

How Shall They Believe In Him Of Whom They Have Not Heard? [1]: An Investigation Into the Question of Salvation Outside Formal Christianity

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I. Introduction

"On Drawing Lines, When Drawing Lines Is Rude" is the title of one of the chapters in a recent book by D. A. Carson.^[2] Professor Carson believes that Christians need to relearn the art of drawing lines: we must turn again to the Scriptures, reconsider what we believe, and engage in the painful business of separating

true doctrine from heresy, and the moral from the immoral. This will be neither easy nor comfortable, but, he insists, it is essential if the truth is to be preserved in our churches, and if we are to resist the forces of *Truth Decay*^[3] that are slowly destroying our world. Central to this will be the reaffirmation that Jesus Christ is the *universal* and *exclusive* Lord and Saviour, a statement which will seem particularly *rude* to the majority of people, for “nothing is so unacceptable to the [post-]modern temper as religious exclusivity.”^[4] But we must not be put off, because truth demands it.

It is certainly refreshing to hear someone of this calibre saying such things, and my immediate response is to feel inspired with the desire to do something about it. But then come the problems: the ‘*what about?*’ questions. Certainly, I know that whenever I preach Jesus as the only Saviour, there will be people in the congregation who quite understandably ask themselves: That’s all very well, but what about all the people who never get to hear about Him? Specifically: **1)** What about all the people who lived and died before Jesus was born? **2)** What about all those in the modern world who are not fortunate enough to hear the Gospel? **3)** And what about all those other religions?

Today, more than ever, we are aware that huge numbers of people live beyond the reach of the Christian message, even if as some predict the task of reaching all people is at least on the distant horizon.^[5] We have always known that the world’s religions claim huge numbers, but today with international travel and telecommunications, we have become acutely *aware* of devotion to other gods and sacred systems. World figures for religious adherence vary considerably, but the more conservative estimates are: 2,000,000,000 for Christianity (in a wide sense, including heresies like Mormonism); 900,000,000 for Islam; 850,000,000 for Hinduism (which is wide by definition); 850,000,000 agnostics or atheists; 350,000,000 Buddhists; 220,000,000 adherents of traditional Chinese religions; 16,000,000 Sikhs; and 12,000,000 Jews. Figures for the U.K. include: 6,000,000 Christians (those regularly attending a place of worship); 900,000 Muslims; 400,000 Hindus; 175,000 Sikhs; and 100,000 Jews.^[6]

· What do these figures say to us? Do they merely quantify the saved and the damned, or do they alert us to the possibility that God has salvific dealings with those outside the church? I certainly agree with Carson’s *viewpoint* - our message *must* be clear - why should anyone outside the church take us at all seriously, or more importantly, the Lord in whom we believe, if it is unclear? But when it comes to questions like these, surely we have to hesitate, and consider if there is not more to be said.

A. The Foundation

1. Scripture - The Source of Authority

Without question, the place to start is the Bible. The testimony of the Church down the ages points to this as the one source of authority for our fundamental beliefs. It is not that experience and tradition have no parts to play, for they help to apply and interpret the truths we uncover in the Scriptures, but our search must have a *centre of authority*, otherwise we are adrift. And yet it is this very centre that has been under attack for so long. The Bible has been the subject of intense critical examination for over two-hundred years, and many have come to feel that its authority as the ‘Word of God’ has been diminished, or even destroyed. And for some, the situation has seemed so appalling that they have reacted against the whole critical enterprise by rejecting it out of hand.^[7]

And yet criticism *itself* has never led the attack, but rather another factor which has frequently accompanied it: *the Enlightenment prejudice against the miraculous*.^[8] With its insistence that everything ‘unscientific’ in the Scriptures must be explained away, or later, ‘demythologised,’^[9] this prejudice has been extremely damaging. Apart from shaking many people’s faith, it has brought the Bible into disrepute both outside and inside the Church, and it has even damaged the cause of biblical study by alienating many Christian scholars.^[10] But there is no good reason why this prejudice should be accepted, and once it is rejected, the tools of criticism can prove positively helpful.

“...[T]he most radical criticism of the Scriptures, so far from destroying their value and authority as spiritual testimony, has only succeeded in making their real message stand out in luminous and rugged strength.”^[11]

· Countless evangelicals over the years have found it possible to retain a strong faith in the accuracy of the Scriptures without closing their eyes to good critical scholarship, and the last twenty years or so have seen an upsurge in the number of evangelical scholars who have (not uncritically) embraced some of its methods.^[12] There is a new confidence in the Bible, and in its authority to speak to us truly about Jesus.

2. Jesus - The Exclusive and Universal Saviour

Part of the truth it speaks tells us that Jesus is the *exclusive* and *universal* Saviour. Luke recounts the preaching of Peter:

“Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved.”^[13]

For Paul, Jesus is God’s only answer to the basic need of all humanity. Every person, in every time and place, is a sinner; each of us is involved, in some sense,^[14] in the transgression of our first father Adam, and so we all require the atoning work of the Second Adam, Jesus Christ.^[15] John teaches us that Jesus is “the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through [Him],”^[16] and that “He who has the Son [Jesus] has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life,”^[17] and in his Apocalypse, anyone whose name fails to appear in the Lamb’s Book of Life at the end of time is thrown into the lake of fire.^[18] For the writers of the New Testament there is “one Mediator between God and men [humanity], the Man Christ Jesus, who gave Himself a ransom for all.”^[19]

3. A Challenge to the Words of Scripture

Some, however, insist that Jesus Himself never made such unique claims, and that the New Testament presents us not so much with the *real* Jesus, the ‘Jesus of history,’ but with the ‘Christ of faith,’ who was largely an invention of the early church.^[20] But as William Lane Craig says:

“New Testament scholarship has reached something of a consensus that the historical Jesus came on the scene with an unparalleled sense of divine authority, the authority to stand and speak in the place of God Himself and to call men to repentance and faith. Moreover, the object of that faith was he himself...”^[21]

There can be no substantial separation between the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith. In one sense, there *is* a Christ of faith in the New Testament, but only because certain statements about Him are not open to historical verification. When John says that Jesus is the Logos, his statement certainly cannot be tested historically - it is a *faith statement* - but it is not reasonable to suppose that it is therefore “mythological,”^[22] for we are justified in believing that the Spirit of God can reveal truths that could never be known apart from further revelation. John assures us that Jesus believed exactly this:

“I have much more to say to you, more than you can now bear. But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth.”^[23]

In fact, to make a *sharp* separation is to deny that Jesus is the Messiah. If one set of important statements about Jesus in the New Testament is true, and the other false, then God has not inspired and protected the message about this man Jesus. But how could God fail to do so if Jesus really is the Messiah?^[24] Would God leave us to grope around in the dark, hoping in human reconstructions about His Messiah? The truth is that the real Jesus is the Jesus of history *and* the Christ of faith. The Bible presents us with a choice: either we bow to the Christ of Scripture, or we reject Him - there is no middle way.

4. An Apologetic for the Words of Scripture

Someone who seeks a middle way is John Hick. He brands as “absolute dogmatists” those who regard the “Fourth Gospel sayings of Christ...without question as historical.”^[25] Apparently, unless we disregard these exclusive claims, we are being “pre-critical.” But even if these *actual words* are not historical

(though that is contestable), they are certainly historical in the sense that they capture the vision Jesus had about His ministry. It is virtually beyond doubt that Jesus believed His Messiahship to have implications for all people in every time and place, because His understanding of that rôle was intimately bound up with the Jewish belief in the Kingdom of God, a belief which was *universal* in its scope.

As David Jenkins points out, the Jews believed “that God controls history for the sake of his people,”^[26] and that the ultimate goal towards which everything was being directed was the Kingdom of God. Although this began as a temporal hope, it developed into a transcendent hope, which many expected to be fulfilled only at the end of history in connection with the appearance of the Messiah. (In the event, the Messiah’s coming was to involve two Advents: the First, inaugurating that Kingdom and inviting anyone who will to join it, and the Second, consummating that Kingdom at the end of time). But whatever the details about the coming of this Kingdom, it is clear that the Hebrew vision was *universal in scope*, for it held implications for *all peoples in all times and places*.

i) On the one hand, the coming of the Kingdom was associated with the Day of the Lord when all people everywhere would be judged.

“For with fire and with his sword the Lord will execute judgement upon *all* men, and many will be those slain by the Lord.”^[27]

ii) But on the other hand, the Kingdom would include people from all nations. Judgement was seen as universal, but so was the offer of hope, for the Kingdom would include some from outside the Abrahamic Covenant.

“...[F]oreigners who bind themselves to the Lord...I will bring to my holy mountain and give them joy in my house of prayer.”^[28]

iii) Nevertheless, this hope for Gentiles was specifically tied to allegiance to Yahweh, whose Kingdom it would be, and “Israel’s vocation [was] to convey the divine invitation to the whole world.”^[29]

“Turn to me and be saved, all you ends of the earth; for I am God, and there is no other.”^[30]

“And many peoples and powerful nations will come to Jerusalem to seek the Lord Almighty and to entreat him. This is what the Lord Almighty says: ‘In those days ten men from *all languages and nations* will take firm hold of one Jew by the hem of his robe and say, ‘*Let us go with you*, because we have heard that God is with you.’”^[31]

· The Jews hoped for a Kingdom that would be universal in scope, for it would involve all people whether by way of inclusion or rejection - and what is inescapable is the fact that *Jesus saw His Messiahship as inextricably bound up with that hope*.

“...[W]e can have little doubt that in his self-understanding Jesus saw both his living and his dying as centrally associated with God’s bringing in of his Kingdom.”^[32]

We can also have little doubt that, as the Messiah of that universal Kingdom, Jesus saw His position as *unique* in history. His claim is not only to be the King of the Jews, but *the Lord of all*.

B. Drawing Some Lines

If it is true that Jesus is Lord of all, then how are we to deal with the questions that were raised earlier? What about those who lived and died before Jesus was even born? They were never in a position to know anything about Him.

