



Vol 9, No 2

September 1993

MELANESIAN JOURNAL OF THEOLOGY

Editorial: Biblical Interpretation and Local Culture

Revd Christopher Garland

Jewish and Early Christian Use of the Old Testament

Fr Michael Hough

Spiritual Powers in Paul's Writings

Marilyn Rowsome

Myth and Counter-myth in the Siane

Br Silas, SSF

Did Jesus Envisage a Gentile Mission?

Fr Peter Yeats

Christianity and other Religions

Mark Brimblecombe

The Distinctive Use of Psalms in Africa

Professor David Adamo

Contributors

Journal of the Melanesian Association of Theological Schools



K3.00



The *Melanesian Journal of Theology* aims to stimulate the writing of theology by Melanesians for Melanesians. It is an organ for the regular discussion of theological topics at a scholarly level by staff and students of the member schools of the Melanesian Association of Theological Schools (MATS), though contributions from non-members and non-Melanesians will be considered.

The *Melanesian Journal of Theology* is ecumenical, and it is committed to the dialogue of Christian faith with Melanesian cultures. The Editors will consider for publication all manuscripts of scholarly standard on matters of concern to Melanesian Christians, and of general theological interest. Manuscripts should be typed, double-spaced, and in duplicate.

The *Melanesian Journal of Theology* appears twice yearly, in April and October.

EDITORIAL ADDRESS:

Revd Christopher Garland
Lecturer in Theology
Newton College
PO Box 162
Popondetta, Oro Province
Papua New Guinea

SUBSCRIPTIONS ADDRESS:

Revd Dr Wesley Kigasung
Secretary/Treasurer of MATS
Martin Luther Seminary
PO Box 80
Lae, Morobe Province
Papua New Guinea

SUBSCRIPTION RATES:

	<i>Developing Countries</i>	<i>Developed Countries</i>	
A. <i>Overseas</i>			
Surface mail	US\$7.00	US\$10.00	£7.00
Air mail	US\$10.00	US\$13.00	£10.00
Single copy	US\$4.00	US\$4.00	£4.00
B. <i>PNG</i>			
Surface mail	K5.00		
Air mail	K6.00		
Single copy	K3.00		
MATS membership	K12.00		

Christianity and Other Religions

Mark Brimblecombe

We need a theology of other religions, if we are to see the revealing activity of God in its widest context (Keith Ward)¹

According to Gen 1-11, the common ancestors of every tribe understood some truth about God, and His purposes for humankind. However, sinful rebellion against God led to the fragmentation of the human family, resulting in the proliferation of tribal groups. The different religions, which emerged from these diverse groups, may be explained in relation to this “Genesis” story. In this regard, it is worth noting that scholars of religious history contest the once-popular evolutionary theory of the development of religions (i.e., from animism, to polytheism, to monotheism).² Instead, we may regard the religions of the world as containing a remnant of God’s original revelation of Himself, combined with acquired knowledge about God, through reason and nature. However, alongside this, there has also been the darkening of the human mind, because of its rejection of the one true God, and His revelation to humankind (Rom 1: 18-32; 2:12-16).

Can There be a True Religion?

Each of the different religions in the world presents their own picture of reality. Each has its own ideals and goals. While the religions contain much, which is symbolism, there is also a lot of factual content. There are claims about the nature of ultimate reality, human history, and destiny. To the extent that a religion embodies truth claims, these claims can be challenged. Where two views are contradictory, only one of them can be true logically. As Keith Ward says:

Where claims conflict, we have to choose one. That is not arrogance, nor should it lead to intolerance. It is logically unavoidable, and compatible with the greatest respect for the different opinions of others. It is, quite simply, our opinion that it is true. But that does not mean it is just “true for us” (a senseless phrase, if ever there was one), as though something else could be true for other people. If it is true, it is true. Either God created the

¹ Keith Ward, *Holding Fast to God: A Reply to Don Cupitt*, London UK: SPCK, 1982, p. 163.

² Wolfhart Pannenberg, “Toward a Theology of the History of Religions”, in G. H. Kehm, tran., *Basic Questions in Theology: Collected Essays*, vol 2, Philadelphia PA: Westminster Press, 1971, pp. 63-118.

world, or he did not. We cannot demonstrate its truth to everyone. But we believe it to be true. There is no escape from the necessity of making such choices.³

So, religion is not a matter of preference, but of making a statement about truth and reality. The truth is personal, concrete, and historical.⁴ The ideology of pluralism, which considers everything as subjective and relative, must be rejected. As C. S. Lewis puts it, Christianity is somewhat like mathematics in this regard:

