nation (Ex. 19:3-6). In the light of such a responsibility, for Israel to have accepted Canaanite and other religions as equally valid and acceptable alternatives to their own faith would have been no act of tolerance, kindness or maturity. It would have been an utter betrayal of the rest of mankind, for the sake of whose salvation they had been chosen and redeemed.

b. Israel's social structure. One of the great failings of the various syncretistic views of religions (popular and scholarly) is that they treat religions as systems of concepts, 'insights' and beliefs,

¹² S. J. Samartha (an Indian scholar), in his contribution to G. H. Anderson and T. Stransky (eds.), *Christ's Lordship and Religious Pluralism* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1981), pp. 31f.

which can be mixed or swapped, and fail to take into account that religions are part of total world-views and are integrally related in particular to the whole socio-economic and often political structures of life of their adherents. This was as true in the ancient world as it is today. The difference between Israel and the Canaanites and other surrounding societies was not a simple difference over what gods were to be worshipped and how. Israel was distinctive in her total social system from both the Canaanite system she replaced and other contemporary ancient Near Eastern cultures. And that social distinctiveness was an integral part of her religious self-awareness and theological significance. Space forbids full exposition of this point, but it has been worked out in massive sociological detail by N. K. Gottwald,¹³ and I have written elsewhere on this theme of the interpenetration of the social and religious realms in Old Testament Israel.¹⁴

It is a theme which could be illustrated widely from the prophets, but Elijah's encounter with Ahab after the murder of Naboth in I Kings 21 is especially powerful. Jezebel's treatment of Naboth and his family was not just to satisfy Ahab's greed. It was an act of socio-cultural imperialism based on Jezebel's concept of political power (where the monarch could do as he pleased with the land and subjects he virtually owned), and her concept of economic practice (where land was a commercial commodity, not an inalienable family trust). In both respects her cultural background was diametrically opposed to Israel's social system, as Ahab had sullenly accepted. And the Baal cult she fostered was an integral part of the same socio-cultural matrix.

That is why the story of Naboth—a story of social and economic injustice—though it is set in the middle of a saga of religious conflict (Yahweh v. Baal) is not at all out of place or peripheral to such a context. The struggle between Yahweh and Baal for the soul of Israel was not merely 'religious', but thoroughly social; not just a question of who was really the true God (as on Mt. Carmel), but of how Israelites were to live and treat each other.

The religion of Jezebel sanctioned and sanctified a system of politics, economics and social life which was stratified, oppressive and exploitative. Baalism was the ethos of that kind of society, the unjust social outworking of fallen, idolatrous humanity, the native soil and element of a Jezebel. Israel's relationship to Yahweh, in clear and deliberate contrast, demanded and had originally created a social system based on liberty (in the comprehensive deliverance of the exodus), equality (in the economic division of the land) and fraternity (even the king was 'one of your brothers'). Such words sound revolutionary! And indeed Israel was revolutionary, when compared with her contemporaries, both in religious and social life.

To worship Yahweh, to be an Israelite, meant ... to practise a specific way of life in separation from and in overt opposition to time-honoured established ways of life regarded throughout the ancient Near East as inevitable if not totally desirable.¹⁵

¹³ N. K. Gottwald, *The Tribes of Yahweh: A Sociology of the Religion of Liberated Israel, 1250-1050 BCE* (London: SCM, 1980).

¹⁴ C. J. H. Wright, 'The Ethical Relevance of Israel as a Society', *Journal of Christian Social Ethics*, June 1984; and also *idem*, *Living as the People of God: The Relevance of Old Testament Ethics* (Leicester: IVP, 1983).

¹⁵ Gottwald, *op. cit.*, p. 59.

Thus the spiritual and the social struggles were part of each other, for if Israel, who were called to be a manifestation of God's own character and holiness, deserted him for different gods, it would lead to a failure to be distinctive in every other sphere of life.

It is vital that we remember this integration of spiritual and social realities when assessing other religions. We must avoid the idea that religion is something for God's good, as if we ought to choose the right God because he will be piqued if we don't. God's revelation and the response it demands are for man's own good. To choose (in Joshua's terms) the true God is to opt for the truly human as well. Conversely, idolatry and injustice still go together as much today as in ninth-century Samaria. Some of the most deeply ingrained social oppressions in our world are integrally linked to religions which sanction them.

