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The Life of the World and Future Judgement

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If we say that Jesus Christ is 'the life of the world', what are we implying about the validity of non-Christian religions and their claims to bring life or salvation to the world? Do we mean that Jesus Christ is one among many sources of life, and that he happens to suit us best? Or does our claim about Christ involve the judgement that other religions are inadequate or inferior? Emilio Castro raised this question in an issue of *International Review of Mission (IRM)* which heralded the theme of the Vancouver Assembly:

To those outside the Christian family, the theme sounds somewhat imperialistic and pretentious. Who are these Christians to claim for themselves the secret of life? Who is this Jesus, unrelated to some of the most important religious traditions of humankind, to pretend to be the bearer of life? Does not an explicit claim on the part of Christians imply a judgement of others?¹

It is a question of first importance—too important to be debated only by those Christians who have a close personal knowledge of other religions and cultural traditions. So, despite my limited qualifications, I shall try here to offer a route through the question. I shall not of course attempt to compare whole religions, nor to ask what should be the Christian attitude to Islam or Hinduism or Buddhism or Marxism. Nor shall I interpret 'life of the world' in its broad, semi-secular sense, though I believe that Christians can and must co-operate with people of all religions and political beliefs to create the conditions for a secure and worthwhile life for all men. Instead, I shall focus on the specific question of whether eternal life and salvation may be found only in Christ, or whether salvation is possible in other religions.

The challenge of non-Christian belief

Gone are the days of the confident optimism about Christianity's confrontation with other religions which characterized the World Missionary Conference at Edinburgh in 1910. In his official account of that conference, Temple Gairdner could write: 'The spectacle of the advance of the Christian church along many lines of action to the conquest of the five great religions of the modern world is one of singular interest and grandeur.'² Since then, western Christianity has

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experienced declining numbers of adherents, declining confidence, and growing secularism. Improvements in communication systems, and the influx of communities from overseas, have made us aware of the beliefs and values of other religions and cultures. Greater theological sophistication has made us wary of 'writing off' the majority of mankind on the pretext that it does not happen to be Christian. Can we go on saying, as evangelicals have traditionally said, that only those who actually hear the gospel and put their faith in Christ can be saved? Or must we bow to the logic of Carl Braaten's complaint, that this view commits us to believing that, in the end, God's share of mankind will be much smaller than the devil's? 'There is not much for the angels to sing about if the evangelicals get what they expect—a heaven sparsely filled with only card-carrying Christians.'³

Let us begin, then, by surveying and commenting on some influential viewpoints on whether salvation may be found apart from Christ.

First, there is the traditional view that salvation is only available through explicit faith in Christ. The Council of Florence in 1442 declared:

The holy Roman Church firmly believes, professes and proclaims that none of those who are outside the Catholic Church—not only pagans, but Jews also, heretics and schismatics—can have part in eternal life, but will go into eternal fire, 'which was prepared for the devil and his angels', unless they are gathered into that Church before the end of life.⁴

John Wesley wrote in a letter in March 1748:

In plain terms, wherever I see one or a thousand men running into Hell, be it in England, Ireland, or France, yea, in Europe, Asia, Africa or America, I will stop them if I can: as a minister of Christ, I will beseech them in His name to turn back and be reconciled to God. Were I to do otherwise, were I to let any soul drop into the pit whom I might have saved from everlasting burnings, I am not satisfied that God would accept my plea 'Lord, he was not of my parish'.⁵

This attitude is not much welcomed these days, but it has been forcefully advocated recently by Dick Dowsett in a book written in popular style.⁶ The biblical basis of this view, and my own attempt to rephrase it, will be discussed later.

