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Universalism and the World-Wide Community

N. T. WRIGHT

*With none to heed their crying
For life, and love, and light
Unnumbered souls are dying
And pass into the night.*

OR DO THEY? Or is that hymn, embodying as it does so much standard, old-fashioned Christian thought on the fate of those who do not acknowledge Christ in this life, to be relegated to the theological museum as part of the typical Western triumphalist attitude towards those of other faiths? And is the concept of the death or final loss of a soul one which we can use today at all? Must we, in the new world-wide community of which we are all part, reject as simply untenable the statement of Article XVIII, that

They also are to be had accursed that presume to say, That every man shall be saved by the Law or Sect which he professeth, so that he be diligent to frame his life according to that Law, and the Light of Nature. For holy Scripture doth set out unto us only the Name of Jesus Christ, whereby men must be saved . . . ?

This is a question to which, I submit, we must give close attention in preparation for the Nairobi Assembly of the WCC; there has been a good deal of loose thinking, or even refusal to think, in this area in the past, and the result is general confusion in both theory and practice. The purpose of this article is to re-examine some of the issues involved in the whole question of Universalism, particularly as that question is raised by the problem of relations with those of other faiths, and hence as it concerns section 3 of the Assembly's programme ('Seeking Community—the common search of people of various faiths, cultures and ideologies'): for (among other reasons) if universalism were true, and known to be true, it could well lead—and, it could be argued, often does lead—to an exclusive concentration on issues of this world, and an abandonment of real concern in the area of supernatural salvation.

I am only too aware of the difficulties of tackling this subject; we would probably all like universalism to be true, and we cannot speak of hell without great sorrow. Yet speak we must, even at the risk of alienating one or other of several groups who may be involved in the debate, or at least arousing their suspicions. In addition, the fact that the dossiers of preparatory material, though dated February 1974, were not made available to delegates until a year after that date, some nine months before the Assembly, means that any comments cannot help but be rushed and unpolished. What I have to say, therefore, is more a contribution to the discussions that will take place than any sort of attempt at a definitive answer to the problems involved. To pretend otherwise would be to do the opposite, whatever that may be, of taking a sledgehammer to crack a nut.¹

The Problem

THE problem before us is highlighted by the very first paragraph of the notes for section 3 in the booklet *Jesus Christ Frees and Unites*, which is worth quoting in full:

Christians understand community on the basis of God's dealing with humanity in Jesus Christ. The Son of God, we believe, has assumed humanity on behalf of all people of all ages and cultures, and both authenticates and answers the basic human need for community. In Him, God's love and purpose of salvation extend to all the corners of the earth. Interpreting the main theme for the Assembly Christians should recognise and celebrate how Jesus Christ can liberate men and women to seek and realise community.

It seems to me that this statement, in many ways admirable though it is, disguises or glosses over the whole question that must be asked as fundamental to the section, namely, in what way do we understand the statements that 'The Son of God . . . has assumed humanity on behalf of all people of all ages and cultures . . .' and that 'in Him, God's love and purpose of salvation extend to all the corners of the earth'? There are (at least) three ways of taking this, and until we know which we mean we will not get much further in discussing the world-wide community that is to be built on this theological foundation. *First*, it could mean that all men of every age and culture are really Christians, if only we had eyes to see the truth behind their differing religious beliefs and practices—that all men, no matter what their outward profession of faith, are citizens of the kingdom of heaven, or will be one day. This would have the corollary that, instead of evangelism, the priority for those who are self-confessed Christians would be active work in promoting a world-wide community, happily sharing in worship with all men on the basis that we all really believe the same things and have the same ultimate goals. *Second*, it could be making

the similar but weaker claim that in each tradition of religious belief those who follow the highest and best insights of that faith are really the same at heart, whatever their outward profession. This could be applied to the present situation by stripping off the unnecessary accretions from our different traditions and getting down to the supposed 'real essentials' of faith and common life. Now these two points of view, when put crudely in this way, may appear to be caricatures of the views, often carefully worked out and well stated, of many current thinkers; my primary concern at the moment is to identify them as frequently made (but unspoken) assumptions that lie behind a lot of modern thought in this area and which, if they remain unrecognised and undebated, could produce endless misunderstandings. It seems to me that both are mistaken, and that if we are to make progress we must understand why they are mistaken and what alternative interpretation we are to put in their place. I therefore intend to put forward a *third* way of taking the original statement, in discussion of which we will examine the reasons for rejecting the first two. This interpretation might run along the following lines: In Christ, God has revealed the one way of salvation for all men; there is therefore no other way to salvation than through faith in him, with the corollary that those who do not in some sense have this faith are on the broad road that leads irrevocably to destruction. Even if we allow for the possibility of real Christian faith in some of those who outwardly profess other faiths, there is still a great gulf fixed between Christ and all other supposed ways of salvation. This does not mean that there is no common basis for working together in world-wide community; it does mean that any such co-operation must be on a realistic basis, acknowledging and living with the differences and working out what common aims there can be between various groups. It also means that the urgent duty of evangelism can no more be demythologised into social action than it can be substituted for such action.

