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Editorial: Worldview, World Religion, and Missions

Greater knowledge of Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism is needed in order to evangelize the unreached peoples of the world. It can hardly be denied that this knowledge is needed and that it must be on a deep worldview level. Since the great majority of the unreached peoples belong to long standing and well developed religious systems it is paramount that frontier mission personnel deeply understand the worldviews of the non-Christian religions.

As we shall in this issue, worldview properly understood shapes and determines the behavior and the way people live. Missionaries are after real change in the lives of people, not just change in behavior without a corresponding change in worldview. In fact change in values and beliefs will not suffice unless these are based on a deep change in worldview. Only deep seated change as related to the Gospel will produce fruit that remains and plant the church that prevails!

It is with this in mind that we have developed this special issue with its focus on worldview and world religion. We want to make a strong case for a close link between worldview and world religion. Most of the articles in this issue focus on beliefs, values and hopes of non-Christian religions compared to Christianity. These articles describe concepts, perspectives, hopes, developments, systems of thought and belief that are worldview issues that focus on the questions of ultimate reality, which normally (traditionally at least) have been associated with religion.

Questions of origin and purpose of the universe, questions concerning who we are as human beings and what is wrong with humanity, including the remedy for the malady, cannot be answered without fundamental beliefs usually associated with religious beliefs. But we want to link religion and worldview and make the point that the dichotomy many of us see between

them is false because it rests on wrong assumptions, i.e., worldview, that is founded on naturalistic and humanistic thought systems. These systems radically divide the sacred and secular, the natural and supernatural, as well as science and religion. As will become clear in this issue, that essential dichotomy of reality is wrong because it is anti-biblical, and also is intrinsically wrong—it contradicts and undermines reality as it objectively is.

For that reason we want to make the point that there is no essential or radical dichotomy. Worldview and religion need to be closely linked. In fact when rightly understood on a deep belief level, they are one and the same.

Besides getting a deeper understanding of worldview and making us more effective ministers of the Gospel, we want to make a very strong case for another very important point: Christians in general and missionaries in particular need to develop a solid Christian biblical worldview for themselves. The point is as follows: “Christians should have a worldview that is strongly related to their faith. However, some Christians hold worldviews inconsistent with biblical truth and often heavily influenced by surrounding culture. There is the strong, consistent temptation to adopt elements of a cultural worldview, a worldview that may have little regard for Christian truth. The Christian’s task, then, is to shape a worldview according to the teaching of Scripture, and continually test the (cultural) worldview beliefs against the Scriptures. A biblical worldview should then serve as a guide through life.” (From Richard T. Wright’s book *Biology through the Eyes of Faith*, 1989 pg. 11-14)

We are convinced, and we trust that our readers will see the same, that the Church in general and Missions in particular need to develop a solid Christian worldview, one that is thoroughly supernatural, that gives us a complete cos-

mology of “the heavens and the earth,” including what the apostle Paul called the visible and the invisible reality of creation and existence (Col. 1:15-20). Christians everywhere need to develop a world and life view that answers the ultimate questions of life in God’s way based on His revelation which is totally trustworthy because it reveals objective reality and therefore is absolutely true!

We are convinced that without a biblical worldview of life and its purpose nothing of real significance in the Church nor in Missions will happen—in fact it cannot happen. Without a biblical Christian view of life and existence secularism, rationalism, humanism and the other currents of our time, will continue to take deeper roots in Western culture, and increasingly weaken the Church, and may eventually destroy Christian faith and life altogether (See Luke 18:8). Furthermore, without a solid biblical worldview, there is every likelihood that the unreached of the world will remain unreached. For how can they be reached “if the trumpet gives an uncertain sound”? (1 Cor. 14:8) How can we evangelize them if we proclaim a Western secularized gospel rather than *the Gospel*? Jesus specifically said that “this Gospel of the Kingdom” is what the nations need “as a testimony unto them.” (Matt. 24:14)

There exists a vital link between worldview, world religion and world missions. Christian faith and life and our service unto the Lord in world missions depend on it. May we all see it. May we all rediscover the need to build solid biblical foundations for faith and life and develop a deep Christian worldview. As nothing else will, this will make us complete “equipped for every good work.” (2 Timothy 3:16, 17)

*Hans M. Weerstra,
IJFM Editor
April, 1997
El Paso, TX USA*

Christian Worldview Development

Without doubt, greater knowledge of Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism is needed in order to understand their worldviews and be able to evangelize the unreached effectively. However, what is even more important is that the Church in general and Missions in particular develop a solid Christian worldview, one that is thoroughly supernatural, that provides a complete cosmology, that answers the ultimate questions of reality in God's way based on His revelation. Without it nothing of real significance will likely happen—nor can it. Without it the unreached will remain unreached.

by Hans M. Weerstra

The introduction to a famous mission training course begins as follows: “The message of John 3:16 is simple enough for a child to understand, yet so profound that theologians will continue to probe its implications throughout time. Though most of us have individually experienced the salvation God offers through His Son, have we really begun to fathom the Father’s love for lost mankind? What does “God so loved the world” really mean?” (From *World Mission: An Analysis of the World Christian Movement*, by Jonathan Lewis, editor, Part 1, page 1-1)

Not just theologians, but missionaries and Christians in general, need to deeply understand the love of God on the fundamental level that *God is love*. This truth, when seen correctly, is the law of the universe, which needs to be known deeply before we can begin to appreciate the Father’s love for the world.

This article is designed to help us “fathom” the deep things of God. Specifically, its purpose is to “fathom” the foundations of the Christian faith, to explore the qualities of our foundations, and with God’s help build them stronger on a deep worldview level. Although the term “worldview” does not appear in the Bible, the concept with its important meaning for Christian faith and life is taught everywhere in all of Scripture. It is much like the term “Trinity” which does not appear in Scripture yet is a foundational teaching of the entire Bible.

We will begin by looking at a key Scripture passage on the parable of

the wise and foolish man. It will become clear that this passage is talking about building firm foundations on a deep worldview level. It will also help us identify the currents of our times that are eroding biblical foundations, that have the potential to destroy Christian faith and life.

Second, we want to define worldview and make the case that not just missionaries but Christians in general need to develop a solid Christian biblical worldview. We will see how crucial this is for our Christian faith and life and service unto the Lord in today’s world.

Third, we will look at a biblical case study where the Lord changes hearts and opens minds and literally develops a worldview in His disciples. What is important about this case study is that it show us how we can develop a biblical worldview in our lives today. What happened to the disciples then can happen to us today!

Fourth, we will conclude by looking at the power of the inspired Scriptures which are able to make us complete and equip us for every good work, especially the good work to declare the Gospel of salvation in Christ to the ends of the earth.

Building Firm Foundations

Therefore whoever hears these words of mine, and does them, I will liken to a wise man who built his house on the rock: and the rain descended, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, and it did not fall, for it was founded on the rock. (Matt. 7:25, 26)

Building firm foundations is

absolutely essential for Christian faith and life. There is little doubt that God’s people everywhere can greatly benefit from such an endeavor. Many Christians have had little or no deep discipleship training. All of us to some degree have been affected by the currents of our time (see what follows) that like flood waters erode our foundations. To some degree, we all stand in need to rebuild our foundations, to shore them up, and build them stronger.

Looking at this parable, we see that building foundations on a deep level is what this passage really teaches. In so many ways it says we need to make sure that our houses (lives) will stand the winds and the floods that will inevitably come trying to destroy us. We need solid foundations for life, the kind that can withstand the tests of time and the attacks of destruction. This becomes even clearer in the Lukan parallel passage where the wise man “dug deep” while the foolish man simply built his house “on the ground without a foundation.” (See Luke 6:46-49)

Building solid foundations applies to individuals, as well as to families and churches, and even applies to whole societies and cultures. The context of this passage is the Sermon on the Mount in which Jesus taught His disciples. But the passage also makes it clear that He was teaching the crowds that had gathered around who were listening. (See Matt. 5:1) Jesus would say that individuals need good foundations, that His disciples need to have good foundations, but in a wider sense whole

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societies and cultures, like the whole Jewish nation represented by the crowds, also need foundations for life which will help them survive the destructive forces that inevitable come.

The Rock

The rock in the parable represents good foundations while the sand represents poor ones. Most Evangelical Christians would identify the rock with the person of Jesus. Undoubtedly this is related to what the apostle Paul affirmed, “For no other foundation can any one lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ.” (1 Cor. 3:11)

Although this is true, we want to explore it further and deeper and have Jesus Himself tell us the identify the rock. If asked, would Jesus say that He Himself is the rock? The parable leads us to think that the rock represents the solid foundation which one can get if he/she hears Jesus’ words and puts them into practise. What differentiates the wise man from the foolish man is not hearing Jesus’ words but the actual doing of them. Both men hear the His words, but only one does them. Jesus would say that the rock represents foundations for life which men have when they both hear and do His words. Jesus would say that such a man (or woman) is likened to the wise man who had solid foundations for his life, while the foolish man, who just heard the words of Jesus, had poor foundations (sand, or no foundations at all) which was the reason for the great destruction of his life.

How does this relate to worldview development? As Christians we should build firm foundations on a deep level which is more than just believing in Jesus even though He is central to Christian foundations. It has to do with hearing and doing His words (not just believing in Jesus), which includes the words that He taught in the Sermon on the Mount, as well as well as everything else He taught. In fact in will become clear, that it should include every-

thing we call the Gospel, as well as what the New Testament calls the Scriptures, i.e., the Old Testament.

Doing the Word of God

But notice that just hearing and knowing do not suffice. The crux of the matter is doing Jesus’ words, or doing the Word of God. Lest we go astray at this point, we need to ask what exactly does it mean to do the words of Jesus or do the Word of God? Looking at the passage in its context we should see that Jesus is not endorsing work righteousness. The context of the Matthew 7 parable, as well as the Lukan parallel, gives us a very important clue on this matter.

Apparently, there were some who called Jesus “Lord, Lord” a term that indicates lordship and linking it with Yahweh, who were seemingly doing good works. They were prophesying in Jesus’ name, casting out demons in His name, and doing many mighty works in His name. Yet the Lord declares to them “I never knew you, depart from me, you evildoers.”

The passage is saying that good works in themselves will not suffice, even when done in Jesus’ name. This implies that doing good works or being good to one’s neighbors, or just staying out of trouble, will not give anyone good foundations. Something radically different is needed!

In this passage Jesus is coming down hard against an unbiblical system of thought and belief, i.e., worldview, one prevalent in Judaism in Jesus’ day, by which people believed that they could save themselves by doing good works—by obeying the law of God. Here Jesus is saying that good works, even mighty ones done in His name will not save from destruction. Jesus is clearly rejecting a work righteousness system where by people can save themselves by their own good works and righteous deeds.

What then does it mean to do Jesus’ words? The passage indicates that

there is a big difference between hearing and really hearing. The wise man really heard deep enough that he acted on what he heard. In other words he became a *doer* of the Word of God and not a *hearer only*. (See James 1:22-25) The foolish man just heard the words of Jesus, maybe thinking they were interesting stories or good entertainment. He heard what Jesus said, but not deep enough to affect him or change him to the degree that he would put them into practise.

The Bible calls the action of the wise man faith—true authentic faith and trust in God and His words, the kind of faith that results in a corresponding change in action and behavior. It is the kind of faith that actually produces the kind of behavior based on what was heard. The apostle Paul and the other apostles called this the “obedience of faith” or “the obedience that comes from faith” also called “the works of faith.” This they understood to be the goal of their ministry. Paul saw his calling to bring the nations (the Gentiles) to the obedience of faith, obedience to the Word of God, or doing the words of Jesus, that flow out of and rests on faith in God and His Word. (See Acts 6:7, Romans 1:5, and 16:26, 1 Thess. 1:3 and 2 Thess. 1:11.)

The Currents of our Time

What do the winds and the rains and the floods represent? The text makes it clear that these are forces in life that have the potential to destroy life completely and totally. The destruction of the house of the foolish man was great—it was total. These forces represent more than the normal crises in life, more than the setbacks and the disappointments that everyone experiences. They represent forces that are able to destroy completely. What forces in life (theirs and ours) have that kind of destructive potential?

Upon textual evidence, the winds rains and floods in the parable represent the currents of culture (their and

ours) that the Bible calls worldliness, that are systems of thought and beliefs that are contrary to God's will and revelation and undermine it. It is like the self-righteous belief system in Judaism, that was an enemy of the Gospel because it totally undermined the Gospel. In culture we can identify the winds and floods as ungodly systems of non-Christian worldviews which undermine the Gospel and Christian faith. In our Western culture we can identify these systems as secularism, humanism, materialism, relativism and pluralism. These systems need to be seen as worldview systems that answer and make up and form the underlying assumptions of life that act as foundations for all of reality—how we perceive it to be. But since contrary to God and His revelation, these act as winds and rains that relentlessly beat on our lives, that when accompanied by floods erode the foundations of our lives, that when left unabated have the potential to destroy Christian faith and life totally.

Because of the great fall of the house in the parable, indicating complete destruction of life, we need to see that this is no ordinary fall nor is it ordinary destruction. The text leads us to link the destruction with ultimate destruction that points to the final destruction in the "lake of fire" prepared for Satan and the fallen angels. (See Rev. 19:20, 20:10, 14, 15, and 21:8)

All of this points to the great and urgent need of building firm foundations for faith and life—for developing a solid biblical worldview. The same parable would also point us toward getting an adequate understanding of the prevailing winds and currents of our time. Understanding these modern-day systems of thought and belief and action based on them will indeed help us to identify worldliness in our day as well as unmask the strongholds of evil that are bent on our destruction.

Secularism

Secularism is a system of thought and actions, i.e., worldview, that sees life and the world as non-religious, as being divorced from God and spiritual reality. It sees existence as worldly and temporal as contrasted with the spiritual and eternal, which for Christians represents God, His Word and His Kingdom. A secularist is a person who essentially rejects religious faith and worship because he/she essentially believes, and lives life accordingly, as if there is no God, or if there is a God, that He has nothing basic to do with life here as we know it. A secularist holds

The modern day systems of thought are truly enemies of the Gospel, having a radically different view of reality, and as such have the potential to destroy Christian faith and life at its foundations.

to a worldview that is closed to the divine and the spiritual and the supernatural. It means living in a closed universe which sees reality as such—there is nothing beyond the universe as we know it. There maybe UFOs, and life on other planets and galaxies may exist, but that does not imply the existence of God, nor the reality of the heaven of heavens, nor the Kingdom of heaven as the Bible reveals it. The existence of extraterrestrial beings does not deny the belief in a universe that is fundamentally closed. Other than human beings may exist but these would still be part of a closed universe. Secularists live life accordingly, as if there is no God, as if there is no supernatural existence beyond this universe. It also implies that secularists are not pleased when others believe and behave contrariwise, especially when it contradicts this system.

Humanism

Essentially humanism is a way of

thinking and acting that centers upon distinctively human interests and ideals usually at the expense or exclusion of God and the spiritual and supernatural, which are seen as pertaining to the non-human world of thought and ideals. Francis Schaeffer defines humanism as follows:

There is a real unity in non-Christian thought... The unifying factor can be called rationalism or if you prefer humanism... (which in its larger inclusive sense) is the system whereby men and women, beginning absolutely by themselves, try rationally (rationalism) to build out from themselves, having only Man as their integration point, to find all knowledge, meaning and value... So rationalism or humanism is the unity within non-Christian thought. Yet if Christians are going to be able to understand and talk to people in their generation, they must take account of the form rationalism (humanism) is currently taking. In one way it is always the same—people trying to build from themselves alone. (From *The Complete Words of Francis A. Schaeffer, A Christian Worldview*,

Volume 1, "A Christian View of Philosophy and Culture" page 9.)

It should be obvious that both humanism and secularism are enemies of the Gospel and undermine and threaten Christian faith and life on a worldview level, and indeed have the potential to destroy it. They are formidable enemies of the Gospel, having a radically different view of life, and as such have the potential to destroy Christian faith and life where it counts—at its roots and foundations. Because of this they cannot be our friends. What Jesus said about money He would say today about secularism and humanism, "you cannot serve God and unrighteous Mammon." (See Matt. 6:24 and Luke 16:9-13.) What James and John warned about worldliness is directly related to the currents of our time. (See James 4:4 and 1 John 2:15-23)

Modern-day worldviews have their roots in the kingdom of darkness, act

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as strongholds of evil in our lives, and have the potential to totally destroy. They have the potential to divorce us from God who is the only source of light and life in the universe and in the process end up destroying us.

Materialism

Materialism is a kissing cousin of humanism and secularism. This system of thought considers the facts of the universe to be sufficiently explained by the existence of nature and matter itself—by itself. Materialist usually believe that matter is eternal, and that if there is a God, matter also is god. In Eastern cultures, which is now invading Western cultures, this view of reality is the basis of pantheism, a belief that sees everything to be divine. It sees the universe or cosmos to be extension of divinity. It is the doctrine that holds that the forces and laws that exist and operate in the world and the universe are divine, are God. In Western popular culture, materialism leads to the attitude that material well-being, especially on the individual level, should rule and control our conduct as to how we live and what we do. This gives rise to the importance of material accumulation and possession of material goods. Materialism in essence becomes one's god (idol) since the love of money and the accumulation of material goods becomes the main passion of life which takes the place of God and robs Him of His glory. This is why love of the world, and love for the things of the world, makes one an enemy of God. (See James 4:4 and 1 John 2:15)

Relativism

Relativism as a system of thought that holds knowledge to be relative, limited and biased. It is limited to the nature of the mind and the human condition of knowing, which implies that knowledge is not true to independent reality—reality as it truly is. Truth and knowledge are therefore relative to one's subjective interpretation and human condition. This means that truth

may be true for one but not for another since everyone has different interpretations based on different human conditions. Since all knowing is subjective, in the final analysis this means that there is no absolute truth, or if there is, it cannot be known. We cannot know it because everything that we know is relative. This means that we cannot be dogmatic or sure about anything, including our knowledge of God and His Word, since knowledge is always tainted (conditioned) by one's own subjective experience (bias).

Along with humanism and secularism, we should see that relativism is another great enemy of the Gospel and Christian life. Why? Because as Christians we know and believe for sure. What God says and does is not relative. God's revelation to us is truly true regardless of biased interpretations of men. This fundamental truth rest on the deeper reality of God's objectivity and personality, which makes His Word totally reliable, trustworthy and absolutely true. Relativism as a system totally undermines the heart of the Christian faith and life, truly attacking it at its roots and foundations. It denies and undermines God's existence, as well as the truth revealed to us by Him and about all of existence and reality all of which are based on His person, character and purpose. When Christianity loose these foundations it really ceases to be, and its followers cannot survive. For that reason relativism is so devastating and dangerous to everything that Christians believe in, stand for and do for God's glory in the world.

Pluralism

Pluralism is perhaps the most subtle wind that pervades our culture and times. It is the doctrine or view of the world that maintains there is more than one kind of ultimate reality, contrasted with theism which states that there is only one, namely the one that is given by God. Pluralism believes that there are many ways to explain the world

and the universe and its purpose including our existence. It also would maintain that there are many roads leading to "heaven" all equally valid, good, and true. Whereas relativism holds that no truth is sure or can be known, pluralism holds that all are equally valid and true.

The favorite word in pluralism is "tolerance" being "tolerant," and being "broad-minded." It gets a new twist in church circles: Those who contend for the faith, who hold to the non-negotiable reality of the Christian faith, are seen as intolerant, they are "narrow-minded" and "dogmatic" and worse "bigoted." This then is interpreted as displaying unloving non-Christian attitudes, fruit born of the flesh and not of the Spirit.

As can be seen, pluralism is a close kin to relativism. It works hand in glove with secularism and humanism and like the others deeply undermine the ultimate truth of the Gospel and the Christian faith. Because of its more subtle nature, pluralism is perhaps the most dangerous and sinister. As the other systems, pluralism comes from the kingdom of darkness, is a modern-day example of worldliness, and is a stronghold of evil that needs to be broken in our lives as disciples of the Lord. Maintaining any of its tenets in our hearts will erode our Christian foundation and ultimately destroy us in the process.