Secondly, we may group together various Roman Catholic writings which express the spirit which pervaded Vatican II. Already in 1961, Karl Rahner had begun to popularize the notion of 'anonymous Christians'.⁷ According to Rahner, God desires the salvation of all mankind and therefore makes himself known by grace to all men. His gift of salvation takes different forms in different religious contexts. But since all salvation is Christ's salvation, the adherent of a non-Christian religion is an 'anonymous Christian'. Once the Christian

message is adequately presented to such people, they are obliged to embrace Christianity. For Rahner, Christ remains the final and normative revelation. And he also asserts that a person who is explicitly a Christian 'has a much greater chance of salvation than someone who is merely an anonymous Christian.'

Problems with this view have often been pointed out. A devout adherent of another religion may understandably feel insulted at being labelled an 'anonymous Christian'. How would a Christian feel at being called an 'anonymous Buddhist'? Milan Machoveč has in fact illustrated the problem by arguing that those in our world who experience the pain of alienation, and strive to transform the *status quo* by their radical political commitment, may be labelled 'anonymous Marxists'.⁸

Other Roman Catholic theologians, whilst avoiding Rahner's problematic terminology, have embraced similar viewpoints. A conference at Bombay in 1964, attended by men such as Hans Küng and Raymond Pannikar, concluded that men can be saved 'in their own non-Christian religions', which are 'the historical way to God for their followers'.⁹

These statements, like Rahner's position, are open to criticisms voiced by Lesslie Newbigin. The argument from the universal saving purpose of God to the saving value of non-Christian religions assumes, without proving, that it is religion among all human activities which is the sphere of God's saving action. And, more seriously, it assumes that our position as Christians entitles us to know and declare what is God's final judgement on other people.¹⁰ If this is a problem with the traditional view—that all men apart from Christ are destined for condemnation—it is no less a problem for the view that there is salvation in other religions. Both approaches leave too little room for the element of surprise which is such a feature of Jesus' teaching about human destiny.

A third approach is that of John Hick. He argues that the differing world religions represent different responses to God's self-revelation, arising from the different cultural situations of each religion's early adherents.¹¹ The conflicting truth-claims of the various religions arise because, like the blind men touching the elephant, the understanding of truth varies according to the part of the elephant each touches. Each religion's account of the divine may be true in that it represents a genuine encounter with the divine. Hick takes the argument further when he postulates that, for all men and women, life after death takes the form of a series of 'lives' in which the self is gradually drawn by God's love towards perfection and the vision of God.¹² Thus, however near or far from God a person has been in his religion (or lack of it) in this life, he will eventually be won, in a free response of love, into a perfect harmony with God. My difficulties in accepting Hick's universalist view will become clear in the next section, where I shall sketch

out under six headings what seem to me to be key elements in a biblical approach to our question.

A way forward?

1) *Universalism is unacceptable* as a solution to the problem of the destiny of adherents of non-Christian religions, or of no religion. Undoubtedly there is a strong 'universalist strand' in the New Testament which is frequently underplayed by evangelicals: see passages such as Romans 5:18; 11:32, 36; 1 Corinthians 15:24–28; Ephesians 1:9f.; Colossians 1:19f.; 1 Timothy 2:4. But they must not be lifted out of context and made to teach that God will save all people in the end. Paul uses the word 'all' with different shades of meaning in different contexts. Thus in Romans 11:32, 'all' means 'Jews and Gentiles alike'. To argue that 'all' here means 'all men individually' is to take it out of its context in Romans 9–11, which shows clearly enough that Jews, as well as Gentiles, who disobey are subject to God's condemnation. And to impose a dogmatic universalism on Romans 5:12–21 renders incomprehensible the argument of Romans 1:16–5:11, which expounds God's judgement and the way of salvation through faith in Christ. Moreover, nearly all these 'universalist' statements occur alongside other statements about the need for faith in order to experience salvation. In Colossians 1:19–23, for example, God's plan to 'reconcile to himself all things' is said to include the Christians at Colossae, 'provided that you continue in the faith . . .' So we can hardly take these 'universalist' statements as declarations of what *will* happen. Rather, they declare that God's saving *purpose* has universal scope, even though some people may refuse to enter into that purpose.