There will be many who will object to this more or less 'traditional' view, and for various reasons. I propose to look at two areas of objections which are in fact closely related—first, the objection that all men *will* eventually be saved, and second, the view that Christians must not deny to other faiths the possibility of being ways to God of similar, or analogous, value to Christianity. These two objections are frequently bound up together—sometimes literally, as in John Hick's *God and the Universe of Faiths* (London, 1973)—but for the sake of clarity it is best to treat them as separate issues.

Universal Salvation?

UNIVERSALISM proper, the doctrine that though hell may exist, it will at the last be untenanted—that God's will to save all men indi-

vidually will finally triumph—that, *inter alia*, Judas will be saved though Jesus did not think he would be—this doctrine is perhaps the greatest unspoken premise of modern thought within the Christian church. Like all widespread assumptions, it is difficult to tie down, since it usually appears not as an explicit statement on its own but as a corollary of some other discussion. Thus John Hick reaches universalism at the end of a thorough treatment of the problem of evil:³ John Robinson sees it as part of the doctrine of God:³ some orthodox theologians come to it via a doctrine of the Holy Spirit.⁴ Others again make the main thrust of their argument the growing body of opinion within the church.⁵ Most claim that there is a considerable amount of biblical support for their position. The task of questioning this many-sided and widely-held belief is a difficult one, and we must be content to raise a few questions about the universalist case as it is commonly stated today. I have noted four types of weakness (as they seem to me) in the universalist works I have studied.

First, there is a frequent *reliance on inadequate reasoning and evidence* in the universalists' presentations. Hick, for instance, by setting it out as a first principle that

the eventual attainment of man's highest good is guaranteed by God's sovereignty: He has made His human creatures for fellowship with Himself and will eventually bring them to this high end⁶

assumes at the outset the very thing he will later seek to prove. Again, it is fatally easy for a theologian to set up a moral standard, based on human observation of human life, and then to use that standard as a rule which God must follow; that this error has not always been avoided will become clear in much of our subsequent discussion. And when we find a theologian basing much of his case on 'the witness of the Christian heart' it is surely right to protest that not all Christian hearts are agreed on the matter, and that the feelings thus given supreme authority look suspiciously like the Spirit of the Age in cassock and surplice.

Inadequate evidence, both biblical and doctrinal, is presented in several areas. This is nowhere more apparent than in the use made by universalists of certain celebrated texts whose interpretation only favours their case if a whole weight of exegetical argument is overlooked. Frequent appeal is made to Paul's use of the word 'all' (e.g. in Rom. 5 and 11, and in 2 Cor. 5) with no apparent realisation of the different shades of meaning that must be understood in the particular contexts.⁶ In Romans 11:32, for instance, Paul is drawing to a close his carefully argued case that God's mercy is not for Jews only, nor for Gentiles only, but for *all*—Jews and Gentiles alike. To assume that this verse *must* mean 'all men individually' is to take the text right out of the context both of the chapters 9-11 (in which we see God's judgment on all, Jew and Gentile alike, who disobey, as well as God's mercy on all, Jew and Gentile alike, who obey) and

of the whole epistle (in which salvation is only through faith in Christ, and in which clear warnings are given of impending judgment—e.g. 1:18ff., 3:8, etc.). The word 'all' has several clearly distinct biblical uses (e.g. 'all of some sorts', 'some of all sorts' etc.), and to ignore this frequently-noted fact is no aid to clear thinking.

In the area of doctrinal argument, the universalist case is often rested on (what seem to me) misleading views of each person of the Trinity. Thus many have set up an oversimplified picture of a 'God of love' which simply begs the question, as when Robinson treats God's justice as one outworking of his love,⁹ and thus ensures that it is love—and love as he sees it—that wins in the end. Robinson is surely right that God's justice is not something that only comes into effect when love fails (we will discuss some other similar 'Aunt Sallies', demolished as though they were the only possible alternative to universalism, in the next section); but it would surely be equally possible, and biblically preferable, to see both love and justice as outworkings of God's essential *holiness*.¹⁰ To foist attributes on God—particularly such an attribute as the peculiarly modern notion of a love incompatible with sternness or serious judgment—is neither safe nor wise. Again, the notion of being 'in Christ' has been cut loose from its biblical moorings (where it is firmly anchored to the church, to the sacraments, to justification by faith and to holiness of life) and allowed to sail the seas of unwarranted speculation: 'Hell is an ultimate impossibility' it is asserted 'because *already* there *is* no one outside Christ.'¹¹ So too the doctrine of the Holy Spirit is made to serve universalistic ends,¹² by what seems to at least one observer a failure to distinguish between God's common grace and his saving grace (cf. Matt. 5:45; there is no suggestion—particularly in the light of 5:20 and 7:13-27!—that God will at the last save all those to whom he gives earthly comforts). To argue from creation, and from the world-wide work of the Spirit, to universal salvation is to ignore whole tracts of the theology of sin and redemption.

