

INTRODUCTION

THIS IS A BOOK ABOUT A QUESTION that is new to most of us today: Why are there other religions at all? If the true God is the Father of Jesus Christ, why did this God permit the rise and flourishing of other religions?

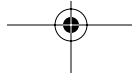
Although this question is new for us, it wasn't new for the biblical authors and early church thinkers. They had thought long and hard about this question, and came up with an intriguing set of answers. We have generally not recognized these answers, or if we have seen the answers, we have not imagined that they were answers to *this* question. Instead, reading with eyes that have been conditioned by the Enlightenment, we have overlooked them or dismissed them as ancient superstition.

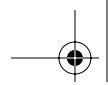
If there is one theme, or red thread, that runs through the following chapters, it is this: the biblical authors and early church theologians saw the religions not simply as human constructions but as spiritual projects as well. The religions are living and breathing beings, if you will, that have inner souls, derived in part from spiritual entities called "gods" by the Old Testament and "powers" by the New Testament. Not every bit of every religion is spiritual or directly linked to spiritual entities, but at least some parts of some of the religions are just that.

This does not rule out the presence of goodness, truth and beauty in many of the religions for the biblical authors and early church Fathers. Nor does it mean that we cannot learn anything of value from the religions.

But it does mean that this spiritual dimension of the religions, which helps answer the question above and which has been generally ignored or dismissed in academic studies of the religions, must be taken seriously if we are to understand a biblical and early Christian view of non-Christian religions.

I am not the first to advance this argument. But while this perspective



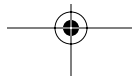
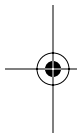


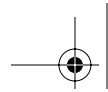
has been addressed—usually tangentially—in many articles and parts of books, I believe this is the first book-length attempt to tackle this question directly and at length. And it may be the first to find this common thread linking the biblical authors and the earliest major theologians. Much of the information I present is neither new nor startling (except to those who are not familiar with these sources), but I think this book shows lines of connection in a new light, which in turn sheds new light on the question we have posed.

Before we go any further I need to clarify something. I have posed my question in a way that will be accessible to you, my readers. The biblical authors and the rest of the ancient world, however, might not have understood talk about “other religions” as if they were distinct from other areas of life (which we call “culture” and “society” and “philosophy” and so on). They did not consider, as we have tended to believe since the Enlightenment, religion to be separate from “nonreligious” concerns. Everything in daily life and society had to do with Yahweh (in the Old Testament) or the Father and Jesus and the Holy Spirit (in the New Testament). This has implications for whether there is truth in “other religions,” a subject we will take up in a few pages, and then repeatedly in this book.

If the biblical authors did not think of religion as distinct from anything at all in life, neither did they think of “other religions” as separated from true religion. By this I don’t mean that they thought other religions were true, but that they typically did not even think in terms of “other religions.” They saw people of other nations as following other gods and therefore failing to know the one true God. We will discuss what they meant by “other gods,” but the point we need to know at the start is that the modern concept of “religion” as a domain somehow separated from the totality of life was unknown or dismissed by the ancient world. Some biblical authors might have believed there are other supernatural beings (called “gods”) in rebellion against the only true God, but none thought of “religion” in the modern sense—as a belief system that is separated from the rest of life, or of rival belief systems that can be considered apart from active loyalty to or rebellion against the true God.

Yet because I am writing for moderns and not ancients, I will talk in terms of “the religions” and hope you will remember this important ca-



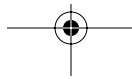


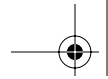
veat. When I speak in this book about biblical and early church ideas about “the religions,” I mean their ancient way of understanding religion as inseparable from all of life, and that no human beings in “other religions” can be considered apart from the real truths of the real God.

I don’t mean to imply that all the biblical authors said the same thing, or that the theologians completely agreed on the religions. There is theological diversity in the Bible on the nature and reason for the religions, and each of the four early church thinkers I consider had different perspectives, largely related to the problems of their own cultural environments. But there is a developing argument, you might say, about the spiritual nature of the religions. By “developing,” I mean it is cumulative, each chapter building on the preceding. Paul builds on what he finds in his Torah, and Justin Martyr develops what he finds in Paul and other parts of the New Testament. Irenaeus uses Justin but then goes in a different direction to try to understand historical dynamics. Clement learns from Irenaeus but innovates significantly. Origen listens to his predecessors, but adds a note of warning. While each of these four theologians has something different to say, and to some ears they might sound discordant, each voice has genuine biblical resonance. In other words, each of these early thinkers could claim, with justification, that he was teaching a biblical approach to the religions.