These people can be divided into two groups:

i) those who were committed to Yahweh, and

- ii) those who were not (for whatever reason).
- i) Scripture is clear about the first group. Those who genuinely trusted in Yahweh will receive a place in the Kingdom along with believers in Christ.

“These [of Old Testament times] were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised. God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect.”[\[33\]](#)

The key to this is ‘faith in God’ as understood from God’s dealings with Abraham in Genesis. Paul reminds his Galatian readers that “Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness,”[\[34\]](#) and teaches them that this constituted *an announcement of the gospel itself, within the Pentateuch, in advance of Christ’s advent.*

“The Scripture foresaw that God would justify the Gentiles [and Jews][\[35\]](#) by faith, and announced the gospel in advance to Abraham.”

Scripture therefore teaches that anyone who lived and died before Christ, having true faith in Yahweh, will be saved. But it is also clear that this salvation is only ever as a consequence of Christ’s work on the Cross.

“...[Jesus] has died as a ransom to set them [those under the first covenant] free from the sins committed under the first covenant.”[\[36\]](#)

Christ’s offering is therefore equally valid for all future time and all past time, and so all who placed their faith in Yahweh before Christ will be included in the Kingdom of God, along with everyone who has believed, or will believe, in Jesus.

ii) Since the first group can be understood as including all believers in Yahweh (B.C.) and all believers in Jesus (A.D.), the second group can be redefined as: *those who do not respond to the Gospel.*[\[37\]](#) This second group then falls into two subgroups:

- a) those who reject the Gospel, despite having substantial knowledge of it through the witness of Christians (or Israel), and
- b) those who never have the chance to hear it.

a) It seems to me, that if anyone flatly rejects the message about God, if it is faithfully spoken and demonstrated in love, then God is neither unjust nor unloving if He condemns that person. He is not unjust, because everyone is guilty before God without exception[\[38\]](#) - nobody deserves to be offered salvation - and He is not unloving, because He has made an offer of forgiveness that has been consciously rejected.

However, much care is needed when ‘drawing lines’ in this area. Lesslie Newbigin believed, certainly at this point, that no-one should attempt to draw lines at all. Can we always be sure, for instance, when a person seems to reject the Gospel, that the message they heard accurately represented the truth? Can we be sure that they had no psychological or philosophical barriers to hearing that message correctly, even if it was faithfully preached?[\[39\]](#) These are not attempts to ‘let everyone off the hook.’ The point is that none of us is in the position to see things as God sees them, and although we *do* know that outright rejection of God forfeits salvation, we cannot always know - maybe we can never know - when a real rejection has taken place. That is God’s business, not ours.

“I am astounded at the arrogance of theologians who seem to think that we are authorized, in our capacity as Christians, to inform the rest of the world about who is to be vindicated and who is to be condemned at the last judgement.”[\[40\]](#)

None of this negates the business of evangelism. It merely reminds us of our need for humility; for it may well be that some whom we are tempted to dismiss for ‘rejecting the Gospel,’ are known to God as those who have never heard.

b) So what about those who have never heard? The remainder of this essay is concerned with this question, looking briefly at the main arguments given for the various positions held: exclusivism, inclusivism (soft and hard), pluralism and universalism.[\[41\]](#)

II. ...isms, Hard and Soft...

A. Exclusivism

The exclusivist's answer is this: Those who never hear the Gospel remain in their sins, and are therefore damned. Harold Lindell is very forthright about it: there is no possibility for anyone to be redeemed unless they hear the specific content of the Gospel message.

“God does not reveal Himself redemptively through other means than . . . through His children's missionary activity to a lost world.”[\[42\]](#)

John Stott, in his 1975 commentary on the 1974 Lausanne Covenant, says much the same:

“What, then, about those ignorant of the Gospel? Are we to say that they are ignorant of God altogether, including those who adhere to non-Christian religions? No. *We recognize that all men have some knowledge of God*.... Such knowledge of God is not saving knowledge, however. *We deny that this can save*.... So, far from saving them, their knowledge actually condemns them. And they are without excuse (Rom. 1:20).”[\[43\]](#)

The great appeal of this position is that it seems, at first glance, to be the most faithful to Scripture, because it appears to agree with certain statements in the New Testament such as Acts 4:12[\[44\]](#), and yet arguably it is *unfaithful*, because it fails to deal with the *whole* of Scripture. The exclusivist is satisfied that God is completely *just* in condemning all those who have never heard the Gospel. A ‘Calvinist’ will say that they are simply not elect, and that no-one can criticise God for His decision to predestine people to destruction.[\[45\]](#) An ‘Arminian’ will be concerned that the evangelistic mission of the church has not kept in step with the Spirit, but that God is still just to condemn. But these address only *one half* of the problem. God is surely *just* to condemn, but there is more to God's character than sheer justice: He is also *loving*. John even sums up God's character that way: “God is love,”[\[46\]](#) and throughout the Psalms we are reminded of the great and excellent *loving-kindness* of God. (Newer translations lose something of the emphasis of the King James Version when they translate it merely as “love.”) So a full answer to the problem needs to address why God, in His great and excellent loving-kindness, has not allowed many of those He *loves* to hear the Gospel. It does not matter whether He predestined individuals not to hear, or simply failed to arrange circumstances for them to hear - the problem is the same - *where is God's loving-kindness in all this?*

Most exclusivists, however, are less strident. In *The Gagging of God*, even Carson reveals a small chink in his armour when he discusses Paul's Athenian Address in Acts 17. Paul writes:

“From one man he made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live. God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us.”[\[47\]](#)

Is Paul really preaching that a person can reach out and find God apart from hearing the Gospel? Carson comments:

“...it *may* be the case that God has in some cases opened the eyes of some people to recognize the existence and graciousness of their Maker and turn to him and [sic.] in repentance and faith, imploring him for mercy. But the text does not say that this has taken place; certainly Romans 3:11 is not very encouraging.”[\[48\]](#)

The text does *not* say it, but the logic of Paul's statement cannot preclude the possibility that someone, somewhere, might come to know God that way, and Carson is forced to admit this. His further comment that Rom. 3:11 is "not encouraging" is certainly true, (though that passage is clearly hyperbole),^[49] but this hardly provides the full picture: we might just as well say that Rom. 1:20 and 2:14f. *are* encouraging. Interestingly, although Carson is extremely reluctant to admit the possibility himself, he does quote some surprising words by J.I. Packer in a favourable light:

"We may safely say (i) if any good pagan reached the point of throwing himself on his Maker's mercy for pardon, it was grace that brought him there; (ii) God will surely save anyone he brings thus far; (iii) anyone thus saved would learn in the next world that he was saved through Christ."^[50]

· If an 'exclusivist' of this stature finds the logic of such Biblical passages hard to dismiss, it may well be that the fully exclusivist position is insupportable, and that the Scriptural evidence, when considered as a whole, speaks a different message.

B. Inclusivism

Most Christians, and in fact probably even the majority of evangelicals, believe that God extends His salvation beyond the limitations of the mission field to those who never actually hear the Gospel. The idea is far from new; even Justin Martyr had thoughts along these lines in the Second Century:

"Christ is the Word [Logos] of whom all man partakes. Those who lived by reason [Logos] are Christians, even though they have been considered atheists: such as, among the Greeks, Socrates, Heraclitus, and others like them; and among foreigners, Abraham, Elias, Ananias."^[51]

But this kind of thinking does not imply that salvation is available apart from Christ's Sacrifice, it simply maintains that God is able to choose to apply the merits of Christ's work to whomever He wishes. To exclusivists this is heresy; to inclusivists, it is a truth deduced from our Scriptural knowledge of the loving-kindness of God, and both directly and indirectly supported by the wider teachings of Scripture.

- 1) Indirect evidence can be seen in God's covenants with
 - a) Adam, and
 - b) Noah.
- 2) Direct evidence is to be found in:
 - a) God's dealings with various individuals in the Old Testament, and
 - b) passages that imply the salvific potential of general revelation.

1. Indirect Evidence - God's Covenants

a) The Covenant with Adam

The Covenant with Adam teaches that there is, in principle, *an offer of salvation open to everyone*. Although the Scriptures do not speak explicitly of a covenant between God and Adam

"all the elements of a covenant are indicated in Scripture... two parties are named, a condition is laid down, a promise of reward for obedience is clearly implied, and a penalty for transgression is threatened."^[52]

Whether we consider the penalty for Adam's sin to be the loss of unending earthly life or the loss of the possibility of attaining heavenly life, "the clear implication... is that in the case of obedience death would not enter, and this can only mean that life would continue."^[53] There is, then, an implied promise of everlasting life, if only Adam will keep his part of the covenant (not to eat of the Tree). However, this promise is not only for Adam, for he is not merely the first man, he is also the *representative of the whole human race*:

“Adam is the first man; he is at once himself and the race.”[54]

This solidarity is expressed by the Apostle Paul when he insists that Adam’s sin in some sense involved us all.[55] God’s covenant with Adam therefore applies to the whole human race. It is a general covenant of works: if humanity will obey God’s commands, eternal life is possible. The principle is also implied in the New Testament, and Paul makes it very clear that it applies to both Jew and Gentile, for

“...it is those who obey the law who will be declared righteous. Indeed, when *Gentiles*, who do not have the law [of Moses], do by nature things required by the law, they are a law for themselves, even though they do not have the law, since they show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts now accusing, now even defending them.”[56]

· Thus the principle is the same for everyone: “those who obey the law will be declared righteous.” In practice, of course, this means different things. For the Jew, it means obedience to the Law of Moses, and for the Gentile, obedience to the law of conscience insofar as it coincides with God’s Law. Paul does not argue that anyone actually *keeps* either form of law - the context suggests very strongly that no-one ever does - but the very fact that Paul builds his argument upon the general principle of *obedience-unto-life*, while including the *Gentiles*, confirms that there exists a *universal covenant of works through Adam*. This offer of salvation is therefore open to everyone, in every place and time. Even though it is through works, and so unattainable in practice because of sin, it is still important, precisely because it is a *universal offer*.

b) The Covenant with Noah

This covenant reveals a further principle: God’s *universal loving-kindness*. When God executes judgement upon human wickedness by sending the flood to “wipe mankind... from the face of the earth,”[57] He nevertheless shows mercy towards Noah and his family by saving them in the ark. They then become the new genetic stock for the whole human race: there is a new beginning.[58] And so when God makes a covenant with Noah and his descendants, that never again will He judge the world by flood, the promise is universal as it was with Adam. While it is true that this is a covenant conferring only natural blessings, it nevertheless demonstrates that God’s justice and mercy go hand-in-hand. His *justice* is universal, but so is His *mercy*.