Second, there is a frequent *failure to understand the nature of the traditional case*, with the result that 'Aunt Sallies' are set up and easily knocked down, leaving the universalist without opposition. This is true, for instance, in some treatments of the nature of God's justice;¹³ it is true of some treatments of the 'divide' between Christians and non-Christians.¹⁴ It is especially true when universalist writers speak of hell as a chamber of horrors symbolising 'eternal evil', a concentration camp in the midst of a blissful countryside, or of a doctrine of heaven dependent upon other people's not getting there.¹⁵ All of these criticisms are based on the 'equal and opposite' idea of hell; but this is surely a caricature of the full biblical picture, and one moreover which adds a good deal of unjustified emotive weight to the universalist case. There is no compelling reason why a doctrine of hell should be presented in any of these bizarre ways—indeed, there is every reason

why it should not. Hell is first and foremost the place of spiritual death, of being cut off from the presence of God: thus, in terms of heaven, hell is a thin, slight world whose only attributes are negatives; it has not the positive features that would give it the right to place a veto on the joys of heaven by its very existence. Those who refuse mercy cannot for ever make those who accept it unhappy; a dog-in-the-manger tyranny will not work in heaven.¹⁶

Third, there is a frequent *failure to meet the objections* that are urged against universalism. Of these objections the best known, and still the most powerful, is the presence in the gospels—on the lips of Jesus himself—of sayings which leave no room whatever for the universalist's position. The sheep and the goats, the separation of the rich man and Lazarus, the broad and narrow ways, the fate of those who cause little ones to stumble—these, and many, many more are clear and uncompromising.¹⁷ Faced with this problem, the universalist can do one of three things. He can ignore the sayings, and base his views on a supposed general overall view of the gospels or on philosophical ideas instead;¹⁸ he can claim that they are not the actual words of Jesus but rather the invention of later writers;¹⁹ or he can argue that Jesus did indeed say those terrible things, but that, as a child of his time, he was in fact mistaken.²⁰ Against the first argument we must assert the primacy of the scriptures *in detail* over against a vague general view that conveniently ignores awkward facts. Against the second we must point out, first that such subjective textual surgery is calculated to produce, not the original words of Jesus, but a reflection of the critic's own ideas; second, that the texts will not in fact 'come away clean', leaving the 'gospel' of universalism untarnished; and third, that if the 'severe sayings' are the invention of the early church, it is surely odd that those documents in which we *do* see the mind of the early church (the rest of the New Testament) show us, by and large, such a mild picture by comparison. Against the third we must stress that, when Jesus disagreed (as he often did) with the ideas current in his own day, he was not slow to say so; that he repudiated²¹ the narrow Jewish vindictiveness to which so many seem to assimilate his teaching; that if this view were true we would be left with the absurd picture of a Messiah, God incarnate, who was the worst possible child of his times while his earliest followers and interpreters somehow avoided this unfortunate failing. We are, in short, only able to know the mind of God through the revelation of Jesus Christ in the scriptures; there are no promises of successful theological enquiry, but rather the reverse, for those who appeal over the head of the incarnate Son. If the sayings of Jesus are at least more or less correctly reported, and if universalism is true, then we must 'condemn the preaching of Christ and his apostles as either inept or immoral . . . [for] if universalism is true, and [they] did not know it, their preaching stands revealed as ignorant and incompetent', and we should not therefore be justified

in believing anything else they taught either: 'and if universalism is true, and they did know it, their preaching stands revealed as bluff, frightening people into the Kingdom by holding before them unreal terrors'.²²

Another objection to which the universalist has, it seems, no satisfactory answer, is the theological charge of confusing the doctrines of creation and redemption (as is pointed out by J. Andrew Kirk in his article elsewhere in this number). This appears particularly in the view of the Fall as, basically, a 'Rise', a necessary stage in the soul-making process, and also in the certainty of the end result which seems to rob man of any freedom to make real human choices. John Hick, whose views these are, has been taken to task for them by better men than me.²³ Suffice it now to say that the picture as Hick draws it (*EGL*, pp. 313ff.) defines out of existence both the biblical picture of Adam before the Fall and, perhaps more importantly, the gospel picture of Jesus as fully human yet able to challenge his followers to point to any sin in his life. In addition, does not Hick's view (cf., e.g., *EGL*, pp. 297, 323) make God directly responsible for evil and sin? The Fall may not be an easy doctrine to understand (who pretends it is?): it is not one which can be discarded without serious damage elsewhere.

Finally, the universalist has not escaped from the charge that his doctrine cuts the nerve both of real moral choices in this life and of the urgency of evangelism.²⁴ To say, as Robinson does,²⁵ that the myth of hell in the New Testament is there to emphasise the 'infinite seriousness', rather than the 'infinite time' of the punishment of those who reject Christ is surely to play with words. If hell will be at last empty, and if we can know this for certain, then I know of at least one man for whom the temptation to laziness would be very strong. This problem is squarely faced by John Baillie, who says that universalism (which he believes) must be stated in a form 'which does nothing to decrease the urgency of immediate repentance and which makes no promises to the procrastinating sinner. It is doubtful whether such a form of the doctrine has yet been found'.²⁶ It might be suggested that it could only be found when we have learnt how to have our theological cakes and eat them. For one writer there are no two ways about it: S. G. F. Brandon writes that, since men gave up believing in hell, serious and widespread observable moral consequences have ensued in a way that demands 'the attention of both theologian and sociologist'.²⁷ As for the urgency of evangelism, it will not do to say with Hick (*EGL*, pp. 384f.) that we should not use hell as a technique for frightening people in our evangelism, since the Apostles did not; this is another regular 'Aunt Sally' beloved of universalists, but we must point out that though the Apostles' message of salvation was, obviously, motivated by love for men and women and obedience to Christ, it was precisely love for those who, without the gospel, would one day meet Christ as Judge. Nor will it do for Robinson to say (p. 126) that