If you are a Christian, you do not have to believe that all other religions are simply wrong, all through. . . . If you are a Christian, you are free to think that all these religions, even the queerest ones, contain at least some hint of the truth. When I was an atheist, I had to try to persuade myself that most of the human race has always been wrong about the question that mattered to them most. When I became a Christian, I was able to take a more liberal view. But, of course, being a Christian does mean thinking that, where Christianity differs from other religions, Christianity is right, and they are wrong. As in arithmetic – there is only one right answer to a sum, and all other answers are wrong; but some of the wrong answers are much nearer being right than others.⁵

Christianity is True, But Does not Have All the Truth That Can be Known

The Christian points to Jesus as the master-clue, in the common search of humanity for salvation, and invites others to follow.⁶

Christianity claims to be true, in what it says about God, and His revelation in Jesus Christ. This truth is the gospel of Jesus Christ, the ultimate measure of truth and reality. It is not the truth of propositions only, but truth, found in the person of Jesus. Therefore, this is apprehended by commitment to a person, and not simply by intellectual analysis.

The Christian will not allow compromise, syncretism, or theological relativism, to obscure this essential message of the gospel of Jesus Christ. As Stephen Neill puts it:

³ Ward, *Holding Fast to God*, p. 164.

⁴ Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, Grand Rapids MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1989, p. 170.

⁵ C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, New York NY: Macmillan, 1943, p. 43.

⁶ Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, p. 158.

Simply as history, the event of Jesus Christ is unique. Christian faith goes a great deal further in its interpretation of that event. It maintains that, in Jesus, the one thing that needed to happen has happened, in such a way that it need never happen again. . . .

Making such claims, Christians are bound to affirm that all men need the gospel. For the human sickness, there is one specific remedy, and this is it. There is no other. Therefore, the gospel must be proclaimed to the ends of the earth, and to the end of time. The church cannot compromise on its missionary task without ceasing to be the church. If it fails to see, and to accept, this responsibility, it is changing the gospel into something other than itself. . . .

Naturally, to the non-Christian hearer, this must sound like crazy megalomania, and religious imperialism of the very worst kind. We must recognise the danger: Christians have, on many occasions, fallen into both of them. But we are driven back, ultimately, on the question of truth.⁷

But this does not mean that Christianity today has all the truth that can be known. The Christian expression of faith is, itself, always in the process of development. It begins with the definitive revelation of God in Jesus Christ, and moves toward the greater revelation of Christ at His second coming. “Now, I can know only imperfectly, but then I shall know, just as fully as I am, myself, known” (1 Cor 13:12, NJB). Christian truth and knowledge, from the perspective of limited human experience, must always grow, because the Christian faith is a relationship with an infinite and all-knowing God.

The apprehension of truth is also the task of every generation, as truth is expressed in terms intelligible for that generation. In this process, Christian truth is often redefined in clearer terms, and at other times, obscured by the dominant philosophies and ideologies of the age. At times, dialogue with other religions may help clarify the truth.

The Truth in Other Religions

When the apostle Paul spoke before the philosophers of Athens (Acts 17: 16-34), he recognised that God had already revealed to them certain truths about

⁷ Stephen Neill, *Crisis of Belief: The Christian Dialogue with Faith and No Faith*, London UK: Hodder & Stoughton, 1984, p. 31.

Himself and human reality.⁸ Like Paul, we should also appreciate that God has not left Himself without a witness in the world's religions and cultures.

If God is everywhere guiding people to an insight into His own reality, no great religion will be without the touch of God's grace. None will be just wrong, in its entirety. Each will have something of great, and maybe unique, value to contribute to our understanding of God. It would be a terribly restrictive view of God's love to say that He had only revealed Himself in one tradition, and not at all to others. We must believe, then, that something of God is truly seen in all the great religious traditions.⁹

Christians should be willing to learn from others, and be open to see the truth embodied in other religions. While the Christian believes that all the necessary truth for life is present in Christ, and His message, the criticism, and claims, of those in other religions may help in seeing more clearly this truth, which is implicit in the gospel. Christ is the true light, and we should welcome all reflections of that light in others.

There is something deeply repulsive in the attitude, sometimes found among Christians, which makes only grudging acknowledgment of the faith, the godliness, and the nobility to be found in the lives of non-Christians. Even more repulsive, is the idea that, in order to communicate the gospel to them, one must, as it were, ferret out their hidden sins, show that their goodness is not so good, after all, as a precondition for presenting the offer of grace in Christ.¹⁰

Other religions may also show us further truth and reality. Although, as Stephen Neill says, "we may find, in the end, that this also was an aspect of the message of Christ that we had somehow overlooked."¹¹

Salvation for Non-Christians?

God will be the final judge of who is saved, and who is not. This should be a warning to those who pretend to make a judgment in advance. At the second Vatican Council, the Roman Catholic church affirmed that there may be men and women, outside of the church, who have responded to the light they have, and so

⁸ Paul quotes one of their own Greek poets to show this (Acts 17:28).