2. Direct Evidence

a) God’s Dealings with Characters - Melchizedek and Abram

Though there are other examples of God’s grace towards non-Jews in the Old Testament,[59] the most striking example is that of Melchizedek, who is to be found sneaking around the edges of God’s First Covenant with Abram. Here it is possible to identify a third principle: that salvation through faith in God is *universally available*.

To Abram, God makes an unconditional divine promise, that he and his offspring shall possess the land of Canaan[60], and that they shall be as numerous as the stars in the night sky.[61] Abram’s response is faith.

“Abram believed the Lord, and he credited it to him as righteousness.”[62]

The covenant is then sealed in the ancient way by passing through a passage between the parts of slaughtered animals.[63]

Much is made of this covenant in the New Testament, because it establishes the principle of *righteousness by faith*, as distinct from righteousness through obedience to law, and anticipates the promise of imputed righteousness (and therefore salvation) through faith in Christ. In Romans, Paul calls Abraham “the father of all who believe,”[64] and contrasts Abram’s reward for faith, with the receiving of wages for a hard day’s labour, (an analogy for someone who is rewarded for obedience to the Law). The two are totally

different principles. The writer to the Hebrews sees this principle at work in a whole catalogue of characters from the Old Testament, and argues that it is specifically their *faith in God* that entitles them to be included among the saved.[65]

Into the scene steps Melchizedek, one of the oddest characters in the whole Bible. Melchizedek is King of Jerusalem, and he enters Abram's life in Genesis 14, offering Abram a meal of hospitality after he returns from recapturing his possessions and rescuing Lot from his kidnappers. Strangely, Melchizedek is described as "priest of God Most High,"[66] and this is particularly surprising because he was most likely a Canaanite king-priest, which suggests that the term "God Most High" actually refers to the supreme *Canaanite* deity of the time.[67] And yet Abram gives to Melchizedek a tenth of everything he has recaptured, an act which honours not only Melchizedek, but the God in whom Melchizedek believes. At first sight this looks like idolatry, but for the fact that Abram recognises Melchizedek's faith in "God Most High" as *tantamount to faith in Yahweh*, for he says to the king of Sodom:

"I have raised my hand to the Lord (Yahweh), *God Most High*, Creator of heaven and earth..."[68]

Most probably, Melchizedek's understanding of the Creator was inferior to Abram's, but Abram was nevertheless quite happy to accept that they served the same God.[69] What is more, there is good reason to believe that Melchizedek had actually become *acceptable* to God.[70] If Melchizedek had knowledge of God, and if it seems he enjoyed a saving relationship with God, how was this possible? Had he already responded to the 'provisional form' of the Gospel entrusted to Abram? That seems very unlikely, because there is no suggestion in the text that Melchizedek and Abram had ever met before. One conclusion seems possible: it was Melchizedek's *faith in God based on an alternative source of knowledge* that had made him acceptable.[71]

· It seems, therefore, that there is a precedent for believing that salvation through faith in God is *universally available*, in that salvation may be possible for a person if they have a sufficient understanding of God as He is, and exercise faith in Him. Just as the principle (though not the achievement) of *salvation by works* is universal, so too, it seems, in accordance with God's *universal loving-kindness*, is the principle of *salvation by faith in God*.

b) The Salvific Potential of General Revelation

However incomplete, Melchizedek's faith was still based upon knowledge,[72] and yet it came from a source other than special revelation.[73] So where could it have originated? Two sources of general revelation are identifiable from the Scriptures: first, a testimony in the created order as to the existence and attributes of the Creator; and second, an innate knowledge of the basic principles of good and evil.

(1) The Testimony of Creation.

According to the psalmist,

"The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands. Day after day they pour forth speech, night after night they display knowledge. There is no speech or language where their voice is not heard. Their voice goes out into all the earth, their words to the ends of the world."[74]

Paul echoes the same conviction when he says in Romans:

"...[W]hat may be known about God is plain to them [Gentiles], because God has made it plain to them. For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities - his eternal power and divine nature - have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse."[75]

God is therefore knowable through the testimony of His Creation, so no-one will be excused on the Last Day for claiming that they “just didn’t know!”

In the main, this knowledge is intuitive, though it is not without rational foundation, for any such intuition rests upon the analogy between creation-Creator and artefact-designer, which is formally expressed as the Argument from Design. This argument occurs in philosophical writings from Plato onwards, appearing in Aquinas’ Five Ways, and in the Nineteenth Century in William Paley’s *Natural Theology*.^[76] However, since the time of David Hume, and later, Charles Darwin, the argument fell into disrepute, because of logical flaws in the argument produced by the limitations of scientific knowledge at the time.

Paley’s version of the argument asks what we would think if we were to find a watch lying on the heath: would we ascribe its origin to natural forces, as we would for a stone? No, because its many parts “are [clearly] framed and put together for a purpose.” They are:

“... so formed and adjusted as to produce motion, and that motion so regulated as to point out the hour of the day; that if the different parts had been differently shaped from what they are, of a different size from what they are, or placed after any other manner or in any other order than that in which they are placed, either no motion at all would have been carried on in the machine, or none which would have answered the use that is now served by it.”^[77]

The sheer complexity and specific order of parts forces us to infer *design* rather than chance, and since “every observation... concerning the watch may be repeated with strict propriety concerning the eye, concerning animals, concerning plants, concerning, indeed, all the organized parts of the works of nature,”^[78] we may infer that the world was designed too.

Shortly before this, however, David Hume had raised serious objections to this type of argument, the most important of which asks whether it is reasonable to prefer this watch-world analogy to any other. Why should we liken the world to a mechanism? Why not to something that *looks* designed, but which is actually the product of atoms in random motion gradually settling into patterns over time? Why not a vegetable? Perhaps any number of other analogies could describe the world.

“In this little corner of the world alone there are four principles, *reason, instinct, generation, vegetation*, which are similar to each other, and are the causes of similar effects... Any one of these four principles above mentioned, (and a hundred others which lie open to our conjecture,) may afford us a theory by which to judge of the origin of the world...”^[79]

As John Passmore explains, Hume’s argument does not call for “the invention of a theory,” but asks us to show “that one theory is better than another.”^[80] And within a generation, it seemed as if there was a better theory to explain the origin of all living things, and perhaps the whole world: Charles Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection, or the Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life*, published in 1859. Hume was right, so it seemed; the analogy with a mechanism was dead; the natural order had gradually *evolved* through a dialectical process; it was more like organic growth than design.

· This has been the state of play ever since, but for a few voices here and there. But in the last couple of decades this situation has totally changed. The most influential factor has been the Anthropic Principle,^[81] which has helped to convince many that it is more reasonable to believe in a Designer than to be satisfied with any other explanation. Even more recently, the writings of Michael Behe and William Dembski have produced a substantial apologetic for Paley, arguing from the worlds of biochemistry and information theory that many of the mechanisms of life are just that - *mechanisms* - so complicated and intricately ordered^[82] that no *purely* Darwinistic process can possibly account for their development.^[83] If we can therefore reject all known theories with respect to the development of these microbiological systems (at least), then we are perfectly justified in drawing an inference to the best available explanation: *design*.^[84]

“Yes, the heavens still declare the glory of God, and yes, God’s invisible attributes are clearly seen from God’s creation.”[\[85\]](#)

(2) Innate Knowledge.

The key text is Rom. 2:14ff. Even the Gentiles, without knowledge of the Law, “show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences...and their thoughts... accusing [and]... defending them.” Everyone, irrespective of their origin, has a fundamental knowledge of the absolute difference between good and evil, even if there is disagreement about which thoughts and actions belong in each category.

“I know that some people say the idea of a Law of Nature or decent behaviour is unsound, because different civilizations and different ages have had quite different moralities. But this is not true. There have been differences between their moralities, but these have never amounted to anything like a total difference. If anyone will take the trouble to compare the moral teaching of, say, the ancient Egyptians, Babylonians, Hindus, Chinese, Greeks and Romans, what will really strike him will be how very like they are to each other and our own.”[\[86\]](#)

This may not be a proof for the existence of God, but it certainly tells us something about the nature of God if He exists. If, however, our inference from the created order is correct, that a Creator does indeed exist, then the very absoluteness and universality of this basic moral sense heavily suggests that this morality is an attribute of the Creator.

· The Scriptures therefore teach that it is possible for someone to gain knowledge of God from these two sources of general revelation: knowledge that God exists, and knowledge that His nature is good and just. Melchizedek may well have come to faith in Yahweh by these means, and the faith which he displayed was sufficient for him to be acceptable to God. It would seem then that the Scriptures leave room for us to believe that a faithful response to the light of general revelation can lead to salvation, without specific knowledge of the Gospel.

(3) The Power of the Areopagus Address.

In the middle of bringing special revelation to the “men of Athens,” Paul mentions a factor that has implications for general revelation: the fact that *God has chosen from eternity the geographical and historical position of every person.*

“From one man he made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live.”[\[87\]](#)

We are then told why God did this.

“God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us.”[\[88\]](#)

· These are extremely important verses, for if God determines the location of every person in order that they might seek Him and find Him, then He does so in full knowledge of the ‘advantages’ and ‘disadvantages’ of those same geographical and historical conditions into which He places people. In other words, the ‘advantages’ and ‘disadvantages’ can only really be *apparent*, for God would otherwise be confounding Himself. More will be said about this in connection with William Lane Craig and Molinism, but here it is important to note that God has placed people in positions where He *knows* they will never hear the Gospel, and He has done this with the desire that that they should find Him. This is a strong argument in support of the case that general revelation provides sufficient knowledge of God for saving faith to exist.