Calvinists and universalists are alike in appearing to act illogically by evangelising. It is the hyper-Calvinist, believing that the elect will be saved *automatically*, who acts illogically if he engages in evangelism; the Calvinist, believing that God will save his people *through the preaching of the gospel*, has the strongest possible evangelistic motive. That the universalist, believing that God will save all men anyway, has therefore the leisure to get on exclusively with other matters is seen clearly in much modern thought, which has abandoned serious evangelism in favour of some form of social action—particularly but sadly in the World Council of Churches, where 'salvation' has been given such a firm this-worldly orientation that evangelism often becomes simply irrelevant.²⁸

Fourthly, there is among universalists a *frequent appeal to unwarranted assumptions*. The main one—that 'other faiths' are equally valid roads to salvation anyway—I leave aside for the moment; there are two other regular methods by which the universalist gets off the hook he has so carefully constructed.

The first of these is an updated doctrine of purgatory—which appears, more or less, as a doctrine of hell that is on its way to being fully demythologised but has not yet quite made it. In other words, there must be some process or other (it is felt) by which sinful but free men are to be made willing and fit to meet a holy God, and this process is a purgatory whose traditional inhabitants (the souls of the faithful departed) are suddenly joined by another company (the souls of the *unfaithful* departed). But this teaching, widespread though it is, creates more problems than it solves. There are, for a start, the standard objections to any form of the doctrine of purgatory. First, it ignores the work of Christ by suggesting that punishment for sins must, after all, be borne by the sinner; and second, it ignores the biblical view of Christian life and death by asserting the need for further purification after this life. Full purification is in fact the combined effect of suffering and mortification during this life and of death itself; the precise theological function of death is to finish all that remains of sin in the believer, however imperfect he may then be.²⁹ In addition, the revised doctrine of purgatory-for-all is open to two further objections. First, it assumes a continued time-sequence in which souls can be presented with the gospel over and over again.³⁰ But this is to do precisely what Robinson (p. 132) forbids us to do, namely, to transpose the whole operation from the key of *kairos* into that *chronos*. Second, the idea of the gospel's being presented in a whole variety of different ways sounds attractive, but fails to reckon with the finality and completeness of the revelation in Jesus Christ. The gospel *is* Jesus Christ; how can it ever be presented but according to the pattern of his life, death and resurrection? It was to men of this earth in this life that God revealed himself and his love in his Son, and we have no warrant for thinking that he will change his mind, far less his own character so

revealed. Neither, therefore (to borrow Dr. Packer's illustration) have we any warrant for preaching a sermon 'How shall we escape if we neglect so great salvation?' by talking first of the great salvation and second of how to escape if we neglect it.³¹ To go easily through life with the false hope of a 'second chance' could well be the one case where travelling hopefully really did turn out to be preferable to arriving.

The second unwarranted assumption which the universalist is inclined to make is the last-resort appeal to mystery, to the impossibility of definite knowledge about the hereafter.³² But this will not do. The concept of mystery in the New Testament is never that of a theological puzzle; rather, it is the mystery of Christ, made known in the life of Jesus and through the power of the Holy Spirit. It remains a mystery, not because we have no idea what it is about, but because we can only understand it in the light of the paradoxes of incarnation and atonement, of the cross and resurrection, of ascension and Pentecost.³³

How are we, then, to state a doctrine of salvation which avoids universalism? We must first give full weight to the *biblical* idea of universalism—that in the seed of Abraham all nations will call themselves blessed, that there is 'no other name' than that of Jesus Christ by which men must be saved. That is to say: God the Father is the *only* creator, and Jesus is the *only* redeemer. Salvation is for those who belong to the people of God through faith in Christ, joined to him in death and life and feeding daily upon him. We should not expect that any *alteration* of God's method of revealing himself would produce faith where there is none at present; those who do not heed Moses and the prophets will not listen even if one should rise from the dead. The mystery of salvation is according to the pattern of Christ; it is not that our understanding is simply perplexed at this point, since if we realised the true position this is exactly the area about which we should expect the very limitation of understanding that we find ourselves to have. To appeal to mystery at this point is in full accord with our status as fallen beings; if there is one thing we cannot expect to be able to do, it is to stand outside the world of sin and moralise on how it should be dealt with. To attempt to do so would be like the attempt of a tadpole to discuss the difference between 'wet' and 'dry': his whole conceptual framework is bounded by wetness, and the result would be farcical. In other words, to put our moral standards above our knowledge of God is to commit *the* sin of the Fall, as Bonhoeffer pointed out;³⁴ it is also to commit the sin of Israel, who put God's law before God himself (Rom. 9:30ff.). It is not that God and man have a different set of moral laws entirely (though there are occasions, e.g. Rom. 12:19ff., when there is discontinuity between them); it is, rather, that man must remain humbly content to know God first in all things, and to trust that the Judge of all the earth will do right—without thinking that *he* always knows what is right and can expect the Judge

to agree with him! We should heed the wise words of C. S. Lewis, written at a time (after his wife's death) when one could easily have forgiven him for shaking his fist at God:

Can a mortal ask questions which God finds unanswerable? Quite easily, I should think. All nonsense questions are unanswerable. How many hours are there in a mile? Is yellow square or round? Probably half the questions we ask—half our great theological and metaphysical problems—are like that.³⁵

Other Faiths

THE one large question remaining can be simply put. What about the 'other faiths'? Are we to say that every man who has not explicitly acknowledged Christ is finally lost? And what should the Christian attitude be to the Hindus and Buddhists, the Sikhs and Muslims, with whom he rubs shoulders not only abroad but now at home in our increasingly multi-racial society? Space does not permit anything like a full discussion of this well-trodden debating-ground: we must be content with a brief statement of some salient points.