Naturalism

To the five modern-day currents above we must add one more and then contrast it with its opposite. Naturalism as a philosophical system is "the doctrine denying that anything in reality has supernatural significance; specifically, the doctrine that scientific laws account for all phenomena, and that teleological conceptions of nature are invalid; loosely, materialism and positivism. Theologically (it is) the denial of the miraculous and supernatural in religion, and is the rejection of revelation as a means of attaining truth." (*Web-*

ster's *New Collegiate Dictionary*, 1956)

In comparison with the other systems of thought and belief, naturalism is the real culprit and forms the core for the others. Webster's definition alludes to this when it associates naturalism loosely with materialism and positivism. The latter is defined by Webster as "a system of philosophy originated by Auguste Comte which excludes everything but the natural phenomena or properties of knowable things, together with their relations of coexistence and succession." Positivism and naturalism are closely related since both explain reality in terms of "natural phenomena." Both worldviews would deny supernatural significance because the universe can be sufficiently explained by "scientific laws" which can account for everything.

According to naturalism "teleological conceptions of nature are invalid." Teleology (not to be confused with theology) means that life has an end (Greek *telos*), or that it has purpose. Again following Webster, "teleology (refers to) the fact or the character of being directed toward an end or shaped by a purpose—said especially of natural processes, or of nature as a whole. (It is) the doctrine or belief that design is apparent, or ends are immanent in nature; especially the vitalist doctrine that the processes of life are not exclusively determined by mechanical causes, but are directed to the realization of certain normal wholes—opposed to mechanism."

Naturalism (loosely positivism), like the other "-isms" of our time, is radically opposed to the message of the Gospel and the Word of God. We should see naturalism as the arch-enemy which lies at the root of all the other currents of our time. Naturalism as a philosophy of life is the denial (theologically speaking) "of the miraculous and supernatural

in religion, and the rejection of revelation as a means of attaining truth." Revelation here means God's Word, i.e., the Scriptures, which according to naturalism and its followers is an invalid means of attaining truth. This means that on a worldview level, naturalism is radically opposed to the Christian faith and life. It totally undermines God's Word as well as His person. It also undermines any real purpose for creation and for our existence as human beings. For naturalism and the other

blood and as such are not supernatural, yet everything that exists, including humankind, has its origin and life in God, who in every way is supernatural. In the deepest and truest sense our lives as people and nations receive and maintain the state and quality and purpose of life from God and is determined in relation to Him. As supernaturalists we also would assert with full confidence the "control and guidance of nature and men by an invisible power and powers" This means that God and His King-

dom is what controls and guides life generally, corporately and individually. As supernaturalists we also would acknowledge the existence and forces of Satan and the kingdom of darkness that would "kill, steal and destroy." (John 10:10)

To help us become biblically grounded supernaturalists we need to look at the meaning of worldview and how it functions in culture generally

and in our lives. Afterwards we need to apply this knowledge to the dynamics of developing a Christian worldview and thereby become biblical supernaturalists.

Worldview in Culture

One of the best way to get a basic understanding of worldview is to see Dr. Lloyd Kwast's description of culture and worldview. Dr. Kwast talks about worldview in a classic article he wrote on the subject called "Understanding Culture." (See *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement* edited Ralph D. Winter and Steve Hawthorne, and in *World Mission Part 3* by Jonathan Lewis, pages 11-12 through 11-15.)

Worldview as Kwast sees it is the core element of culture, of any and all cultures, including our own. Kwast maintains, and for good reasons, that no real change of any significance will or can occur in the lives and hearts of people until it (whatever the change) has deeply

All Christians stand in need to develop a biblical worldview. This is most urgent in our day since Christian beliefs and values, and questions concerning Christian truth and ultimate reality, are under relentless attack.

"isms" there is no real design to life nor any real purpose as directed by God the Creator who is above and greater than the whole.

Supernaturalism

What is crucially significant is that we need to contrast naturalism with supernaturalism and see how radically different each is from the other. Webster defines supernaturalism as "as a quality or state of being supernatural. (It is) a belief in the supernatural order of existence; specifically, any doctrine that asserts the control and guidance of nature and men by an invisible power or powers."

Filling it with biblical content and meaning, supernaturalism is a perfect description of a Christian worldview and our existence and purpose as a human beings. We could assert that as Christians we all need to become thoroughgoing biblically grounded supernaturalists. Although human beings are flesh and

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touched peoples' worldview which is the core of their cultures. This is true for missionaries as they evangelize cross-culturally but also is true for every Christian even if they never become missionaries in the strict sense of the word.

In fact, in the pluralistic multi-cultural world in which we now live, understanding culture, has become a great need and is no longer an optional luxury. Life for missionaries is never simple, but neither is it for life at home. We no longer can rest on our laurels and just assume that we will be understood, that life will go on as we had expected, and that radical changes will not affect us. Understanding of culture and worldview, including our own, has become an indispensable need for modern-day life!

As we consider culture, we want to reduce it to its most basic elements that can help us readily grasp the "big picture." Dr. Lloyd Kwast's model provides us with such a tool:

There is probably no more comprehensive word in the English language than "culture" or no more complex a field of study than cultural anthropology. Yet a thorough understanding of the meaning of culture is prerequisite to any effective communication of God's good news to a different people group.

The most basic procedure in a study of culture is to become a master of one's own. Everyone has a culture. No one can ever divorce himself from his own culture. While it is true that anyone can grow to appreciate various different cultures and even to communicate effectively in more than one, one can never rise above his own or other cultures to gain a truly supracultural perspective. For this reason even the study of one's own culture is a difficult task. And to look objectively at something that is part of oneself so completely is nearly impossible. (From *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement: A Reader* (revised ed. pp. C3-C6)

Worldview is "nearly impossible" to comprehend even though it is a "prerequisite" for effective mission work. Kwast suggest that we view culture,

any culture, including our own, as having "several successive layers of understanding, as one moves into the real heart of the culture."

Using the "man from Mars" technique, Kwast helps us see how an alien or a foreigner from outside of a given culture would perceive culture. The first layer of culture that the "man from Mars" would observe is called *behavior*, which is "the outer and most obvious layer of what would be observed by an alien." It answers the question of what is done, what do people of a given culture do in any given situation. It tells us how they behave and conduct themselves.

Next is a deeper layer of culture. "In observing the inhabitants, our alien begins to realize that many of the behaviors observed are apparently dictated by similar choices that people in the society have made. These choices inevitably reflect the issues of *cultural values*..." This layer of culture answers the questions of what is good, what is best, what is beneficial and what ought to be done. It tells us how people ought to behave and live in a given culture.

Going still deeper into culture, Kwast takes us to a more fundamental layer called *cultural beliefs*: "Values in culture are not selected arbitrarily, but invariably reflect an underlying system of beliefs." Kwast reminds us of the important distinction of beliefs. Some beliefs are "operating beliefs (beliefs that affect values and behavior)" while others are simple "theoretical beliefs (stated creeds which have little practical impact on values and behavior)." The belief system that affects values and behavior of the people. This layer tells us what really matters to people. It answers the basic question of what is true about life in that culture.

But what is the heart of culture, of any culture, including our own? What is at the core of every culture?

At the very heart of any culture is its worldview, answering the most basic

question: "What is real?" This area of culture concerns itself with the great "ultimate" questions of reality, questions which are seldom asked, but to which culture provides its most important answers. Few of the people our man from Mars questions have ever thought seriously about the deepest assumptions about life... Who are they? Where did they come from? Is there anything or anyone else occupying reality that should be taken into consideration? Is what they see really all there is, or is there something else or something more? Is right now the only time that is important? Or do events in the past and the future significantly impact their present experience? Every culture assumes specific answers to these questions, and those answers control and integrate every function, aspect, and component of the culture. This understanding of worldview as the core of every culture explains the confusion many experience at the level of beliefs. One's own worldview provides a system of beliefs which are reflected in his actual values and behavior. Sometimes a new or competing system of beliefs is introduced, but the worldview remains unchallenged and unchanged, so values and behavior reflect the old system. Sometimes people who share the gospel cross-culturally fail to take the problem of worldview into account and are therefore disappointed by the lack of genuine change their efforts produce. (ibid.)

Upon a moments reflection, it should be very obvious that understanding worldview is immensely important to our personal, family, and community life. It also is of crucial significance to Christian life and faith and our service unto God as His people. We can also unequivocally say that all Christians need to have a deep Christian biblically based worldview. Worldview issues with the great questions of ultimate reality need to be answered by God's Word, according to His reality, so that the values and beliefs we hold as His people would be thoroughly Christian. When this happens our actions (our attitudes and behavior) as God's People would be in line with God's Word. This implies that we would have firm foundation since both the hearing of God's Word plus

the doing or acting on them is involved. In other words, we would be thinking, speaking and acting as the Lord's disciples, because our values and beliefs, which rest on a Christian worldview are all in line with God's will and Word.

To some degree, all Christians stand in need to develop a biblical worldview. As we have seen this is most urgent in our day since Christian beliefs and values, and questions concerning Christian truth and ultimate reality are under relentless attack and are being eroded at every hand.

Christian Worldview Development

How can and should Christians go about forming a Christian worldview?

This is the all important questions that remains. From what has been said so far it should be very clear that the "questions of ultimate reality" which provide the most important answers to life, *must be answered for Christians by God's revelation, i.e., by the Scriptures.* We cannot leave secular humanistic systems and the currents of our times answer the great questions of life. God wants our lives to be thoroughly Christian, He wants our foundations to be based squarely on His words, because He knows that out of this fundamental reality, i.e., our worldview, flow all the issue of life. When our foundations and worldview are biblical, we *will* have right beliefs, which *will* produce right values, (the kind that God would have us value), which like the obedience of faith *will* result in doing His words and works. Indeed we will be like good trees who are "planted by the streams of water, that yield its fruit in its seasons, and its leaves do not wither. Everything that this man (tree) does will prosper" (See Psalm 1:3 and compare it with Luke 6:43-45 which talks about being a good tree. Notice that this passage is the immediate context of the Lukan version of the parable of the wide and foolish mens houses.)

What follows is a biblical case study

in which Jesus develops in His disciples a biblical worldview that gives them sure foundations. Notice the dynamics of this process which show us how modern-day disciples are to develop their worldview today. Also notice that Jesus developed it quickly in them. What He did and how He did it He can do for us today!

The Emmaus Road Seminar

Did not our hearts burn within us while He talked with us on the road, and while He opened the Scriptures to us? (Luke 24:32)

This verse is based on a very significant event in the lives of two of

Then as well as now Jesus is still opening the Scriptures. He still wants to open up the meaning and truth of the Scriptures to all who follow Him, who have eyes to see and ears to hear!

Jesus' disciples, who were walking from Jerusalem to a nearby village called Emmaus. Jesus appeared to them, and caught up with them as they walked on their way. Upon careful reading of this story, we have every reason to call this a "seminar" because Jesus personally taught these two disciples the deep things about God and the Word of God with the result that their worldview changed—they received a new way of seeing reality.

The first amazing thing about this Easter story is that the disciples did not recognize Jesus. The Bible says that their eyes were held from recognizing Him. We might speculate about that and ask why that was so? The passage seems to indicate that this happened for a reason and purpose. It seems that the Lord actually blinded their eyes so that (purpose) they would not recognize Him. We might ask why the Lord would do that? The text seems to lead us in

the direction that Jesus wanted to make a more wonderful point, or at least He wanted to accomplish a prior objective, more wonderful than revealing to His disciples His glorious resurrection.

This was resurrection Sunday. Three days prior Jesus had been crucified and buried, and these disciples were saddened by all that had transpired over the weekend in Jerusalem. Here are two disciples who had heard rumors about what had happened on that Easter morning, but who had not personally seen the Lord, who were still walking in ignorance, doubt and darkness, coupled with sadness concerning the death of Jesus in whom they had pinned all their

hopes. What a revelation of immense proportion would it have been to reveal to these needy disciples the knowledge of His resurrection.

This is how we would see it from our perspective. If we had had it our way we would quickly have concluded that Jesus' first order of business should be to reveal Himself.

And notice they really were His disciples, not just ordinary curious followers from the crowd. Why was it that Jesus did not open their eyes? In fact, why did He close their eyes to begin with, which is exactly what the text seems to indicate?

A Greater and Prior Work

It seems pretty clear that Jesus had a greater and prior work to accomplish in the hearts of these two disciples. After Cleopas and the other disciple tell the companion, whose identity is not disclosed, the sad story of the events that transpired on that Easter Sunday the visitor surprisingly rebukes them. He says, "O foolish men, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into His glory?" Then "beginning with Moses and all the prophets, He interpreted the things concerning Himself." (Luke 24:25-27)

Christian Worldview Development

It is hard to believe, but we need to see that Jesus really *rebuked* them. It is no small matter. He does not comfort them, nor minister to their sadness and need, nor does He compliment them. It was like adding insult to injury. At the same time we need to see that Jesus would not have rebuked them without a good reason. He would not have rebuked them for simple ignorance. Looking at the passage we get the idea that Jesus called them foolish because they should have known better. They are foolish because they should have known something they did not know. Jesus rebuked them for that reason.

What should they have known? Jesus wanted to take them out of their foolishness, out of their dull and senseless existence and lead them into truth that would set them. How? By opening unto them the Scriptures: “And beginning with Moses and all the prophets, He interpreted the things concerning Himself.” This was the greater and prior work that Jesus wanted to do before revealing to His disciples the great reality of His resurrection.

Opening the Scriptures

Jesus used the Word of God, i.e., the Old Testaments Scriptures, to bring them to understanding, taking them to a new and deeper plane of life and existence—in effect giving them a biblical Christian worldview. We come to that conclusion because when it is all said and done, the two disciples react to what had transpired. Although they were very glad that they finally recognized the Lord and know that He was alive and risen, they were especially excited about what Jesus had done prior on the Emmaus road. This prior work was their great excitement. They are really excited about what occurred to them during the “seminar” as He explained to them Moses and the prophets, prior to having revealed to them the great reality of His resurrection. They said to each other, “did not our hearts burn within us while He talked to us on the

road, while He opened to us the Scriptures?” (Luke 24:32)

Then as well as now Jesus is still opening the Scriptures. He still wants to open up the truth of the Scriptures on a deep level to all who follow Him and serve Him. Today like then, Jesus wants all His disciples to clearly understand how all of the Scriptures speak of Him. He would want this to burn in our hearts like it burned in the hearts of His first disciples.

Reading beyond this passage we notice that Jesus accomplished the same great work with the rest of His disciples later on during that same first Easter Sunday. Jesus appeared to the whole group consisting of the eleven disciples, plus the two disciples from Emmaus, plus others who accompanied the eleven disciples that day. This is what we read:

These are my words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the law of Moses and the prophets and the Psalms (i.e., the Old Testament Scripture) must be fulfilled. Then He opened their minds to understand the Scriptures, and said to them. Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be preached in his name to all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. And behold, I send the promise of my Father upon you; but stay in the city (in Jerusalem), until you are clothed with power from on high. (Luke 24:44-49)

What happened to the first disciples should happen to every Christian, and in the same way. The Lord “opened their minds to understand the Scriptures” and so must He open ours. As in the case of the first disciples, this work must be the prior and greater work the Lord needs to do in order for us to fully understand the enormous significance of His resurrection, as well as all His other supernatural works, including His great purpose and plan for world redemption and our place and part in it as His disciples.

This indeed was the Lord’s plan and purpose, as it continues for us, “that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in His name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem.” (Luke 24:47) For them then, and for us now, it should be perfectly clear that development of a biblical worldview, one based on Scripture, especially on the Old Testament, is absolutely essential and prerequisite to firm foundations and Christian worldview development. As the Lord opens the Scriptures to us, as He did to His first disciples, we will become biblical supernaturalists, who have a Christian worldview.

In this light the words of the apostle Paul get their full meaning. Speaking of the inspired Scripture (i.e., the Old Testaments Scriptures, which was the only Scriptures available at the time) Paul claimed that these are profitable for teaching and reproof, for correction and instruction in righteousness (in doing right and good) so that “the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work.” (2 Timothy 3:17).

As a final point in this article we want to consider these all important words concerning the profitability, purpose, and function of the inspired Scriptures. Truly the Scriptures as God’s inspired Word are designed to make us complete and whole in a deep way so that we will be equipped for every good work, especially to preach the forgiveness of sins to all the nations.

The Inspired Scriptures

All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine (teaching), for reproof, for correction, for instruction, in righteousness (justice), that the man of God may be complete (fitted), thoroughly equipped for every good work.” (2 Timothy 3:16, 17)

As previously alluded to, we deeply need to underscore the question concerning the source of our knowledge and the answers to our worldview

questions. In a pluralistic and relativistic society this is no small matter. Someone will ask: Is it even possible to get a reliable objective and trustworthy source, and one that can be known? Is there something true for everyone? Who or what will give us “true truth” to use Francis and Edith Schaeffer’s words, (See *The God Who is There* by Francis Schaeffer and *A Way of Seeing* by Edith Schaeffer).

From a biblical perspective, (and no one comes to any task with out one), truly hearing the words of Scriptures, we come to see that there is but one Being in the whole universe who is qualified and objective, who sees and knows reality as it truly is, who at the same time is totally trustworthy because He is totally benevolent. That person as Scriptures reveal Him is God—the One True Living Eternal Personal Triune God, the All Knowing and All Wise God, who has revealed Himself, in His Son, and in His Word, who has given us the true answers to the ultimate questions of life. God has revealed the essential truths concerning the universe, the cosmos, all of life, including human life, including all things, both visible and invisible reality. (See Colossians 1:15-17)

The Bible declares that God at no time has left Himself without witness but that from the beginning, and throughout history, and continuing to the present, He has clearly revealed who He is. God also revealed what He has done in creating and sustaining the universe, as well as of His control over the same—reigning according to His purpose and end (*telos*). (See especially Romans 1: 20, 21, Acts 14:16-18 and Acts 17:24-28)

What we find revealed in Scriptures originated in the mind and will of God Himself, who is the ultimate source of life and light for all reality. For that reason the Bible is called the Word of God. (See Deuteronomy 4:1, 8:1-3, 30:15 and 30:19, 20; also Proverbs 11:19 and 12:28 and Matthew 4:4 and John 5:39-40, 10:10;and 20:30, 31)

The inspired Scriptures need to be the source of our life and light (knowledge and understanding) in order to give us the answers to the ultimate questions of life. In the Scriptures we find the building blocks for faith and life and our service unto God. By His word and Spirit God needs to develop in us a worldview that is true and consistent with the objective reality as it truly is.

The word translated “inspired” or “given by inspiration” in the original Greek means “God-breathed.” This implies that the Scriptures are the breath of God which denotes two basic truths: 1) It has come from God, specifically from the Holy Spirit who is portrayed in the Bible as the breath of God. It also implies 2) That the Bible gives life and light to those who listen to it deeply,—God gives life to those who believe it and act on what it reveals.

For that basic reason the apostle Paul is able to say that the Bible is useful and profitable, able to teach and correct, able to make us mature and complete (fitted) men and women equipped for every good work.

In Conclusion

We have explored the meaning and importance of developing a solid biblical worldview. We have noted that as Christians we cannot survive without it nor be productive. Of greatest importance, we have learned that the only way Christians can build firm foundations is by both hearing and doing the words of God, that include the Old Testament Scriptures, as Jesus Himself modeled with His disciples. The obedience of faith (or the works coming from faith) is the key dynamic whereby the Lord’s disciples build firm foundations for life and develop a solid Christian worldview whereby they become true biblical supernaturalists. We have noted that a Christian worldview is a central prerequisite to Christian life that makes us complete, mature, and equipped for every good work. As we have seen this is focused on the good work that “repent-

tance and forgiveness of sins should be preached in His name to all nations.” Truly may we become equipped and skilled workers that would preach the Gospel in His name to all the nations. As the Lord’s disciples “we are witnesses of these things.”

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One's Future in Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam

Just because the Christian message is true does not imply that everyone should take the time to grasp its truth. Only if the nature of the message is so important that one's future fulfillment and happiness depend on knowing it should the effort be made to properly respond to it. That the biblical message is indeed that important is made clear by contrasting it with the prospects for happiness that one would have as an adherent of each of the three great non-Christian world religions.

by Daniel P. Fuller

Two remarkable aspects of God's purpose for his creation are found in Isaiah 64:4: "Since ancient times no one has heard, no ear has perceived, no eye has seen any God besides you, who acts on behalf of those who wait for him." The first aspect is his promise that for those who trust him, he will work to do them good. The encouragement this gives is made even greater by a further promise in Jeremiah 32:41: "I will rejoice in doing them good...with all my heart and soul." The Almighty God, the Creator of the universe, thus wants nothing so much as to work for people's benefit; doing so brings him complete and unsurpassed joy. The more we consider this truth, the more we become assured of enjoying an eternity of happy tomorrows.

The second remarkable teaching in Isaiah 64:4 is that God works for the benefit of those who wait for him. It must be emphasized that enjoying the blessing of having God working for our benefit is conditioned upon ceasing to trust in our own wisdom and efforts to attain a happy future, but waiting instead for him to bring it to pass.