There are two extremes which often surface in Christian theology of the religions. One is what we might call the fundamentalist extreme. This tends to equate other religions with the demonic, suggesting that other faiths are netherworlds of unmixed darkness that should never be studied and about which there is nothing to appreciate. Christians of this persuasion think the only proper response to the religions is exorcism. Although this book highlights the biblical and early church focus on the spiritual (with emphasis on “darkly” spiritual) nature of the religions, and considers the possibility that some of the religions are animated by rebellious powers, it does not assert that this is the case for every religion, or every part of every religion. I am reminded that the history of Christianity is also interlaced with the demonic. I also highlight in these pages the biblical and early church recognition that God has left traces of his truth and beauty even in religions whose origins were problematic.

Part of the reason why many Christians today take this thoroughly





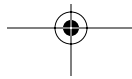
negative approach to other religions is because they take a modern approach to “religion,” which, as I have already suggested, separates religion from other aspects of life. These Christians can acknowledge truth or beauty in non-Christian “culture” or “philosophy,” and are often quick to add that because “all truth is God’s truth,” God is ultimately the source of this truth and beauty. Therefore (they would say) God can show us his truth and beauty through Plato and Mozart (who were not orthodox Christians) and non-Christian scientists—but not through non-Christian religions, lest it be suggested that people can be saved through other religions.

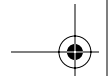
Now, I am an orthodox Christian who believes salvation comes only through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. There is salvation in no one else (Acts 4:12). But the question of who can be saved has nothing to do with the questions of where we can find truth and where that truth came from. To restrict truth to culture and science and other areas is to use a modern definition of “religion” which the biblical authors would not recognize. They did not distinguish religion from any other area of life. There were no neutral domains that provided truth or beauty apart from the one true God.

Even we moderns recognize this at least at a tacit level. When we try to distinguish what is “cultural” from what is “religious,” we often have difficulty. How can American respect for law and order, for example, be distinguished from America’s Christian heritage which prized a God who revealed his laws and judgment against those who broke them? How can East Asian emphasis on respect for elders be separated from the Confucian teaching about filial piety?¹

Religion and culture, then, are not easily separated. Even moderns (and modern conservative Christians) who think religion is separated from culture concede that many things in culture are rooted in religion or have a religious dimension. At the same time they recognize some truth and some beauty in culture. This suggests there might be truth and beauty in other religions, for two reasons: (1) much, if not all, of culture

¹Some might argue that Confucianism is more ethical than religious, but the religious dimension is clear in Confucius’s *Analects*. Confucius said that Heaven was the author of his virtue and object of his prayers (7.23; 3.13; 7.35) and that nature was under Heaven’s control (16.8; 10.25).





is rooted in religion, and (2) if God is the author of truth, then all truth—no matter where it is found—must come, at least indirectly, from God. Another way of putting this is to say that if we see both truth and error in various cultures, we should not be surprised to see truth and error in various religions—since religion and culture are so intimately connected.

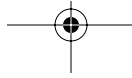
The other extreme that appears in Christian theology of the religions is what I would call “religious relativism.” This is the position that every major religion is equally true and equally false, or at least similarly imperfect in their crude approximations of the divine. No one religion, as this position would put it, is more true than another. Folks who take this position also tend to say that God is not a person who has revealed himself, so we cannot know that one religion is the true one. Instead, various human societies over time have constructed their own theologies based on their own religious experience, and the latter is always so conditioned by historical particularities that no objective knowledge of the divine is possible. At best we can say that the divine exists, but we are on very thin ice when we try to say what the divine looks like.