Overused though the concepts of 'continuity' and 'discontinuity' may be, they may still perform a valuable function in helping us to see our way through this particular maze. That there is a basic continuity between the religions of the world and Christianity is something at which no Christian should be surprised; the question is, rather, of what significance is this continuity for the status of other religions? It is at this point that some have blurred the distinction between the doctrines of creation and redemption, and have made the unwarranted jump from continuity to fundamental identity.³⁶ This view must be challenged. There is a more thorough—and more biblical—explanation to hand. Because the one God has created all men, and because his image in man, though tarnished and defaced, is not removed by the fall, it is precisely what we should expect that all man's strivings after God should mirror the truth in some ways. It is God's world that the nature-religions observe; it is God's image that is seen by those whose religions set out a programme for man's self-improvement. When views of God are constructed on the basis of observation of creation or man they are not 100% wrong; God *is* a God of seedtime and harvest, of right and wrong, of judgment and mercy, of life through death. But it is at this point that the problem arises. 'Though they knew God, they did not honour him as God or thank him, but became foolish in their understandings . . . and exchanged the glory of God for the image of the likeness of mortal man, and of birds, and animals, and reptiles'. Seeing God's reflection in the mirror of creation, the religions of the world worship the mirror instead of the one there reflected. Thus there comes about a radical

discontinuity between such religions and true worship of God. God is indeed known through his creation, but not with saving knowledge.³⁷ True knowledge of him comes only through his historical revelation, fully disclosed in Jesus Christ. This continuity and discontinuity is stressed in the speeches to Gentiles in Acts (see especially 10:34f. and 42f.; 14:15-17; 17:16-31). In each of these cases we see the truth of Bishop Neill's remark about the early African response to the gospel; 'It is as though they were hearing again an old tale almost but not quite forgotten. There is an element of the familiar as well as of the unknown'.³⁸ This is why, it seems to me, it is misleading to focus on the manward aspects of a religion if we are to understand and not to gloss over the differences. For instance, the notion of *faith* has given rise to several misunderstandings, as when R. Panikkar writes

By faith I mean an attitude which transcends the simple data and also the dogmatic formulations of the different confessions, that attitude which reaches an understanding even when the words and concepts are different, because it pierces through them, as it were, goes deep down to that realm which is the religious realm *par excellence*.³⁹

In the New Testament, faith is never a religious feeling in general, nor simply that which all men know in their hearts; it is never, by itself, self-authenticating. Faith in the New Testament is a window which exists simply for the sake of what is seen through it; and the window of Christian faith looks out on, and only on, Jesus Christ. In Jesus Christ all 'religions' (even, as Kraemer points out, Christianity insofar as it becomes a 'religion'⁴⁰) are both fulfilled and condemned. Nor is this anything new; as C. S. Lewis showed, Jesus is so like the 'corn-kings' of popular religion that his failure to identify himself as one is almost amusing—until it is realised that he is the historical embodiment of that truth of nature which they dimly reflect.⁴¹ The same thing can be observed in the relationship between Israel's religion and the local Canaanite myths of a god who defeated the floods and mighty waters. Israel knew—and, in Old Testament language, was married to—a God who *had* defeated the mighty waters, and that within fairly recent memory. In short, the biblical faith in Yahweh and in Jesus shows us the writing into world history of that which is written across the created order. The difference is that to perceive the truth in nature alone—or, come to that, in conscience—will not save since fallen man will 'worship and serve the creature rather than the creator'. But to see the truth in the historical revelation means at once to belong to the historical people of God, the Body of Christ—to realise the essential *pro me* of the gospel—and to recognise 'Jesus Christ come in the flesh' as the one who *remakes* (and not merely informs) sinful (and not merely muddled) human beings.⁴²

What are we to make, then, of the recent powerful attack on this view by John Hick?⁴³ He advocates a 'Copernican Revolution' in the theology of world religions, as a result of which we will no longer

view our position as the centre (as the Ptolemaic view of the universe saw the earth), but as one of a number of different positions all of which have the same central point of orbit—namely, God himself. Without going into detailed criticism of this view,⁴⁴ we may point out that there are other ways of looking at this seemingly attractive step forward. It might be the case, for instance, that the planets should be taken to represent, not the different world religions but the different churches in the (Christian) ecumenical movement—and that the other faiths correspond better to stars and worlds outside our solar system altogether, not only not circling the earth but not circling the sun either. Or (for this seems unlikely in view of the observed continuity), we might agree that all the 'faiths' have the same centre, but we might notice that, so far as we can tell, there is no possibility of life—certainly no possibility of sustaining human life—in any of them unless we import living conditions from our own world. In theological language, creation cannot be taken to guarantee redemption.