C. ‘Soft’ Inclusivism

These considerations lead in the direction of one main question: Just how much *knowledge* of God must a person have in order to exercise saving faith? Of course, on an individual level, no-one can say: this will be something known only to God, and none of us is in a position to read the Mind of God. But on the level of general principle, we do have the guidance of Scripture, which may suggest some possibilities.

One suggestion comes from Millard Erickson, an evangelical Baptist theologian, who proposes that the “essence” of the Gospel is available to all:

“...the essential nature of saving faith can be arrived at without the special revelation... Perhaps, in other words, it is possible to receive the benefits of Christ’s death without conscious knowledge-belief in the name of Jesus.”[\[89\]](#)

The source of this *Gospel-in-essence* is general revelation, which, he suggests, can lead to the following knowledge and convictions:

“(1) The belief in one good powerful God. (2) The belief that he (man) owes this God perfect obedience to his law. (3) The consciousness that he does not meet this standard, and therefore is guilty and condemned. (4) The realization that nothing he can offer God can compensate him (or atone) for this sin and guilt. (5) The belief that God is merciful, and will forgive and accept those who cast themselves upon his mercy.”[\[90\]](#)

The idea is very persuasive. It upholds the seriousness of sin, insisting that God will righteously judge all people, and yet it reassures us that in His loving-kindness God has made the *essence* of the Gospel available to all. It also preserves the need for evangelism, for although it presents the *theoretical* possibility that people might be saved through general revelation, it recognises that the Bible, especially Romans 3, gives us no reason to suppose that this is the norm. We must, therefore, continue to preach. Even John Stott, an exclusivist in the days of the 1974 Lausanne Covenant, seems in more recent years to be embracing this view, known in the jargon as ‘*soft inclusivism*.’

“In the Old Testament people were “justified by faith” even though they had little knowledge or expectation of Christ. Perhaps there are others today in a similar position, who know that they are guilty before God and that they cannot do anything to win his favour, but who in self-despair call upon the God they dimly perceive to save them.” [\[91\]](#)

But does this view not nullify the doctrine of the Atonement? After all, if people can be reconciled to God without faith in Christ’s work on the Cross, is not Jesus’ Sacrifice rendered superfluous? The answer is, No; and here the heart of the inclusivist case becomes apparent. When considering the connection between someone’s salvation and the Person and work of Jesus Christ, inclusivists point to a distinction between *ontological necessity* and *epistemological necessity*.[\[92\]](#) The ontological necessity is that Christ has to *be* there, behind the scenes so to speak, which includes everything He is, was and will be, and everything He has done, does and will do. The Atonement is therefore included in the definition as a necessity: it must have happened in order for salvation to be possible. On the other hand, epistemological necessity is that the specific content of the Gospel has to be *known*. It is *this* that the inclusivist denies: Christ is ontologically necessary, but not epistemologically necessary, which is an economical way of saying that a person can be saved even though they have not heard of Jesus, but it is nevertheless Jesus who does the saving. As John Stott puts it:

“If God does save...their salvation is still only by grace, only through Christ, only by faith.”[\[93\]](#)

Inclusivists do not deny the Atonement, they merely hold that God sometimes chooses to apply the merits of Christ’s Sacrifice to a person who is ignorant of Jesus, in the knowledge that their faith is such (in the light they have) that were they to hear the Gospel, they would recognise its message and respond.

· There was a moving illustration of this idea in a sermon by Peter Fenwick, pastor of Central Housechurch in Sheffield. He spoke of a missionary to China, who had gone to preach to the inhabitants of a small town which had remained almost totally isolated from the outside world. The missionary preached about Jesus in front of a large gathering, and when he had finished, a very elderly man made his way up to the front, and with tears in his eyes said, “The One of whom you speak, I have known all my life.”

1. World Religions?

One implication of this idea is that the religions of the world can serve as *repositories* for truth, even though they may contain much that is false. The fullest revelation of God is found in Christ, but it is not therefore true that the world’s religions are totally in spiritual darkness. As the aphorism puts it, “All truth is God’s truth.” Insofar as a religion or philosophy contains teachings which are consistent with the revelation of God in Christ, that system must be said to contain truth. Certainly, the other Semitic religions, Orthodox Judaism and Islam, share with Christianity a substantial knowledge of God through their common Old Testament roots.

a) Semitic Faiths - Islam

For the Muslim, it is axiomatic that “There is no God but God” (*Kalima*), and that He is the “Compassionate and Merciful,” which together accord with Erickson’s first principle: “belief in one good powerful God.” The *Kalima*, or Creed, is the very first tenet of the Islamic Principle of Faith (*Iman*), and it reveals that there is a major agreement between Christianity and Islam on a fundamental article of faith. But it may in fact be more than just an agreement. It is possible that Mohammed’s insistence on the absolute sovereignty of the One and Only God is evidence that the Spirit of God was actively involved in the birth of Islam. Hans Küng makes a very strong case for this, observing that Mohammed’s message was successful in converting large numbers of people from the false gods of folk religion to faith in the one true God. His message distorted the true picture of Jesus, but Mohammed nevertheless taught much that was true, and it is hard to believe that God was not involved.

“The people of seventh-century Arabia were justified in listening to Mohammed’s voice. They were lifted to the heights of monotheism from the very this-worldly polytheism of the old Arabian tribal religion.”[\[94\]](#)

Many other similarities to Christianity are to be found: God is Creator, Lawgiver and Judge; Mankind is creature, owing obedience to God, (Erickson’s second principle); and the list could continue. But, of course, there are significant differences. The most important stems from Mohammed’s respectful, but unbelieving, attitude towards Jesus Christ. In the Qur’an, he explicitly refuses to acknowledge Jesus’ divinity:

“O followers of the Book! do not exceed the limits in your religion, and do not speak (lies) against Allah, but (speak) the truth; the Messiah, Isa son of Marium is only an apostle of Allah...far be it from His glory that He should have a son...”[\[95\]](#)

He also dismisses Christ’s work of atonement, through denying the crucifixion:

“And their saying: Surely we have killed the Messiah, Isa son of Marium, the apostle of Allah; and they did not kill him nor did they crucify him, but it appeared to them so (like Isa) and most surely those who differ therein are only in a doubt about it; they have no knowledge respecting it, but only follow a conjecture, and they killed him not for sure.”[\[96\]](#)

Apart from important Christological differences, Islam also has a different understanding of God’s *grace*. The Muslim is taught that paradise is attainable through correct practice of *Din*, the Five Pillars of Islam: (i) reciting the confession of faith; (ii) observing prayers; (iii) giving the obligatory contributions; (iv) fasting in Ramadan, and (v) making the pilgrimage to Mecca. But for the Christian, whatever God commands, no human obedience will ever merit the reward of heaven: the only hope is God’s grace. Unfortunately,

although the Qur'an promises forgiveness to those who truly repent of their sins^[97] (Erickson's fifth principle), the emphasis of Islam is on *attainment* : it is only through faithful practice of *Din* that a place in paradise may be won.

“Salvation is attained by all who submit to Allah, that is, live according to his rule as revealed by Prophet Mohammed.”^[98]

This puts the Orthodox Muslim in a trap. If he becomes conscious of failure to meet Allah's standards, he may well cast himself upon His mercy, but if he is honest he will realise that he *continues* to fail, and so must never cease to seek Allah's forgiveness. But then he will know that paradise is unattainable, because his practice of *Din* will never be perfect.^[99] If, on the other hand, he ceases to ask Allah for pardon, through believing that his practice is sufficient, he is bound to be condemned for self-righteousness. How is he to escape? His only hope is to reach beyond this austere vision of God, and somehow find the forgiving Father of the Christian revelation. Unfortunately, Islam's view of God hardly encourages this.

Din functions much like the Law of Moses in the Old Testament, which was destined never to bring salvation, because no-one could ever live up to its standards.^[100] Its function was to bring about a *consciousness of sin* in the believer.

“Therefore no-one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin.”^[101]

But once this consciousness has arisen, what hope is the Muslim to find in Mohammed's words? Islam preserves a glimmer of the light of God's forgiveness, but access to this truth is largely obstructed by the overall austerity of Islam's vision of God. It is at this point that the Gospel message of God's forgiveness in Christ brings a dimension that is missing from Mohammed's teaching.^[102]

· Clearly Islam contains much *error* as well as truth, but that does not mean that God never uses the truth it *does* contain to bring people into a saving relationship with Him. Whatever the distortions of Islam, and the incompleteness of Judaism, the fact remains that the Semitic religions share a common heritage, and their traditions preserve something of the light of God's self-revelation. *And wherever there is preserved light, there is reason to hope that, in some cases, this light will be seen, despite the surrounding darkness.*

b) Eastern Faiths - Chinese and Hindu

Eastern faiths, however, present a much more difficult problem. On the whole they view the Absolute as *impersonal*, in contrast to the very *personal* God of Christianity, Judaism and Islam. Correspondingly their analysis of the human condition is different: if there is no Holy God to whom we owe obedience, then our current state of alienation is not a judgement for sin, but the automatic result of breaking impersonal laws^[103] or the consequence of metaphysical ignorance. This worldview seems to exclude God entirely, and it is especially difficult to see how the light of God's truth can break through.

But all may not be as bleak as it seems. Many scholars believe that, before the arrival of Buddhism, the ancient Chinese worshipped a personal God with the names: 'Supreme Lord' and 'Heaven,' and that the impersonal view of 'Heaven' in later Confucianism does not represent the original monotheistic use of the term.^[104] Also, there are very old traditions in Hinduism^[105] which show definite evidence of the search for a personal God. The *Īg Veda*, the earliest of the four Vedas (the most ancient Hindu scriptures), is a collection of more than a thousand hymns to the many gods of the early Hindu pantheon. In the first stages of the *Īg Veda*, the gods are clearly personifications of one or other aspect of the natural world: Indra, the god of storms and battles; Agni the god of fire; Pīthivīṣ, the earth-god; Sārya the sun-god, and so forth. Later, however, dissatisfaction with the arbitrary distinctions between these gods, led to a tendency to merge them all into *one supreme God*, who then became the object of devotion.