It may be noted that I have used the expression, 'God's revelation and the response it demands', rather than simply 'Israel's religion', or indeed, 'the Christian religion'. For historically these 'religions', considered as human, institutional and social complexes, have both gone through periods of corruption and the betrayal of the truth and ethic entrusted to them, by themselves being implicated in or used to justify oppression, injustice and various forms of idolatry. Hence the need for prophets and reformers who bring the spiritual and social critique of the word of God to the 'religion' of those who are his redeemed people. But the criterion by which we assess other religions is not the 'religion' of Christianity at any point in its all too human history, but

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the unique authority of the revealed word of God, to which the Christian submits his own 'religious' understandings, convictions, practices and behaviour.¹⁶

c. Prophetic satire. A prominent feature of the account of the great conflict between Yahweh and Baal on Mt. Carmel is Elijah's mockery of the prophets of Baal for the manifest impotence of their god (1 Ki. 18:27-29). This satire on other gods is found elsewhere in the Old Testament, and two particular passages call for some comment.

1 Kings 18:27ff. Two comments on Elijah's scorn: First of all, it was directed, not at the mass of the people, but at the false prophets. The people were like witnesses to a case who were challenged to make a clear verdict (v. 21). The mockery was on those who had led the people astray from their God and who were in fact responsible for the judgment of drought they were suffering. In this respect it is comparable to Jesus' own sarcasm against the Pharisees and

¹⁶ There is always danger in well-meant attempts to defend Christianity as a 'religion', the danger of slipping unawares into the syncretist's marsh. Visser 't Hooft warns of the damage done by Christians who speak as if Christianity were just one species—even the highest or best species—of the wider genus, 'religion'. But that is not at all the biblical position. 'Christianity understands itself not as one of several religions but as the adequate and definitive revelation of God in history.... Every time Christians use the word religion meaning something wider than Christianity but including Christianity, they contribute to the syncretistic mood of our times.... It is high time that Christians should rediscover that the very heart of their faith is that Jesus Christ did not come to make a contribution to the religious storehouse of mankind, but that in him God reconciled the world unto himself' (Visser 't Hooft, *op. cit.*, pp. 94f.).

religious leaders who were actually keeping people out of the kingdom of God. Secondly, this was not mockery of primitive paganism. These were not unenlightened heathen, but men who had once belonged to God's people but had turned aside and rejected Yahweh, his covenant and its demands. Apart from Jezebel's own imported prophets of Baal and Asherah, the Israelites among Elijah's opponents were apostates from the faith of Yahweh, not the deluded followers of some other religion.

Isaiah 44:9-20. Here it is the idolater himself, not the apostate, who attracts the prophet's satire. This passage is the most sustained satire on idolatry, but it is not unique. It is preceded by earlier comments on the futility and contemptible impotence of man-made idols (*cf.* Is. 40:19f.; 41:7; 21ff., *et al.*). Those earlier passages referred to the great state gods of Babylon and asserted Yahweh's incomparable superiority—an important pastoral/evangelistic point for those the prophet was preparing for release and return from Babylonian captivity. But here the butt is home-made idolatry, which is practically the domestic by-product of eating and heating. Again, two brief comments:

First, the prophet recognizes that such idolaters are to some degree blinded, deluded and misled (*cf.* vv. 9, 18, 20). Idolatry is not just stupidity, but involves a blindness which is partly wilful and culpable and partly the work of some external force or power. There are links here with Paul's teaching in Romans 1:21-25 and 2 Corinthians 4:4.

Second, the criticism sometimes made that the prophet fails to understand the inner dynamic of idol-worship or to distinguish the material idol from the spirit, power or deity it symbolized or localized, is really beside the point for several reasons. What aroused the prophet's scornful wonder was the sight of living man bowing in worship to something other than the one incomparable living God (*cf.* vv. 6-8)—regardless of whether that 'something' was the idol itself or the deity it represented. Furthermore, the prophet was, in fact, well aware of the difference between a material idol and the deity it supposedly figured. For in *Isaiah 46:1f.* he pictures Bel and Nebo, two prominent Babylonian gods, watching their idols being carried away by their worshippers in defeat and disgrace. Such is the impotence of these gods that they cannot save their own idols, let alone save their worshippers!¹⁷ And in any case, the prophet's purpose here and in all these passages was not to describe the psychology of idolatry, but to contrast it devastatingly with the proven reality and power of Yahweh (Paul manages to do both in Rom. 1:18ff.). He was not the neutral chairman of a polite dialogue between the religions of Israel and Babylon, but the proclaimer of the imminent victory of the Lord of the universe and history, beside whom all other claimants to deity were indeed contemptible.