Universalism also does not take freedom seriously enough. Whereas the universalist claims that for all men *not* to be saved would be a defeat for God and therefore unthinkable, I would argue that God will go on respecting the freedom of those who resist him—even though it means that his will is not fully realized. We may recall C. S. Lewis's words: 'What you call defeat, I call miracle: for to make things which are not itself, and thus to become, in a sense, capable of being resisted by its own handiwork, is the most astounding and unimaginable of all the feats we attribute to the Deity.'¹³

Another problem with many expositions of universalism, including Hick's, is that it postulates a period of purgation after death, during which a person moves from rebellion or imperfect response towards a complete openness to God. This is a very speculative structure, with no foundation in the New Testament.¹⁴

2) We must ask *who, according to the New Testament, is condemned by God, and on what basis?* Here it may be helpful to distinguish between the teaching of Jesus and of Paul, since rather different emphases are discernible. In the gospels, Jesus seems to reserve his

condemnation for those who have had opportunity to hear and understand his message and have rejected it. The people of Chorazin and Bethsaida are condemned for rejecting the evidence of their own eyes and ears (Luke 10:13f.). Religious leaders are frequently denounced, precisely because they should have known better (e.g. Luke 12:52). By contrast, the people whom we might compare to 'those who have never heard the gospel'—the outcasts, the foreigners whom Jesus encounters—are characterized as 'lost' rather than 'wicked'. It is from these 'no-hopers' that his followers mostly come. And they are not saved by being articulate in their faith. The cry of helplessness, which casts itself on Jesus as the only conceivable source of help, is enough (Mark 5:28; Luke 7:9; cf. 18:9–14). I would not want to build too much on this, but I think it fair to conclude that Jesus explicitly announces God's rejection only of those who reject him on the basis of adequate knowledge, and that he does hold out hope of salvation to those who look to God for mercy.

Paul, on the other hand, with his more systematized theology, appears to divide humanity into two groups. There are 'believers' and 'unbelievers'. There are those who are under the wrath of God, and those who are 'in Christ Jesus' and therefore not subject to condemnation (Rom. 8:1). There are 'those who are being saved' and 'those who are perishing' (2 Cor. 2:15; cf. 4:4f.). It appears that Paul assumes everyone to be without salvation unless and until they explicitly have faith in Jesus. That leaves little room for manoeuvre to anyone wishing to urge that salvation may be found outside the Christian fold. But perhaps, even here, there is reason to believe that Paul's meaning is not so cut-and-dried, as we shall suggest under heading 4.

3) *The New Testament was written for people in a pluralistic culture.* Although it is often assumed that Christianity's encounter with other religions is a comparatively new phenomenon, that is not the case. The first Christians inhabited a world of many cultures and many religions. And against that background they quite consciously and deliberately asserted the unique claims of Christ as they had experienced him. The earliest followers of Jesus, all Jews, had no desire to start a new religion, but were driven by their own experience to acknowledge Jesus as the fulfilment of Jewish hopes and therefore to argue that Jews who refused the claims of this Messiah forfeited salvation. Jesus, they said, gives life in *contrast* to religion (John 5:39f.). Paul, in the multi-religious Graeco-Roman world, argued that though there are many so-called gods, 'yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist' (1 Cor. 8:6). It might perhaps be argued that the old myths of the Greeks and the sensual mystery religions of Paul's day are hardly worth comparing with the great eastern religions of today, which deserve more credence and respect than Paul gave to those expressions of religion which he

encountered. Yet Paul, too, was dealing with people influenced by the great philosophies of his day (including the philosophy of Plato, who himself shows some signs of being influenced by Hinduism). Nevertheless he offers no hints that the philosophies provide a viable way to salvation.

So it is in full awareness of rival claims that the New Testament writers claimed Jesus as the universal Lord and Saviour (cf. Acts 4:12; 1 Cor. 8:6; Rom. 10:12f.; and many other passages). They could not allow the saving efficacy of other religious systems without denying their experience of God in Christ. Or, rather, they claimed to have received in him what other systems vainly promised. The question of salvation in other religions is a matter of Christology.