Must we then hold out no hope of final salvation for anyone who has never heard of Jesus Christ? We would be foolish to put any trust in such a hope, for it would be almost entirely without foundation. Yet at the same time we must draw back from a sweeping condemnation of all who name the names of other gods. While it is difficult to follow Panikkar and say that 'it is through the sacraments of Hinduism, through the message of morality and the good life, through the Mysterion that comes down to him through Hinduism, that *Christ* saves the Hindu normally'⁴⁵ (for a start, the 'message of morality and the good life' is precisely that which the Christian knows cannot save him!); we may still hope that in the mercy of God there are those, whether many or few, who do in fact follow the highest they know, and who, acknowledging their failure to keep the standards they have, trust in a power beyond themselves to save and defend, and who will at the last recognise Jesus Christ as the one whom they had ignorantly worshipped. It may be that such a possibility exists, but we have no warrant for a dogmatic assertion that it must.

Our attitude to those who profess other faiths (and to those who profess none) must therefore be twofold. We must renounce all semblance of arrogance and 'triumphalism' (though we must not let this fashionable term of abuse rob us of the very real triumphant note in the gospel; cf. Col. 2:15!), all attempts to 'use the gospel as a cloak for greed' (1 Thess. 2:5—the first century equivalent of 'commercialist exploitation'!), and all neo-colonial or paternalistic attitudes, as unworthy of the master we serve and the gospel we proclaim. We must engage in humble dialogue, spending and being spent in love, not fearfully but gladly.⁴⁶ At the same time we must—the whole church must—engage in a full-orbed evangelism that, beginning with man's deepest spiritual needs, moves on and grows to the full stature of the work of Christ in healing and restoring shattered lives and communities.

We cannot pretend that we do not seek 'conversions' (*pace* Panikkar in the dossier to section 3, p. 7); but we must seek them not with the motto 'compel them to come in' but with the message, and the methods, of the cross.

Towards World-Wide Community

IT might seem that the conclusions reached above should lead to a pessimistic approach to the whole question of world-wide community. But this is not so; pessimism would be the order of the day only if the foundations were wrong. A realistic approach, recognising clearly the problems that confront us, is ultimately far more promising than a hollow unity which will disintegrate as soon as there is work to be done. But how must the Christian—and the World Council of Churches—proceed? A few ideas are here offered by way of conclusion.

The basic aim and desire of the Christian for himself and for the world is for the true knowledge of God—knowledge, that is, in the biblical sense of a personal relationship of trust and full obedience, which includes, of course, knowledge *about* God and membership of his people. If we keep this category before our minds, we are, I submit, in a stronger position than if we think simply in terms of human attributes, whether faith, conversion, or anything else. Many could not articulate the faith they have; many can not and should not look back to a single 'conversion experience'; the full knowledge of God is not bound by such categories. But how are we to present this knowledge? *The Christian can recognise no knowledge of God that is not Christ-shaped*; the creation (fashioned by the Word) and the incarnate Jesus himself bear witness to God in the recognisable pattern of omnipotence and holiness, of death and resurrection, of love and judgment, that forbids us to preach or to live out another gospel, and that condemns any claim to know a different God. We must present this Jesus Christ to the whole world—to every nation and tribe and tongue, in the spirit of the true biblical universalism—not only by word but also by deed, and not only by deed but also by word. We must humbly ask the great religions of the world to look again at Jesus Christ; and we must make their task easier by showing them the shape of his gospel in our lives. If that means feeding the hungry, so be it. If it means freeing the captives, so be it. It may also mean the poor nation being prepared to stay poor (though the church at large must do all in her power to enrich her); it may mean the oppressed nation being prepared to stay oppressed (though the church at large must seek to free her by all Christian means). This, it would seem (cf. 1 Pet. 2:18-25), is the application of the theology of the cross that each person—and nation—must make in his *own* case. Woe betide the church, of course, if

she uses this as an excuse for a laissez-faire policy! (cf. Jas. 2:14-17). It will mean the church sacrificing local and national interests, and party politics of both right and left, and uniting in a life of glad and selfless service. Nor should any assume too readily that it is *their* opponents who should make the first move in the sacrifice of interests. The knowledge of God in Christ is thus a category wide enough to include all the social needs of the world, as well as specific enough to include definite Christian commitment and evangelism; compare 'he judged the cause of the poor and needy . . . was not this to know me? saith the Lord' (Jer. 22:16).

In the specific questions of world community, the basis of continuity between all mankind will ensure, as many have pointed out, that there are several areas of common concern where men from widely differing backgrounds and beliefs will gladly join together. It is not a question of agreement on specific beliefs or ultimate aims; 'the question is rather how, in a world of many living faiths and ideologies, men and women can best work together on the basic issues of human life'.⁴⁷ We should surely welcome this realistic and positive approach, while also noting the warnings sounded by those who see all too clearly the potential clashes over ultimate aims.⁴⁸ As has been well pointed out by the Librarian of the WCC,

Only as Christians engage in the actual process of advancing together with all men towards a creative, healthier and stronger world community, is it permissible for them to speak of human sin and the solidarity of guilt . . . Only then is their particular Christian identity again and again given to them. And perhaps then it may dawn upon secular and other religious men alike that the crucified and risen Christ continues to hold this globe together in one single unity.⁴⁹

Let us thus hope that the church, the World Council, and Christians everywhere will pray and work towards that true universal community in which

The earth shall be filled with the knowledge of the Lord

As the waters cover the sea.