The uniqueness of God's promise to work beneficially for those who wait for him can be verified in large measure by comparing Christianity with the three other great religions in the world: Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam. This comparison will show that only in one of Buddhism's two branches is there anything faintly resembling the idea of Isaiah 64:4, though closer examination will show that it too falls far

short of providing lasting happiness. First, however, we look at Hinduism, probably the oldest of these three religions.

Hinduism

Some 630 million people (13.1 percent of the world's population), most of them in India, espouse this ancient religion. Since its religious leaders are pictured as content and serene, one might infer that Hinduism provides the sort of peace and joy that people would have whose God is acting benevolently on their behalf. But a consideration of its tenets makes clear that, to the contrary, this serenity comes from learning to suppress the desire for happiness by disciplines designed to enable one both to become detached from this present world and to be indifferent to one's welfare in the future.

This detachment is illustrated in the "Song of God," a famous passage in the Bhagavad Gita that has been called the Gospel of Hinduism.¹ The song begins by telling how Arjuna, a member of the noble warrior caste (Kshatriya), was poised with his four brothers to do battle with an army made up of close relatives. Previously Arjuna had been robbed of his land and exiled for thirteen years by his cousin Duryodhana. Upon his return he sought to reclaim his land, but not even his uncle could prevail upon Duryodhana to restore it. So Arjuna prepared to do battle with his relatives, and the story opens as the two armies confront each other.

But Arjuna was troubled as he faced these men whom he would soon be trying to kill. Therefore he asked

Krishna, his charioteer, who was actually the ninth incarnation of the god Vishnu, to delay the battle by halting between the two forces. As Arjuna looked at these "fathers, grandfathers, uncles, cousins, sons, grandsons, teachers, friends, fathers-in-law and benefactors" arrayed against him, he confessed to Vishnu, "My limbs fail me...my body trembles and my hair stands on end. [My bow] slips from my hand, and my skin burns. I cannot keep quiet, for my mind is in tumult..." What good can come from the slaughter of my people on this battlefield?" (8). "If, on the contrary, [my cousins]...should slay me, unarmed and unresisting, surely that would be better for my welfare! (10). To these questions Krishna replied,

The wise grieve neither for the dead nor for the living. There was never a time when I was not, nor thou, nor these princes [in the opposing army] were not; there will never be a time when we shall cease to be... Those external relations which bring cold and heat, pain and happiness, they come and go; they are not permanent. Endure them bravely, O Prince! The hero whose soul is unmoved by circumstance, who accepts pleasure and pain with equanimity, only he is fit for immortality... The Spirit [the ultimate reality, Brahman], which pervades all that we see, is imperishable. Nothing can destroy the Spirit. The material bodies which this Eternal, Indestructible, immeasurable Spirit inhabits are all finite. Therefore fight, O Valiant Man! (16).

He who thinks that the Spirit kills, and he who thinks of it as killed, are both ignorant. The Spirit kills not, nor is it killed... Even if thou thinkest of it as constantly being born, constantly dying, even then, O Mighty Man, thou

still hast not cause to grieve. For death is as sure for that which is born, as birth is for that which is dead. Therefore grieve not for what is inevitable. (17)

[Brahman] the end and beginning of beings [is] unknown. We see only the intervening formations... Though many are told about [Brahman], scarcely is there one who knows It. [Therefore] thou must look at thy duty. Nothing can be more welcome to a soldier than a righteous war... Refuse to fight in this righteous cause, and thou wilt be a traitor... incurring only sin... To the noble, dishonor is worse than death... If killed, thou shalt attain Heaven; if victorious, enjoy the kingdom of earth... Look upon pleasure and pain, victory and defeat, with an equal eye. Make ready for combat, and thou shalt commit no sin. (18)

Several facets of Hindu thinking are apparent in this exchange between Arjuna and Krishna. First, there is Brahman, an impersonal reality at the heart of everything in the universe. Here all the apparent opposites of the visible world for example, "cold and heat, pain and happiness, victory and defeat" meld together as one. Second, between phenomenal individuals and the noumenal, impersonal Brahman are "intervening formations." These are caused by what Hinduism calls *maya*, something of an illusion, so that people find it easy to regard as real the opposites in the phenomenal world around them.

The Hindu concept of righteousness also becomes evident. It is one's relationship to *dharma* (the "law," "custom," or "order") that spells out the duties the members of each caste are obliged to perform. Thus in the Bhagavad Gita we see Krishna's argument to Arjuna that sin is not killing revered relatives and friends but failing to behave as one who is a member of the warrior caste.

Another facet of Hindu thinking is *yoga*, the discipline necessary for going beyond the illusory phenomenal world and becoming conscious of the noumenal world of Brahman. "But thou

hast only the right to work, but none to the fruit thereof. Let not then the fruit of thy action be thy motive; nor yet be thou enamoured of in action. Perform all thy actions with mind concentrated on the Divine [Brahman], renouncing attachment and looking upon success and failure with an equal eye. Spirituality [*yoga*] implies equanimity" (21).

Arjuna, however, regarded this teaching as hard to follow and thus objected to Krishna. "I do not see how I can attain this state of equanimity which Thou hast revealed, owing to the restlessness of my mind. My Lord! Verily, the mind is fickle and turbulent, obstinate and strong, yea, extremely difficult as the wind to control." Krishna agreed that the mind is "exceedingly difficult to restrain, but... with practice and renunciation it can be done." (65).

Verily this Divine Illusion of Phenomenon manifesting itself in the Qualities is difficult to surmount. Only they who devote themselves to Me and to Me alone can accomplish it... Who meditates on Me without ceasing, devoting himself only to Me, he is the best... After many lives, at last the wise man realizes Me as I am. A man so enlightened that he sees God [Brahman] everywhere is very difficult to find... I am not visible to all, for I am enveloped by the illusion of Phenomenon. This deluded world does not know Me as the Unborn and the Imperishable [i.e. Brahman]. (72)

[But] to him who thinks constantly of Me, and of nothing else, to such an ever faithful devotee, O Arjuna, am I ever accessible. Coming thus to Me, these great souls go no more to the misery and death of earthly life, for they have gained perfection. The worlds, with the whole realm of creation, come and go; but, O Arjuna, whoso comes to Me, for him there is no rebirth. (80)

In truth, therefore, there is the Eternal Unmanifest, which is beyond and above the Unmanifest Spirit of Creation... The wise say that the Unmanifest and Indestructible [Brahman] is the highest goal of all; when once That is reached, there is no return. That is My Blessed Home. (82)

Karma and "rebirth" are also important facets of Hindu thinking.

Karma is the degree of merit in achieving detachment from the phenomenal world that one has achieved in previous lifetimes and to date in the present life. Krishna spoke of it to Arjuna as follows:

No evil fate awaits him who treads the path of righteousness. Having reached the world where the righteous dwell, and having remained there for many years, he who has slipped away from the path of spirituality will be born again in the family of the pure, benevolent and prosperous... Then the experience acquired in his former life will revive, and with its help he will strive for perfection more eagerly than before. Unconsciously he will return to the practices of his old life; so that he who tries to realize spiritual consciousness is certainly superior to one who only talks of it. Then, after many lives, the student of spirituality, who earnestly strives, and whose sins are absolved, attains perfection and reaches the Supreme. (66)

The task of reaching the "Supreme" or the "Blessed Home" of Brahman thus is formidable. Only a "very few" devote all efforts to becoming spiritual. These must meditate without ceasing on the noumenal aspect of Krishna, or on one of the other aspects of Brahman such as the gods Shiva or Brahmin. They must also renounce all thought of the rewards they will gain from their labor to sustain life. No doubt the "restless mind" can be stilled for a few hours by rigorous exercises in meditating on the illusory nature of the phenomenal world pressing in on all sides. But such awesome forces as one's complete immersion in this phenomenal world and the mind's instinctive inclination to choose activities that will bring gain from one's work will soon again concentrate one's thoughts upon the illusory phenomenal world. Thus one's karma rating will decline. And the painful knowledge that one tends to live life exactly as it was lived in previous incarnations would tend to extinguish any hope of success in constantly meditating on the noumenal Brahman.

In contrast to Hinduism, all that is required of those who desire blessings from the omnipotent and omniscient God of the Bible is to wait for him in the sense of banking all their confidence for a happy future on the many promises he has made. So the future happiness one may have as set forth in the Bible is vastly more attainable than that offered to the Hindu. And since all humanity craves happiness, Hindus included, are therefore well advised to expend the time and effort necessary to learn God's whole purpose in history as set forth in the Bible.

Buddhism

Buddhism emerged from a Hindu context in the person of Siddharta Gautama, born around 560 B.C. in a town in Nepal, near the northern border of India. Currently 556 million people (11.5 percent of the world's population) adhere generally to one of two basic forms of Buddhism. The original teachings of Gautama are most recognizable in southern Asia (Sri Lanka, Burma, Thailand, Kampuchea, and Laos), although even here it has undergone variations. In Sri Lanka, for example, it is combined with astrology and many elements of primitive animism—ideas that Buddha himself would have spurned.

Fear of unknown forces is a very powerful controlling factor in the lives of many Buddhists and Hindus in Sri Lanka. They go regularly to astrologers, shrines, medicine men, exorcists, or such people, who claim to have power to control or direct supernatural forces. When the people are faced with sickness or some such trouble, they ask, "Is this because of a charm or an evil spirit?" If so, they want to counteract the evil forces, using whatever means available to them.²

A different sort of Buddhism is found in Tibet, parts of the Soviet Union, Mongolia, China, Taiwan, Vietnam, Korea, and Japan. In distinction to that of much of southern Asia, this northern form calls itself Mahayana

("Upper Vehicle") Buddhism. Since this title implies that the Buddhism in parts of southern Asia is inferior, its followers in the South prefer to call their religion Theravada Buddhism, or "The Buddhism of the Elders." A consideration of this earlier form is necessary in order to understand Mahayana Buddhism.

Since all humanity craves happiness, Hindus included, are therefore well advised to expend the time and effort necessary to learn God's whole purpose in history as set forth in the Bible.

The Buddhism of the Elders

Siddharta Gautama, or Buddha ("the enlightened one"), a name Gautama received from his followers, was born into a wealthy family living in a palace as isolated as possible from the misery, poverty, and death in the world outside.³ But one day at age twenty-nine, married and the father of a small child, Siddharta disobeyed his father's order never to leave the palace grounds and went out to see how the rest of the world lived. So profoundly shocked was he at the spectacle of death, poverty, and human suffering outside his palace that a few nights later he left his sleeping wife and child and departed, never to return.

Donning the saffron robes of a wandering beggar, shaving his head, and generally following Hindu teaching, he tried to block out the phenomenal world of suffering and reach Brahman through meditating and subjecting himself to ascetic extremes. But though he persisted in this regimen for six years, he found no relief from the problem of suffering.

Therefore he abandoned such efforts, and while sitting under a tree, later

called the Bodhi ("knowledge") Tree, he decided upon a new approach. The previous six years, he was convinced, had brought no enlightenment because he had sought it with the very same selfish desire that causes so much suffering in the world. Therefore he abandoned his efforts to get through to Brahman by rigorous efforts to concentrate on one of its manifestations such as Krishna,

choosing instead to follow a more relaxed "middle way" of living. Seven weeks later full enlightenment finally came. Going then to a public place in the nearby city of Benares, India, he began to teach this new way to attain peace in a world of suffering. As he taught, he radiated such calm and self-possession that ascetics who had known him during the first six years

became convinced that he truly had received a remarkable enlightenment. And so for the remaining forty-five years of his life, he tirelessly traveled throughout northern India preaching his message and radiating his serenity. An increasingly large number of men from different castes began to follow his precepts, and in time women too were allowed, to become initiated into an order.

Siddharta summarized his enlightenment in "Four Noble Truths": (1) suffering is universal; (2) the cause of suffering is attachment to things or a craving for them; (3) the cure for suffering is the elimination of craving and attachment by (4) following the "middle way." This middle way obviously meant avoiding one extreme of giving into carnal lusts. But it also meant avoiding the opposite extreme of craving knowledge of Brahman in the Hindu way of asceticism. To elucidate this middle way Siddharta advocated the Eightfold Path.

The first step of the Eightfold Path is *right belief*. Part of this right belief is to waste no time and energy trying to

answer metaphysical questions as to whether the world is created, is temporal or eternal, finite or infinite, or whether the life principle of a person is identical with the body or distinct from it. Suffering still exists no matter what answers are given to such theoretical questions. Effort should therefore be devoted instead to fostering worthy attitudes and practical ethical behavior. One must avoid modes of behavior that cause suffering such as killing, stealing, immorality, lying, tale-bearing, harsh language, covetousness, and ill will.

The second step, *right mindedness*, requires carrying on one's activities from a proper motive. While this step naturally includes rejecting the motives that lead to forbidden behavior, it also emphasizes the need to carry on one's activities with a wisdom that will alleviate suffering in oneself and others.

The third and fourth steps, *right speech* and *right action*, repeat much of step 1. The fifth step of *right living* concerns choosing a life vocation that brings benefit rather than hurt to society. *Right effort*, the sixth step, spells out the four virtues one needs to foster: avoidance of evil, overcoming of lust and bad habits, development of helpful words and actions, and maintenance of the sort of behavior that will help eradicate suffering.

The seventh step of *right attentiveness* also singles out four objects—the body, the emotions, the mind, and worldly phenomena—from which so much suffering can come until one learns, for example, not to love the beautiful or strong parts of the body, because they will wither and die as readily as the body's uglier and weaker parts.

Right concentration then brings the Eightfold Path to a climax. Those making progress into this eighth step should begin to experience the joy of trances that are a foretaste of nirvana, where one never again has to be reborn into the world of suffering.

True to his distaste for metaphysical

speculation, Buddha was vague in describing nirvana, which means literally the "blowing out" of existence. This concept would seem to imply annihilation, a conclusion that Buddha never affirmed. All that mattered to him concerning this subject was that it marked the end of painful becoming and the beginning of the peace of an eternal, changeless state of being. Those destined for nirvana after their last lifetime would await death with calm detachment and contentment.

In distinction to the Hinduism from which it sprang, Buddhism could be characterized as a humanistic, even as an atheistic, religion. It did, however, carry over into its teaching two somewhat revised features of Hinduism: karma and rebirth. Buddha reiterated the concept of karma, whereby one's merit from a preceding life would determine the status attained in a future one. But his understanding of karma allowed people to be much more optimistic about their future than they could be in Hinduism. "In [Buddha's] view a man of any caste or class could experience so complete a change of heart or disposition as to escape the full consequences of sins committed in previous existences... [The Law of Karma] could not lay hold upon a man... who had achieved arahatship, "the state of him that is worthy,"⁴ the last step of the Eightfold Path. This arahatship, or spirituality, canceled out the past karma that heretofore had determined the quality of one's next life. So in Buddha's teaching a spiritual person, or *arahat*, would live eternally in nirvana and never become a part of the painful world of flux again.

Buddhism also distinguished itself from Hinduism in that Buddha and his followers were to foster a benevolent attitude toward others. So, for example, the sixth step of the Eightfold Path decreed that one should choose a vocation that contributed to the well being of society. Buddhists were also to

maintain a loving rather than an unconcerned or vengeful attitude toward others, which was essential to have peace of soul. This emphasis on love figured largely in the rise of "Upper Vehicle" Buddhism, which became prominent around A.D. 100 after going through several modifications.

Mahayana ("Upper Vehicle") Buddhism

The first modification came from the strong influence of King Asoka, who became ruler of all India in the third century B.C. To secure such power required his dealing cruelly with the people who lived alongside the Bay of Bengal, though the Buddhist teaching he had already received condemned him for such violence. Asoka decided to make Buddhism the official religion of India but expounded it as a system of piety whereby people could be good Buddhists simply by carrying on normal lives, without having to become monks or nuns.

Another step toward Mahayana Buddhism was the virtual deification of Buddha. Although Buddha himself had asserted that there were many gods in the universe, he discouraged prayer or devotion to any of them, since they, like human beings, were finite and subject to the pain that comes from the flux of life. Buddha himself never encouraged people to direct prayers to him after he died and entered nirvana. But in order to spread his teachings, his followers had come to build sanctuaries called "wats," where ordinary people could assemble to be instructed by monks. Most of these wats had an image of Buddha seated above the altar.

Although the well-trained monks regarded prayers as nothing more than repetitions that earned merit, the common people began to direct their prayers toward Buddha himself. They saw him as one who would help them in their need because he had fostered a benevolent attitude toward others and now enjoyed the transcendence of being in the changeless nirvana. It was then but a

short step to think of Buddha as having preexisted before coming down to earth to tell people how to gain alleviation from suffering. To this notion was added the idea that he was a divine omniscient being who had repeatedly volunteered to be incarnated on earth to bless people with his teachings. It was then another short step to the belief that Buddha had lived sinlessly during these incarnations and therefore had earned enough merit to dwell in Tusita, the most desirable heaven.

The third step in Buddhism's modification came with the belief that many such buddhas had come to earth before Siddhartha Gautama and that others would come after him. Thus the idea took shape that the universe was full of compassionate beings who wanted to aid suffering humanity. Now people sought salvation not just by the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path but by looking to these buddhas as divine beings with vast stores of merit that they were eager to share with the faithful so they too could enjoy the blessings of heaven. This exceedingly hopeful message carried by Mahayana Buddhism caused it to spread much more rapidly than the original form. By the second century A.D. it was found throughout the lands generally north of the Himalayas-Tibet, China (including Vietnam), Mongolia, Korea, and Japan.

Mahayana Buddhism taught that ordinary people who were well on their way toward the final step on the Eightfold Path were bodhisattvas ("Buddhas in the making"). But when they died, instead of entering nirvana, they would choose another rebirth, so that they might help thousands more learn the way to nirvana. The greatest of these bodhisattvas had chosen rebirth rather than nirvana thousands of times, and as a result

had acquired so much merit that they dispensed it from a heavenly place to those who worshiped them and directed prayers to them. Noss observes that "this merit is so great that they could readily achieve the full status of Buddhas and pass into nirvana; but they are com-

Ordinary people simply could not be satisfied with its indifference to transcendental matters. Their needs impel them to reach out for an omniscient, omnipotent, and loving God to answer their prayers and deliver them from the difficulties of this life.

passionate beings who out of love and pity for suffering humanity postpone their entrance into nirvana and transfer their merit, as need arises, to those who call upon them in prayer and give devotional thought to them."⁵

The following statement from a Prajnaparamita Sutra ("teachings concerning transcendental wisdom") written soon after the first century A.D., explains the motivation of such a being.

Doers of what is hard are the Bodhisattvas, the great beings who have set out to win supreme enlightenment. They do not wish to attain their own private nirvana. On the contrary, they have surveyed the highly painful world of being, and yet, desirous to win supreme enlightenment, they do not tremble at birth-and-death [of future lives on earth]. They have set out for the benefit of the world, for the ease of the world, out of pity for the world. They have resolved: "We will become a shelter for the world, a refuge for the world, the world's place of rest, the final relief of the world, islands of the world, lights of the world, leaders of the world, the world's means of salvation."⁶

One such bodhisattva is Amitabha, a great god revered in China, Korea, and Japan. According to Noss, The hopeful devotee turns to Ami-

tabha, and has merit transferred to him from the great being's store. A Mahayana treatise widely read in China and Japan, "A Description of the Land of Bliss" says distinctly that faith in Amitabha, quite apart from meritorious works and deeds, is alone sufficient unto salvation. It declares:

Beings are not born in that Buddha country as a reward and result of good works performed in this present life. No, all men or women who hear and bear in mind for one, two, three, four, five, six, or seven nights the name of Amitayus [an emanation from Amitabha], when they come to die, Amitayus will stand before them in the hour of death, [and] they will depart this life with quiet minds, and after death they will be born in Paradise.⁷

Is Mahayana Buddhism then, like Christianity, a religion of hope for the future?

An Evaluation of Buddhism

Unquestionably the original Buddhism, the "Teaching of the Elders," is more encouraging than Hinduism in that it affirms that one can break out of the destiny one's karma, gained through countless previous rebirths, would otherwise decree for one. Through a far-reaching repentance, one could be born instead into a much better form of existence in the next life. It is also more encouraging in that it clearly teaches that with the attainment of nirvana, one will never again be reborn into this world of flux and suffering. But the very changes that took place in the years following Buddha's death indicate that this earlier form too left much to be desired.