It has of course been argued from time to time that the 'exclusive' statements of the New Testament are not to be taken at face value. Peggy Starkey, in an article in the *IRM* to which I referred at the beginning, tackles Acts 4:12 and John 14:6.¹⁵ She argues that Acts 4:12 ('There is salvation in no one else . . .') is a confessional statement, an affirmation of the community of believers that Jesus Christ is the name through which they have experienced salvation. And because it is a confessional statement ('This is what *we* have experienced') rather than a metaphysical statement, it is not meant to deny that God's saving grace may come to other people in other ways. However, this way of looking at the verse underplays the fact that a confessional statement in the New Testament is not *merely* a description of experience, but is a statement about Jesus' power and place in God's purpose *in contradistinction* to other beliefs and confessions. The context of Acts 4:12 (especially vv. 10, 11) implies that, since God has resurrected Jesus to a unique position, those who rejected him were in the wrong, and would not find salvation apart from him. (This is not to deny that, on a different level, the passage is about healing, and implies that ultimately all healing derives from the God revealed in Christ.)

Starkey describes John 14:6 ('I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but by me') as 'survival language'. It is the kind of strong assertion made by a group struggling to defend a position against powerful opponents. Once the Christian church has become the community in power, it cannot go on repeating the absolute claims of the original statement without becoming unfaithful to its original meaning. She also suggests that statements such as John 14:6 may be the overstatement of religious enthusiasm, and that New Testament writers might have expressed themselves differently if they had been aware of the rich religious heritage of mankind which we know today. Again, I do not think these 'explanations' are adequate, because they fail to do justice to the fact that John 14:6 (and similar statements) bears witness to a figure whose resurrection is a unique event and implies something unique about the salvation which he offers.

4) There are elements of *continuity and discontinuity*, of fulfilment and newness, in the New Testament's handling of other faiths. Jesus' relationship to Judaism was one of continuity: he fulfilled Jewish longings rather than destroying Jewish religion. Yet also he condemned what was not true to the gospel (e.g. Matt. 5:43f.). The prologue of John's gospel is designed to show how God's action in Jesus is continuous with his action in Jewish history, and indeed with his activity in the whole of creation, including Greek philosophical systems. Yet at the same time there is a discontinuity—'the Word became flesh'—which marks out Jesus as the unique, saving embodiment of God's revelation. The discontinuity here involves the distinction between the doctrines of creation and salvation. It is not that there is salvation in Greek philosophy but a fuller salvation in Christ. Rather, there is a knowledge of God apart from Christ, but it is not apparently a *saving* knowledge. There is 'common grace' (Matt. 5:45), but that is not the same as 'saving grace' (cf. Matt. 7:13–27).

This same distinction explains the attitude of Peter in Acts 10 and of Paul in Acts 14 and 17. Peter recognizes that 'in every nation anyone who fears God and does what is right is acceptable to him' (Acts 10:35). He acknowledges that Cornelius the Gentile is within the scope of God's care. But in calling Cornelius 'acceptable' to God, he cannot mean that Cornelius is 'accepted' in the sense of 'saved'. He still needs to hear the gospel (vv. 36ff.). Similarly, in Acts 14 and 17, Paul speaks of God's revelation in creation, in a way which would strike a chord in the minds of his hearers. But he does not say that his hearers' awareness of these things brings them salvation. On the contrary, he claims that their knowledge of these truths makes their idolatry inexcusable. God has overlooked it in the past, but now commands all men to repent, in view of coming judgement by Jesus, the resurrected one (Acts 17:30f.). And the same themes emerge again in Romans 1–3.

5) The idea that all are saved in their own religions *leads to impossible contradictions*. Whilst religions share much in common, there are crucial points at which contradictions occur, and the question of truth and falsehood has to be asked. One familiar example is Islam's denial that Jesus was crucified. To take another example, Panikkar believes 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.'¹⁶ But how is this to be squared with the Christian's awareness that 'the message of morality and the good life' is precisely what cannot save him?