“Mighty in mind and power is Viñvakarman,^[106] maker, disposer, and most lofty presence.

Their offerings joy in rich juice where they value One, only One, beyond the seven Īōis.
Father who made us, he who, as disposer, knoweth all races and all things existing,
Even he alone, the deities' name-giver,
- him other beings seek for information.
To him in sacrifice they offered treasures, - Īōis of old, in numerous troops as singers..."[107]

· It is true that this stage of monotheism was superseded by the philosophical questionings of the later stages of the *Īg Veda*, and further reinterpreted by the monism of the UpaniṪads (the final portions of the Vedas); but it is significant that a belief or yearning after the One God had its place in the development of Hindu thought, and that it leaves a legacy of theism today in the highly influential *Bhagavad-gṣṭ*. Does anyone find God via this route? Surely the possibility cannot be dismissed if Erickson's suggestion is to be taken seriously.

c) Buddhism

Much less hope seems to be offered by Buddhism. It appears so weighted towards the impersonal and the negative: there is no God, but the Void; there is no Being, but non-Being, there is no heaven but Nirvana (the state of being 'extinguished'). But according to Hans Kūng, none of these terms is understood in a *purely* negative way by any of the various schools of Buddhism, and it is necessary to understand what they mean in context. Neither the earlier Hinayana Buddhism, nor the later Mahayana Buddhism define Nirvana as *absolute nothingness*. Buddhists are generally agreed that Nirvana is

“...permanent, stable, imperishable, immovable, ageless, deathless, unborn and unbecome, that it is power, bliss and happiness, the secure refuge...the Good, the supreme goal...the eternal, hidden and incomprehensible Peace.”[108]

· If these qualities are attributable to Nirvana, how can the Void, the Ultimate Reality, be *nothing*? Strictly speaking, the Void, a term for the Absolute (especially in Ch'an Buddhism or Zen Buddhism), is a word that denotes the end-point of a process of philosophical reasoning: if the Ultimate Reality is beyond all concepts, then it cannot be referred to as Being, but neither can it be referred to as non-Being, for that too is a concept; therefore it is neither - it is *Void*. What is left is an abstraction: 'That about which nothing may or can be stated.' But if the state of harmony with the Void, Nirvana, has so many *positive* qualities in the minds of Buddhists, it cannot be correct to see the Void as mere *emptiness*. And if the Void is not empty, maybe there is the hope that in some cases there will be sufficient of the light of truth for faith in God to exist.[109]

d) Amida Buddhism

At the other extreme lies Amida Buddhism. In fact, Karl Barth saw so much truth in its teachings that he described it as “the most adequate and comprehensive and illuminating heathen parallel to Christianity.”[110] Strictly speaking, 'Amida Buddhism' refers to any sect whose adherents worship the Japanese Bodhisattva Amida,[111] but its use is generally restricted to Jodo Shu (Sect of the Pure Land) founded by Genku-Honen (1133-1212), and Jodoshin Shu (True Sect of the Pure Land), founded by his pupil Shinran (1173-1262).

Genku-Honen was initially a student of Tendai Buddhism, which taught that liberation could be attained through one's own moral effort, meditation and by reciting the name of Amida. But this emphasis on self-achievement failed to satisfy Honen. In his view, there was another route to liberation: *faith in Amida and in his merits*. Although this faith was not quite like Christian faith, in that Honen still regarded faith as a personal achievement, it came much closer to the truth, because it no longer saw the object of faith as *self*, but as *Amida*.

Shinran took this idea much further. After twenty years in the Tendai sect trying to achieve enlightenment, he succeeded only in becoming more and more conscious of his own moral failure. He came to realise that human works were useless for achieving liberation, and that all his own attempts would lead him inevitably

to hell. This insight into human nature then led him to the amazing declaration that the only hope for salvation was the *unmerited grace of Amida-Buddha*. The basic difference between the two men's teachings can be seen in their sayings:

“Honen says, ‘Even a bad man will be received in Buddha’s Land, how much more a good man!’ Shinran turns it into, ‘Even a good man will be received in Buddha’s Land, how much more a bad man!’” [\[112\]](#)

What is more, the manner in which Amida-Buddha was believed to dispense grace, shows an amazing similarity to the concept of the Logos in John’s Gospel. Both Honen and Shinran believed that Hoze the Bodhisattva had attained to Buddhahood - he had become one with Ultimate Reality - and that this had enabled him to mediate the Light of Truth to human beings. It is for this reason that he became known as Amida-Buddha, for ‘Amida’ means ‘infinite light’ or ‘infinite grace.’ This Light was held to shine everywhere, and be the means by which the merits of Buddha could be transferred to the believer through faith.

· There is, of course, no formal concept of a transcendent personal God in these systems; they are basically pantheistic, but that fact is hardly sufficient to bury the truths contained in Amida-Buddhism. Following Erickson again:-

“ (1) The belief in one good powerful God. (2) The belief that he (man) owes this God perfect obedience to his law. (3) The consciousness that he does not meet this standard, and therefore is guilty and condemned. (4) The realization that nothing he can offer God can compensate him (or atone) for this sin and guilt. (5) The belief that God is merciful, and will forgive and accept those who cast themselves upon his mercy”

- there is in Amida-Buddhism: (3) a deep consciousness of moral failure, even though that is not quite the same as *sin* against a personal God; (4) a realisation that all human achievement is insufficient for salvation; [\[113\]](#) and (5) a conviction that the Ultimate is, in some sense, *merciful* towards those who trust. But concepts such as goodness and mercy, which Amida-Buddhism implicitly attributes to Ultimate Reality, are qualities which only have meaning with respect to *persons*, and so, though pantheistic in structure, Amida-Buddhism is rich with quasi-monotheistic connotations. Might this not bring some people to faith in (1) a truly personal God?, and thus in turn imply that their transgressions had been (2) *sin* [\[114\]](#) from the outset?

e) Sky-Gods

The plausibility of Erickson’s thesis is further increased by the fact that nearly all of the ‘primitive’ cultures of the world recognise the existence of a ‘High God.’ Often imagined as living above the sky, the Sky God has infinite knowledge and wisdom. He prescribes the tribe’s moral laws and religious rituals, and watches to judge those who transgress. Strangely, he is seldom the direct object of worship, most tribes choosing to concentrate on the propitiation of lesser spirits; but his presence is recognised, and his superiority to all else widely acknowledged.

“In most, if not all, of the indigenous cultures of Africa there is belief in a supreme spirit ruling over or informing the lesser spirits and gods. He governs natural forces, dwells on high, is inexplicable, creates souls, men, and all things. If the lower spirits and deities are more familiar and intimate... yet for many Africans such a God exists and is not altogether neglected in worship and prayer.

Thus, ruling over the world which teems with divinities and sacred forces, there is - high above in the sky, but not *of* the sky - some kind of supreme Being. Among many primitive peoples outside Africa a similar belief is attested.” [\[115\]](#)

D. 'Hard' Inclusivism

Many inclusivists, however, find the kind of solution represented by Erickson inadequate. It does not go far enough in reassessing the amount of *knowledge* necessary for saving faith. While it speaks of a *minimal Gospel* available to all people through the light of general revelation, it fails to take account of the fact that not everyone is in the same position to *receive* that light. At the heart of this is the problem of "invincible ignorance" - many people are surely at a disadvantage *through no fault of their own* due to false beliefs "that cannot be overcome in practice by any argument or experience."^[116] It is understandable that God excludes from His Kingdom those who *will not* believe in Him, but what of those who *cannot* believe? 'Hard inclusivists,' among whom Karl Rahner the Catholic theologian was the most famous, therefore ask whether or not there really *is* a minimum amount of information that someone needs to receive. Does not such talk about *information* miss the point? After all, is it not fundamentally an inward, spiritual matter?

For Rahner, who was a leading light at the Second Vatican Council in the 1960s^[117], it was unthinkable that God would simply condemn everyone who never has a chance to hear the Gospel. Humanity had to be more than simply "the *massa damnata* from which God in his incomprehensible grace saves some few, while all who are not *baptized* remain in it by a just judgment."^[118] On the contrary, "[God] wants *all* men [and women] to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth."^[119] And yet we are all aware of "entire cultures and peoples for whom Christianity has not been, and perhaps still is not, a genuinely live option."^[120] Many are even brought up in situations where the very notion of a personal God is quite alien, which is likely to obscure the light of general revelation. Such people, it would seem, are at a great disadvantage if *knowledge* of God is necessary for salvation.

Rahner's solution was radically to reassess of the rôle of knowledge with respect to faith, with the proposal that there exists a difference between '*explicit faith*' and '*implicit faith*.' Those with '*explicit faith*' are members of the visible church, while those with '*implicit faith*' represent an "*anonymous Christianity* which can and should yet be called Christianity in a meaningful sense, even though it itself cannot and would not describe itself as such."^[121]

In Rahner's view, both types of faith are built upon a fundamental experience that is common to humanity. All human beings have an innate capacity for "transcendental experience," an ability to experience something of the reality which lies beyond the material world of objects or events. To some extent, every human being has this experience, and it is through this that everyone has an awareness of God's existence; but it is not necessarily a *conscious* awareness, for it is "not like our awareness of other things."^[122]

"In transcendental experience, there is an intuition of God. Granted, this intuition is not always conscious of itself. The one who has it may not even know that it is an intuition of God. But that knowledge is still present."^[123]

Similarly, every person enjoys an *unconscious awareness of God's grace*, which is constantly being offered by God to all people without exception.