Ordinary people simply could not be satisfied with its indifference to transcendental matters. Their needs impel them to reach out for an omniscient, omnipotent, and loving God to answer their prayers and deliver them from the difficulties of this life. People also want definite teachings about the afterlife, and so later Buddhism came to talk about specific heavens whose inhabitants have not lost their identity

as individuals. Also necessary is a religion in which men and women can participate fully without becoming monks or nuns but can carry on the ordinary vocations essential for society's well-being.

The subsequent changes both in the original "Teaching of the Elders" and in the development of Mahayana Buddhism demonstrate how Buddhism added those features for which people yearn. As a result the teaching regarding the foremost bodhisattvas of Mahayana Buddhism comes close to competing with the Bible's teaching that God will rejoice with his whole heart and soul to work for the welfare of the people who wait for him. That the great Bodhisattva, Amitabha, will bring to paradise a person who does nothing more than meditate on his name for one day before death, sounds as if divine blessing could be received by grace. It is open to abuse, however, by those who wish to live sinfully during this life but nevertheless spend eternity in paradise—provided they could accurately predict when they would die. I certainly do not suggest that all who revere Amitabha are like that, for the teachers of Mahayana Buddhism urge people to be full of good works and to aspire to become bodhisattvas themselves.

Nevertheless the problem arising from the possible abuse of Amitabha's grace does exist, which could never arise with the God of the Bible, who works for those who simply wait for him. Waiting for God means banking one's hope for an eternity of happy tomorrows exclusively upon what God has promised to do; it means having him as one's hope for the future. According to Psalm 33:20, "We wait in hope for the Lord; he is our help and our shield." A pronounced change of conduct then occurs in those having such confidence in what the loving and supreme Creator-God of the universe will do for them, for such a hope is the root cause of all virtuous living. People

who confidently wait for God to bring them the desired fulfillment for their lives will not abuse others and use them as means whereby they might gain some happiness for the future. Instead they seek to serve others, because they know that God will provide for every need. All would feel at ease living alongside a person with such a hope in God.

So the Bible teaches that the condition people must fulfill in order to have the loving God work for them is not to wait for him just for one day but to make waiting on him their purpose from the time they first trust him until death. To be sure, the Christian believes in the validity of death bed conversions, for Jesus told the thief on the cross who believed in him that he would dwell with him that very day in paradise (Luke 23:43). But the Bible gives no encouragement whatsoever to think that one could live sinfully for most of life and then be assured of paradise by thinking about God for a day or so before death.

An important advantage Christianity has over Mahayana Buddhism is that people need never feel ashamed to go to heaven. In Mahayana Buddhism a person could never refuse rebirth without feeling guilty that in so doing he or she was being selfish by denying others help so they too could find paradise. But there is no reincarnation taught in the Bible: "[A person] is destined to die once" (Heb. 9:27). Therefore Christians need never choose between enjoying heaven and acting lovingly toward others.

We also noted the tendency in Buddhism toward a personal transcendence. Thus Buddha himself became personalized, even though much of his individuality may have been lost in the indefinite nirvana. Herein lies Christianity's greatest advantage over Mahayana Buddhism: it explicitly teaches people to worship a living Lord now and to look forward to the enjoyment of a

close family relationship with him for eternity.

During his life on earth Jesus was subjected to much suffering, personally experiencing all the hurts life can bring. So we Christians "do not have a High Priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are, yet without sin" (Heb. 4:15). Indeed, in Mahayana Buddhism there are highly personal beings who have experienced the full range of suffering during their innumerable reincarnations. Amitabha, for example, dwells in a land one step removed from nirvana. He remains there because he still wants to use his vast store of merit, constantly increased by his unselfishness in postponing nirvana for himself, to bring millions and millions of people to his place next door to nirvana—the ultimate hope in Buddhism.

So the impersonal and individual-suppressing nirvana is still held to be the final goal of salvation, even though the history of Buddhism gives ample evidence that its adherents yearn not for cessation of individuality but rather for contact with a highly personal, transcendent being. Hence this basic tension, lying at the very heart of Buddhism, remains unresolved.

In Christianity, however, this tension is resolved. According to Revelation 21:1-5, the Christian will finally be in the closest fellowship with God, who "will wipe every tear from their eyes." There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.

Discussion Questions

1. Contrast the bases for the experience of peace as set forth in Christianity and Hinduism. Which would you prefer, and why?

2. Though Hinduism sees good and bad as merged together in Brahman, the impersonal, ultimate reality underlying all things, nonetheless it does

teach that there is sin. In what does this sin consist?

3. Why would Krishna's exhortation quoted above, to behave as a true warrior and not to worry about killing relatives and friends, be a counsel of despair?

4. What tends to be discouraging about the Hindu teaching of karma?

5. "Why would it be wrong for a Hindu to aspire to the highest (Brahmin) caste?"

6. How might a Hindu argue against Buddha's teaching that the desire to become one with Brahman was fostering a desire for attachment rather than detachment?

7. "What is more hopeful about "the Buddhism of the Elders" than Hinduism?"

8. Contrast the Buddhist nirvana with the biblical heaven? What would cause you to choose one rather than the other?

9. What is the strongest objection to Buddhism, which led to the development of "Upper Vehicle Buddhism"?

10. How does Christianity avoid the objection that one is selfish to want to go to heaven?

11. Under what circumstances can a Christian's desire to go to heaven be an extreme form of selfishness?

12. What great problem confronts both forms of Buddhism and causes Upper Vehicle Buddhism to teach something that at first glance seems to be a gospel of grace?

13. Why must it take as long as 1.25 billion years for one to become a bodhisattva, an "enlightenment being"? Why cannot one who renounces nirvana for the good of others start preaching Buddhism in the near future as soon as reaching maturity in his or her next rein-

carnation?

14. The teaching of Mahayana Buddhism about the god Amitabha

In perusing the paradise passages in the Koran, one notes that the ultimate blessings for the Muslim do not go beyond a superabundance of the most pleasurable things to be enjoyed in this life. There is no indication whatsoever that heaven's joys culminate in fellowship with God.

sounds like salvation by grace, which would seem to prove Isaiah 64:4 false. But why does Isaiah 64:4 remain true?

15. Why do the bodhisattvas, despite all the merit for others they have accumulated, finally become valueless in Upper Vehicle Buddhism?

The World of Islam

Islam, or "submission to the will of God," is the most recent of the world's great religions and claims 970 million followers, or 18.4 percent of the world's population. This monotheistic religion directs all worship to Allah as the creator and almighty God and regards Muhammad, whose teachings are set forth in the Koran, as the final prophet, superseding all previous prophets such as Abraham, Moses, and Jesus.

Muhammad was born around A.D. 570 in the region of Mecca in Arabia. With no acting father and a mother who died when he was six, he was cared for by his grandfather for a short time and then by his uncle. Becoming a shepherd boy, he lived in poverty as a nomad near Mecca. Some verses in the Koran may echo this time: "Did [Allah]

not find thee an orphan and shelter thee? Did he not find thee erring, and guide thee? Did he not find thee needy, and suffice thee?"(93:6-8).⁸

Later Muhammad accompanied caravans organized by his uncle; these took him as far north as Syria and as far south as Yemen. In this work he gained a reputation for being dependable and honest, and around 595 these qualities caught the attention of the wealthy widow Khadija, who entrusted her business affairs to him and later married him, though fifteen years his senior. With her wealth supporting him, he now had more leisure time.

By the seventh century both Judaism and Christianity had extended their influences into Arabia, and the frequent references to the Old Testament and to Jesus in the Koran indicate that Muhammad had been exposed to them both as a dweller in Mecca and during his travels as a caravaner. Their teaching of the one God who was not to be represented by any image or picture may have aroused within him a loathing for the idolatry of the pagan Bedouins. In any event, around 610 Muhammad formed the habit of withdrawing at night to a cave at the foot of a mountain north of Mecca, where he meditated and prayed. About a year later on the night of 26-27 Ramadan, he received his first revelation when the angel Gabriel appeared to him and said, "Recite: In the Name of thy Lord who created, created Man of a blood-clot. Recite: And thy Lord is the Most Generous, who taught by the Pen, taught Man that he knew not" (96:2-5).

Mecca had long been the destination of the pagan polytheistic Bedouins because of the sacred black meteorite resting in the corner of the Kaabah—a cube-shaped sanctuary for their gods. Since the economy of the town depended heavily on the money brought by these pilgrims, at first Muhammad was

reluctant to repeat the messages he had received from this monotheistic God. Such teaching would clash with the polytheism of the Bedouin pilgrims and would probably deter them from visiting Mecca and enriching its economy. But as Muhammad continued to receive revelations, his assurance that they were genuine increased. The resulting conviction that he had therefore become a prophet of the one and only God may be indicated by the following: "I swear... by the night swarming, by the dawn sighing, [that] truly this is the word of a noble Messenger having power, with the Lord of the Throne secure, obeyed, moreover trusty" (81:1521).⁹

With his calling assured, around the year 613 Muhammad began to declare that there was one supreme God and that he was that God's final prophet. He seems also to have denounced the Bedouin practice of burying alive baby girls thought to be superfluous (81:9). As expected, his preaching infuriated the people of Mecca. But his wife, Khadija, encouraged him to keep on preaching Allah as the only supreme God, a God of mercy and justice who would judge all people for their behavior. Earlier this God had been proclaimed by Abraham, Moses, and Jesus, but now he, Muhammad, had superseded them. "It is He [Allah] who has sent His Messenger [Muhammad] with the guidance and the religion of truth, that he may uplift it above every religion. God suffices as a witness" (48:25).

Opposition at Mecca to Muhammad and his followers (now called Muslims, or "those who have submitted to Allah") became so pronounced that in 619 he and many of his converts fled two hundred miles north to the city now called Medina. After his arrival he was invited to umpire disputes between tribes, and his success paved the way for more refugee Muslims to join him. Their number was then swelled by additional converts at Medina.

A number of battles ensued between

the Muslims of Medina and the pagans of Mecca, but finally Muhammad reached an agreement with the Meccans that allowed him and his followers to return as Muslim pilgrims. Thus Mecca became the Muslim sanctuary, and Muhammad now undertook to subjugate all of Arabia to Islam. For him there was no division between church and state. Jews and Christians could practice their faith as second-class citizens as long as they remained loyal to the state, but pagans were to be conquered. As "idolaters," they were to be given a few months to turn to Islam. If they failed to do so, however, the word was clear: "Slay the idolaters wherever you find them... But if they repent, and perform the [Muslim] prayer, and pay the alms, then let them go their way; God is All-forgiving, All-compassionate" (9:5). Another directive reads, "O believers, fight the unbelievers who are near to you, and let them find in you a harshness" (9:125). With such statements it is no wonder that Islam was soon called the religion of the sword.

The Teachings of Islam

This use of the sword was one reason why, after only a century, Islam reigned from Spain to India. It almost engulfed France as well, being turned back only after its forces suffered a decisive defeat in 732 at the hands of Charles Martel. Another reason for its amazingly rapid advance was the simplicity of its teaching, so that today it is the world's largest religion next to Christianity. Only five things are required to be a Muslim: (1) confess the unity of God and the apostleship of Muhammad; (2) pray five times a day facing toward Mecca; (3) give the prescribed alms; (4) observe a fast during the month of Ramadan, when no food is eaten from dawn until evening;¹⁰ and (5) if at all possible, make one pilgrimage to Mecca before death.

There are also high ethical commands in the Koran. For example, in

2:272 one hears an echo of the Christian teaching to conceal one's good deeds: "If you publish your freewill offerings, it is excellent; but if you conceal them, and give them to the poor, that is better for you, and will acquit you of your evil deeds." This passage is significant not only as a likely instance of Christian influence on Islam but also as evidence that in Islam, salvation is attained as one performs more good deeds than bad ones: evil deeds are canceled out, or acquitted, by the performance of good deeds. But there is no hope of salvation for those denying the tenets of Islam.

The metaphor of the pan-balances of a scale appears several times in the Koran to emphasize that entrance into paradise depends on a preponderance of good works over evil ones.

For when the Trumpet is blown... then he whose scales are heavy—they are the prosperors, and he whose scales are light—they have lost their souls in Gehenna [hell] dwelling forever, the Fire smiting their faces. (23:104-5)

We shall set up the just balances for the Resurrection Day, so that not one soul shall be wronged anything; even if it be the weight of one grain of mustard-seed [to determine whether the good outweighs the bad or vice versa]. We shall produce it, and sufficient are We for reckoners. (21:48)

If the pan-balance shows that one's good works outweigh the bad, then at the Judgment Day that one will be admitted to paradise with blessings far exceeding the tit-for-tat good works performed on earth: "Whosoever does an evil deed shall be recompensed only with the like of it, but whosoever does a righteous deed, be it male or female believing—those shall enter Paradise, therein provided without reckoning [in a tit-for-tat way]" (40:44).¹¹ For those who earn this paradise pleasures abound:

O which of your Lord's bounties will you and you deny? [i.e., it will be hard to choose which of the abundance of Paradise's bounties are to be enjoyed.] Therein [are] two fountains

of running water,...therein of every fruit two kinds. ...[Therein you shall be] reclining upon couches lined with brocade, the fruit of the gardens nigh to gather [whenever one wishes them],... therein [are] maidens restraining their glances, untouched before them by any man.... [They are] lovely as rubies, beautiful as coral... Shall the recompense of goodness be other than [such] goodness? (55:49-60, italics added)

[The God fearing] shall have whatsoever they will with their Lord; that is the recompense of the good-doers, that God may acquit them of the worst of what they did, and recompense them with the wages of the fairest of what they were doing. (39:35-36, italics added)

The Value of Islam

There is no denying that the blessings of the Islamic paradise are enticing. But attention should be directed toward two drawbacks in these blessings as Koranic teaching presents them.

Inability to Satisfy the Heart

In perusing the paradise passages in the Koran, one notes that the ultimate blessings for the Muslim do not go beyond a superabundance of the most pleasurable things to be enjoyed in this life. There is no indication whatsoever that heaven's joys culminate in fellowship with God.

In comparing Islam with Christianity, we may find it helpful to reflect on one of the *Pensees* (or "thoughts") of Blaise Pascal (1623-62), the famous French mathematician and philosopher.¹²

All men seek happiness, without exception; they all aim at this goal, however different the means they use to attain it... The will never makes the smallest move but with this as its goal. [The quest for happiness] is the motive of the actions of all men, even of those who contemplate suicide.

And yet, for centuries past, never has anyone, lacking faith, reached the mark at which all continually aim. All men murmur: princes, subjects,

nobles, commoners; old and young; learned, ignorant; sound and sick; of every clime, of every time, of every age, of every state...

What is it then that this eager desire, and this incapacity, cry aloud to us but that man once possessed true happiness, of which nothing now remains save the mark and empty outline [*la trace toute vuide*], which he vainly

The uniqueness of the God of the Bible becomes most evident, for he "is not served by human hands as if he needed anything" (Acts 17:25). To the contrary, the God of the Bible works on behalf of, or for the benefit of, those who trust and hope in him. And he is so complete in himself that in thus working he finds his greatest joy.

tries to fill in with his circumstances, seeking from things [ahead in the future] the help which he fails to find in things present, [but] all of them incapable of giving [contentment and joy], because the infinite abyss [*goufre infini*] can only be filled by one infinite and steadfast object, i.e., by God Himself? (Thought 250)

Pascal argued that a philosophy contrived by human reflection could never succeed in filling this "infinite abyss" because philosophy can talk only about things either in this world or imaginatively by analogy to these things. But since human experience proves that nothing in this world succeeds in silencing humankind's universal complaint, it follows that to fill the abyss, attention must be directed to the great religions, with their claims to know of transcendent things that human imagination cannot concoct. As Pascal said in Thought 249, "Let us examine all the religions of the world, and see whether there is any other than Christianity which satisfies our need."¹³

On the subject of the ultimate blessings the Christian is to enjoy, the Bible's teaching contrasts sharply with the Koran's message for the Muslim faithful. During this life, fellowship with God for the Christian is the only thing that satisfies: "Whom have I in heaven but you? And earth has nothing I desire besides you. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever" (Ps. 73:25-26). The same great hope is held out for the hereafter: "And I, in righteousness I will see your face; when I awake, I will be satisfied with seeing your likeness" (Ps. 17:15). As does the Koran, the Bible refers to heaven as a place free from the miseries of this world; only the heaven of the Bible, however, includes enjoyment of intimate fellowship with God: "No longer will there be any curse. The

throne of God and of the Lamb [Christ] will be in the city, and his servants will serve him. They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads" (Rev. 22:3-4).

Pascal's reasoning seems sound that the inner desire of humankind can never be met by earthly pleasures but only by fellowship with God. How, then, could one living in a Muslim heaven find contentment for eternity doing nothing more than lounging in gardens through which cool streams flow, being served refreshing drinks by beautiful and diffident maidens? But to have fellowship with a God who is like Jesus Christ would constitute a joy that could never become commonplace.¹⁴

Why does the Koran lay no emphasis on the ultimate blessing of having fellowship with God? One plausible explanation is that the blessings of a Muslim heaven are regarded as wages paid by God. Islam honors the individual as a workperson who has had the skills,

strength, and character necessary to meet some need of Allah the employer. So it would be incongruous in this system to consider fellowship with such a deficient God as a reward for one's praise worthiness in meeting his needs.

Precisely at this point the uniqueness of the God of the Bible becomes most evident, for he "is not served by human hands as if he needed anything" (Acts 17:25). To the contrary, the God of the Bible works on behalf of, or for the benefit of, those who trust and hope in him. And he is so complete in himself that in thus working he finds his greatest joy. As Old Testament theologian Walther Eichrodt observed, Israel's religion was the direct opposite of those practiced by the surrounding peoples. In their religions god was the client for whom the people must work in order to get from him certain blessings regarded as wages— something earned. But for Israel it was just the reverse: Israel was to regard itself as the client for whom God was working, as long as the people trustingly obeyed his directives for their welfare.

The situation in Islam is exactly reverse of Christianity. In the Christian faith God is the praiseworthy worker who meets the needs of believing people, then having fellowship with such a good God becomes most desirable. We thus can conclude that Islam, in comparison with Christianity, promises a heaven that falls far short of being what the human heart craves for most.

No Assurance in Islam

This second drawback is made clear by the Koran, which teaches that it is only the pan-balances at the future judgment that will determine those Muslims who will be saved. In the meantime one can only hope that his or her good works will outweigh the evil. But no one can be sure, and this fear of failure tends to keep one somewhat nervous about the future and to that extent unconcerned about the needs of oth-

ers. Thus the very lack of assurance reduces a person's potential for being loving. Also the less benevolent one is to others, the fewer good works will be in the pan-balance to counteract the evil ones. This situation in Islam, and even in some branches of Christianity (i.e., Roman Catholicism) can easily create a vicious circle, where the lack of assurance of being God's child keeps uncertainty reigning in the heart, which in turn lessens one's chances for doing good works. And the more people realize that this fear is keeping them from looking for opportunities to be benevolent, the more they lack assurance that God will be pleased with them.

Here then, is a striking contrast between Islam and the religion of the Bible. Hebrews 6:11-12 says, "We want each of you to prove the same diligence as before in maintaining full assurance of hope unto the end of your lives, in order that... you may be imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises" (author's own translation). The Bible makes full confidence that God is for us and not against us which is the foundation on which to build a life of good works. In contrast, Islam teaches that one must try to amass as many good works as possible without any such assurance, since only at the final judgment can it be known whether one is to spend eternity in paradise or in hell.

These two major drawbacks in Islam underscore the superior value of the religion taught in the Bible, as do the difficulties inherent in Hinduism and Buddhism. We therefore conclude, that the Bible sets forth a message well worth our while expending the time and energy to understand. Only by appropriating its message will the God-shaped vacuum of the heart be satisfied, completely and forever.¹⁵

Review Questions on Islam

1. In what sense is Allah merciful, even though paradise is reserved only

for those whose good deeds outweigh the bad?

2. What is the most significant omission in the Muslim description of paradise (heaven) in contrast to the Christian description of heaven?