The whole OT (and the NT as well) is filled with descriptions of how Yahweh-Adonai, the covenant God of Israel, is waging war against those forces which try to thwart and subvert his plans for his creation. He battles against those false gods which human beings have fashioned

¹⁷ G. A. Smith commented on the contrast with Yahweh who, in vv. 3f., carries his own people: 'It makes all the difference to a man how he conceives his religion - whether as something he has to carry, or as something that will carry him.' Further on the nature of these other gods, *cf.* R. R. de Ridder, 'God and the Gods: Reviewing the Biblical Roots', *Missiology* 6 (Jan. 1978), pp. 11-28.

from the created world, idolized, and used for their own purpose ... the Baals and the Ashteroth, whose worshippers elevated nature, the tribe, the state and the nation to a divine status. God fights against magic and idolatry which, according to Deuteronomy, bend the line between God and his creation. He contends against every form of social injustice and pulls off every cloak under which it seeks to hide.¹⁸

d. *Eschatological vision*. The goal of this prolonged spiritual and social struggle is that ultimately not only Israel but every nation of mankind will acknowledge that Yahweh, God of Israel, is in reality the only true and living God of all the earth. This is the proximate aim of the two key acts of Yahweh on Israel's behalf which took place on the international stage—*viz.* the exodus (see Ex. 9:14, 16, 29), and the return from exile (see Is. 45:6, 22ff.). But even they only foreshadowed that ultimate era when all nations will turn to Yahweh and appropriate for themselves the saving history of Israel. This is a prominent theme in the 'kingship psalms' (*e.g.* Pss. 96,

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97, 98, 99) as well as in the prophets (*e.g.* Is. 2:2-5; 19:19-25; 45:22-25; Am. 9:11f.; Mi. 7:12-20; Zc. 14). Perhaps this is the best context in which to comment on Malachi 1:11—often referred to as a text which seems to support the view that the worship of other religions is pleasing and acceptable to God. But the tense of the verse is not explicit, in the absence of a finite verb in the Hebrew text, and it is perfectly possible (some would say highly probable) that it should be read eschatologically, as in NIV:

My name will be great among the nations, from the rising to the setting of the sun. In every place incense and offerings will be brought to my name, because my name will be great among the nations.¹⁹

Even if it is taken in a present sense, one needs to bear in mind the specific purpose of the context, which is vigorous accusation of Israel for profaning the true worship of Yahweh with diseased and inadequate offerings. This verse would then be a rhetorical, ironic comparison intended rather to shame Israel than soberly to describe paganism. A similar rhetorical technique occurs in Ezk. 16:49-52, where Israel and Judah are compared with Sodom and Gomorrah, who are then said to be righteous, in comparison with Israel's wickedness!

So the Old Testament's eschatological forward vision ties up with its proto-historical promise—God's blessing on mankind as a whole, issuing in the ingathering of other nations into knowledge of and covenant with the living God. But in between those two poles is slung the story of redemption in history and the distinction between the people of God who, by his grace, know and worship him, and 'the nations' who, as yet, do not. As Bavinck puts it, 'from first page to the

¹⁸ J. Verkuyl, *Contemporary Missiology, An Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), p. 95. For further missiological perspective on the prophetic treatment of idolatry, *cf.* J. H. Bavinck, *An Introduction to the Science of Missions* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed PC, 1960), pp. 18, 226.

¹⁹ *Cf.* J. Baldwin: *Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi* (TOTC; London: IVP, 1972), pp. 227-230, for pointers in the text to its eschatological nature, especially the phrase 'from the rising to the setting of the sun', which elsewhere is linked to the eschatological universal reign of God, *e.g.* Pss. 50:1; 113:3; Is. 45:6; 59:19.

last the Bible has the whole world in view', and the separation of Israel from the nations is 'a temporary division, necessary in the divine plan of salvation, but one which would be abolished in God's due time'.²⁰

Now it is important to maintain both the balance and distinction between these two biblical perspectives (the eschatological vision and the present historical situation) and to avoid severing or coalescing them. Thus, on the one hand, we should not absolutize the historical divide between the redeemed and the rest in any way that suggests we can anticipate the eschaton in our judgment of who will or will not be saved. The eternal destiny of any man or nation, of whatever religion, is thankfully not ours to pronounce within our time-bound blinkers. But on the other hand, it is hermeneutically invalid to quote texts with an eschatological universalism as though they already applied in the present—that is, to use Old Testament texts which look forward to all nations ultimately worshipping Yahweh as support for the view that all religions are in present reality the worship of the one divine Being, thereby dissolving the radical biblical distinction between the people of God and the world in this age.

The point where the universal eschatological vision and the particular historical role of Israel in the world are most closely related is in the mission of the Servant of Yahweh, which is the last Old Testament theme to which we now turn.

e. The mission of the Servant. It is well known that the identity of the Servant, both in the 'Servant Songs' and in the other references to Israel as 'servant' in Isaiah 40-55 oscillates between the nation of Israel corporately and a mysterious, but quite definitely individual, person. It seems equally clear to me that the mission of the individual Servant is to fulfil the role in which historical, corporate Israel was failing—namely to be that 'light to the nations' and ultimately to bring the knowledge and salvation of Yahweh to the ends of the earth. The Servant's mission thus becomes the link between historical 'present' and the universal 'future'.