And what are we to make of Newbigin's observation that so often it is at points of highest ethical and spiritual achievement that the religions find themselves threatened by, and therefore opposed to, the gospel? It was the guardians of God's revelation who crucified the Son of God. It is the noblest among the Hindus who most emphatically

reject the gospel. Surely the Samaritan was closer to God than the priest and the Levite.¹⁷ The tax-collector was closer to God than was the Pharisee (in Luke 18:9–14).

6) *All who are saved are saved through God's grace in Christ, and through their response to his grace.* This is the central truth of the gospel and of Christian experience. If we have rejected in our discussion several commonly accepted standpoints on the question of salvation in non-Christian religions, we have picked up some hints that salvation may be attainable by God's grace to some who have not explicitly known Jesus Christ through explicit response to the gospel. We have noted the attitude of Jesus to those who cast themselves on God's mercy. We have seen that God reveals something of himself and his will in the created order. We could add that the Old Testament tells of people such as Noah and Job who found acceptance with God outside the normal workings of his covenant with Israel. And if (as I believe) the 'parable' of the sheep and the goats in Matthew 25:31–46 is about the judgement of all men on the basis of their care for the suffering and the destitute, we have another interesting piece of evidence. For the theme of surprise in the passage indicates that the 'sheep' are saved not on the basis of good works understood as merit, but on the basis of response to God which issues (unconsciously or 'naturally') in acts of charity. They have been open to the grace of God in their lives, even though they have not necessarily named the name of Christ.

Finally, it must be stressed that in any religious context, including a Christian one, 'saving faith' involves coming to the end of one's 'religion' and abandoning oneself to the grace of God. If I am saved, I am saved by Christ. I am not saved by adherence to the Christian religion any more than my Sikh friend is saved by adherence to the Sikh religion.

Will there be many or few who find salvation in this way? I do not know. Would Cornelius have been saved, on the basis of responding to God as fully as he knew how, if he had not heard the gospel preached? I do not know. What I do know is that Jesus refused to answer such speculative questions (Luke 13:23f.), and that I must take very seriously his teaching about reversal, about surprise, at the final judgement (Luke 13:23–30). To fail to take such teaching seriously would be to risk aligning myself with the religious professionals who have got everything worked out, and to incur Jesus' judgement on *them*.

If the approach outlined here is right, evangelism amongst people of all cultures and religions must continue to be the church's top priority. Certainly any approach which says, 'A person may find salvation without explicitly putting faith in Jesus, and therefore it is wrong to evangelize people of other faiths', is out of step with the spirit of the New Testament. There are those who fear that any retreat from the

traditional view, that every individual who does not explicitly believe in Jesus will be condemned to hell, is bound to reduce motivation for evangelism. But this need not be so. A doctor who has discovered a vaccine to prevent a lethal disease will rightly desire to persuade everyone to take the vaccine, and his motivation for this desire to persuade is not reduced by his knowledge that not every individual will in fact catch the disease. Precisely because the outcome is uncertain for everyone who does not take the vaccine, he urges everyone to take it and be sure of protection. How much more, then, should followers of Jesus want to bring a sure knowledge of God's love and his salvation to all peoples?¹⁸

Does such an approach imply a judgement on non-Christian religions?

We return, finally, to Emilio Castro's question with which we began. The answer, I think, must be 'Yes, but . . .'. I cannot avoid answering 'Yes' without at the same time surrendering that which makes me a Christian—the conviction that Jesus, crucified and risen, is the unique revelation of God, and God's way of salvation for all mankind. Yet there are some 'buts' which, I believe, preserve us from the imperialistic arrogance which such a claim might seem to imply.