3. Who is the client in Islam, God or the Muslim? Who is the client in biblical religion, God or the believer?

4. When should one gain full assurance of sins forgiven in Christianity? When is it gained in Islam?

5. Explain why the Christian doctrine of assurance helps one to be more benevolent than does the Muslim doctrine.

Notes

1. *The Bhagavad Gita*, trans. Shri Purohit Swami (London: Faber & Faber, 1978). This song is part of the Mahabharata, a 100,000-verse epic composed 400 B.C.-A.D. 400. According to John B. Noss, scholars estimate that the Bhagavad Gita was composed around A.D. 100 (*Man's Religions*, 3d ed. [New York: Macmillan, 1963], 266).
2. Ajith Fernando, *The Christian's Attitude Toward World Religions* (Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale House, 1987), 43. The author is a native of Sri Lanka.
3. The information regarding Buddhism for this summary comes from Noss, *Man's Religions*, 167-252, and from *A Buddhist Bible*, ed. Dwight Goddard (New York: E. F. Dutton, 1952).
4. Noss, *Man's Religions*, 180.
5. *Ibid.*, 217.
6. Edward Conze, *Buddhism: Its Essence and Development* (New York: Harper & Row, 1959), 128.
7. Noss, *Man's Religions*, 221, citing Sir Charles Eliot, *Hinduism and Buddhism*, 3 vols. (London: Edward Arnold, 1921), 2:30. The quotation is from the Lesser Sukhavati-vyuhā.
8. The 114 suras, or chapters, in the Koran ("Reading") are arranged not chronologically but generally by length (e.g., the second is 15 percent of the whole Koran; the last one consists of only seven lines). Quo-

tations from the Koran are taken from *The Koran Interpreted*, trans.

Arthur J. Arberry (New York: Macmillan, 1955), a translation regarded as of the highest quality.

9. Muhammad never regarded himself as an inspired revelatory spokesperson, but only as one who repeated what the angel Gabriel, the “noble Messenger,” told him.
10. Because Muslims have a lunar calendar, over the course of several years Ramadan occurs at every season of the year.
11. The “believing” here is limited to the affirmation of Muslim beliefs and the denial of others; for example, “They are unbelievers who say, ‘God is the Messiah, Mary’s Son’” (5:19). Unlike the Bible, the Koran says nothing about the power of faith, understood as hope and confidence in God’s promises, to produce works pleasing to God and helpful to others.
12. Blaise Pascal was a genius who, in his twenties, developed analytical geometry and the principles of probability. At the age of thirty-two, he pursued more actively his long-time interest in religion and entered the reform-inclined, monastic Jansenist community of Port Royal, France. At the risk of his life, he wrote a score of pseudonymous letters exposing the devious practices the Jesuits were successfully using to silence all dissent against the papacy. Overtaken by cancer in his late thirties, he began his lifelong ambition of writing a book on the evidence for the truth of the Christian religion. His deteriorating health, however, allowed him only to jot down about one thousand “thoughts,” which were to be basic themes and arguments for this book. Though death intervened at age thirty-nine, his “thoughts” have been regarded ever since as theological thinking at its best. The source for quotations here, both English and French, is Pascal’s *Pensées*, trans. H. F. Stewart (New York: Pantheon Books, 1950).
13. In this chapter and the preceding one I have attempted to carry out, on a

small scale, such an examination of the world’s four major religions—Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, and Christianity. Now we have seen that, unlike the other three great religions, Christianity satisfies the craving of the heart and enhances the welfare of society, thus making its truth of the greatest relevance.

14. Only a century after Islam’s founding, a mystical movement arose in a group called the Sufis, who sought to gain a sense of fellowship with Allah. Such a development indicates the insatiable desire of the human heart to have close communion with what is ultimately transcendent in one’s religion.
15. After comparing the Bible’s message with the teachings of other religions it becomes evident that its teaching about a God who works for people is unique. Tragically, however, this message is absent from many Christian traditions that have not kept on testing their teachings against biblical theology so that they might “always be reforming themselves” (*semper reformandum*). As recently as 1990 it dawned on me that the Bible’s unique message provides the quickest proof of the Bible’s truth.

Step #1: The human ego is completely averse to the idea of a God who works for people, because that idea gives the ego no room for pride. So in other religions, as well as tradition-bound Christianity, we hear much talk about our obligation to work for God. In Islam, for example, one works for Allah and earns “recompense” and “wages” from him (Koran 39:35-36; 55:49-60). But in Acts 17:25 Paul said to the proud Athenians “God is not served by human hands as though he needed anything.”

Step #2: How did the Bible, penned by humans, ever come up with this message so offensive to the human ego? The answer begins with an axiom, a self-evident proposition, verifiable by the absurdity of its denial. The axiom is that every effect must have a commensurate

cause. The Bible is an effect. But we need to see that what caused it, or what brought it into being, cannot lie within the realm of human dynamics because human nature hates this message. But since every effect must have a cause, we have to leave the “first floor” of human dynamics and go upstairs to the “second story” of God’s enablement to find the cause for the Bible’s existence. The apostle Peter in 2 Peter 1:21 talks of how writers of Scripture “spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit.” This explains the unique message of the Bible. It exists here on the “second story” because the Holy Spirit countered the egos of the Bible’s revelatory spokespersons and moved them to write a message totally abhorrent to the human ego.

Step #3: Therefore, the Bible’s message is true, because its existence can be explained only as a work of Almighty God. In that God moved people to pen such a message agrees with Paul’s statement that he and the Bible’s other revelatory spokespersons did not use “words which man’s wisdom teaches, but which the Holy Spirit teaches.” (See 1 Cor. 2:13)

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Yahweh and the Gods: A Theology of World Religions

It was Israel who saw the uniqueness of Yahweh acting in her history (Ex 8:6; 9:14). It was Israel who experienced the difference between Yahweh and the gods (Ex 15:11). It was out of the richness of these experiences that Israel truly knew Yahweh... The polemic throughout the Pentateuch (and the Old Testament prophets) is persuasive evidence for an exclusivistic understanding of Yahweh in a pluralistic environment. Yahweh, instead of the pagan gods, is the sovereign Creator who controls nature, brings fertility, and subdues nations.

by Ed Mathews

Pluralism is a major challenge confronting contemporary religions. The challenge is a serious one. For in the past, when various religions encountered each other, new insights and expressions of faith developed.¹ These developments resulted in either different religious formulations or fresh spiritual growth.

Christians are reexamining the foundations of their faith, especially their understanding of God, and who He is. Did the Israelites borrow their understanding of God from their pagan neighbors? How should a Christian respond to the claims of religious pluralism? These questions are the focus of the ensuing examination of the Pentateuch.

Yahweh in the Pentateuch

God revealed himself in the history and culture of ancient Israel. This disclosure occurred among societies that believed in a pantheon of gods. The similarities between Yahweh and the gods are interesting; the differences are convicting. What the Lord did in Israel “simply never happened elsewhere” (Noth 1958:2,3). The central elements of biblical faith are unique in that they could not have emerged by any natural evolutionary process from the pagan world in which they originated (Wright 1968:7; cf. Richardson 1961:71,72). The Hebrews realized their religion was different from other religions because their God was different from other gods!

“There is No One Like the Lord”

Yahweh was without equal. None of

the pagan gods was like Him. He was incomparable (Durham 1987:128). In the Old Testament, several phrases expressed this uniqueness: “there is none, there is nothing, there is no one ... as, like, compared to, on a level with, equal to...” For instance, in comparing Himself to other gods, Yahweh said, “There is no one like me in all the earth” (Ex 9:14). While blessing Israel just before his death, Moses said, “There is no one like the God of Jeshurun, who rides on the heavens to help you...(Dt 33:26). As expressions of uniqueness, one-of-a-kindness, or singularity, these comparative phrases also described the plagues of hail and locust (Ex 9:18,24;10:14); the despairing cry of the Egyptians (Ex 11:6); and the leadership of Moses (Dt 34:10). It is obvious that, as a particular linguistic form, these comparisons were part of everyday conversation. They had their origin in the idiom of the people (Labuschagne 1966:15). Only later did Israel apply them to the incomparability of Yahweh.

“Who Among the Gods is Like You?”

Besides comparative statements, the Israelites employed rhetorical questions to express uniqueness and singularity. For example, Moses asked, “What god is there in heaven or on earth who can do the deeds and mighty works you do?” (Dt 3:24). Again, Moses inquired, “Has any god ever tried to take for himself one nation out of another nation, by testing, by miraculous signs and wonders, by war, or by great and awesome deeds, like all the things the

Lord your God did for you in Egypt before your very eyes?” (Dt 4:34). Yahweh was beyond comparison among all divine beings. “There is simply none like Him, none even approaching an equality with Him” (Durham 1987:207). He was magnificent in holiness, awesome in splendor, and extraordinary in accomplishment! Moses also used rhetorical questions to describe the uniqueness of Israel, i.e., without equal among the nations (because Israel’s God was without equal among the gods. (Dt 4:7; 5:26; 33:29). It seems clear, then, that a rhetorical question was a communication device for expressing a deep conviction (Kessler 1982:8). The anticipated answer to these “who is like” questions was always “none.” When they referred to the Lord, the expected reply was “none but Yahweh” or “Yahweh alone.”

“The Lord is One”

The escape from Egypt and subsequent passage through the wilderness shaped the identity of Israel, an identity clarified by the demand to “love Yahweh with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength” (Dt 6:5). The force of this demand rested on the profound realization and repeated mention in the Pentateuch that “Yahweh is your God.” The Shema goes a step further in affirming that “Yahweh is one” or “Yahweh alone” is the God of Israel. Though the Hebrew text is ambiguous at this point, “monotheism is implicit” in both versions of that grand

creedal statement (Christensen 1991:145). If the ambiguity is irresolvable, as some argue (Miller 1990:99), then the task of interpretation calls for grappling with the sense of both translations.²

Undivided Loyalty of Israel

The translation “Yahweh is our God, Yahweh alone” anticipates the command to love God with undivided devotion. It describes the appropriate commitment of Israel. Its concern is her loyalty to the God of the covenant, a refusal to permit her to direct only part of her love to God (Wyschogrod 1984:25). Therefore the Shema, according to this rendering, is a radical confession that the loyalty of Israel is one, a loyalty to worship “no other gods” except Yahweh—to have “no other gods” except Him (Ex 20:3).

Undivided Nature of God

The alternative translation “Yahweh our God, Yahweh is one” speaks of the integrity and the unity of His purpose, thus emphasizing His oneness (Moberly 1990:211-215). The Lord was known as “the one who brought Israel out of the land of Egypt” (Dt 5:6). When His people made a golden calf, God was ready to destroy them (Dt 9:12-14). This threatened destruction made Him appear fickle and inconsistent (Dt 9:28,29). In the end, the integrity of God prevailed because He kept His covenant with Israel (Dt 7:8,9).³ The Shema demanded the same integrity (or undivided commitment) of Israel toward God (Janzen 1987:291-295). To confess that “Yahweh is one” was to claim that He was faithful and consistent in purpose and being—undivided in heart and mind and will.

Yahweh and the Gods

Yahweh was unique and incomparable, whole and undivided, a covenant God of impeccable integrity. Where did these ascriptions originate? Did Israel borrow them from local pagan religions and apply them to their God? The evidence does not warrant that con-

clusion. Instead, Yahweh was both greater than and distinct from the gods of Babylon, Egypt, and Canaan.

Distinct from the Gods

The Israelites lived in a world shaped by polytheism, by a supposed cosmic struggle between gods and goddesses (Glasser 1989:37). The faith of Israel resulted from “the direct activity of God” (Wright 1968:15), not from a religious developmentalism that evolved out of polytheism into henotheism or out of henotheism into monotheism (Rowley 1950:333-338). Though the Pentateuch reflects some borrowing from local sources, the elements in paganism are so radically reconceptualized that the faith of Israel stood in sharp contrast to the polytheistic environment in which it resided.

The God El

The father and omnipotent ruler of the Canaanite gods was El.⁴ He was older than the sub-deities. Thus, in age and power, he surpassed them all. After leaving behind the gods of Ur (Jos 24:14) and entering Canaan, Abraham worshipped El, who was also the God of Melchizedek and Abimelech (Ge 14:18-20; 20:1-17; 21:22-24). Likewise, Jacob built an altar and called it “El, the God of Israel” (Ge 33:19, 20).⁵ About the time Abraham moved to Canaan, the Ugaritic texts were written. They told the myth of Ba’al driving El from the kingship over the Canaanite gods, a myth that began in the north and swept steadily south through Palestine (Kapelrud 1963:40-42). This religious revolution was the result of the coming of the Amorites who brought their god Ba’al with them (cf. Ge 15:16 and Am 2:9,10; Oldenburg 1969:151-163). The myth reflected in religion what took place in politics—the Amorite conquest of Canaan.) Ba’al, as an agricultural fertility god, did not penetrate the desert regions of Midian in the far south, where Abraham migrated at the beginning of the Amorite occupation and where Moses, six centuries later, wor-

shipped El (Ex 2:15-31). While in Midian, Moses came face to face with El, “the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob,” at the burning bush (Ex 3:6). There the Lord, who was similar to El, revealed himself as distinct from El.⁶ He said his name was Yahweh: “I am who I am” (Ex 3:14)⁷ Moses, who had worshipped El, was given a new understanding—an insight into the distinctiveness of Yahweh—to prepare him for confrontations with Ba’al.

The worship of Ba’al.

When Israel crossed the Jordan and moved into Canaan, defeating the people and taking over the land, the Hebrews became bitter enemies of the Canaanites, and Yahweh became the fierce adversary of Ba’al. In spite of dire warnings (Dt 4:5-20; 7:1-6; 8:19,20; 17:1-3; 18:9-13; 30:17,18), some Israelites abandoned Yahweh (Jdg 2:10; 6:7-10; 10:6,7a). Leaders in ancient Israel adopted Ba’al cult practices (cf. 2Ki 23:4-9 and Jer 32:30-35; Greenfield 1987:546). Deliverers drove out the enemy, abolished the cults, and brought the people back to Yahweh. The rivalry between Yahweh and Ba’al persisted through out the course of Israel’s and Judah’s history. The Israelites misunderstood the distinctiveness of Yahweh, the only God who asked His people to love Him as He had already loved them (Ex 34:10-14; Christensen 1991:15).

Greater than the Gods

Whenever the Pentateuch mentioned other gods, it assumed the gods were real to the pagans. Yet, when comparing Yahweh with the gods, it portrayed Yahweh not only as distinct from the gods but also greater than the gods. The prohibitions against idolatry and the expressions of exaltation reflect this greatness.

Prohibition against idolatry

Idols were not to be made or worshipped by the Israelites (Ex 20:4,5; 34:17; Lev 19:4; 20:1; Dt 29:16-18).

They were merely man made pieces of detestable, useless, ineffective, dead wood and stone (Dt 27:15; 29:17; 32:21). Images could not see, hear, eat or smell (Dt 4:28). They disappointed and embarrassed those who trusted in them. Why, then, did Yahweh prohibit idolatry? The Pentateuch does not give a precise answer.⁸

In contrast to the gods of Canaan—that were known through idols—Yahweh made Himself known entirely apart from images (Dt 4:12-18). The prohibition against idolatry, therefore, set Israel apart from her pagan neighbors (Curtis 1985:285). It distinguished Israel from her contemporaries and Yahweh from their gods. As the sovereign Lord, He had the authority to impose the ban against idols, (Deut. 4:1,2). He was the God of gods, the God not formed or controlled by human hands.⁹

Expressions of Exaltation

Some scholars suggest that Israel adopted her forms of exaltation of Yahweh from her pagan neighbors (Wright 1951:4). Since Babylon, Egypt, and Israel employed similar statements of uniqueness for their deities, the question of borrowing must be taken seriously. Considering the evidence, however, “it cannot be proved on sufficient grounds that Israel borrowed the concept” (Labuschagne 1966:129). It seems more plausible to believe that the Israelites formed expressions of exaltation independently from the rich resources of her language. Although the Hebrews probably knew the local idioms of incomparability, the idea developed in the experience of Israel with Yahweh as a distinct, unique God, remarkably different from pagan deities.

It was Israel who experienced Yahweh as a God of integrity, a holy God, a God of justice, a God of mercy toward the helpless, who gave command-

ments, who spoke to his people in passionate language, and who demanded complete commitment and undivided loyalty. It was Israel who saw the uniqueness of Yahweh in the plagues, the exodus, and the wilderness journey (Ex 8:6; 9:14). It was Israel who experienced the difference between Yahweh

Israel linked the uniqueness of Yahweh as a creedal confession, that Yahweh was one, an entirely different God beyond comparison or imitation. There was none greater!

and the gods (Ex 15:11). It was out of the richness of these experiences that Israel knew Yahweh. There was no need for her to imitate, adopt, or borrow from her pagan neighbors. The polemic throughout the Pentateuch (and the Old Testament prophets) is persuasive evidence for an exclusivistic understanding of Yahweh in a pluralistic environment, i.e., Yahweh, instead of the pagan gods, is the sovereign Creator who controls nature, brings fertility, and subdues nations. The author is aware that some religions are nontheistic. In such cases, the question should be reworded: What is the relationship between Yahweh and their “ultimate concern” (Tillich 1957:106), Yahweh and “the holy” (Otto 1958:12-19), or the “Real”? Each religion—whether theistic or nontheistic—is an attempt to seek and respond to that which is considered the One.

From the very beginning, Israel linked the uniqueness of Yahweh with her salvation from Egypt (Ex 20:2). The concept was not borrowed from pagan minds but began as a creedal confession—based on the activities of God—that Yahweh was one, an entirely different God beyond comparison or imitation. There was none greater! There was none other (Dt 4:39).

Yahweh and Religious Pluralism

The contrast between Yahweh and the gods contributes to an understanding and appreciation of the Lord. It demonstrates the qualitative difference between God and the gods, draws attention to his singular uniqueness, sets the parameters for religious pluralism,

and provides a basis for responding to the contemporary voices of religious tolerance. In view of the various world religions with their divergent beliefs and practices, what relationship does Yahweh have with their gods? Three possibilities¹⁰ will be dis-

cussed: “One reflected in the many, One reached by the many, and One instead of the many.”

One Reflected in the Many

This position assumes that there is a reality at the center of all religions. The different perceptions of that reality in the various religions are true to the people holding them but, as the pluralists argue, they cannot be imposed upon those of other religions (Hick 1977; Smith 1981). Therefore, Yahweh cannot be normative (and no god or ideology can be the standard for all religions). Instead, pluralists say, all talk of Yahweh is “mythological speech about the Real” (Hick 1989:248). This severs any connection between human language and divine reality (D’Costa 1991:67). Pluralism provides no way for people to speak about God and, should they attempt to do so, no way of knowing if they are speaking about the same God (McGrath 1994:463). Therefore, in accommodating all religions, pluralism accommodates none. Truth is relativized. The “One reflected in the many” approach creates an impossible dilemma.

One Reached by the Many

This understanding advocates a utilitarian function for every religion. It

assumes all religions are ladders to help their devotees reach the One. The various religions are “traditions of instrumentality” (Coward 1985:96), all supposedly leading to the same God or, at least, to the same destiny. Some inclusivists believe that the faithful adherent of a non-Christian religion is an “anonymous Christian” (Rahner 1974:73), that God will ultimately sum up all things in the Messiah, and that, therefore, by whatever way people come to God, they will be saved (Knitter 1985:143). This is problematic. People would receive salvation who do not desire it. They would acquire grace from a God they do not know, acknowledge, or worship.

One Instead of the Many

The exclusivist view says there is only one God and only one way to be reconciled to Him. Though people of other religions may live sincere and faithful lives, they cannot be saved by their religions that, at best, are human attempts to reach God—attempts, perverted by rebellion, to find Him (Kraemer 1938). The claims of exclusivism are logically possible but present a painful question: Can a merciful God deny salvation to those who have never heard of Him (Klootwijk 1993:458)? The answer to that question depends on understanding the God of the Pentateuch.¹¹

Yahweh was greater than the gods. He was incomparable, singularly unique. There was no other god like him (Ex 9:14;15:11; Dt 3:24; 33:26). These ascriptions were not philosophical deductions or cultural adaptations. *Israel developed them out of her experience with Yahweh.* He intervened in her history with redemptive power (Ex 20:2; Dt 4:34; 33:29a). His mighty deliverance was His way of showing the pagans that He was Yahweh (Ex 7:5,17; 8:10), of telling Israel that it was Yahweh who rescued her (Ex 6:7; 10:2; 16:6,12).¹² These are not self-evident truths or humanly devised myths. They are clues to the concern and compassion of God, to his nature and mis-

sion in the world.

The *covenant love* of Yahweh also clarifies his incomparability (Dt 7:9; cf Ex 34:6,7). His nearness to Israel manifested that love (Dt 4:7), a love no one could question, a nearness no god could equal. Yahweh heard the cry of His people, He saw their misery, He agonized over their suffering (Ex 3:7,9). He promised to be with them (Ex 3:12), to be their Immanuel. And He was!