K. Stendahl, in a missiological Bible study which is inclined to deflate the view that the mission of the church is to 'Christianize' the rest of mankind,²¹ wishes to regard this mission of Israel/the Servant as confined to witnessing as light—not making 'conversions' to Israel's own faith or God. 'Israel has a universal mission: to be a light for the nations, the Gentiles (Isa. 49-6, *et al.*). But not by making them Jews, but by a faithful witness to the Oneness of God and the moral order...' (p. 16).

But this is to overlook not only the many texts (in psalms and prophets) where the nations are envisaged precisely as coming to Israel/Jerusalem in order to hear and know Yahweh and to obey his law, but also a specific Servant passage in this context which clearly envisages a process of conversion, namely Isaiah 44:1-5. Here Israel is being reassured that they will not wither and die, but grow abundantly (v. 3), both by natural reproduction (v. 4—'biological growth'), and by the addition of proselytes (v. 5—'conversion growth').

²⁰ Bavinck, *op. cit.*, pp. 11, 13.

²¹ In Anderson and Stransky (eds.), *Christ's Lordship and Religious Pluralism*.

One will say, 'I belong to the LORD';
another will call himself by the name of Jacob;
still another will write on his hand, 'The LORD'S',
and will take the name Israel.

Since no native born Israelite would need to do what this verse describes, it can only refer to Gentiles who will become members of Israel by accepting the names of Yahweh and Israel, that is, by appropriating personally Israel's redemptive experience through which the name of Yahweh was known.

This clearly indicates that turning to Israel's God also involved turning to Israel herself. A man could only confess the God of Israel as his lord if he took his place among the people who served this God. Israel's religion never became something purely spiritual, which could be professed without reference to the history of the chosen people or involvement in it.²²

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If we relate 'Israel' here to the church, as our biblical theology should, then this point seems to me to be of immense significance both for our ecclesiology and our missiology. Isaiah's theology of the relation of the Gentiles to the redeemed people of God, whether considered historically or eschatologically, evidently contained no category classified 'anonymous Israelites'!

B. THE NEW TESTAMENT

1. The kingdom of God

Jesus came proclaiming the kingdom of God. As is well known, he was not talking about a place or realm, but a state of affairs—the active reign of God among men which was breaking into history in a new way with Jesus' own arrival and which demanded urgent response on man's part. Our understanding of what Jesus meant must start from the fact that he was proclaiming the fulfilment of Jewish hopes springing out of the Old Testament ('The time is fulfilled...'). And in the Old Testament the kingship of God has several layers of meaning. This is not leading up to a full-blown 'two-kingdoms' theory, but simply to be aware that there were different dimensions to the Old Testament concept of God's reign which, while clearly related (since it is the one God, Yahweh, who is king), were nevertheless not identical in themselves or their implications.

God reigns as universal sovereign over the whole earth (*e.g.* 2 Ki. 19:15; Pss. 99, 145, *etc.*). Nothing takes place beyond his providence or outside his control. The affairs of nations in history are under his universal reign—both in general terms (*e.g.* Pr. 21:1) and specifically as they relate to his own people, whether God uses other nations in punishment on Israel (*e.g.* Is. 8:6ff.; 10:5ff.) or for their deliverance (*e.g.* Is. 45). But secondly, God's reign over and among his people Israel is of a different dimension inasmuch as it is a kingship acknowledged in covenant obedience and based on specific historical acts of redemption, through which Yahweh is known as Lord and

²² C. Westerman, *Isaiah 40-66* (London: SCM, 1969), pp. 137f.

sovereign. Then thirdly, there is the eschatological hope of the world-wide extension of this acknowledged reign of God so that eventually 'all nations acknowledge his saving power' (*cf.* Ps. 67).

Now the kingdom of God as proclaimed by Jesus relates primarily to the second and third. He was the fulfilment of the second dimension in that his was the final and climactic act of historical redemption, through which the new covenant people are bound to God through him. They acknowledge God as king and live in the obedience of discipleship to Jesus as Lord. He also decisively inaugurated the beginning of the third dimension, both in his redemptive victory with its cosmic efficacy, and in the mission entrusted to the church to 'go into all the world'. As the parables of the growth of the kingdom of God indicate, 'this good news of the kingdom' of God must be preached throughout the whole world before the end comes (Mt. 24:14).

This means that we have to be very careful with the expression commonly heard in missiological and comparative religions debates, that 'the kingdom of God is at work in other religions', for it is a very slippery concept with potentially contradictory inferences drawn from it according to the stance of the speaker or writer.