[For] on that day,

The Root of Jesse, who stands for an ensign of the peoples—

Unto him shall the nations seek:

And his dwelling-place shall be glorious.

(Isa. 11:9-10)

¹ In my preparation of this article, I have been greatly helped by various friends, notably Dr. J. I. Packer and Mr. M. Sadgrove; they are not, of course, to be held responsible for any of the views I may express.

² John Hick, *Evil and the God of Love* (hereafter *EGL*), London, 1966 and (Fontana) 1968. Page references are to the latter edn.

³ J. A. T. Robinson, *In the End God*, London, 1968.

⁴ E.g., Georges Khodr, 'Christianity in a Pluralistic World—The Economy of the Holy Spirit', *Ecumenical Review* XXIII, 2, April 1971, pp. 118-128; also printed in S. J. Samartha ed., *Living Faiths and the Ecumenical Movement*, Geneva, 1971, pp. 135ff., and quoted in the dossier to section 3, pp. 16ff.

- ¹ Cf. C. S. Duthie, 'Ultimate Triumph', *SJT* 14.2, June 1961, pp. 156ff. Unlike Duthie, I will not in this article discuss the particular views of Karl Barth, who was not explicitly a universalist even if many have taken his teaching in that way. To do so would have increased the length of this study out of all manageable size.
- ² Hick, *EGL*, p. 17; cf., similarly, p. 292.
- ³ Duthie, *art. cit.*, p. 157.
- ⁴ E.g. W. A. Visser't Hooft, *No Other Name*, London, 1963, pp. 99ff.; H. H. Farmer, *The World and God*, London, 1935, p. 255n.; Robinson, *op. cit.*, p. 110. Robinson holds that there are two myths which stand side by side, irreconcilable, in the New Testament—one teaching hell and the other teaching universalism.
- ⁵ Robinson, *op. cit.*, p. 115. It is difficult to argue against this view without seeming either to belittle the love of God or to be heartless and callous about the fate of the lost. But any examination of the NT passages which assert God's love will show that such a love is fully compatible with stern justice; see note 10 below. Of course we mourn over the lost; but we cannot pretend, out of embarrassment, that there are none such.
- ¹⁰ It is God's holiness that is asserted as the primary quality of his nature in, e.g., Isaiah 6 and Revelation 4 and 5; his saving love and his wrath against sinners are both seen in this context. 'God is light' (1 John 1:5) is basic to 'God is love' (1 John 4:8).
- ¹¹ Robinson, *op. cit.*, p. 130 (his italics). This is a question which underlies much of the 'other faiths' debate.
- ¹² Cf. Khodr, *op. cit.*, and A. J. Van der Bent, *The Utopia of World Community*, London, 1973, pp. 96ff.
- ¹³ John Baillie, *And The Life Everlasting*, London, 1934, p. 241, where Plato's doctrine of retributive justice is cited as the highest expression of such justice on offer.
- ¹⁴ W. C. Smith, *The Faith of Other Men*, New York, 1963 and 1972, p. 104, tells us that we must revise the assertion 'that would divide mankind into two groups, ourselves who are being saved and the rest of the world who are damned'. While some Christians undoubtedly do think in these localised and exclusivist categories, it cannot be claimed that in ridiculing this Smith has damaged the view of many others, that at the last there will be both saved and damned, and that these groups will stand in a clear, though not one-for-one, relation to the earthly church and those outside.
- ¹⁵ Cf. Baillie, p. 244; Robinson, p. 132; Smith, p. 130.
- ¹⁶ The best statement of this view known to me is in C. S. Lewis, *The Great Divorce*, London, 1946 and (Fontana) 1972, pp. 109-115.
- ¹⁷ For a discussion of these sayings cf. A. M. Fairhurst, 'The Problem Posed by the Severe Sayings Attributed to Jesus in the Synoptic Gospels', *SJT* 23.1, February, 1970, pp. 77ff. Fairhurst in the end (p. 91) is content to state the problem fully and invite other theologians to tackle it.
- ¹⁸ Cf. Robert Mackintosh, 'Universalism', in *A Dictionary of Christ and the Gospels*, ed. J. Hastings, vol. II, London, 1908, p. 785; Hick, *EGL*, p. 379: for the philosophical basis, see the works cited by Fairhurst, p. 77.
- ¹⁹ Cf. Hick, *EGL*, p. 382.
- ²⁰ E.g. G. W. H. Lampe, *The Holy Spirit* (Fairacres Publication no. 41), Oxford, 1974, p. 16.
- ²¹ Cf. J. Jeremias, *Jesus' Promise to the Nations*, London, 1958, esp. pp. 41-45.
- ²² J. I. Packer, 'The Way of Salvation; Part III: The Problems of Universalism', in *Bibliotheca Sacra*, 130, 1973, Dallas, USA, pp. 3-11.
- ²³ Cf. Dom Illtyd Trethowan, 'Dr. Hick and the Problem of Evil', *JTS* n.s. XVIII, pp. 407-416, and J. M. Rist, 'Coherence and the God of Love', *JTS* n.s. XXIII, pp. 95-105. Hick replies to Trethowan in *JTS* n.s. XIX, pp. 591-602, reprinted in *God and the Universe of Faiths*, pp. 62ff.
- ²⁴ For this charge, cf. T. F. Torrance, 'Universalism or Election', *SJT* 2.3, September, 1949, p. 318 (in reply to Robinson in *SJT* 2.2, pp. 139ff.). Robinson replies in *SJT* 3.1, December, 1949, pp. 378ff., and in *In the End God*, pp. 128ff.
- ²⁵ *Op. cit.*, p. 132.
- ²⁶ Baillie, *op. cit.*, p. 245. He at once, with remarkable naïvety, concludes the argument by saying 'But one has the feeling that in this whole question . . . we