I reject this extreme as well. The real event of Jesus of Nazareth in human history and his historically-attested death and resurrection declare to the world that God has indeed revealed Himself in definitive fashion. These events also show that we can know God by knowing Jesus Christ. And by knowing Jesus Christ, we can know something of the relative truth of other religions. (This, by the way, is the key to discerning what is true and false, right and wrong, in all the religions—by measuring them against the truth of Jesus Christ.)

Each of these two extremes would cut out significant portions of the biblical and early church approach to the religions. The fundamentalist extreme would deny that anything of value can be seen in the religions, while the religiously relativist perspective would dismiss the existence of other “gods” or “powers” as pre-critical superstition.

Neither option is open to us, since those things which both options reject are found in Scripture. The Bible attributes positive significance to some aspects of other religions, while it also points to darker powers. This is why the early church theologians could discuss the religions in both positive and negative terms.

In other words, there is tension in the Bible. There are biblical reasons





for learning about and from the religions (see chap. 2). There are signs that God has used the religions to protect people from greater evil (see Clement's argument in chap. 7), and indications that the Logos has scattered seeds of beauty and truth in some of the religions (see Justin's proposition in chap. 5). There are also biblical reasons for being wary of the religions (see Origen's warning in chap. 8), because of the demonic nature of some dimensions of some of the religions (see Paul's suggestion in chap. 4). Problems come, for both biblical theology and Christian relations with non-Christian neighbors and friends, when that tension is dissolved. Either the extremes of fundamentalism and relativism resurface, or other distortions arise.

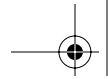
A common approach to these biblical themes in the last century has been to try to "get behind" the text to what was "really" there. For example, there is common agreement among scholars that ancient Israel believed, at least in its earlier history, in a "divine council"—other heavenly beings with whom Yahweh consulted or at least to whom He delegated certain functions. Much scholarly work was devoted to the question of which ancient Near Eastern myths this belief came from, or how it morphed over the centuries into the "myth" of rebellious gods and angels.

I am not concerned with those questions. My concern is to show that many biblical authors, in both Testaments, believed in the real existence of other beings or powers, and that the divine council is part and parcel of this belief. I am interested in the fact that they considered these powers to be involved in the genesis and ongoing existence of other religions and that the early church picked up and developed this view. In other words, I take a literary and theological, more than a critical-historical, approach. It matters less to me what critics think "really" happened than what the biblical authors themselves thought was happening.²

Since I believe that the Bible is the Word of God, and the Spirit therefore speaks to us through its view of other religions, I think these biblical and early church convictions cannot and should not be dismissed, and

²In later chapters I discuss briefly the influence of surrounding cultures on certain biblical authors and the development of the Bible's treatment of the divine council. But while some critics try to determine how and why these themes developed, and distinguish confidently the mythical from non-mythical, my intent is simply to note the presence of these themes and their meaning for other religions.





that they can in fact shed new light on how Christians today can understand and relate to other religions and their devotees. And, not unimportantly, they can also tell us a little something about why there are other religions at all. At the same time, like other questions such as why God permits evil, there is far more to that question that is shrouded in mystery.

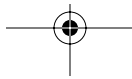
Not only is there mystery, but complexity as well. I will suggest in this book that the Bible and the early church were on to something when they pointed to the spiritual dimension of all religions. But I do not want to imply that that is all there is to the religions. Human agency and imagination are also involved. As for any phenomenon, there are several levels of explanation.

Take a lie, for example. At one level, Christians believe Satan might have had something to do with it, since he is the “father of lies” (Jn 8:44). But a human being also has a will and therefore chooses to lie. If we blame Satan, we must also blame the individual. But we can also blame the surrounding culture, if at another level it reinforces the lie with what sociologists call “plausibility structures.” So if there are untruths in other religions, they cannot be blamed solely on spiritual powers operating in or behind those religions. There are also real human choices and larger social forces.

This also means that religions are caused by both natural and supernatural factors. All are ultimately under God of course, as we said before when we talked about the ancient view of “religion.” But even the ancients recognized that things happen not only by the permission and power of God but also by the will and imagination of human beings. The New Testament authors, for instance, said that Jesus was killed by the Romans and the Jewish leaders (Acts 2:36) but also by God’s will (Rev 13:8). The natural and supernatural work together in history and in the same historical events.³ So too in the religions. If there are supernatural causes, there are also natural causes.