"...God communicates himself as absolutely present, close and forgiving...[His] grace which is at work everywhere, omits no one, offers God to each and gives to every reality in the world a secret purposeful orientation towards the intrinsic glory of God."^[124]

This is the fundamental ground of experience common to all human beings, and upon this foundation can be built either **i) explicit** or **ii) implicit faith**.

i) Those in the Church are in the position to respond to God with "explicit faith" for they have the benefit of special revelation; their transcendental experience is given form and shape by the propositional content of the Gospel; their awareness of God has become *conscious*; they *know* themselves to have faith in God. To some extent this is true even of people outside the Church. For some, general revelation will give form to that unconscious awareness,^[125] and so they too will have "explicit faith," even if less complete, while

for others it will be their religious traditions which give the form and shape, especially if that tradition is monotheistic, and so closer to the truths of the Gospel itself.[\[126\]](#)

ii) But for those for whom the Biblical concept of God is quite alien or even unacceptable, the situation is different, and yet even here Rahner sees the possibility for hope. For such people there will still be the possibility for true faith in God, but this faith would remain at the level of the unconscious - it would be "implicit faith" - a faith in God that was not consciously known as such, but which was nevertheless real and salvific.[\[127\]](#) Quite what Rahner means by "implicit faith" is difficult to pin down, but it springs into life...

"...whenever we are *aware of ourselves as knowers or seekers trying to understand the mystery of life*, then God is present in that self-awareness: present as mystery, as the absolute and incomprehensible source of all that is."[\[128\]](#)

"Implicit faith" seems to be active in a person who is truly concerned with the ultimate questions of life. It is not a matter of intelligence or education, as if the philosopher were more godly than the peasant: rather, it has to do with genuine concern and involvement. "Implicit faith" engages with what Paul Tillich called the things of our "ultimate concern." It is in this way that Rahner can hold that even an atheist can be an anonymous Christian.

"When the Christian of the future sees a "pagan" die willingly,...confessing by such readiness that the abyss is one of meaningful mystery and not of emptiness and perdition, the Christian will see in him the man nailed at the right hand of Christ on the saving cross of human life."[\[129\]](#)

But can this really be true? Is it possible that someone who denies the existence God, the very One who offers salvation, can actually be a Christian, albeit 'anonymously'? A secular humanist, who dismisses the concept of a personal God; a follower of Theravada Buddhism, who accepts that reality is fundamentally the empty Void; a New Ager, for whom the only god is Self: can all these be in reality 'anonymous Christians,' so long as they genuinely concern themselves with the "meaningful mystery" of reality? Keith Ward believes they can.

"... [P]eople can believe what is false - they may even believe there is no God, because the idea of God they have is indeed an immoral and unintelligible one - and still be saved by Christ."[\[130\]](#)

The reason is that, in the matter of salvation, it is not important that people *believe* the right things; so long as they have earnestly *sought* the truth, they will be saved.

"We might say: you will be judged by how seriously you have sought the truth; but you will not be judged on whether you have actually found it or not."[\[131\]](#)

But the Scriptures disagree. In Paul's view, anyone who seriously seeks the truth will *find* it, or at least a substantial part of it. Moreover, it is precisely because of its availability, that everyone who fails to find the truth will be declared "without excuse" on the Day of Judgement.

"For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities - his eternal power and divine nature - have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse."[\[132\]](#)

Surely we *shall* "be judged by how seriously [we] have sought the truth," but we will also "be judged by whether we have found it or not," and since God has made it possible for us to know something of His "eternal power and divine nature," we will certainly not have found the truth if our concept of God is "immoral and unintelligible."[\[133\]](#)

At its root, all of this is the attempt to reduce the epistemological necessity closer and closer to zero, to remove the rôle played by knowledge, so as to make the whole question of salvation an entirely *subjective*

matter. The hope is that everyone will then be seen to have an equal chance, for whereas we do not all have the same access to knowledge, we can all at least be ‘true to ourselves,’ so to speak. But far from depreciating the rôle of knowledge, Jesus’ teaching *affirms* it. We are told in John’s Gospel that it is the *truth* that will set us free, and while it is undeniable that part of what John means by the truth is Jesus Himself, which has more to do with relating to a Person than with possessing information, the *propositional view of truth* is certainly stressed too, for the condition Jesus attaches to being set free is obedience to His *teaching*.

“If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.”[\[134\]](#)

It is certainly an attractive idea that all people have an unconscious awareness of God’s existence and grace, and it may well be true in itself, but the suggestion that this awareness can be elevated into a salvific mode of living quite *apart from any knowledge or understanding of any truth which could correspond to Biblical truth* must be rejected, because it is contradicted by Scripture.

One of the Scriptures often used to support the hard inclusivist case is the Prologue to John’s Gospel where the Word (Jesus), which “was coming to the world,” is described as “the true light that gives light to every man.”[\[135\]](#) In itself, the statement is ambiguous and can mean “the light which has the *potential* to illuminate every person was coming into the world,” or it can mean “the light which *does in fact* illuminate every person was coming into the world.” Hard inclusivists opt for the latter, because it seems to teach that Christ is actively enlightening everyone in every time and place. Unfortunately however, the next verses make it clear that, far from illuminating every person, Christ was not even received by the majority of people when He became a man and walked among us.

“He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognise him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him.”[\[136\]](#)

In addition, the wider context of the Gospel reveals that John is using the distinction between “light” and “darkness” as a literary device to show that followers of Jesus are in the “light,” whereas the rest of the world is in “darkness.”

“I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.”

“I have come into the world as a light so that no-one who believes in me should remain in darkness.”[\[137\]](#)

None of this gives weight to the idea that Christ’s light is constantly shining on everyone in a hidden way, bathing the world in sufficient light for salvation to break out everywhere even where the concept of a personal God is flatly denied. Rather, John teaches that Jesus came into the world precisely in order to reveal His light to a world which otherwise would have remained in darkness.

1. Four Further Objections

i) Another problem with hard inclusivism is that it seems overly optimistic about the numbers to be saved apart from the Gospel. Even if the Bible admits the *possibility* of salvation through other means, surely it must be acknowledged that this is the exception, not the rule, as is clear from the pessimistic view of human nature found in Romans 1-3.[\[138\]](#)

ii) The view also seems to be contrary to the missionary emphasis of the New Testament. According to Rahner:

“In preaching Christianity to “non-Christians”, therefore, the future Christian will not so much start with the idea that he is aiming at turning them into something they are not, as trying to bring them

to their true selves. because God in his grace, in virtue of his universal salvific will, has already long since offered the reality of Christianity to those human beings, so that it is possible and probable that they have already accepted it without explicitly realizing this.” [139]

But this is not the picture the New Testament presents. Paul, who daily preached to those of other faiths, never suggested that mission was simply a matter of bringing extra light to people who would otherwise be saved anyway. On the contrary, concerning the need of both Jew and Gentile to hear the very specific information content of the Gospel, [140] he says,

“How can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them?” [141]

The New Testament’s command is for Christians to “go and make disciples of all nations,” for God “wants all men [and women] to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth.” [142]

iii) Hard inclusivists also often insist that salvation is granted “if people respond in sincerity and love to the best that they know.” [143] For instance, Raimon Panikkar believes that “Christ saves the Hindu” through “the message of morality and the good life.” [144] But, as Steven Travis points out, this is not in agreement with God’s message to us in Christ, for “the Christian’s awareness is that the message of morality and the good life is precisely what cannot save him.” [145]

iv) There is also a tendency to believe that is through *adherence to religions as such* that salvation becomes a possibility. In Rahner’s view

“Man who is required to have a religion is also commanded to seek and accept a social form of religion.” [146]

And yet the New Testament’s attitude towards religion, as such, is nothing like so positive. Stephen Travis notes Lesslie Newbigin’s observation that it was those of the highly ethical and highly developed religion of Jesus’ time who most vehemently opposed 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.” [147]

A personal friend of mine, who converted from Hinduism to Christianity, has many times remarked that it is the Brahmins, the highest adepts of Hinduism, who are least likely to believe in God, and who depend for their very existence upon the structural unfairness of the caste system; a system which views as dogs those ‘untouchables’ whom Jesus, in His ministry, would have embraced with love and acceptance. Clearly, *religions* cannot save; not even ‘Christianity.’

“...[I]n 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 is saved by adherence to the Sikh religion.” [148]

· Hard inclusivism therefore seems to fail to answer the problems it seeks to solve. It is not so much that this failure comes from inconsistency of internal logic, but from inconsistencies with respect to its use of the Scriptures. It rightly appeals to the Bible to prove the uniqueness and sufficiency of Jesus Christ, as the One who is necessarily behind the processes of salvation, but at other times it side-steps the Scriptures and proceeds merely as a philosophy.

E. Pluralism

An understandable response to all this is to feel that the fault lies with our *view* of Scripture. If most of our difficulties arise when we try to square reasoning with the teachings of Scripture, maybe the problem is that we are reading the Bible in the wrong way? Perhaps we misinterpret Scripture when we say it is fundamentally about propositional truth. Might it not rather be about *symbols* and *metaphors*, which are operating to ‘lead us towards,’ rather than ‘teach us about,’ a deeper truth? And perhaps this deeper truth is a *single truth*, shared by all the religions of the world, but expressed in different ways through different symbols and metaphors, because of different cultural settings.

In the last few decades this view has become extremely popular, to such an extent that Lesslie Newbigin chose to call it “the contemporary orthodoxy.”^[149] It is simply the case that most people believe that all religions lead to God.^[150] And it is a very appealing thought: everyone has a truly equal chance of salvation, because each culture has its own religion, and every person, if they so choose, can embrace that faith and approach God to find salvation. And what most people believe intuitively, John Hick, the most famous of the pluralist thinkers, has managed to express in persuasive scholarly language.