Is the phrase intended to mean that God is sovereignly at work among all men, regardless of religion, working out his purposes in human history as the Lord of history and nature (*i.e.* first dimension)? If so, this is undoubtedly a biblical truth, but it is hardly what Jesus meant by his proclamation of the kingdom of God. He announced something which took effect in a radical new way with his own arrival, which was certainly not the case as regards God's providential sovereignty, operative in the world since creation. Further, the kingdom of God as taught by Jesus in his parables was something which, from small beginnings in his own ministry, would grow and spread like seed or yeast. Again, God's universal sovereignty can hardly be said to 'grow'. And thirdly, entering or belonging to the kingdom of God is virtually identical, according to Jesus, with faith, obedience and discipleship to Jesus himself. But these are not at all prerequisites for the operation of God's wider rule over the world. God reigns over the history of men and nations with or without their obedience, co-operation, or even conscious knowledge (witness Pharaoh, Nebuchadnezzar, Cyrus, for example). Most pertinently, the Jewish opponents of Jesus, even in their rejection and crucifixion of him, were agents of the sovereign purpose of God, subject in that respect to the first mentioned dimension of his kingship (Acts 2:23). But through their persistence in unbelief they remained outside the kingdom of God as taught, brought and embodied by Jesus himself.

Is the phrase then intended to mean that the kingdom of God is at work redemptively within other religions (second dimension)? This can lead to diametrically opposite conclusions. On the one hand it is clearly true that God works within the hearts and environments of men prior to their coming to the 'obedience of faith' in personal knowledge of Christ. We have already noted how God related to the patriarchs in terms drawn from their existing religio-cultural background. Likewise, many other individuals come into a relationship with God from 'outside'—through acknowledgment of the living God of God's people (*e.g.* Melchizedek, Balaam, Jethro), through experience of his saving healing power (*e.g.* Naaman), or through prayer and response to God's word (*e.g.* Cornelius). But our awareness of such divine presence and activity in the world

beyond the boundaries of the church ought to be an incentive to evangelism—*i.e.* taking the saving knowledge of the name of Jesus to those he is already preparing to receive it.

On the other hand, however, there is a common view that evangelism is rendered unnecessary, even misguided or offensive, by the alleged or discerned presence of the kingdom of God. This is either because God is said to be working redemptively in and through other religions in themselves—something which I find impossible to reconcile with the Bible' on any serious interpretation; or because God is said' to be working redemp-

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tively in Christ in other faiths, but in a hidden, unacknowledged, 'anonymous' way (see further under 'Light and logos' below). However, this latter view seems to me incompatible with the New Testament, where the kingdom of God is inseparable from the acknowledged lordship of Christ. To preach Jesus (exclusively) as Messiah and Lord is tantamount to preaching and spreading the kingdom of God (*e.g.* Acts 8:12; 28:23, 31). It is not the lordship of some hidden or mystical Christ-principle (whatever that could mean) which constitutes the presence of the kingdom of God but the lordship of the historical Jesus, who, as Orlando Costas points out so effectively, is dissimilar to all other 'lords' in this world precisely in his historical life, ministry to the poor, suffering, crucifixion and resurrection.²³ Costas also makes the point that, along with the necessity of this acknowledgment of Jesus, other religions could only be said to 'mediate' the kingdom of God in any biblically recognizable way if they advocate and exemplify the values of the kingdom as taught by Jesus in the personal and social realms—*e.g.*, love, justice, freedom, forgiveness, peace, hope, and that radical reversal of this world's standards and values.

But to my mind the most telling contradiction of this view that the presence of the kingdom of God somehow neutralizes the need for evangelism in Jesus' name, is the experience of Jesus himself among his contemporaries. Here were a people privileged with the knowledge of God and his mighty acts and actually awaiting the kingdom of God. Yet when it came among them in very person and in demonstration of its power before their very eyes, many still refused to enter or were very slow to. Here surely is proof that the mere presence of the kingdom of God among a people or in a situation in no way guarantees that all those who witness it can be counted among the redeemed and beyond the need of the explicit evangelistic challenge of faith and obedience towards Jesus Christ.

2. Light and logos

The prologue of John's gospel, along with other passages where the cosmic nature and work of Christ are referred to (such as Col. 1:15ff., Heb. 1:1ff.) is clearly very important in any discussion of the relation between Christ and other faiths.

²³ Orlando E. Costas, in Anderson and Stranksy (eds.), *Christ's Lordship*, pp. 133-156. Cf. also, J. H. Yoder: 'Discerning the Kingdom of God in the Struggles of the World', *International Review of Mission*, Oct. 1979, pp. 366-372.

Light. 'The true light, that gives light to every man, was coming into the world' (Jn. 1:9 NIV). This seems to me the correct rendering of the ambiguous Greek of this verse.²⁴ The context tells us of John the Baptist's role as herald, as the prologue moves forward towards the completed incarnation. At this point Christ, who enlightens all men continuously, is 'on his way', so to speak, into that particular historical span of space and time that he would occupy in the world.

What is this 'enlightening' of all men? It is urged by some that if all men receive light from the cosmic Christ, then all are in some saving relationship to God through him—whether conscious of it or not. This Christ-light is already there in all men. In evangelism, therefore, if it be allowed at all, we do not take Christ to people of other religions, but we meet the Christ already in them.