While this book focuses primarily on the supernatural powers that shape and manipulate religions, I do not mean to imply that religion is

³I do not mean to suggest that the natural and supernatural always cooperate as distinct powers. Often, as in human willing, it is impossible to separate the divine from the human: “For it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure” (Phil 2:13).



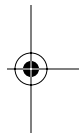
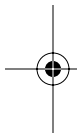


the only domain⁴ in which these forces operate. As Origen suggested, there may be supernatural powers at work—and in nefarious ways—in education, entertainment, politics and other kinds of culture. But this book does not discuss those possibilities.

I should also add that my treatment of these texts and issues reflects my Reformed theology. In other words, I believe in a big God who works in ways that burst all of our conceptual boxes—with contrasting approaches which sometimes seem paradoxical or even contradictory to us but which for him are no problem. Hence, the rebellion of angels who were intended to be dutiful servants was neither a surprise nor an obstacle to a God who sovereignly superintends everything for his ultimate purposes. The development of new religions that use some of his truths for purposes opposed to his declared designs—even these are woven into his ultimate design.

This also shapes my view of biblical inspiration. Because God is a big God, he can use pagan thinking to influence biblical authors in such a way that the final result in the biblical text is still exactly what he wants. If all truth is God's truth—and it is—then God can direct pagans toward light and then direct the biblical authors to use that “pagan” light in precisely the way that God wants.⁵

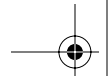
Finally, the reader will notice that I use the masculine pronoun for God. Rather than take undue space here to explain why, I have added an appendix at the end of the book for those who are curious.



⁴Because I speak to moderns in a modern context, I find it nearly impossible to avoid language that suggests religion is a domain separate from other aspects of reality—a notion inconceivable for the ancients and difficult even for moderns who consider the problem. But the reader should note my earlier qualifications of such language.

⁵I do not mean to suggest that the Bible is simply reworked paganism—only that where there are signs of influence from other cultures, God is still the final author.





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THE SCANDAL OF PARTICULARITY

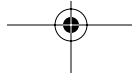
Why Has the True God Come to Only Some People at Some Times?

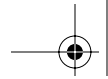
MARY OGBU IS A TWENTY-THREE-YEAR-OLD Nigerian mother of two. One year ago, after wandering into a Pentecostal church in her city, she became a Christian. Her three-year-old son had been very sick, and prayer by an elder at the church healed the boy. Mary believed the elder's testimony that Jesus was the Lord of all the gods, and that she must follow Jesus to be saved.

Now, however, Mary is confused. Her own mother, who is not a Christian, has asked her why she no longer makes sacrifices to the "orishas," Nigerian deities of nature and spirit. "And Mary," her mother asked, "why can't you worship both the orishas *and* Jesus?"

Mary had grown up believing that the skies and earth were full of all sorts of spirits and gods and demons. She had seen their power. People she knew had gotten sick, and some had died, after witch doctors had put curses on them in the name of those spirits and gods. Now that she was a Christian, she believed that Jesus' dying on the cross saved her from hell. But what about all the spirits and gods? Where was Jesus in relation to them? And where did they come from in the first place? Mary was confused.

Shang is a history professor in southern China. His specialty is the history of India and the Middle East. Three years ago, while studying for the second time at an American university in the Midwest, he became a Christian.





Shang had been an atheist before he came to faith. He remembers fending for himself for several years as a teenager during the Cultural Revolution because Red Guards had taken his schoolteacher parents to the countryside to work in the fields. His teachers in high school and university had said that religion is only for the weak-minded, and he believed them. Yet when he came to the American campus many years later, Christians invited him to church. The gospel sounded strange. But he was overwhelmed by the love that these Christians showed—especially when he had lost his wallet, and it was returned with two hundred dollars still inside.

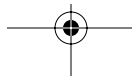
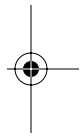
Shang was persuaded that Jesus was God in the flesh two thousand years ago, but he still wondered about other religions. His wife is still a Buddhist. Is she wrong? Or is the Buddha just another version of the same god whom Jesus represents? Someday, he tells himself, he wants to study what Christian theologians have to say about these things. These questions puzzle him.