At one point John Hick’s views were “strongly evangelical and indeed fundamentalist,”^[151] but during his many years teaching in Birmingham, in which he came to know many from the Muslim, Sikh and Hindu communities, his theology began to change, as he increasingly questioned the relationship between Christianity and other faiths. Through attending their different places of worship, he began to feel that all these people were enjoying a common religious experience: they were all “human beings opening their minds to a higher divine Reality.”^[152]

As a result, Hick calls for theology to undergo a kind of “Copernican revolution.”^[153] Just as Nicolaus Copernicus had demonstrated the solar system to be heliocentric, against the geocentricism of the prevailing Ptolemaic system, so now it is time for theology to become “theocentric” rather than “Christocentric.” Even Rahner’s view that Christ is at the centre of salvation needs to be transcended. We must embrace a “pluralistic hypothesis” and recognise that the true centre of the world’s faiths is the “Real,” and that each has its own ways of thinking about and approaching this Reality.

“The religious traditions involve different human conceptions of the Real, with correspondingly different ways of experiencing the Real, and correspondingly different forms of life in response to the Real.”^[154]

For some, the Real will be thought of as the personal God, for others as the impersonal Absolute.

“... [T]he Real, the Ultimate, is capable of being experienced in terms of many different sets of human concepts, as Jahweh, as the Holy Trinity, as Alláh, as Shiva, as Vishnu, and again as Brahman, as the Dharmakaya, as the Tao, and so on.”^[155]

But we must not think, because there are contradictions between these different concepts, that one view may be true and another false, for the language of religions when considering the Real is essentially one of “mythological truth,” rather than “literal truth.” This means, for example, that when the Bible speaks of Jesus as the Word become flesh, it is not stating an objective fact, but offering a poetic resemblance, which can help us to *approach* the Real. In this sense, all religions may be said to be true.

“A statement or set of statements about X is mythologically true if it is not literally true but nevertheless tends to evoke a proper dispositional response to X.”^[156]

In addition, all religions have a similar structure when it comes to concepts of salvation or liberation. On the surface, it may look as if the Christian hope of Heaven, and the Buddhist goal of Nirvana, are totally irreconcilable concepts, but this is to lose the bigger picture in the details, for each answers its problem in a way that reveals a structural similarity between the two.

“...[T]he great world traditions are fundamentally alike in exhibiting a soteriological structure...they are all concerned with salvation/liberation/enlightenment/fulfilment. Each begins by declaring that our ordinary human life is profoundly lacking and distorted. It is a “fallen” life, immersed in the unreality of *maya*, or pervaded by *dukkha*, sorrow and unsatisfactoriness.”[\[157\]](#)

1. Various Objections

Despite its appeal however, the “pluralistic hypothesis” is unable to withstand a deal of severe criticism.

i) One of the most important objections is that it breaks two of the fundamental rules of logic, the Principles of Contradiction and Excluded Middle.

“The Principle of Contradiction asserts that *no statement can be both true and false*. The Principle of Excluded Middle asserts that *any statement is either true or false*.”[\[158\]](#)

In order to reconcile the world’s religions, Hick is faced with the challenge of mediating between the essentially *personal* Reality of the theistic traditions and the fundamentally *impersonal* Reality of most eastern traditions, (or *personae* and *impersonae*, as he calls them.) Unfortunately these positions present a contradiction, and they cannot be reduced to a third that might mediate between them, in spite of Hick’s analogies that attempt to prove this possible.

“... [C]onsider the famous duck-rabbit picture used by the philosopher Wittgenstein. This is an ambiguous diagram which can be seen as representing either a duck looking to the left or a rabbit looking to the right, and the mind tends to flip back and forth between these two ways of seeing it. Now suppose there is a culture in which ducks are a familiar sight but rabbits are completely unknown and have never even been heard of; and another culture in which rabbits are familiar but ducks are completely unknown. When people in the duck-knowing culture see the ambiguous figure they naturally report that it is the picture of a duck. And, of course, it is the other way round with the rabbit-knowing culture. ... each group is right in what it affirms but wrong in its insistence that the other group is therefore mistaken.”[\[159\]](#)

But the analogy does not work, because the picture does not present a contradiction, whereas identifying the ontological status of the Real as personal and impersonal *does*. If the Real is personal, that is identical to saying that the Real is not impersonal, and vice versa. But the duck-rabbit picture is different: there is nothing contradictory about a *picture* being both a picture of a duck *and* a picture of a rabbit.[\[160\]](#) Therefore, in spite of this analogy, and others like it, to suggest that one person may believe the Real to be personal, and another believe the Real to be impersonal, *and both be right*, is to break the Principle of Contradiction.[\[161\]](#)

Moreover, in the process of “mythologising” the religions’ fundamental truth statements about the Real, the term “Real” itself is made to function as what Francis Schaeffer called a “semantic mysticism.”[\[162\]](#) It merely serves as a “connotation word” to give the impression that beneath the personal and impersonal there is a third mysterious state which unites the two, whereas in fact the contradiction is being pushed back into a kind of no-man’s-land. This disobeys the Principle of Excluded Middle, because it is the same as saying that the statements, ‘the Real is personal,’ and ‘the Real is impersonal,’ are neither true nor false.

ii) A second objection is that the pluralist hypothesis is self-contradictory: it assumes the existence of the Real, while effectively denying this existence in its method. Following Immanuel Kant’s doctrine that the objects (‘noumena’) of our perception cannot be known *in themselves*, but only as they *appear* (‘phenomena’) to our senses, Hick’s method considers our most fundamental statements about the Real to be on the level of the ‘phenomenal,’ whereas the true ‘noumenal’ Reality is beyond every human concept.

“...[W]e cannot apply to the Real *an sich* the characteristics encountered in its many *personae* and *impersonae*. Thus it cannot be said to be one or many, person or thing, conscious or unconscious, purpose or non-purposeful, substance or process, good or evil, loving or hating. None of the

descriptive terms that apply within the realm of human experience can apply literally to the unexperienceable reality that underlies that realm.”[163]

Thus to say: ‘the Real is personal,’ is to give an opinion from the world of *phenomena*, it is not a literally true statement about “the ineffable ultimate reality (the divine *noumenon*) beyond the scope of our human conceptual systems.”[164] But surely the same must be said of the statement, ‘the Real exists,’ [165] for the hypothesis must cope with the facts that for the theist, God exists, whereas for the Hsiang-Kuo Taoist, there is, strictly speaking, no existence at all.[166] Therefore even statements about the *existence* of the Real must be on the level of the phenomenal. This reveals a deep inconsistency, because Hick certainly believes that the Real exists:

“Hick holds a critical realist view of religious phenomena. He believes that the objects of religious belief, with a number of qualifications, do exist independent of one’s perception.”[167]

But where does Hick’s preference for the existence of the Real come from? It is certainly not entailed by the hypothesis, for that implies something much more like the traditional Taoist belief that the fundamental reality is *neither* Being *nor* Non-being: it ‘is’ simply the *Tao*, or the Unnameable. The logic of the pluralist hypothesis ends in the same silence - it *removes all content from any statement about the Real whatsoever*. [168] And at this point it becomes almost impossible to see any difference between this position (which claims to be an example of “critical realism”[169]) and that of “religious non-realism,”[170] which denies that religious language refers to anything transcendent at all.

iii) A third problem is that the pluralist hypothesis requires an unbiblical view of Christ. If it is to accommodate all faiths, it must see Christianity as just one manifestation of the Real among others.

“...[P]luralism implies that the religions (including Christianity) are all imperfect because all formed within imperfect human cultures, and that no one of them can properly make an exclusive claim to absolute truth.”[171]

This forces Hick to reassess the rôle of Jesus, for if Christianity is not for everyone, Jesus must be seen as *a* way to God, rather than *the* way. The direction of this logic is clearly seen when Hick explains why he finds the Incarnation “unacceptable”:

“What makes this [exclusive claim to absolute truth] unacceptable...is the conviction that Jesus was God incarnate (i.e. God the Son, Second Person of the Holy Trinity, incarnate). For if Jesus was God, and if he founded a new religion, then that religion is the only one to have been founded directly by God and must therefore be uniquely superior to all others.”[172]

He supports his argument by noting that a large number of scholars agree that Jesus most probably never *openly* claimed to be God:

“New Testament scholarship, since the modern rediscovery of the Jewishness of Jesus, strongly suggests that Jesus himself would have regarded as blasphemous the idea that he was God incarnate.”[173]

But interestingly, in his article “Is Christianity the only true religion, or one among others?” Hick chooses to quote exclusively from scholars who, whatever their views on this subject, nevertheless remain committed Trinitarians.[174] Even if they agree that Jesus’ teaching did not involve *open* claims to deity, they nevertheless continue to believe that He is God Incarnate, because they believe that the New Testament progressively reveals the divine implications of Jesus’ words. As Professor Charles Moule says, (one of those quoted by Hick):

“Jesus was, *from the beginning*, such a one as appropriately to be described in the ways in which, sooner or later, he did come to be described in the New Testament period - for instance, as ‘Lord’ and even, in some sense, as ‘God.’ “[175]

· There is no question that the pluralist position is attractive. It seems to offer great hope for a world that is constantly being troubled by war, fanaticism, and religious competition. It seems to answer that perennial call for an Idea that can unite all peoples in mutual respect and co-operation: a Religion of World Religions. But the bottom line is *truth*, not utility. No matter how useful pluralist ideas might be for encouraging co-operation, though success on a large scale seems extremely doubtful, if the question of truth is swept under the carpet, every effort will have been for nothing. [176] If, at the end of the day, God requires faith in Christ, (or faith in Allah and Mohammed, or liberation is to be achieved through experiencing *satori*), then the pluralist's cause will have been profoundly damaging to countless souls. In the end, since the pluralist hypothesis is effectively *another religion*, and not a successful unification of faiths, it falls into the same category as the very pragmatic suggestions of Julian Huxley and other humanists, for whom 'Religion Without Revelation' [177] is little more than a modifier of human behaviour.