Because of the experiences of Israel, Moses declared, in speaking of Yahweh, that there was no god besides him (Dt 32:39). He was not like a pagan god, namely, a false “rock,” a god who disappeared in times of crisis, a “no-god” image, a worthless idol (Dt 32:21, 31,37). There simply was no other God (Dt 4:35,39). If Israel took the reality of her monotheism seriously, she had an authentic witness within pagan polytheism. If she kept at bay the voices of religious tolerance, the temptations of religious pluralism, she had an incredible purpose, a marvelous privilege—for, like Pharaoh, she was the means of proclaiming His name “in all the earth” (cf Ex 9:16 and I Ki 8:56-60). Is that not also our calling, our purpose, our privilege as God’s people today?

End Notes

- 1 The world religions emerged in and were shaped in reaction to pluralistic environments. In every case, the existing religions were made to question their beliefs and practices (Coward 1985:94,95. See also D’Costa 1986 and Martinson 1987).
- 2 Canonical support for the legitimacy of both translations of the Shema is found in Mark 12:32: “You are right in saying that God is one and there is no other but him.” This statement points to both the undivided nature of Yahweh and the undivided loyalty of Israel.
- 3 A similar scenario is recorded in Numbers 14:11-16.
- 4 Some will argue that “El is rarely if ever used in the Bible as the proper name of a non-Israelite Canaanite deity (Cross 1974:44). Though that may be true, the Ugaritic texts are the exception to that rule. El is depicted not as a generic name but a specific deity. “El is a word common to all Semitic languages. It occurs as a common noun (the god, god) and also as the proper name for a particular god. This is clearly demonstrated in the texts from Ugaritic in North Syria (fourteenth century B.C.)” (Schneider 1986:67, see also Manley 1962:478).
- 5 Genesis depicts no antagonism between the religious practices of the patriarchs and the inhabitants of Canaan, an antagonism strongly evident elsewhere in the Pentateuch (Ex 23:23-25a; Dt 11:8-17; Moberly 1992:91). Many misread this lack of antagonism as an original polytheism which later gave way to monotheism. Cf. Rowley 1967:14, 15, and Smith 1987.
- 6 El and Yahweh were both called “the creator,” “the God of mercy,” and “the Holy One.” They were both authors of social order, teachers of righteousness, and champions of widows and orphans. Among the Canaanite gods, none were like El and Yahweh. Nevertheless, unlike El, the Lord did not rule over a pantheon of gods. He allowed Israel to worship no other god except (or besides) Him (Ex 20:3; Clifford 1973:15. See also Weasels 1989:49-51).
- 7 The meaning of the divine name is unclear. Many possibilities are suggested (Gianotti 1985:40-46). “I am who I am” may mean “I am the God who is active in whatever situation you are called to face” (cf. Dt 29:1-6; Davidson 1964:27. See also Kim 1989:108-117).
- 8 Several possibilities have been suggested: (a) An image of Yahweh would not be Yahweh; consequently, any worship of such an image would (by definition) be idolatry (Kaufmann 1960:18). (b) An image of Yahweh would make the assimilation of Canaanite fertility cult practices easier (Childs 1974:485,486. See also Milgran 1985:48-55; Ratner and Zuckermann 1986:15-60). And (c) an image allowed humans to control their god; thus prohibiting the use of idols meant Yahweh did not submit to the whims of human control (Albright 1968:171, 172; Miller and Roberts 1977:9-17).

- 9 Textual and archaeological evidence support the conclusion that from the beginning of the occupation of Canaan the prohibition against idolatry was for the most part kept by Israel. "Figurines of the mother goddess, to be sure, are regularly found in Israelite towns... but... excavations have thus far brought to light not a single image of Yahweh" (Bright 1981:60). Hebrew polytheism was not existent to a significant degree in Israel until the early monarchy. The exile came as a direct result of such disregard for Yahweh (Tigay 1986:37-41. Cf. Taylor 1988:557-566).
- 10 These three possibilities are frequently employed as a framework for discussing a theology of world religions, i.e., pluralism, inclusivism, and exclusivism respectively (cf. Race 1982; D'Costa 1986; McGrath 1994).
- 11 What ultimately will happen to those who do not know Yahweh can be left in the hands of a just, compassionate, forgiving, holy God. Their destiny, like the rescue of Israel, will be grounded in His concern for everyone (Thomsen 1990). Our concern should not be THEIR judgment but OUR faithfulness to His mission call.
- 12 The Red Sea event had the same two purposes (Ex 14:4, 18,31).

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A Theology of Culture: Desecularizing Anthropology

The presupposition of this paper is that the boundary between cultural anthropology and theology is artificial, constructed by modern thinking, and not founded upon biblical theology nor reality as a whole. The disciplines of theology and anthropology must merge, intermingle, and unify. This will produce a theology of culture that world missions desperately needs in order to evangelize the nations and finish the task.

by Gailyn Van Rheen

Anthropology as a social science developed into a discipline during the modern era and assumed many of the presuppositions of enlightenment thinking. The rationalism and dichotomy of this era, perhaps beginning with the work of Descartes in the first half of the seventeenth century and extending into the twentieth century, have significantly shaped anthropology as a discipline.

According to the modern worldview, reality is divided into two large cognitive domains, the natural and the supernatural. Humans, guided by human reason and the laws of nature, operate within the natural realm and live largely independent of the spiritual. The academic discipline of anthropology studies human beings within in the natural realm, while theology deliberates on the supernatural. Even most *Christian* anthropologists become uncomfortable when the boundaries between anthropology and theology disintegrate.

The modern era, however, is coming to an end. Some conjecture that rejection of the modern worldview began during the third quarter of the twentieth century when science and human reason could not adequately respond to fears of nuclear holocaust, urban overcrowding, unresolvable military conflicts based on ethnic and religious differences, famine, and epidemics (Oden, 1990, 46-49). The psychological weight of the Jewish holocaust during the Second World War (Kung 1992, 443-45), the American defeat in Vietnam, and the pluralistic options of the informa-

tional age have amplified this disintegration. As the influence of the modern era wanes, the undergirding presuppositions and dichotomies of anthropology are being questioned. People have begun to ask spiritual questions concerning what modern man had called the natural realm.

In the post modern age people are beginning to think much more holistically and dichotomies in academic disciplines are fading. As a scholar of missions I welcome this integration, for the spiritual world could only artificially be segmented from the natural.

The presupposition of this paper is that the boundary between social or cultural anthropology and theology is artificial, constructed by modern thinking, and not founded upon biblical theology nor reality as a whole. The disciplines of theology and anthropology must merge, intermingle, and unify. If the dichotomies of modern thought are used, a missiologist must become both a Christian anthropologist and a culturally aware theologian. Anthropology cannot become Christian, nor be truly useful without the merging of these two disciplines.

To show the integration of anthropology and theology four influences which shape culture will be described from biblical revelation. God will be shown to be the Creator and Sustainer of culture, Satan is the contorter of culture, *Christ* is God's anointed transformer of culture, and *humans* are God's designated rulers over culture and innovators within culture. Anthropology cannot

merely be viewed as a study of human culture, which exists autonomously outside of the spiritual realm. In this article a description of each influence shaping culture is given, along with their role in a *theologized anthropology*.

The Creator and Sustainer of Human Culture

Scripture portrays God not only as the creator of physical culture but also as originator of social culture. He instituted the foundations of marriage, work, and government. God realized that it was "not good for man to be alone so he made a helper suitable for him" (Gen. 2:18, 20b-24), thereby instituting the marriage relationship. He gave man responsibility to care for the garden (Gen. 2:15), and even after the fall, man was commanded to work by the sweat of his brow (Gen.3:19), thereby laying the foundations for work. God created man to rule over the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, all livestock, and all the earth (Gen. 1:26 27), thus establishing government. God must, therefore, be pictured as the creator of human culture.

Because God is Creator, He must be acknowledged as sovereign over every aspect of culture. This is the implied meaning of the Psalmist when he declared, "The earth is the Lord's and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it; for He founded it upon the seas, and established it upon the waters" (Psalm 24:1-2). Humans living without God, therefore, are "without excuse" because, "since the creation of the world, God's invisible quali-

ties—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made” (Rom. 1:20)

God is incomparable; no gods are like Him. After He delivered the Israelites from Egyptian captivity, Moses praised Him, saying, “Who among the gods is like you, O Lord? Who is like you—majestic in holiness, awesome in glory, working wonders?” (Exod. 15:11). God the Creator reigns as sovereign Lord over the universe.

God not only created culture but also actively works to sustain it. His sustaining of human social culture is seen in raising up judges to deliver the Israelites (Judge. 2:10-19), instituting *priests* to intercede for the people of Israel (Exod. 28-29; Lev. 8-9), sending *prophets* to proclaim his message to kings and the people (Jer. 1:54; 15:19; Amos 7:16; Ezek. 8:17), and giving His Son *Jesus Christ*, the Messiah to die for humankind (John 3:16).

God’s actions consistently reflect His desire to sustain His relationship with humankind. When Adam and Eve sinned against God, He walked in the garden searching for them, calling “Where are you?” (Gen. 3:10). After delivering the Israelites from Egyptian captivity, God defined his mission as bearing the Israelites “on eagles’ wings” and bringing them to Himself (Exod. 19:4). Because of human alienation, He established a covenant with Israel to be His priests to the nations (Exod. 19:5) and His light to the Gentiles (Isa. 42:6; 49:6).

Through Christ, God also upholds physical culture. Paul writes that in Christ “all things hold together” (Col. 1:17). The Hebrew letter describes Christ as “sustaining all things by his powerful word” (Heb. 1:3). While Satan and the resulting power of sin contorts culture, God seeks to sustain His personal relationship with humanity. God is, therefore, both the creator as well as the sustainer of culture.

God’s actions in sustaining culture result from the interaction of His two predominant attributes, love and holiness. In the Old Testament God is characterized by “steadfast love” (*hesed*). He is “compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness” (Exod. 34:6-7, cf. Num. 14:18; Neh. 9:17; Psa. 86:15; 103:8; 145:8; Joel 2:18; Jonah 4:2). In the New Testament this attribute is attested in the sending of God’s Son to become flesh and die for sinful humankind (Rom. 5:8). God’s eternal nature is love (1 John 4:7-8).

God, who is love, is also holy. The heavenly host reflects this quality by proclaiming, “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty” (Isa. 6:3; Rev. 4:8). The sacrificial system described in Leviticus is based on a holy God desiring to unite sinful people with Himself. Therefore, God identifies Himself as “the Lord, who makes you holy” (Lev. 20:8).

God’s love and holiness define both why and how God relates to humankind. He did not merely create culture and leave it. He loved those He created and desires to live in a relationship to them. Yet He desires that human culture reflect His nature (1 Pet. 1:16; Lev. 11:44, 46). God, therefore, as a *holy God* feels our sins. He is like a father who tenderly loves his disobedient son (Hos. 11:1-11), a faithful husband who devotedly loves his unfaithful wife (Hos. 1-3), a husbandman who lovingly shapes and cultivates his unproductive vineyard (Isa. 5:1-7), and a physician who compassionately cares for the sick (Isa. 1:5-6; Matt. 9:12). God loves the world despite unholiness. God does not disengage from culture but works for spiritual revitalization of culture from within.

Some missiologists have expressed the view that God is “supracultural”—“beyond and above culture.” There is some truth in this description because God is not bound by culture; however. He has not separated Himself from culture; He continually interacts with His

creation in and through culture. Some theologians have also expressed the view that God “intervenes” in human history. The view acknowledges God’s active work in the world but implies that He is a cultural outsider who must enter human cultures.

If Christian ministers and missionaries only perceive God working in culture, without the concurrent working of Satan, they will conclude that humankind, as well as the culture in which they live, is intrinsically good. Christian ministry will, therefore, affirm the value of culture, rather than work in opposition to it

The Contorter of Human Culture

Despite disclaimers of the modern mind that the malevolent realm cannot exist, Satan (as well as God) is active in shaping human culture. The Bible shows Satan as a distinct, malevolent personality who has opposed the work of God “from the beginning” (1 John 3:8). The terms *Satan* (the adversary) and *devil* (the slanderer) are used interchangeably to describe the pernicious being who was hurled from heaven with his angels and now “leads the whole world astray” (Rev. 12:9). In his control over the unbelieving world he is described as *the ruler of this world*. Because of his control over contemporary culture, he is called “the god of this age” (2 Cor. 4:4), who blinds the unbelievers so that they cannot see the light of the gospel; “the ruler of the kingdom of the air” (Eph. 2:2), who works in the disobedient; and “the tempter” (1 Thess. 3:5), who causes new Christians to fall away from their relationship with God. He is a real being, not a mere projection of evil upon a spiritual personality and thus a creation of the human mind (Wink 1986,26-30). He is the great usurper who attempts to stand in the place of God

While culture had its origins in God, Satan tempted humankind to fall away from God. In doing so, he fractured the harmony of the universe, intro-

duced an allegiance alien to God's design, and disrupted the unity and relation of humanity and divinity.

Kent Smith describes four alienations which occurred in the Fall (1989, 18- 21). First, there was an alienation from self. Humans felt shame. No longer were Adam and Eve comfortable with themselves as they were created. They felt compelled to cover themselves (Gen. 2:25; 3:7, 10). There was also an alienation between humans. Adam blamed Eve for his disobedience (Gen. 2:12), Cain killed Abel (Gen. 4), and before the flood the hearts of people were "only evil all the time" (Gen. 6:5). Also there was an alienation from creation. The ground was cursed and began to produce thorns and thistles. God said to Adam, "Cursed is the ground because of you... It will produce thorns and thistles for you... By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground" (Gen. 8:17). An element of hostility was introduced in man's relationship with the physical universe.

Most significantly however, there was an alienation from God. The intimate, personal relationship that Adam and Eve had with God suddenly became a terrifying prospect. Adam and Eve, perceiving this rupture, hid from God. Ultimately, they were forced out of the garden, separated from God's presence, and barred from reentry. Sin alienated Cain from God so completely that "He went out from the Lord's presence" (Gen. 4:16b), estranged the world from God during the days of Noah (Gen. 8:5-6); and gave those building the tower of Babel an identity apart from God (Gen. 11:4). Thus the ultimate consequence of the fall was alienation (of self, of others, of the creation, and above all of God). Sin had separated humanity and divinity, a breach running through the entire creation, spanned only by God's acts of reconciliation.

The fall projected a false authority—Satan, the archenemy of God ruling over humankind. While God created culture, the fall allowed Satan to reign where God, by virtue of creation, should rightfully rule. The fall opened the door to the rule of Satan. However, even in the fall humankind did not totally lose "the image of God" (Gen. 5:1; 9:6; James 3:9). Humans were not to kill (Gen. 9:6) or curse (James 3:9) because

Christ, therefore, is not only the redeemer and transformer of culture but also God's designated sovereign over culture!

they were made in the image of God.

Because Satan has usurped God's rightful reign, Christians are today engaged in spiritual warfare. Paul describes this confrontation in terms of a military metaphor because of the reality and intensity of the confrontation:

Put on the full armor of God so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. (Eph. 6:11-12)

Satan has indeed become "the god of this world" (2 Cor. 4:4) for those who do not believe (Eph. 1:19)!

How then should Christians view the relationship between Satan and culture? Christians may correctly perceive that the world is the domain of Satan, the arena where satanic influence has displaced that of God. "The whole world is under the control of the evil one" (1 John 5:19). Missionaries will need to conclude that humankind is basically evil, contorted by satanic influences and will, consequently, oppose cultural standards.

Using Niebuhr classifications, they will view Christ as *against culture*, rather than of *culture* (Niebuhr 1951). The

praxis of Christianity will involve models of action in opposition to or rejection of culture: spiritual warfare by those believing spiritual are real and active; liberation theology by those who perceive Satan's malevolence in the social structure; or ascetic withdrawal by those who desire to retreat from the midst of a sinful world to recreate the kingdom of God.

God's Anointed Transformer of Human Culture

Paul in Ephesians 2 sets forth the roles of God and Satan within human culture and also introduces the role of Christ. He depicts the sinful condition of unbelievers under Satan, summarized by the word death (vss. 1-3). Satan is described as "the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient" (vs 2). Contrary to contemporary secular understanding, sin is not merely due to lusts of the flesh but also related to Satan's tempting enticements. Thus the "ruler of the kingdom of the air" (vs 2) is at work within "the cravings of our sinful nature" (vs 3a). Because of satanic-related sin, unbelievers are "by nature objects a wrath" (vs. 3b), "dead in (their) transgressions and sins" (vs. 1). These verses are immensely depressing if read by themselves without their fuller context. However, Paul emphasizes the darkness of satanic servitude and sin as a backdrop to make God's love and mercy shine more brightly.

Although believers were once dead in sin (vss. 1-3), God has, made them *alive in Christ* (vss. 4-6). While the preceding verses depict *death*, this section reflects *life*. God's great love undergirds the entire passage. "God who is rich in mercy" gives life to those "dead in transgressions" (vs. 4), reconciling fallen humankind to Himself in Jesus Christ and seating them "with him in the heavenly realms" (vs.6)!

The apostle Paul then describes the

essence of salvation (vss 7-10). The believer has been saved “by *grace* through faith” (vs 8). The believer, who was once dead in sin, has been made alive with God because of His great love and compassion. These eternal qualities motivate God to enter human culture to provide the gift of salvation in Jesus Christ.

God’s activities in Jesus Christ have healed the alienations brought about by Satan and initiated at the fall (vss. 11-22). Gentiles were once “separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of promise, without hope and without God in the world” (vs. 12). But those alienated from God have been “brought near because of the blood of Christ (vs. 13). Christ has unified both humanity with divinity as well as humanity with humanity. Christ is the “peace” who has, destroyed the barriers between Jew and Gentile and reconciled both in Jesus Christ (vss. 14-18). Believers are, therefore, no longer “foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God’s people and members of God’s household” (vs. 19). The fragmentations initiated at the fall when Satan tempted Adam and Eve are mended in Jesus Christ.

Two passages succinctly define the purpose of Christ’s ministry: “The Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost” (Luke 19:9b), and “The reason the Son a God appeared was to destroy the devil’s “work” (1 John 3:8b.). Westerners use the first passage to define Jesus’ ministry in terms of individual salvation. However, the metaphor portrays Christ as a shepherd seeking any who are lost. Salvation extends even to tax collectors like Zacchaeus, who were intensely hated by the Jews because of injustices wrought upon them on behalf of an external political power. The second passage portrays Christ’s cosmic battle with the forces of Satan. Westerners find this passage more difficult to interpret

because it is incompatible with their secular cosmologies. While the first metaphor pictures Christ as the saving shepherd, the second portrays Him as a mighty warrior seeking to defeat God’s ultimate opponent. Holding those two metaphors in tension—Christ as loving shepherd yet mighty warrior—helps the Christian to define his perception of Christ.

What, then, is the role of Christ and culture within culture? First, Christ is God’s anointed redeemer and transformer of culture. Culture, in its beliefs, values, and allegiances, has fallen away from God. The gods of this world have replaced God. Sin has become pervasive. Bribery and corruption, rape and murder, sensuality and promiscuity, violence and hatred have become institutionalized and are found on all levels of society and culture. Estranged humankind feels the burden of sin and the tensions of the alienations from self, from other people, from creation, and above all from God.

Anthony Wallace, the anthropologist of religions, describes revitalization movements which occur during times of cultural stress and disillusionment with existing cultural beliefs. He outlines five stages of a revitalization cycle: *the steady stage*, when concepts of birth, life, and death are comprehensible and believable; *the period of increased individual stress*, when tension increases and individual members of a culture have difficulty coping with personal problems; *the period of cultural distortion*, when stress rises to intolerable limits and prophetic voices call the people back to the old ways or to new, distinctive patterns; *the period of revitalization*, when culture is reformulated around a new, distinctive perspective of reality; and *the new steady stage*, when a new worldview has taken root and the resulting beliefs, values, and behaviors have proven themselves viable. Wallace thus gives a paradigm of the process of cultural change (1956).

Sweeping change to Christianity usually occurs during times of individual stress and cultural distortion. During these times, people are crying for change. They are like the multitudes described by Jesus: “harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd” (Matt 9:36). In such contexts sin has demoralized and alienated people from God. God has anointed Christ to break the chains of such sin and transform culture by reconciling believers to Himself.