are touching one of the growing-points of Christian thought at the present time'.

²⁷ S. G. F. Brandon, *The Judgment of the Dead*, London, 1967, pp. 193-196.

²⁸ Cf., e.g., the dossier to section 3, pp. 49f.

²⁹ These objections have never, to my knowledge, been taken seriously by proponents of purgatory, who persist in seeing the reformers' protests only in terms of the abuses of the doctrine and never in terms of its basic theology: for this, see John Frith's work *A Disputation of Purgatory* in my forthcoming edition of *The Work of John Frith*, pp. 80ff., and the introductory chapter on purgatory. For this view of death see especially Romans 6-8.

³⁰ Cf. P. T. Forsyth, *The Justification of God*, London, 1917 and 1948, p. 161; H. H. Farmer, *The World and God*, London, 1935, p. 256; Hick, *EGL*, p. 380.

³¹ J. I. Packer, *art. cit.*

³² Cf. Farmer, *op. cit.*, p. 256; Hick, *EGL*, pp. 369ff., 387; and the concluding remarks of Savas Agourides, 'Salvation according to the Orthodox Tradition', *Ecumenical Review* XXI.3, July, 1969, p. 203.

³³ Cf. Rist, *art. cit.*, p. 102 'The thesis of God's ultimate incomprehensibility cannot legitimately be used to defend logical absurdities in theology'.

³⁴ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, London, 1955, pp. 3ff.

³⁵ C. S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed*, London, 1961 and 1966, p. 55.

³⁶ Cf. Khodr, *art. cit.*

³⁷ Romans 1:18ff. Cf. A. F. Walls, 'The First Chapter of the Epistle to the Romans and the Modern Missionary Movement', in *Apostolic History and the Gospel*, ed. W. W. Gasque and R. P. Martin, Exeter, 1970, pp. 346ff.

³⁸ Stephen Neill, *Christian Faith and Other Faiths*, 2nd edn., London, 1970, p. 145n.

³⁹ R. Panikkar, quoted in the dossier to section 3, p. 9. Cf. W. C. Smith, *The Faith of Other Men*, New York, 1963 and 1972, p. 52.

⁴⁰ H. Kraemer, *Why Christianity of All Religions?*, London, 1962.

⁴¹ Cf. C. S. Lewis, *Miracles*, 2nd ed., London, 1960, pp. 116-135. This whole passage is of great significance for the present debate.

⁴² This is why it will not do to say that all that is necessary for Christian faith is the bare facthood of Jesus, since the real thing is the existential decision of the believer. The 'merits and death' of Jesus in all their fulness are the essential ground of all Christian life. To insist on demythologising to escape the scandal of detailed historicity is to change the entire nature of Christianity into just that sort of religion from which Christ came to set men free.

⁴³ *God and the Universe of Faiths*, chs. 9 and 10 (pp. 120-147). Cf. too *Truth and Dialogue*, ed. Hick, London, 1974.

⁴⁴ Which is not new; Smith, *op. cit.*, pp. 115ff., thinks of this Copernican revolution as past and looks forward to the Newtonian revolution which will explain it.

⁴⁵ R. Panikkar, *The Unknown Christ of Hinduism*, London, 1964, p. 54 (his italics).

⁴⁶ There are still those who are afraid that dialogue is another name for syncretism. They should take heart from the words of S. J. Samartha ('Reflections on a Multilateral Dialogue', *Ecumenical Review* XXVI.4, October, 1974, p. 643): 'the "crusade" approach and the "fruit-salad" approach were both tacitly rejected . . . what people seem to be looking for . . . is a larger framework in which there is "differentiated interrelatedness" where responsibilities for living together in community could be accepted without in any way ignoring particularities. Therefore it is justifiable to say that dialogue is not a way to syncretism but a safeguard against it.' Cf. also Neill, *op. cit.*, p. v. It is still, of course, possible for dialogue to turn into syncretism where participants are not sure of their ground; cf. dossier to section 3, p. 46, para. 5.

⁴⁷ S. J. Samartha 'Living Faiths and Ultimate Goals', *Ecumenical Review* XXV.2, April 1973, p. 140.

⁴⁸ Cf. S. Talmon 'Towards World Community—A Jewish View', *Ecumenical Review* XXVI.4, October, 1974, pp. 617ff.; and A. J. Van der Bent, *The Utopia of World Community*, pp. 20f.

⁴⁹ Van der Bent, *op. cit.*, p. 138.