However, this flies in the face of the immediate context and the rest of the gospel. If the enlightening of all men in v. 9 means that all already have saving knowledge of God then what was the necessity or purpose of the light becoming incarnate? And if all mankind are redemptively enlightened by the 'non-incarnate' Christ, why do some reject the light of the incarnate Christ, preferring darkness, to their own judgment (Jn. 1:10f.; 3:19f.)? Consider again Jesus' contemporaries—'his own'. Here were those who had received more light from Christ than any other religion through the Old Testament revelation. Yet so many of 'his own received him not'. This strongly undermines the idea that it is the 'sincere', the 'devout' or the 'enlightened'- *i.e.* 'the best' in other religions who are evidence of the presence of this enlightening from Christ in any salvific sense. It was precisely this stratum within Judaism which rejected the incarnate light and crucified him, and, in the person of Saul of Tarsus, persecuted his disciples.

This is not by any means intended to devalue what John means, or to deny that all moral goodness has its origin in God. But when this is turned into a redemptive principle it almost inevitably becomes moralistic—salvation for the best—in a way utterly alien to the New Testament. As Lesslie Newbigin puts it:

It is the 'men of good will,' the 'sincere' followers of other religions, the 'observers of the law' who are informed in advance that their seats in heaven are securely booked. This is the exact opposite of the teaching of the New Testament. Here emphasis is always on surprise. It is the sinners who will be welcomed and those who were confident that their place was secure who will find themselves outside. God will shock the righteous by his limitless generosity and by his tremendous severity.²⁵

The enlightening of v. 9 must surely refer to that knowledge of God which is possessed by every man made in the image of God and open to God's general self-revelation. The fact that Christ is said to be the agent of this enlightening does not mean we have to regard it as part of the

²⁴ The alternative is, 'He was the true light who enlightens every man who comes into the world'. But 'coming into the world' seems tautologous as a description of every man (what man doesn't?), but perfectly apt as a description of Christ's incarnation - the prime goal of the prologue.

²⁵ L. Newbigin, *The Open Secret* (London: SPCK/Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), p. 196. *Cf.* also his comments on p. 199.

redemptive work of God in itself.²⁶ For Christ is part of the unity of the Godhead and shares in the totality of the work of the Godhead, including creation, sustaining of life and revelation (*cf.* Jn. 1:3-5).

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We should not hesitate to claim that everything good, beautiful and true, in all history and in all the earth, has come from Jesus Christ, even though men are ignorant of its origin. At the same time we must add that this universal light is not saving light.²⁷

It is also worth remembering that John is talking here about the enlightening of men as men, not about the possibility of light within 'other religions' considered as structural systems of belief, practice and culture.

b. *Logos*. From the early Christian apologists to twentieth-century theologians this term has been used to 'find' Christ in the faiths and philosophies of mankind. Justin Martyr²⁸ asserted that while Plato and other Greek philosophers had not known Jesus, they had lived *kata logon*—'in accordance with the logos', and were thereby, in some sense, 'Christians'. The Roman Catholic theologian Karl Rahner likewise presents the idea of the 'incognito Christ' to whom sincere adherents of other faiths in fact respond when they respond to what grace they receive in nature, for to accept grace is to accept Christ—however unwittingly. Such people he therefore calls 'anonymous Christians'—a term which has entered into vigorous missiological debate ever since.²⁹

There are two points at issue here relevant to our survey. First, it is sometimes said that John's use of *logos* represents a deliberate, syncretistic use of Greek philosophical vocabulary and that this is an illustration of early Christianity's alleged inherent syncretism.³⁰ However, Visser 't Hooft, in his careful study of New Testament terminology with precisely this question in mind, comes to the opposite conclusion.³¹ John (and even more obviously, Paul, in Colossians) is resisting the syncretistic tendency by deliberate assimilation of current vocabulary into a thoroughly Christian (OT based and Jesus centred) theology. In this he differed greatly from what the apologists were trying to do. If A = the revealed truth of the gospel and B = the 'target' culture (in this case Greek popular philosophy and religion), it is one thing to say, with John, 'I will use vocabulary from B because it can be used to make A intelligible to people in culture B, but A remains the unique, distinctive and governing truth which will give the vocabulary fresh

²⁶ In a biblical survey like this, we must forego discussion of Barth's approach, the dangers of Christo-monism, etc.

²⁷ J. W. R. Stott, *Christian Mission*, p. 68.

²⁸ Justin Martyr, *Apologia* 1 46.

²⁹ Essays and articles from Rahner span two decades, the sixties and seventies. A helpful summary is by K. Riesenhuber, 'The Anonymous Christian according to Karl Rahner', in Anita Roper, *The Anonymous Christian* (NY: Sheed and Ward, 1966). A comparable approach related specifically to India is R. Panikkar, *The Unknown Christ of Hinduism* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1965).