Christ is not only the revitalizer of culture, but He is also God’s designated sovereign over culture. In an attempt to negate syncretism in the Colossian church, Paul acknowledges Christ to be “the head over every power and authority” (Col. 2:9). The Colossians were tempted to fall away from Christ and depend upon the basic principles (*stoicheia*) of this world (Col. 2:6-8). *Stoicheia* are literally the rudimentary principles, the ABCs, of culture. These are structures or rules which have been influenced by Satan. Paul challenges the Colossians, “Since you died with Christ to the basic principles (*stoicheia*) of the world, why, as though you still belonged to it, do you submit to *its rules*” (Col. 2:20). The “basic principles” are defined as the “rules” which limit the lordship of Christ since He is not their author. In Colossae the *stoicheia* included legalistic observance of the law, asceticism, the worship of angels, and rituals of handling, touching, and tasting (Col. 2:16-21). By observing these strictures of Satan, the Colossians were losing their “connection with the Head,” Jesus Christ (Col. 2:19).

In other words, the Colossians were allowing the rules laid down by Satan to displace the sovereignty of Christ. Although they considered themselves to be in Christ, they were still controlled by Satan’s rules. Because “fullness of deity lives [in Christ] in bodily form,” He is to be “the head over

every power and authority” (Col. 2:9). Deep biblical revitalization occurs when Christ truly becomes Lord, reigning where the powers once ruled. Christ, therefore, is not only the redeemer and transformer of culture but also God’s designated sovereign over culture!

God’s Appointed Rulers and Innovators Within Culture

The phrase “image of God” (Gen. 1:26-27; 2:8) helps clarify the place of mankind within culture. On the one hand, this phrase elevates humans over all other parts of God’s creation. It demonstrates that God has put the “spark of divinity” in humanity. Humankind is thus not comparable to the animals over whom God has given mankind dominion. (Gen. 1:26). On the other hand, this phrase limits humans. They are made in the “image of God” but are not God. Humans are creatures, not creators; they are finite, not infinite. The perspective of the “image of God” enables one to better understand two significant roles of mankind within culture: humans are God-ordained rulers over culture and innovators within it

Humans were created to rule over God’s creation, including both his physical and social culture. They were to “rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground” (Gen. 1:26, 28). David acknowledged human elevation over creation, “You made him ruler over the works of your hands; you put everything under his feet: all flocks and herds...” (Psa. 8:6-7).

Mankind’s “rule” over God’s earth, however, was to reflect the attributes of God. As vice-regents over God’s creation, mankind was to care for it. Thus Adam and Eve were put in the Garden of Eden “to work it and take care of it” (Gen.2:15). Humans were, likewise, to care for social culture. From the beginning God gave social injunctions demonstrating how He desired His people to live in this world. The Ten

Commandments describe both divine-human relationships (Exod. 20:2-11) and human-human relationships (Exod. 20:12-17). Jewish prophets preached against social injustices (Amos 5:21-24, Hos. 6:4-6; Micah 6:6-8, Isa. 1:10-17). Because humans are God’s vice-regents, they must reflect His attributes in their dominion over culture.

Scripture also shows humans to be creative innovators within cultures. Culture was not created to be static but to change as it was ruled by humanity under God’s sovereign hand. Material and social culture both began very simply and expanded as they were developed by God’s vice-regents.

Sometimes human innovations were in line with the will of God. God desired that humankind name the animals and birds (Gen. 2:19-20). God drove Cain from the ground because of his disobedience yet protected him while he built the first city (Gen. 4:15-17). His descendants also domesticated animals (Gen. 4:20), developed musical instruments (Gen. 4:21), and invented bronze and iron metalworking (Gen. 4:22). Human innovations, however, were at times overt rebellions against God. For example, humans built a tower to unify themselves so that they might not be scattered over the face of the earth (Gen. 11:4) as God commanded (Gen. 1:28). Rather than obey God, mankind egotistically sought to “make a name” for themselves, seeking their identity apart from God (Gen. 11:1-9).

Human innovation, nor mankind’s rebellion, negate continued divine innovation. God innovated the rainbow as a symbol of his decision not to destroy all living creatures again by rain (Gen. 9:12-16), instituted circumcision as a sign of God’s relationship with Israel (Gen. 17:9-14), and established the Lord’s Supper and baptism as Christian rites. God continues to work despite mankind’s confidence in their own inventiveness and rebellion.

Social scientists, even many who are

Christians, have emphasized the human dimension of culture without fully perceiving the influences of God, Satan, and Christ. One missionary anthropologist, for instance, writes, “Indeed, as far as the behavioral sciences can tell, humans originally created culture” (Kraft 1980, 47). This perspective is blatantly secular. Christian ministers and missionaries must not succumb to the secularism of their age that would ascribe human origins to all phenomena. Our eyes must be opened to see the reality of the working of God, Satan, and Christ within the human arenas of life. Christian ministers and missionaries must understand all four influences which work to shape human culture:

- God forms us.
- Satan deforms us.
- Christ transforms us.
- We reform.

How, then, should missiologists understand the discipline of anthropology. It is not merely a secular enterprise describing humans who act autonomously in the world. Whether explicitly understood or not, the initiatives of God, the disruptions of Satan, and cleansing and redemption of Jesus Christ are spiritual activities within culture.

Such an understandings will also guide missiologists and missionaries to evaluate culture correctly. Generally speaking, culture cannot easily be categorized as *good*, *bad*, or *neutral*. The influences shaping culture are complicated and frequently contradictory, impossible easily categorize. The world is described in a parable of Jesus as a field of intermingled wheat and tares (Matt. 13:24-30, 37-43). Christians are called to patiently wait and “let both grow together until the harvest” (Matt. 13:30). At the harvest angels of God will separate the wheat and tares, gathering the wheat into God’s storehouse and casting the tares into eternal fire. The influences of God, Satan, Christ, and humanity are intertwined in the same culture and even within the same heart.

There is, consequently, no room for human ethnocentrism which ascribes *good* to one's own culture but *bad* to another. Good and bad exist in every culture as a result of the presence of God and Satan, which implies that no culture can be simplistically classified as one or the other. There is no such thing as a *natural* culture since in every culture the influences of God and Satan are vying for human allegiance.

Christians within human culture struggle to be faithful as they engage in spiritual warfare. This spiritual struggle, felt within every human heart and every cultural context, is not optional. It is rooted in the reality that the kingdoms of God and Satan stand opposed to one another. Christian ministers and missionaries, however, cannot reject human culture. Like Christ, who "became flesh and made his dwelling among us" (John 1:14), they must communicate in the languages and thoughts of human cultures. Believers, therefore, are "aliens and strangers" in a foreign world (1 Pet. 2:11); they live in the earthlies but belong to the heavenlies (Eph- 2:6); they are "*in* the world" but not "*of* the world" (John 17:14-16). Their very distinctiveness enables them to call the unbelieving from the kingdom of Satan to the kingdom of God, from the realm of darkness to the realm of light. Christian ministers and missionaries, therefore, enter cultural arenas "like sheep among wolves," who must be "as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves" (Matt 10:16) as they perceive what human, divine, and satanic influences shape particular cultural milieu. Ultimately, missions seeks to bring every aspect of culture under the rule of God. Missionaries are God's instruments to bring those ruled by Satan under the sovereignty and love of God.

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Christianity and the Religions in the History of the Church

As we look at the history of Christianity vis-a-vis the non-Christian religions, Paul's motto relative to the full range of religious beliefs and practices around him might well have summed it up "I resolve to know nothing... except Jesus Christ and him crucified." May Paul's motto be equally ours.

by James F. Lewis

The above title suggests a very ambitious task. The best I can do is to offer a brief account of how certain individuals have thought about and interacted with religious others and the consequences of those developments.

The history of Christian religious other interaction is more than the history of how thinkers, churches and communities have viewed the discrete religions. It is also a history of how Christians have come to understand religion as a human phenomenon. As we shall see in the last section of the article, Christianity helped to stimulate the modern academic study of religion experiencing, both positive and negative outcomes, in its understanding of its relationship with the religions.

The individuals I have selected to carry the narrative have been chosen either for the significance of what they did and/or thought or for what I think they symbolized. Accordingly, I have chosen the apostle Paul for his role in leading the Jesus movement out of Judaism to gain an identity of its own. Tertullian was one of several outstanding apologists who sought to offer early formal responses to pagan folk religion and the classical intellectual tradition in which Greco-Roman life was rooted.

William of Rubruck's debate with Buddhists (1254 C.E.) symbolizes the difficulty Christians had (and continue to have) in understanding important segments of this religious world. Luther's attitudes to Islam are examined and shown to be a response based not so much on reliable information about Muslims as on theological and geopolitical concerns.

In the modern period I wish to show how the missionary movement played a small but important part in the rise of the academic study of religion and how that development is impacting Christian self-understanding and interreligious views.

Period of Apostolic Foundation

Referring to the first century Andrew Wall says, "For one brief, vital period, Christianity was entirely Jewish" (Wall 1990:17). This period saw the emergence of a Christian community that at first was socially and religiously tied to a Palestinian Jewish world. Until about 50 C.E. almost all Christians were Jews or had been converts to Judaism. These followers of a Jewish Jesus practiced Judaism while gradually but painfully and inexorably revising and transcending their Jewish heritage. Their Jewish heritage, especially the acceptance of the Old Testament, provided them with the first paradigms for dealing with religious others.

As the Christians moved outside Jewish enclaves they very naturally viewed religious others as similar to the Jewish division of humanity into Jews, Greeks and Barbarians. Thus Christians inherited a bi-polar way of conceptualizing religious outsiders. Greeks stood for culturally sophisticated pagans and the barbarians the uncultured. In some form, this "we-they" conception was to be the typical and largely unchallenged Christian attitude toward other religious communities until the late twentieth century.

Paul's response to the first century religious world was at each of the levels of his contact with it: Judaism,

classical paganism, and pagan folk practices. The Judaism of Paul's time was confident of two things, each of which evoked different responses from Paul. They held that God was one and could only be worshipped spiritually without the aid of man made images. Paul stood foursquare behind this truth and made it a fixed point in his preaching to pagans (Ac 17). But secondly, according to the Jewish mind, followers of the Jesus movement seriously threatened the unity of God. Paul's response to this was unaccommodating: Jesus is the "image of the invisible God" (Col 1:15) yet in such a way that did no violence to that unity. Jesus is the "fullness of the Godhead bodily" (Col 2:9). Paul agreed with his Jewish contemporaries in their message about one God. But he radically departed from that heritage in regarding Jesus as God. The Apostle asserts twin doctrines: God is one and Christ is God. In promoting these doctrines, Paul and the other apostles launch a new religion in human history.

One other point about Paul and Judaism. Though he grieves over their rejection of Messiah, he foresees a future for them. They will be co-inheritors of the eternal ages as a result of a supernatural operation which will enable them to accept the Lord Jesus whom they have so recently rejected (Ro 9-11).

Paul's writings and his recorded experiences at Lystra, Athens and Ephesus demonstrate a thorough knowledge of the pagan Roman world and the Hellenistic culture embraced by it. He knows some classical poetry and is able to carry on dialogue with contemporary philosophers (Ac 17). He seems to find no

place to incorporate ideas from writings of classical Greek philosophers and moralists. Rather, he treats non-Jewish religion, both in its philosophical and more popular forms, with sternness. In 1 Corinthians the wisdom of the Greeks is regarded as foolishness. The popular pagan rituals and beliefs, occult practices of spiritism, divination, spell casting and spirit possession are opposed, excised and exorcised. In Romans 1 he condemns pagan morality as moving away from the truth and descending into a self-destructive spiral.

Yet there are glimpses of a kinder and gentler side. When Paul compares the moral Greek to the self-righteous Jew, he seems to suggest the moral Greek may be less severely judged (Ro 2). But in all, Paul seems to draw a sharp contrast between the gospel and the beliefs and practices of the non-Jewish world. Paul's motto relative to the full range of religious beliefs and practices around him might well have been his words in 1 Corinthians 2:2: "I resolve(d) to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified."

In summary, Christians in this period first gain their identity vis-a-vis Judaism and then go on to sharpen that identity even while contextualizing the message in terms understandable to the broader Roman world. The most fundamental material product of this period is the emergence of the New Testament, a Scriptural corpus which became the touch stone to guide subsequent inter-religious relationships.

The Patristic Era

Andrew Walls notes that the most significant internal religious development for Christianity at this time is the rise of orthodoxy. "Of all the new religious ideas which entered with the Christian penetration of Hellenistic culture, one of the most permeative for the future was that of orthodoxy, a canon of right belief, capable of being stated in a series of propositions arrived at by a

process of logical argument" (Wall 1990:16)

The Christians were faced with religious communities, pagan and Jewish, which had already worked out some systematization of their beliefs. This was clearly true of classical paganism which included the writings of Plato and Aristotle and their various spin-offs. It was also true of Judaism, to some extent, with its rabbinical schools. In view of these realities there was a need to attend to Christian systematics and the result during this period was "orthodoxy, a logically expounded belief set in codified form, established through a process of consultation and maintained through effective organization" (Wall 1990:18).

In this setting Patristic apologists sought to defend their beliefs and state their views against contenders in the market-place of religious ideas. In dealing with Judaism, the apologists could turn to the New Testament to guide their ideas. But there was comparatively less to draw on from the New Testament in dealing with the philosophies of classical thought. "Theologians had almost no biblical precedent for their apologetic to pagan thought" (Pelikan 1971:27).

The early church fathers also had to respond to Roman state religion which called on Christians, like other citizens, to worship the Emperor. But according to George Williams, they were less concerned with the contemporary religions of their own day than they were with classical Greek paganism and pre-Christian Judaism. In dealing with these entities this "new community of faith which thought of itself as a third race, neither Jew nor Gentile, neither Barbarian nor Greek," developed eight distinct positions to explain how these religions related to the revelation of truth through Christ (Williams 1969:322-3). The views are as follows:

1. The view that there might be a few *individuals* elected from amidst the

vast numbers of pagan lost. The religions, quareligions, however, were false religions (Williams 1969:323).

2. Some were possibly saved who could be called "Friends of God" who were heirs to limited portions of the primal Edenic message that had survived and been passed down to certain pagans.

3. Through the influence of the eternal *Logos*, some of the classical Greek moralists and philosophers had received divine guidance in working out their philosophy. This ubiquitous influence of the pre-incarnate Christ was a down payment on the "plenitude of the revelation of the Word as incarnate in Jesus Christ" (Williams 1989:323). Justin was foremost among those who saw a connection between the philosophers and the preexistent Logos who "enabled pagan thinkers like Socrates to see dimly what came to be clearly seen through the revelation of the Logos in the person of Jesus" (Pelikan 1971:32).

4. There was good in the religions. However, whatever was good had been borrowed (or stolen) from either the Hebrews and/or the Christians. This is the most wide spread interpretation of the church fathers. Christians were here taking the same approach which many Jewish apologists, for example Josephus, had taken against the Christians. Specifically apologists alleged pagans read Moses (Justin) and plagiarized Scriptures (Theophilus of Antioch).

5. The religions were counterfeits deliberately spun by Satan to tempt the weak and sinful to embrace them rather than the true faith.

6. National angels guided all people toward the truth which they experienced in various stages and degrees of obedience and disobedience.

7. The non-Judaic-Christian religions were a judgment on various people for having rejected Edenic monotheism and the perfect worship enjoyed by Adam in his pre-fallen state.

8. Finally, there is a universalistic strain in the writings of a few of the apologists: “God intended the salvation of all men and would eventually bring about a *restitutio omnium* (Acts 2:21), including the fallen angels.” (Williams 1969:323).

In a general way these theories echo a theme of opposites: old vs. new; the before vs. the after; the imperfect vs. the perfect; and the lost vs. the restored (Williams 1969:320).

In selecting a representative for this period one might choose a spokesman for either the more generous or more conservative of the above polarities. Origen certainly has been a favorite source for modern exponents of a universalist view. He was regarded by Byzantine Christianity to be the most creative of apologists. But on the other hand the Byzantine theologian Pselus was probably right when he said: “the famous Origen...was the pioneer of all our theology and laid its foundations, but on the other hand, all heresies find their origin in him” (Pelikan 1974:244). Tertullian, on the other hand, according to Pelikan, ranks with Augustine and outweighed all the Greek apologists (Pelikan 1971:28).

Tertullian was concerned to speak to two bodies of religious literature from the past and those who continued to draw on that wisdom to shape their religious conceptions. First, he addressed the philosophers such as Socrates and Plato and other classical pagan religious thinkers. Second, he reached back to the “poets” of Greece’s antiquity, not so much for the purposes of arraying a separate Christian critique against them as to use them against the philosophers. In his view, it was equally unreasonable to follow either the philosophers or the poets in their theology. Thirdly, he is aware of the day-to-day idolatrous practices and traditions regarding deities

in his native north Africa, as well as abroad in the empire in such places as Boeotia, Syria, and Arabia.

As to the contemporary scene it was one where, in the minds and experiences of the masses, gods held influence and power over certain buildings, cities, territories, states, and nations.

What missionaries to the East discovered, was a religious world the likes of which they had never before encountered and which constituted an absolutely new religious challenge in the history of the church.

It was a world governed by deities, by astrology and the occult. Tertullian spares no criticism of temple worship of the many pagan gods. “The principal crime of the human race, the highest guilt charged upon the world, the whole procuring cause of judgment is idolatry” (Tertullian, *On Idolatry*, 2.1; in ANF, Vol 3, p. 61).

Tertullian recognizes the existence of some laudable elements in paganism but rather than interpret this due to the constitutionally given *Logos* in the mind of all, as did Justin and Origen, he understood this as due to natural law given first in an unwritten form to Adam and Eve and through them passed down orally to the nations. This corresponds to number two above. This is the theory that what is true in pagan thought is a residual from primeval times. In this Tertullian, of course, speculates.

He also believed, along with other apologists, that the ancient pagans must have read Hebrew scriptures to have arrived at their truth. In his argument against Marcion he says: “Moses and God existed before all your Lycurguses

and Solons. There is not a single later age that does not derive from primitive sources” (Pelikan 1971:35). This, along with the belief in the transmission of a residual truth, takes the view that the earlier is the better. It doesn’t matter that neither Tertullian nor the fathers could prove this claim, what mattered was its effect on contemporary pagan

thinkers who were inclined to place a high value on antiquity. The older was indeed the truer.

In sum, Tertullian takes a very exclusive position toward paganism in all its manifestations—philosophical and contemporary. Robert Grant summarizes it this way. Though Justin, Irenaeus and Clement were “friendlier to Greek Philosophy than other Christians of

their time (e.g. Tatian and Tertullian) they really had no use for Greek, Roman and oriental religions. They identified such religions as idolatry and considered them false” (Grant 1988:288).

The Age of Barbarian Christianity

Western Christianity in the period from 400 to 1500 now crosses additional cultural and religious boundaries penetrating into the barbarian territories of western and northern Europe which are to be the setting for new states. What is new in western Christianity, says Andrew Wall, is the idea of a Christian nation.

Of apparent significance to our topic in this period is Thomas Aquinas’ *Summa Against the Gentiles*. It was written to Christians about “Gentiles” meaning of course pagans. Ironically there were very few living “Gentiles” around, and those there were could not have appreciated the polemic directed against them. Aquinas was writing against a backdrop of many centuries of conflict with classical thought without himself personally having contact with non-Christian thinkers. His work, of great importance for subsequent

centuries of Catholic Christians, did not constitute anything new in Christianity's perceptions of and encounters with the larger religious world (See Pelikan 1971:39).

Perhaps the most significant development outside Europe, but profoundly impacting it during this period, is the rise of Islam and its threat to Christian states. Pelikan says that Islam posed "the most powerful organized alternative to Christianity until the rise of the Comintern in the twentieth century" (Pelikan 1974:27).

Christianity in the Far East

But it is not the new religious competition in the form of militant Islam that I want to highlight in this period. Rather I wish to turn to a late medieval occurrence to examine what a rough time Christians had and continued to have for some centuries when dealing with religions in the Far East.

When Franciscan friar William of Rubruck arrived in the court of Mongke Khan in Mongolia in 1253 C.E. he was one of ten Dominican and Franciscan monks who over a period of 100 years from 1245-1346 were attempting to win the Mongols to Christ (Moffett 1992:404-420). What he, his brother missionaries and subsequent missionaries to the East in succeeding centuries discovered, was a religious world the likes of which they had never before encountered and which constituted an absolutely new religious challenge in the history of the church.

Richard Fox Young examines William's experience in debating with a Buddhist monk in the year 1255 (Young 1989:100-137). Besides calling attention to the fact that this debate is the first ever recorded between a Buddhist and a Christian, the value of Young's study is in showing the difficulty which William had in dealing with the religions against which he was competing for acceptance. William's experience symbolizes the immense work that remained

to be done to understand the sophisticated Eastern religious thought world Christian missionaries were now encountering. Though there were notable inroads into the mysteries of Indian and Chinese thought by subsequent Catholic missionaries like Robert D'Nobili and Matteo Ricci, it remained a religious world which was not carefully studied until the modern period.