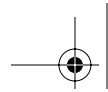
Sarah is a soccer mom in Virginia. She was raised as a Lutheran all her life, but now she has questions that no one around her, including her pastor, seems able to answer. She was particularly troubled by Christianity's limited historical reach. It didn't start until the first century C.E. What about all the people who lived before then? And further, what about the millions and millions of people who never heard the gospel? Were they all damned because they never accepted a gospel they never had a chance to hear?

Two years ago she took a course on the world religions at a local college. Just for fun, she thought. But it became a source of frustration. It wasn't the work or concepts she had trouble with—she made an A-without too much strain. The problem was that some of the world religions seemed to have some real truth. And some of the representatives of those religions who came to class were really neat people.

All of a sudden, after thirty years of accepting her faith without much question, she was disturbed. Why was Christianity relatively local? Sure, it was the largest world religion. But so many, throughout history, had not been exposed to it. Why wouldn't God have shown it to them if it was the only true religion?

And what about these other religions, which for the first time now





seemed a bit attractive? Not that she would convert, but they had some real truth and beauty—along with elements that seemed really wrong and sometimes evil. If Jesus is the fullest form of God, why had God permitted these religions to rise and flourish? Where was God in all of this?

The Scandal of Particularity

All these questions have to do with what scholars have called “the scandal of particularity.” This means the offense that is caused by the idea that the Christian God did not reveal himself fully in all times and places, but has restricted that revelation to certain particular times and peoples and places.

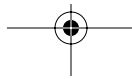
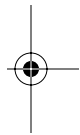
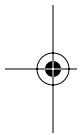
This scandal is not new. More than three centuries ago John Bunyan wondered why such a small proportion of the planet had access to the Christian gospel: “Could I think that so many ten thousands in so many Countreys and Kingdoms, should be without the knowledge of the right way to Heaven?”¹

But this question goes back further than three centuries. In fact, Christian thinkers have wrestled with it since the beginning. This is because religious pluralism was at least as great a problem then as it is now. In its first few centuries the church was confronted by as much religious diversity as exists in a major metropolis today, and its first theologians worked hard to relate Jesus to Greco-Roman religion and philosophy. In the second and third centuries (as we shall see in the chapters that follow) Irenaeus and the Greek apologists (Justin Martyr and Clement of Alexandria) developed theologies of history and revelation that understood God to be at work in non-Christian traditions—and understood Christ, the Logos, to be teaching and saving souls outside of Israel and the church.

Dealing with the Scandal in the Past

Yet for most of the first millennium, most Christians were convinced that *extra ecclesiam nulla salus*: outside the church there is no salvation. As

¹John Bunyan, *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*, ed. Robert Sharrock (New York: Oxford University Press, 1962), p. 31.





Cyprian (d. 258) put it, “You cannot have God for your Father if you don’t have the Church for your mother.”² Cyprian could say this because he shared the prevailing presumption that the gospel had been promulgated everywhere and that everyone had the opportunity to accept it. Even Augustine (354-430), who knew some African tribes had not yet heard, generally restricted salvation to the church: he believed that God had foreseen that those Africans would not accept Christ if he were offered to them.

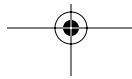
In the second millennium attitudes began to change. Abelard (1079-1142) spoke of pagan saints such as Job, Noah and Enoch. Pope Gregory VII (d. 1085) conceded that Muslims who obey the Qur’an might find salvation in the bosom of Abraham, and St. Francis (1181-1226) referred to Muslim “brothers.” Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) introduced “implicit faith” and the “baptism of desire” for those who have not heard but would have embraced the gospel. Dante’s *Divina Commedia* (c. 1314) places Avicenna, Averroes (Muslim philosophers) and Saladin (a Muslim ruler) in limbo, along with Greek and Roman sages and heroes from antiquity. Some Anabaptists (16th century) talked about an interfaith church of spiritual Semites with three covenants: Jewish, Christian and Muslim.

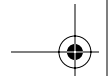
The discovery of the New World and its teeming millions of unevangelized souls stimulated new thinking about how non-Christians could be saved—by special illumination at the point of death, for example, or by evangelism after death. On these and other grounds, the likes of seventeenth-century Reformed divine Richard Baxter allowed for some outside the church to be saved.