³⁰ E.g. W. Pannenberg, who traces Christianity's syncretism back to an identical syncretistic energy in the development of OT religion: *cf. Basic Questions in Theology*, vol. 2 (London: SCM), pp. 85ff.

³¹ Visser't Hooft: *No Other Name*, ch. 2.

shades of meaning.' It is quite another to say, 'I will use vocabulary from B because B (or the best in it) is in reality the same as A, such that B people unconsciously believe A anyway.'

Secondly, talk of the *logos* as the 'non-incarnate Christ' easily becomes abstract and divorced from the unique particularity of the incarnation. The historical Jesus becomes 'the Christ-principle', the once-for-all atoning death of Jesus becomes 'the pattern of the cross', *etc.* Such worthy-sounding concepts fit easily into the syncretistic soup and nicely avoid the 'scandal of particularity'. However, it can easily be seen that though this process may use the Johannine *logos* as a tag, it is fundamentally incompatible with John's intention in his Prologue, which is to lead relentlessly up to the climax: 'The *logos* became flesh'. Whatever you may do with the concept of *logos*, you can't syncretize or abstractify the flesh of the man Jesus.

Such abstract concepts, in any case, though often well-intentioned in seeking to establish links with other faiths, are actually useless evangelistically both in theory,³² and in experience. M. M. Thomas, a well known and prolific theologian in India, and advocate of a 'Christ-centred syncretic process'³³ which seeks (not always successfully, in my view) to preserve a unique place for Jesus Christ within an 'accepting' stance towards other faiths and secular cultures and ideologies, makes the telling remark, 'Nevertheless it is not the ontic Christ or the mystic Christ but the historical Jesus who has made the deepest impact on Hinduism.'³⁴

3. Peter and Paul

The book of Acts is the practical missiology of the early church, written by Luke, a converted Gentile physician who would probably have had considerable inside knowledge of the gods and religions of the first-century Graeco-Roman world. It is full of relevant material, but space limits us to three brief topics.

a. '*No other name*'. The speeches of Peter in Acts have a careful structure to them, in which nothing unnecessary or accidental is thrown in. So this assertion of the uniqueness and exclusiveness of the saving name of Jesus, in Acts 4:12, has to be taken seriously as theologically intentional. Akin to Jesus' own exclusive claims as 'the way, the truth and the life' (Jn. 14:6), it stands like a rock in the way of the syncretistic axiom that all paths lead to God. But salvation is to be found in no-one else, in no other name than that of 'Jesus Christ of Nazareth', crucified and risen (v. 10).

J. V. Taylor, in an attempt to show the true biblical inclusiveness of Christianity alongside its uniqueness, strains our credence beyond its limit when he sidesteps the force of this text by relating it solely to its context of the healing of the cripple.

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³² Lesslie Newbigin has some very caustic comments on the worth of abstract concepts such as 'Transcendent Being' *etc.*, for engagement in real dialogue with those of other faiths, in *The Open Secret*, ch. 10, especially pp. 185-191.

³³ M. M. Thomas: *Man and the Universe of Faiths* (Madras: CLS, 1975), p. 157.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 79, my italics.

Peter was saying that Jesus of Nazareth is the source of every act of healing and salvation that has ever happened. He knew perfectly well that vast numbers of people had been healed without any knowledge of Jesus, yet he made the astounding claim that Jesus was the hidden author of all healing. He was the totally unique saviour because he was totally universal.³⁵

To this one has to say, first, that if Peter had wanted to say that, or even if Luke had wanted to say it through Peter's lips, he could have said it more clearly. Would anyone have understood his words in that sense? Would that construction of the words have occurred to anyone who did not find the text an embarrassment on other grounds? Secondly, Peter has moved beyond reference to the healing only. In v. 10 he deals with the healing; in v. 12 he talks of salvation—a wider and by no means identical term; in v. 11 he quotes an accepted messianic text whose eschatological thrust showed clearly that he is referring to salvation in its fullest, messianic sense (*cf.* Mt. 21:42; 1 Pet. 2:4-10). At the time of the healing itself Peter had used the opportunity to preach salvation, including repentance, forgiveness and 'refreshment' (3:19f.). So now, before the Council, he uses the healing by Jesus' name as a sign or pointer for salvation, which also is by Jesus' name, and nowhere else.

b. *Cornelius*. It is amazing how the dramatic story of Cornelius in Acts 10 is sometimes 'thrown in' to support the idea that sincere pagans can be in a right and acceptable relationship with God without knowledge of Christ, when the whole point of the story is to show the opposite. The detailed description of Cornelius' piety, generosity and prayers presents him as, in a sense, the best that Gentile paganism could offer. And, as we have noted earlier, God clearly addresses him and has heard his prayers and noticed his good deeds. God relates to him on the level of his current religious experience. But having said all that, he still needed to hear the gospel, needed to know the facts about Jesus, needed to have the opportunity to respond in faith to him. That was the problem God graciously solved, on his own initiative, by means of the angelic visitor and Peter's preparatory vision and subsequent visit. Apart from the divine initiative and Peter's obedience, Cornelius would not have received the specific gifts attendant on knowing Christ: forgiveness of sins (10:43), the Holy Spirit (10:44ff.), salvation (11:14), life, through repentance (11:18).