⁹ Ward, *Holding Fast to God*, p. 154.

¹⁰ Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, p. 180.

¹¹ Neill, *Crises of Belief*, p. 283.

be saved.¹² These are people, who respond positively to God, and throw themselves upon His saving mercy (cf. Luke 18:13). Christians agree this is true of those persons mentioned in the Old Testament, who found forgiveness and fellowship with God. While they did not know Jesus, and His way of salvation, they were accepted by God, on the basis of their positive response (faith) to God, and His revelation to them (cf. Rom 4:3; Heb 11:1ff).

But what of those from other religious traditions? The apostle Peter indicates that the same is true of Gentiles, like Cornelius: “I now see how true it is that God has no favourites, but that, in every nation, the man who is god-fearing, and does what is right, is acceptable to Him” (Acts 10:34 NEB). God saves people by His grace, in response to their faith in Him (Eph 2:8). To people like Cornelius, the gospel of Jesus Christ brings knowledge of the basis of their salvation – the forgiveness of sins through the cross of Jesus. So, to those, like Cornelius (those who come to hear the gospel), and to those, who have never heard about Christ, we can apply C. S. Lewis’ observation, “We do know that no man can be saved, except through Christ; we do not know that only those who know Him can be saved through Him.”¹³ This, again, leaves open the possibility that some, who do not know Christ (not “all”, as the universalist claims), are, nevertheless, saved through Him, because of their positive response to God.

Conclusion

The conclusion, which Lesslie Newbigin gives to his own discussion of this topic, is filling. He describes his position as, “exclusivist, in the sense that it affirms the unique truth of the revelation in Jesus Christ, but it is not exclusivist, in

¹² Vatican II, *Lumen Gentium*, November 21, 1964. “Those, who, through no fault of their own, do not know the gospel of Christ, or His church, but who, nevertheless, seek God with a sincere heart, and, moved by grace, try, in their actions, to do His will, as they know it, through the dictates of conscience, those, too, may achieve eternal salvation. Nor shall divine providence deny the assistance necessary for salvation to those who, without any fault of theirs, have not yet arrived at an explicit knowledge of God, and who, not without grace, strive to lead a good life. Whatever good or truth is found among them, is considered by the church to be a preparation for the gospel, and given by Him who enlightens all men that they may, at length, have life. But, very often, deceived by the evil one, men have become vain in their reasonings, have exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and served the world rather than the Creator (cf. Rom 1:21 and 25). Or else, living and dying in this world without God, they are exposed to ultimate despair. Hence, to procure the glory of God, and the salvation of all these, the church, mindful of the Lord’s command, ‘preach the gospel to every creature’ (Mark 16:16), takes zealous care to foster the missions.” Vatican Council II, *The Conciliar and Post-Conciliar Documents*, A. Flannery, ed., New York NY: Costello Publishing, 1975, pp. 367-368.

¹³ Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, p. 65.

the sense of denying the possibility of the salvation of the non-Christian. It is inclusivist, in the sense that it refuses to limit the saving grace God to the members of the Christian church, but it rejects the inclusivism, which regards the non-Christian religions as vehicles of salvation. It is pluralist, in the sense of acknowledging the gracious work of God, in the lives of all human beings, but it rejects a pluralism, which denies the uniqueness and decisiveness of what God has done in Jesus Christ.¹⁴

Bibliography

Lewis, C. S., *Mere Christianity*, New York NY: Macmillan, 1943.

Stephen Neill, *Crisis of Belief: The Christian Dialogue with Faith and No Faith*, London UK: Hodder & Stoughton, 1984.

Newbigin, Leslie, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, Grand Rapids MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1989.

Pannenberg, Wolfhart, "Toward a Theology of the History of Religions", in G. H. Kehm, tran., *Basic Questions in Theology: Collected Essays*, vol 2, Philadelphia PA: Westminster Press, 1971.

Vatican Council II, *The Conciliar and Post-Conciliar Documents*, A. Flannery, ed., New York NY: Costello Publishing, 1975.

Ward, Keith, *Holding Fast to God: A Reply to Don Cupitt*, London UK: SPCK, 1982.

Further Reading

Stephen Neill, *Crises of Belief: The Christian Dialogue with Faith and No Faith*, London UK: Hodder & Stoughton, 1984, especially pp. 30-33, 276ff.

Christopher Lamb, "The Claim to be Unique", in *A Lion Handbook: The World's Religions*, Tring UK: Lion Publishing, 1982, pp. 357-363.

Norman Anderson, "A Christian Approach to Comparative Religion", in Sir Norman Anderson, ed., *The World's Religions*, Grand Rapids MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1975, pp. 228-237.

¹⁴ Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, pp. 182-183.