By the nineteenth century Pius IX had redefined *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* to refer only to those *culpably* outside of the church. Vatican II (1962-1965) proceeded further to say that the religions contain seeds of the Word and “may sometimes be taken as leading the way (*paedagogia*) to the true God and as a preparation for the Gospel.”³

²*Extra ecclesiam nulla salus*, “outside of the church there is no salvation” (Cyprian *Epistles* 73.21). And a note on a similar line in *Epist.* 4.4. For a more detailed treatment of this and other related texts, see Francis A. Sullivan, *Salvation Outside the Church?* (New York: Paulist, 1992), pp. 18-24.

³*Ad Gentes* 1.3.





More Recent Christian Thinking About the Religions

For much of the twentieth century Christian thinking about the religions was dominated by the question of salvation: can non-Christians be saved? In 1983 Alan Race developed a typology that has been used to understand this question until recently: pluralism, inclusivism and exclusivism (also known as restrictivism). Pluralism is the position that there are many saviors, and Jesus is just one of them. Exclusivists contend that Jesus is the only savior, and explicit confession of Jesus as savior is necessary before one dies.

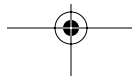
Inclusivists maintain that while Christ is the only way to the Father, explicit knowledge of him is not. They believe “good” Buddhists can be saved by Jesus if they recognize their inability to save themselves and cry out for mercy. Inclusivists say these Buddhists are casting themselves upon Christ, who is God’s mercy—but without knowing his name.

More recently this typology has collapsed, and the question of salvation has now taken a radical turn. Joseph DiNoia was the first prominent scholar to signal this new turn, and S. Mark Heim has given it its fullest explication.⁴ They have argued that inclusivism is incoherent because the religions have different goals. Inclusivism seems to suggest that other religions seek a goal similar to that of Christians: union with an infinite, personal God.⁵ How then is one to make sense of Theravada Buddhists, who don’t believe in such a God and have no such goal?

Not only is inclusivism problematic in view of the plurality of goals in the religions, but closer inspection seems to indicate that all the religions are exclusive (restrictivist, in a sense) in their claims. That is, if we look at all the philosophical and moral and liturgical dimensions of the religions, we find they all teach that their religious goals can be met by following their religion alone—by adopting their methods during this life. Hence each religion is a “one and only,” the only way to its kind of salvation. So inclusivism does not seem coherent because it assumes there

⁴Joseph DiNoia, “The Universality of Salvation and the Diversity of Religious Aims,” *World Mission*, Winter 1981-1982, pp. 4-15; S. Mark Heim, *Salvations: Truth and Difference in Religion* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1995).

⁵Of course, most inclusivist scholars are not so naive as to think that systems such as Advaita Vedanta (a Hindu philosophy) are theistic. The point that DiNoia and Heim make is that the ends of the religions are so radically diverse that it is impossible to think of them as leading by different routes to the same destination.





is only one salvation to be pursued by all the religions, when in reality there are many.

Pluralism doesn't make sense either, because it is crypto-inclusivist. It claims to believe in many goals but actually believes in only one: for John Hick, it is reality-centeredness; for Paul Knitter, orthopraxis that pursues liberation from social oppression; for Wilfred Cantwell Smith, universal common rationality and a universal quality of faith.⁶ Each of these goals is very different from what real practitioners of the religions say they are about. While real believers from different religions say very different things about the divine and how to reach it, pluralists insist they are all talking about the same thing. In effect, then, pluralists deny any pluralism of real consequence. Like inclusivists, they say there is only one end for all. For example, Gavin D'Costa has shown recently that while the Dalai Lama tells the world that no religion is the best, he also believes that only his dGe lugs school of Tibetan Buddhism sees reality in its fullness, and that one can achieve the highest level of enlightenment only by Tibetan Buddhist practice.⁷

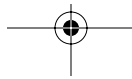
Different Salvations?