Were there other 'Corneliuses'? Were they all visited by apostles or evangelists? And if they were not, what was the position before God of such pious God-fearers who never heard of Jesus Christ? We do not know, any more than we can know the position of similar 'good pagans' in our own day. God alone knows the hearts of all men. What we do know clearly from the story is that not Cornelius' piety but only the knowledge of Jesus brought the joy of salvation and life, and that only the way of Peter's obedient witness can bring such knowledge and joy to those as yet without them.

c. '*An unknown God*'? In the very heartland of Greek polytheism, a distressed but courteous Paul confronts the sophisticated, idol-ridden and curious Athenians (Acts 17:16-34). Full exegesis of

³⁵ J. V. Taylor: 'The Theological Basis of Interfaith Dialogue', *International Review of Mission*, Oct. 1979, pp. 373-384.

this key passage is impossible, so, leaving that to study of the commentaries, we shall make just a few observations.

The crucial sentence, after Paul's brilliant bridge-building introduction, is: 'Now what you worship as something unknown I am going to proclaim to you' (v. 23). When we interpret this in the light of Paul's own development of his theme, we see that Paul is not congratulating the Athenians and saying, 'You are really worshipping the true God, though you don't know it'; but he is saying rather, 'Despite your religiosity, you don't know the true God at all, though you could and should do, for knowledge of him is available before your eyes, but you have obscured it with your "very religious" temples and idols.' Taken thus, it fits perfectly with what Paul writes concerning the availability but suppression of the knowledge of God in Romans 1. God is not, in fact, an 'unknown God'; it is the Athenians who are ignorant of him.

There are, however, those who take Paul's meaning in the former sense, and argue that Paul in fact adopts a very positive and accepting attitude here towards Greek culture, by quoting their own poets. They would see the preaching of Jesus and his resurrection then as the fulfilment of that which the Greeks already worshipped in their excessive religiosity. Certainly Paul quotes from both Stoic pantheism and from Epicurean deism, but careful study shows that he does so in a sense quite different from their author's original intent. In fact he refers to these philosophies in such a way as to deny their over-all truth when set alongside a scriptural (*i.e.* OT) world-view. So this is not a generously approving reinterpretation, but a radical, though still polite, correction which leads up to the explicit command to repent in view of the imminent judgment of God. Repentance means turning. Paul is not expecting the Athenians' gratitude that now they know who they are really worshipping as they continue in their idolatry. Rather he wants them to turn away from those idols to the living God.

Assuming that Luke's portrayal of Paul's mind on this matter is consistent, this fits in exactly with Paul's response to the attempted worship of the crowd at Lystra ('We are ... telling you to turn from these worthless things to the living God...' Note again the emphasis on the availability of the knowledge of God: 14:13-18), and also with his testimony in 26:17f. There he gives it as his mission to the Gentiles that he was 'to open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins...'. This is hardly the language of continuity and fulfilment.

CONCLUSION

I have tried to present a cross-section of the biblical material on this subject in such a way as to bring out both the universal, cosmic, inclusive dimension and the in-

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escapable particular, historical and exclusive dimension of the biblical revelation. It may be felt that the latter has come over more strongly; if so, it may be because that seems to be the most in danger of being watered down and explained away in current debate. I finish by echoing warmly the words of J. Blauw on this very point.

I know of no more positive statement concerning man than the statement that he is the image and servant of God. I know of no more negative statement than the statement that he refuses to be a servant and wishes to 'be as gods' or to use God (or rather gods) for his own ends. I know of no more exciting message than the message that in Christ the real man and the real relationship with God has been restored. These are the realities in the Biblical view of man, over against which it is only a regression to speak about 'human possibilities'. In my opinion the Bible is not interested in questions like 'continuity or discontinuity'. The great continuity is the continuity of God's love for man, revealed first in Israel and then in Jesus Christ. The great discontinuity is man's permanent striving to have a god rather than to serve God; to claim independence when he is completely dependent. The light which the Bible throws on man in his religion, or religiosity, penetrates deeply into the hiding places of human existence.³⁶

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Prepared for the Web in May 2006 by Robert I. Bradshaw.

<http://www.theologicalstudies.org.uk/>

³⁶ J. Blauw: *The Biblical view...*, pp. 38f.