First, we are only claiming to have received what is revealed, what is given by God. The revelation, the gift of salvation is not 'ours' to be triumphalist about. What we share with others is what we in our turn have received from others. We are only too conscious that Christianity comes to us from Asia, and that it has come to us only because the early missionaries to Britain were not persuaded that people should be left to find God in their traditional religions.

Secondly, the Christian believes that the gospel comes not merely as a judgement on his brother of another faith, but as a judgement on *him*. As Newbigin puts it, he meets a person of another faith not by shouting down to him from the top of a stairway, but by meeting him at the foot of the stairway, beneath the cross. And he knows that God's judgement may come to him through the words and life of his partner of another faith.¹⁹

Thirdly, to be intolerant of other religious viewpoints is not necessarily as wicked as is sometimes supposed. Of course intolerance of other *people*, and the refusal to take them seriously, is wrong. But if truth and falsehood are more than merely a matter of personal opinion, then there is a real sense in which intolerance of another viewpoint is essential. Honest dialogue cannot proceed without it.

Fundamentally, the question we are handling is not a matter of one religion in comparison with another. It is a matter of human beings standing before God, dependent on him for grace and salvation. Christians claim that this grace and salvation, though present elsewhere, are supremely focused in Christ. If Christianity is unique, it is

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only because he is unique. If Christianity fails to bear witness to him, it fails to be of any use in the world.

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NOTES

- 1 Editorial in *IRM*, 71, 1982, p.1.
- 2 T. Gairdner, *Edinburgh 1910*, p.135 (quoted in J. R. W. Stott, *Christian Mission in the Modern World* [Falcon, London 1975], p.64).
- 3 C. Braaten, 'Who Do We Say that He Is? On the Uniqueness and Universality of Jesus Christ', *Missiology*, 8, 1980, p.22.
- 4 Quoted in H. Küng, *On Being a Christian* (ET, Collins, London 1976), p.97.
- 5 J. Wesley, *Letters*, Vol. 2, p.137, quoted in R. Dowsett, *God, That's Not Fair!* (OMF Books, Sevenoaks and STL Books, Bromley 1982), pp.48f.
- 6 Dowsett, op. cit.
- 7 K. Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, Vol. 5 (Darton, Longman and Todd, London 1966), pp. 115-34; Vol. 6 (1969), pp. 390-8.
- 8 E. Klinger, ed., *Christentum innerhalb und ausserhalb der Kirche* (Herder, Freiburg 1976), p.141 (cited in P. Hebblethwaite, 'The Status of "Anonymous Christians"', *Heythrop Journal*, 18, 1977, p.51).
- 9 J. Neuner, ed., *Christian Revelation and World Religions* (Burns and Oates, London 1967), pp.22, 23. The statement of Vatican II, *Lumen Gentium*, art.16, is more cautiously, even vaguely, expressed, and avoids the criticisms which follow.
- 10 L. Newbigin, *The Open Secret* (SPCK, London 1978), pp.195-7.
- 11 J. Hick, *God and the Universe of Faith* (Macmillan, London 1973).
- 12 J. Hick, *Death and Eternal Life* (Collins, London 1976).
- 13 C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (Centenary Press, London 1940), p.115.
- 14 I have discussed universalism more fully in *Christian Hope and the Future of Man* (IVP, Leicester 1980), pp.124-33. See also N. T. Wright, 'Universalism and the World-Wide Community', *Churchman*, 89, 1975, pp.197-212.
- 15 P. Starkey, 'Biblical Faith and the Challenge of Religious Pluralism', *IRM*, 71, 1982, pp.66-77.
- 16 R. Pannikar, *The Unknown Christ of Hinduism* (Darton, Longman and Todd, London 1964), p.54 (his italics).
- 17 Newbigin, op. cit., pp.193-5.
- 18 The position adopted in this section is not far from that of Vatican II's *Lumen Gentium*, art. 16, in W. M. Abbott, ed., *The Documents of Vatican II* (Chapman, London and Dublin 1966, pp.34f.).
- 19 Newbigin, op. cit., p.205.