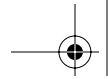
If the typology of pluralism/inclusivism/exclusivism no longer works, now what? Some Christian theologians are proposing a new way to look at whether or how non-Christians can be saved.⁸ They are saying not only that the religions teach different goals or salvations, but that there may actually *be* different salvations. These different ends are not for the same person at the same time but for different people, or for the same person at different times. And this reality of different ends may be "providentially" provided by God. In other words, Theravadin Buddhists may indeed experience nirvana, and Muslims may indeed find Paradise. But they won't experience the fullness of the triune God.

⁶John Hick, *The Myth of God Incarnate* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1977); John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1989); Paul Knitter, *No Other Name?* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1985); Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *Faith and Belief* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1979); W. C. Smith, *Towards a World Theology* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1981).

⁷Gavin D'Costa, *The Meeting of Religions and the Trinity* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 2000).

⁸S. Mark Heim, *The Depth of the Riches: A Trinitarian Theology of Religious Ends* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000).





So, they say, there are three types of religious fulfillment: lostness, imperfect and partial religious fulfillment through a non-Christian religion, and communion with the triune God—the last of which only Christian faith may provide.

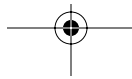
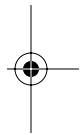
What are we to make of this new way of thinking about whether non-Christians are saved? It seems to relieve us of the tormenting idea that all those who don't confess Jesus are doomed to eternal punishment. It also helps us explain our intuition that there are all sorts of "middle" people—those who don't reject God and in fact seem to love truth and/or God, but for many diverse reasons never reach personal faith in Christ.

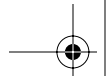
On the other hand, these theologians make very little appeal to Scripture. They make philosophical and theological arguments based on the Neoplatonic Great Chain of Being and its concept of plenitude (the idea that the cosmos must have a near-infinite number of levels and degrees of happiness). They also refer to the Christian doctrine of the Trinity that functions as a "template for diversity" (since God is differentiated among three different persons with different roles, it makes sense that there would be different kinds of salvation). They refer to Dante's circles of Paradise, in which each soul receives its dearest desire and where there are degrees not only of damnation but also of salvation.

But while this new model has some resonance with what the Bible teaches, there are problems. For example, the New Testament proclaims that every human being is a sinner and needs to be reconciled with the triune God, and that apart from such reconciliation there is "gnashing of teeth" (Mt 8:11-12; Lk 13:27-28). Yet this model suggests happy reconciliations apart from Christ. The most noted of these theologians, S. Mark Heim, also implies there is knowledge of God without the mediation of Jesus. Yet the New Testament points to Jesus Christ as the source of all true knowledge of God (Jn 1:9).⁹

The principal result of the scandal of particularity has been the worry that undeserving people would be damned. Even if we agree that we

⁹Heim claims that "the Trinity teaches us that Jesus Christ cannot be an exhaustive or exclusive source for knowledge of God nor the exhaustive and exclusive act of God to save us." Yet Heim does not wrestle with biblical texts (e.g., Jn 1:9; Acts 4:12) that suggest that Christ is the mediator of all knowledge of God and the only savior (*Depth of the Riches*, p. 134).





are all undeserving, it still seems unfair or disproportionate that some are damned for rejecting a gospel they never had a chance to accept. Most of the debate, in other words, has focused on the question of salvation.

Other Questions

But there are other questions that the scandal has raised. One is whether God is interested in those beyond Israel and the church: Does the fact that God sent the gospel only to some people at some times in history mean that he was not interested in other people in other eras?

This book is about the answers that both the Bible and the early church gave to this and the earlier questions about salvation, particularly the question about why God allowed other religions in the first place. Many readers may be surprised to learn that (a) the biblical authors and early church thinkers struggled with these questions, and (b) they came up with some sophisticated answers.

In chapters three and four we will look at how the Old and New Testaments contended with these problems. Then we will move on to early church thinkers: Justin Martyr (chap. 5), Irenaeus (chap. 6), Clement of Alexandria (chap. 7) and Origen (chapter 8).

But before we get to the Bible's answers to these questions, let us first turn to the Bible for some surprising positions its authors take on some more general questions about the religions: whether those outside the church and Israel knew anything true about God through their religions and, more provocatively, whether God's people had anything to learn from people outside the church and Israel.