Prior to their conquests the Mongols had remained undisturbed in their centuries old shamanistic beliefs and practices. Their understanding was that the world was populated with gods and spirits that controlled their lives yet could also be harnessed for good. Similar to the autochthonous religious world of ancient and contemporary cultures, at the top was "Eternal Heaven" (*Mongke Tngri*) or "Father of Heaven" who dwelt in the sky, the image of which was the sun. But there were a host of *tngri* (powers) numbering as many as 100 that were more approachable and intimate with daily life. There were also miscellaneous spirits: familial, territorial and ancestral.

William arrived at the court to find this indigenous Mongol religion in transition since it was being challenged from several directions. Buddhist and Taoist functionaries from China, Central Asia and Tibet were also present in the Khan's court to explain the way of the Buddha and the Tao. They had been invited by previous Khans to join the bevy of court counselors on things spiritual, administrative and political. As religious representatives they were in the vanguard of Chinese religionists who sought to introduce a better way to the Mongol barbarians. The presence of these Buddhist and Taoist believers had the potential of usurping the function of the traditional shamans. But from the Khan's perspective they merely offered an opportunity for him to intentionally supplement and improve, though to that degree also alter, the traditional Mongol religion.

William's presence is then some what unique. He found himself in dialogue with sophisticated barbarians (Buddhists and Taoists) who saw themselves as seeking religious change of those whom they too considered barbarians (Mongols and Christians).

According to William's account, the Khan sponsored a quadrilateral debate on Pentecost eve, 1254, between representatives of the indigenous Mongol religion, Buddhists, Taoists and Christians. The court debates were to provide the Khan with the opportunity to hear these representatives interact, debate and argue. The Khan would draw the conclusions he felt were appropriate.

There was not much actual camaraderie or tolerance between the Buddhists and Taoists at court. Some decades before this debate Chang-chun the Taoist (1148-1227) had attempted to improve his status at court by placing the Buddhist Yeh-lu Chu-tsai (1189-1243) in a bad light by making statements to the Khan from which it could be inferred that Buddhists were "envious of the ecstatic experiences enjoyed by the Taoists" (Young 1989:107). Further tension occurred when financial privileges were sought by Taoists and granted by Genghis Khan leading to uncivil relations at the time William came on the scene.

The Buddhist, Yeh-lu Chu-tsai, viewed Taoist grounds for the claim to superiority quite differently. Ever since the Chinese Tang dynasty times Buddhists, Taoists and Confucians had been recognized as three religions (*san chiao*) with a common origin and common goal. The goal, stated in largely Confucian terms, was self-cultivation and each religion brought its own unique helps to that end. The religions were thus co-religions with a common aim.

Yeh-lu Chu-tsai's views show how this traditional conception of mutual tolerance was more an ideal than reflection of fact. His interpretation of the *san chiao* (three religions) theory placed

these religions into a hierarchy with Taoists at the bottom, Confucians in the middle and, not surprisingly, Buddhists at the top. Yeh-lu Chu-tsai encouraged his patron Genghis Khan to become a Buddhist sage since it was a better way for him than becoming either a Confucian or Taoist sage. This, then, is the setting for the debate at the Khan's court.

According to William's journal the Khan's summons to debate read as follows: "each of you says that his doctrine is the best, and his writings the truest. So he (the Khan) wishes that you shall meet together, and make a comparison, each one writing down his precepts, so that he himself may be able to know the truth" (Young 1989:111-12).

The opening exchange between William and Fu-Yu was whether the debate should be about the origin of the world and the nature of the soul as suggested by Fu-Yu or as suggested by William that it be concerning God "about whom you think differently from us." In the exchange that followed Fu-Yu offered that only fools believe God is one while the wise say there are many. Further, he proposed that "though there is one (God) in the sky who is above all others, and of whose origin we are still ignorant, there are ten others under him, and under these latter is another lower one. On the earth they are infinite in number." William asked if this one God was omnipotent to which Fu-Yu countered: "If your God is as you say, why does he make the half of things evil?" This did not go anywhere but when William proposed they return to the question "whether....any god is omnipotent" Fu-Yu responded that no god is. This was followed by William's response: "Then no one of your gods can save you from every peril, for occasions may arise in which he has no power. Furthermore, no one can serve two masters: how can you serve

so many gods in heaven and earth?" (Young 1989:113-115).

The debate between the two abruptly ended here as Fu-Yu appeared to be speechless. That night William confesses in his journal that he felt he had won the debate. That is why he was so surprised when he was summoned to the

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court the next day and told that he must forthwith leave the kingdom while Fu-Yu could stay.

William records the final exchange between Mongke and himself. Admonishing William not to put down what Mongols held sacred the Khan said: "We believe that there is only one God by whom we live and by whom we die, and for whom we have an upright heart." Given Mongol belief in a large number of deities surrounding them but headed up by *mgri* or "Eternal Heaven" he could only have been thinking of Eternal Heaven as a sort of first among equals.

When William attributed this to the grace of God, Mongke added a caveat to distinguish the Mongol worship of Eternal Heaven from Christian monotheism: "God gives you the Scriptures, and you Christians keep them not. You do not find in them that one should find fault with another do you?" (Young 1989:104).

With this the interview was finished and William's only choice was to follow the sovereign's directive. What went wrong? It was not a matter of tactlessness nor any personal failure. Rather it was that William, though perhaps as knowledgeable as any Christian alive about Buddhist beliefs, did not understand one of the main tenets of

Chinese Buddhist thought *upaya*. For William, if one affirmed that there was only one god, it could not be rationally maintained that there were many. William followed the logical and historic Christian position so nicely expressed by Tertullian in his argument with idolaters of his day. To them he said: "You cannot continue to give preference to one without slighting another, for selection implies rejection" (Tertullian, *Apology*, Ch 13 in Ancient Nicene Fathers, Vol.111, pt 1.29).

But the selection of one religious truth did not imply the rejection of its opposite to Fu-Yu. And ignorance of this not only cost him the debate and resulted in his banishment,

but removed him as a contestant for the Khan's conversion. The field was now left to Buddhists and Taoists who as disputants did understand the doctrine of *upaya*.

Upaya was a doctrine proposed by the Chinese Tien-Tai patriarch Zhi-yi (538-597) in the sixth century C.E. to account for conflicting and logically irreconcilable Buddhist texts originating from India while at the same time claiming to be authentic. Which, if any, of these texts were taught by the Buddha, was the question. If one took a strictly logical approach, one would have to select one or some and reject a great many others. They could not all be right (on logical grounds) but how could any be wrong when they came from Indian Buddhist missionaries and enjoyed extensive support?

Into this context Zhi-Yi proposed the interpretation offered in one of those texts, the *Lotus Sutra (Saddharma-pun-darika)*. It states that the Buddha taught all the texts as *upaya* or "skillful means." That is, the Buddha taught his disciples according to their readiness to understand. To the immature, he taught the *Tripitaka*. To the more mature he taught the *prajna* texts. To the fully mature he taught the *Lotus Sutra* as

the highest and most complete statement of the truth. The texts taken together were so diverse in their teaching that some said the Buddha was a man while others said he was a god. Some taught that one could only attain *nirvana* by strenuous personal effort while others taught that personal effort was insufficient and only the grace of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas would avail. Some refused to comment on what happens to the individual at death, while others (*Sukha-vatuyuha*) promised a paradise for those who had faith in the Buddha.

Young analyzes Fu-Yu's advantage over William in this way: "Buddhism is purposely pluriform because the Dharma is difficult to grasp. If from the outside it appears contradictory, from the inside it is perfectly consistent, in terms of *purpose* if not of *meaning* and *logic*. Provisional truth is not absolute; lower truth can obscure or even conceal higher truth. Nevertheless, all truth is *valid* as such and should not be condemned, excluded, or withheld from individuals who do not yet recognize its inadequacy" (Young 1989:131).

William did not succeed with Mongke because he took an either/or attitude toward Mongol belief in many gods. In his view there were only two choices: God was one or gods were many. But William lost out to Fu-Yu in the view of the Khan, because Eternal Heaven and the other Mongol *ingri* were accepted by the Buddhists while William's religion made no room for them. Fu-Yu accepted the *ingri* provisionally, not because it was true, but as an expedient means. Due to Mongke's limited karmic development, he "had no capacity at that moment to conceive of anything higher" (Young 1989:134).

This is only a single incident but it was not to be an isolated one. Again and again Christian witnesses in the Far East failed to understand the religious thought forms of those they encountered.

Would an understanding of *upaya* by William have enabled him to succeed?

Probably not. But at least he would not have failed on that account. He may have found a different way to deal with his opponents.

Age of Revision and Expansion

Three significant developments in this period are the success of revisionist Christianity under the leadership of the Reformers, expansion of the Christian mission as European nations discovered and aggressively conquered overseas lands within the reach of their maritime technology and the intellectual challenges arising through the "Enlightenment" which provoked defense and accommodation.

There is not a lot to be said about Protestant attitudes toward and relationships with non-Christian religions at the beginning of this period other than with respect to Islam.

Although the religious leaders of the Age of Reformation were seldom directly concerned with the significance of non-Christian religions, the problem at times claimed their attention in connection, especially, with the threat presented by the Ottoman Turks or with the question of the salvation of virtuous pagans, raised with urgency by both the recovery of classical literature and the discovery of new peoples overseas (Williams 1969:319).

The Reformers did not have the intimate contact with the non-Christian world which the writers of the Patristic era experienced. But the Patristic writers seem to reflect more on religions of the past, now largely superseded by Christianity, than on the religions current with their times. The Reformers, on the other hand, though much further from living contact, had to deal with a contemporaneous religion directly affecting their lives. They lived under the looming shadow of expansion of the Muslim Ottomans into Europe. Already three patriarchates in the East had come under their rule and religion.

Concerning the issue of classical pagans, Luther did not reflect overly much about this question though he does

take a considerably more conservative approach than either Erasmus or Melancthon. He held the opinion that those elements in the pagan writers which echo divine truth were probably handed down to them from pre-Noachian times. Luther was thus affirming a position taken by Tertullian, which, as we saw above, was itself one of eight taken by the church fathers regarding the pagan philosophers. "This is one of the few instances of Luther's use of a patristic theme in speaking of non-Christian religions" (Williams 1969:351).

Prior to Luther, theologians of the Middle Ages had proposed three theories regarding Islam, at least two of which were affirmed by Luther. 1) Islam was a chastisement of Christians by God for their schisms and moral declensions. 2) Muhammad was either an emissary of Satan or the Anti-Christ since he usurped the finality of Jesus Christ and his revelation. 3) Allah was merely another name for the true and living God and that God might give Muslims salvation by virtue of their obedience to the Quran (Williams 1969:323-324).

Luther took a kinder view of the Muslim philosopher he did know than of the ordinary Muslim he did not. He thought it not likely that a philosopher like Avicenna, devoted as he was to mind and reason, actually believed in the Quran. One pursuing unrevealed truth would not find much of value in something so obviously bogus. But there were the general rank and file Muslim believers whom he referred to in inflammatory terms as "gross filthy sows." Of them Luther says "they do not know why they live or what they believe" (Williams 1969:347). Strong language! But one must be cautioned that Luther, in the same context, referred to Popish Christians as "plain sows."

From the biblical and theological perspective Luther applied to Islam what he applied to the Pope: they were a religion that sought to be accepted with

God by good works. By taking this view, Luther contributed something of his own to the menu of Christian interpretations that had been growing since the Patristic era. For Luther, Christianity had become a religion of self-righteous recitation. Recitation of truth without the reality of experience. Recitation of doctrine and creed that had been fatally corrupted by medieval scholasticism. Luther hoped to turn Christianity back from dead religion to a pristine doctrine and experience. He saw Islam like he saw Christian works righteousness. All those who attempt to gain acceptance with God by good works are bound to be excluded by God.

Yet there may have been some admiration for Islam here too, for Luther must have known something of *salat*, the practice of prayer five times a day. He may have favorably contrasted the austere and imageless mosque with the lavish cathedrals of Europe. Indeed, Luther may have complimented Islam when he observed there was a more intense earnestness among pagans (meaning Muslims) than among Christians. He drew on Jesus' words in Luke 16:8; "the sons of this world are wiser than the sons of light." Yet Luther makes no statements that would lead us to believe there could be salvation for Muslims or for pagans.

Luther took limited interest in the Quran. It had been available in Europe as early as 1143 C.E. when it was first translated into Latin by Robertus Ketenensis but apparently he had not read it until late in his career. He had read a 1320 C.E. polemic against the Quran entitled *Confutatio Alcorani* and translated it into German with his own added apologetic. In 1542 he read the Quran and concluded that three-fourths of it was nothing more than a tissue of lies.

A new translation of the Quran was prepared by Theodor Bibliander, a

Zurich theologian, which was opposed by the authorities. Luther demurred, however, and in the preface which he was invited to write, he took a very hard line against Islam by indicating that evangelical Christians should separate themselves from "Jews Turks and Gentiles...if they really do consider that it is alone God eternal, creator and sustainer

But if religious pluralists have their way, all ideological positions, not just Christian ones, will be set aside as mere cultural variations rooted in matters other than claims to ultimacy.

of all things, who hears our prayers and is ready to give us eternal life." To this Williams adds: "Never before had Luther made it so explicit that he regarded his God as utterly different from that not only of Muslims and Jews but also of Papists, Anabaptists, and other heretics" (Williams 1969:350).

Luther also viewed Islam from a political perspective. He regarded the menace of the Turks as God's instrument in judging the false and idolatrous ways of the Roman Church. In a context in which Luther opposed the Pope's power of remitting the penalties of sins for the purpose of raising revenues for the crusades, he remarks that the Pope's anti-Turk crusade in fact opposed God's intent to use the Turks as a punishment for the church. The Turks would bring about a judgment which the church was unable to avert through repentance. Leo X's rather accurate summary of Luther's view is this: "To fight against the Turks is to resist God's visitation upon our iniquities" (Williams 1969:339). This did not mean that Luther had a positive view of Islam but only that it was an agent of God for punishment. In Luther's view, the

Turks were "God's rod and the Devil's servant" (Williams 1969:341).

Luther's experience with and attitude toward Islam teaches us at least two things. 1) Social and political realities can and often do influence one's attitude toward the religions of others. 2) Wherever the church is in understanding its own theology will surely affect one's out look on the religions. This is made abundantly clear in the next period.

Global Christianity

It was in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries that Christianity significantly penetrated two of the last remaining centers of historic religions. After 1860 India and China

receive hundreds and even thousands of Christian witnesses who established churches in the heartland of Hindu, Buddhist, Taoist and Confucian traditions. It was at about the same time that the academic study of religion with its non-theological interpretations was launched with the effect of removing Christianity from any special status vis-à-vis other religions. These two developments were interrelated.

This vigorous nineteenth-century missionary movement not only assured that Christianity would be truly global, but that the religions encountered would never be the same. Regarding China, John King Fairbank said that the missionaries alone sought to change China not just trade with them (Fairbank 1974:2).

In both China and India, the missionaries won comparatively few converts but their influence in indigenous social and religious matters was significant. That is seen especially in India. William Carey's commitment to translate selected Hindu classics including the *Ramayana* was so that missionaries and young Indian Christians alike could become conversant with the religious views of Hindus and thus

avoid appearing to them as “barbarians.” According to Carey,

It is very important that we should gain all the information we can of the snares and delusions in which these heathens are held. By this means we shall be able to converse with them in an intelligible manner. To know their modes of thinking, their habits, their propensities, their antipathies, the way in which they reason about God, sin and holiness, the way of salvation, and a future state, to be aware of the bewitching nature of their idolatrous worship, feasts, songs, etc., is of the highest consequence, if we would gain their attention to our discourse, and would avoid being barbarians to them (Speer 1933:147).

It is a matter of history that Carey’s mission contributed to significant Hindu reform. Ram Mohun Roy’s Brahma Samaj joined with the missionaries in criticism of widespread practices of infanticide, *devadasi* and *sati*. Roy did not become a Christian but accepted a monotheistic orientation and was opposed to idol worship. While many Bengalis were influenced to think seriously about revising their religious practices if not their beliefs, others such as Dayananda Saraswati took a more defensive stance in launching the Arya Samaj which continues today. The attack on other Hindu institutions including women’s social and educational conditions helped to stimulate what has been called the Hindu Consciousness movement, which helped to give Hindus an identity vis-a-vis western Christianity.

Carey’s skills as a Sanskritist led to his employment by the East India Company to teach British employees Sanskrit literature at Ft. Williams College. While he was only one contributor to the growing interest in the indigenous religious and philosophical literature of India, by mid-century the foundations had been laid for the modern discipline of *religionswissenschaft*, the science of religion. Other missionaries contributed their part as well. James Legge (1815-1895) sent out by the London Missionary Society in 1839 translated the *I-Ching* and other ancient classics and took the first chair of Chinese literature

established by Oxford University. Journals and ethnological materials of missionaries provided academics information about cultures and religions.

In the latter half of the century pioneers in the disciplines of psychology, anthropology and sociology all made religion an important subject of investigation. Edward Burnett Tylor’s *Primitive Cultures* (1871) explained the rise of religion and the belief in God based on his speculations about primitive people’s mistaken interpretation of deceased relatives they met in their dreams. Durkheim gave a sociological interpretation to the genesis of belief in God and Freud saw religion as rooted in illusion.

While religion was debunked by some, others synthesized and harmonized it into some essential unity. The emphasis was not upon their distinct identities, religious goals and religious means but upon their intuited essences or their phenomenological similarities. Scant or no attention was paid to their differences, their opposites or contradictions.

The study of comparative religions and the science and philosophy of religion tended with many, and in its popular effect, to create the idea that religion is a universal and essentially identical thing always and everywhere, and that each historic religion, Christianity included, is only a branch of a common trunk (Speer 1933:170).

Christians were now offered alternative ways to understand the religions. They could choose to continue to evaluate religions as before based on the Bible and theology which, since the Patristics, had been almost uniformly negative as saving entities. Or they could adopt some combination of the traditional and the modern. The impact of *religionsgeschichte* in America along with critical biblical studies and theological liberalism steadily eroded the special nature of Christianity in the understanding of many mainline Christian

leaders.

This change in the way Christians looked at themselves and religious others has to do with what Lesslie Newbigin calls the prevailing plausibility structure. The “prevailing plausibility structure” is that which tells a culture what is true and what is of value. The reigning plausibility structure places religion, morality and values in the same category as aesthetics. There are no absolutes governing anything nor assisting moderns in distinguishing the true from the false in the religious arena.

If Newbigin and others are right, Christianity with its view of the religions in the broader culture is at a crisis moment on the threshold of the twenty-first century. Throughout the history of Christianity it was seldom questioned that the truth was knowable, subject to rational supports and worthy of pursuit. Christians have honestly believed the gospel message to be finally true. But if John Hick, Paul Knitter and other religious pluralists have their way, all ideological positions (their own excepted!), not just Christian ones, will be set aside as mere cultural variations rooted in matters other than claims to ultimacy.

Gordon Kaufman’s analysis of Don Richardson’s book *Peace Child* is a good example of this trend. The Richardsons went to the Sawi of Irian Jaya to teach them the Christian faith centering on Jesus Christ as God and Savior. Kaufman notes how the presence of the Richardsons resulted in intertribal warfare before the preaching of Christ could occur. When the Richardsons decided to leave, the Sawi villages agreed to make peace by the traditional manner, the exchange of a child between the two sides with each pledging to care for the child of the other tribe. Kaufman comments: “The Richardsons were able to recognize these analogies and see that precisely this sort of actual reconciliation and peacemaking, with resul-

tant human fulfillment, was what Christianity was all about" (Kaufman 1976:120). He goes on to ask "Is the meaning of Christ to be understood as primarily (though of course not exclusively) a matter of subscribing to certain ideas (about God, Christ, humanity, etc.)? Or is the primary significance of Christ fundamentally non-ideational, having to do with the basic quality, style, and character of human life?" Once this proper subordination of the ideational to the existential in Christian faith is recognized, much of the theological difficulty for moderns with traditional christological talk can fall away" (Kaufman 1976:120-121).

Kaufman's abandonment of the "ideational" is only one manifestation of the serious challenges directed at "traditional" Christology. By implication other religions must also give up their ultimate truths as well if the present trend continues.

In conclusion, it may be that in order to respond to this relativist approach, Christianity and the religions will have to form a common front against those who would destroy what is precious to them. Should that unlikely occurrence happen, that too would be a part of the history of Christianity and its relationship with the religions of the world.

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