F. Universalism

Less frequently encountered these days are the various theories of Universalism which conjecture that, in one way or another, everyone shall find themselves saved in the end. If one such theory were true, it would resolve our difficulties. Millard Erickson lists them comprehensively: "the theory of universal conversion"; "the theory of universal atonement"; "the theory of universal opportunity"; "the theory of universal explicit opportunity"; "the theory of universal reconciliation"; "the theory of universal pardon" and "the theory of universal restoration." Only the last four are of interest, because the first three are not truly Universalist theories: they are victims of common misconception. [178]

a) The theory of Universal Explicit Opportunity

This theory is interesting because it proposes that those who are not fortunate enough to hear the Gospel during this life shall nevertheless have the opportunity to respond to it in the next. In some versions of the theory this is extended even to those who have consciously rejected the Gospel during their lifetime. According to James E. Talmage of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, during the time between Jesus' death and Resurrection, the spirit of Jesus preached to the sinners of Noah's day (1Pet. 3:18-20, 4:6), and we should therefore suppose that He continues to preach in the spirit realm.

"If it was deemed proper and just that the Gospel be carried to the spirits who were disobedient in the days of Noah, it is reasonable to conclude that like opportunities shall be placed within the reach of others who have rejected the word at different times." [179]

It does, however, seem precarious to base a doctrine on passages that are generally held to be obscure and susceptible to several interpretations. From the point of view of systematic theology these verses cannot be interpreted in this way, because other portions of Scripture contradict the notion. [180] Jesus' Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus (Lk.16:19-31) indicates that it is useless to give people a second chance, for if they do not respond the first time, they will never respond. And in John 8:24, Jesus presents our state after death as fixed:

"...if you do not believe I am the one I claim to be, you will indeed die in your sins."

Jesus' Parable of the Sheep and the Goats (Lk.25:31-46) gives no suggestion of a second chance, but clearly shows that our status as 'sheep' or 'goat' is decided this side of the Second Coming. And the writer to the Hebrews echoes this with the statement that "man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgement." [181] All of this is made more sure by the fact that "nowhere else in Scripture is there a hint of a second chance for the dead." [182] While it is certainly difficult to make a *positive* statement about the meaning of the 1Peter passages, it is not a problem to make a negative one: *they do not teach a "second probation."*

b) The Theories of Universal Reconciliation and Universal Pardon

These are less interesting theories because they seem to have more to do with wishful thinking than solid argument.

i) Advocates of the first theory believe that Jesus' Sacrifice reconciled everyone to God without exception, such that preaching is merely a matter of informing people of their redeemed status. They often appeal to Paul's words in 2 Corinthians 5:11-21, where he describes the Ministry of Reconciliation:

“All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them.”[\[183\]](#)

· It is difficult to see how this can be seriously argued. Paul has just said “*if* anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation,”[\[184\]](#) which is nonsense if it is indeed the case that everyone is already in Christ; and how is this interpretation of the Ministry of Reconciliation *itself* to be reconciled within the wider corpus of Paul, which so stresses the principle of ‘salvation on condition of faith’?

ii) Everyone will receive God's pardon eventually, according to the second theory. It will not matter how people behaved, neither will God consider their beliefs, for our Creator is so loving, that He will ultimately relax His demands, and accept all into the Kingdom without exception.

· Again, how can this be a serious suggestion? One cannot help wondering if this view of God has more to do with the ‘meek and mild’ Jesus of popular imagination, than the often disturbing Jesus of the New Testament, whose words contain more warning about the *wrath* of God than anyone else in the whole of Scripture.

c) The Theory of Universal Restoration

This theory has the distinction of being expounded by one of the Early Church Fathers, Origen, who proposed that the after-life has two stages: an initial stage of purgatory, and a further stage of restoration, in which eventually, every being will have been purged of sin, and reunited with its Creator.

“But those who have been removed from their primal state of blessedness have not been removed irrecoverably, but have been placed under the rule of those holy and blessed orders which we have described; and by availing themselves of the aid of these, and being remoulded by salutary principles and discipline, they may recover themselves, and be restored to their condition of happiness.”[\[185\]](#)

His argument hinges on a particular interpretation of Psalm 110. The Psalmist describes a Davidic king (probably David) addressing his son (Solomon) with the words:

“The Lord says to my Lord: “Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet.”

Origen, consistent with New Testament thinking, sees this as prophetic of God's placing everything in subjection to Christ.[\[186\]](#) But he then makes the step of interpreting ‘in subjection to’ as ‘obedient to,’ with the idea that when everyone shall one day be subject to Christ, we shall all be obedient to Him in the same manner as the apostles. This must be so, he argues, for to be subject to Christ entails that we receive salvation.

“What, then, is this ‘putting under’ by which all things must be made subject to Christ? I am of opinion that it is this very subjection by which we also wish to be subject to Him, by which the apostles also were subject, and all the saints who have been followers of Christ. For the name ‘subjection,’ by which we are subject to Christ, indicates that the salvation which proceeds from

Him belongs to His subjects, agreeably to the declaration of David, 'Shall not my soul be subject unto God? From Him cometh my salvation.' "[187]

· The image, however, is of 'things placed under' the king's feet, which is a *neutral* picture; some 'subjects' will obey willingly, others will be submissive only under duress. Certainly, the rôle of 'footstool' suggests the latter. There therefore seems to be no good reason to believe that the only way in which we can be 'subject to Christ' is to be in receipt of salvation. But the argument aside, this type of reasoning fails to consider the full counsel of Scripture, for it ignores the Bible's clear teaching that those who are condemned shall remain so. [188]

III. Conclusion

This investigation has sought to answer the question: *Is it possible for a person to be saved without hearing the Gospel of Jesus Christ?* The motivation behind this question was not to distinguish between the saved and the lost, as if we were a position to judge between people, for only God is Judge. Rather, the question arose because of an unease about an apparent contradiction: the Bible teaches, not only that God is just, but that "God is love;" it also teaches that Jesus is the only Saviour; and yet it is obvious that God does not give everyone the opportunity to hear the good news about Jesus. An answer to this question was therefore sought, not for the purposes of self-congratulation, but to reassure us that the teachings of Scripture stand up to the brute facts of the real world.

· One part of the answer was provided by the Scriptures with great clarity. Those who lived B.C. could be saved without hearing the good news about Jesus Christ, but only because there was a partial revelation of the Gospel given in advance to Abraham. All, therefore, who trusted in Yahweh on the basis of that revelation will receive a place in the Kingdom along with believers in Christ.

It then remained to be answered if anyone could be saved B.C. without knowledge of this partial revelation, and if there is salvation A.D. without knowledge of the mature revelation.

· Exclusivism answers: No. There is no salvation without hearing the Gospel message of Jesus Christ. But this brings into question the *loving-kindness* of God, for if God does not give everyone an equal opportunity to respond to the Gospel, He is being unfair. What sense does it make to say that "God is love," if He condemns people without giving them a chance to receive the only remedy for their spiritual sickness?

· Soft inclusivism's answer is Yes. Salvation is possible if people will respond to the light that is available to them, and since the Scriptures teach that humans have access to information about God through general revelation, it is true that there is sufficient light for saving faith to exist. In a sense, therefore, general revelation can provide an *alternative partial revelation* of the Gospel. (One problem with this position is that it does nothing to answer the problem of "invincible ignorance." This is considered in the appendix.)

· Hard inclusivism also answers positively: that salvation is open to all, for there is an innate knowledge of God to which every person may respond, even if God is not consciously known. The great strength of this position is that it never compromises the biblical truth that Christ is the only source of salvation, but it has weaknesses regarding other areas of biblical truth. It steps outside the teaching of Scripture in virtually removing the rôle of knowledge with respect to salvation; it is unbiblical in its over-optimistic view of human nature; and it tends towards a doctrine of works.

· Pluralism's answer is also Yes. Salvation is necessarily open to all because every religion is a way to God. But even John Hick's 'pluralist hypothesis,' widely recognised to be among the most rigorous expositions of the idea, suffers from a number of serious problems. The hypothesis sits very uncomfortably with some of the most basic principles of logic; it may even be internally contradictory; it freely disregards biblical data through its concept of "mythological truth"; and it involves an unbiblical view of Christ.

“ Universalism answers Yes in various ways, concluding that everyone shall find themselves saved at the end, but the arguments given in favour of this position are weak.

It would seem, therefore, that only some form of *soft inclusivism* can provide an answer. It is more successful than the other solutions, because it is able to reconcile some of the hard facts of reality with the teachings of the Bible without involving distortion of the Scriptures, and without calling into question the loving-kindness of God. It may not be a complete answer - that may have to wait for the New Heavens and the New Earth - but it does seem to be the best answer that is available. What is more, it is reassuring, for it gives us reason to believe that the God of love, in whom we believe, and whose Christ is Lord of all, forgets none who are made in His image.[\[189\]](#)

IV. Appendix : William Lane Craig, Molina and Scientia Media

In the discussion about hard inclusivism, it was mentioned that soft inclusivism did nothing to address the problem of “invincible ignorance,” namely: that some people are at a disadvantage, *through no fault of their own*, because they have false beliefs which bar them from receiving the truth, beliefs which cannot be overcome by any means.

One evangelical scholar who has sought an answer to this problem is William Lane Craig. Craig questions whether such people even *exist*? It could be argued, he says, that God gives sufficient grace to everyone to enable them to respond to the truth, and so there is in fact *no-one* whose ignorance is really invincible. Although some people *seem* to have barriers which cannot be overcome, this is in fact not the case, for God, in His foreknowledge of every person’s circumstances, has arranged everything so that each person receives grace in proportion to their need.

“Everyone in this life is given an adequate chance of salvation; indeed, many of the lost may actually receive greater gifts of prevenient grace and, thus, better chances of salvation than many of the saved.” [190]

But then a further problem emerges, which Craig calls “The Soteriological Problem of Evil.” [191] Even if we agree that God gives every person sufficient grace to respond to the truth, whether it be the Gospel or general revelation, surely it is possible that some people who fail to respond to the light of general revelation *would* respond to the Gospel if only they heard it. How can God be loving if He fails to bring the Gospel to such people?

“...some of the unreached who are condemned *might* respond to the gospel if they heard it. So how could a loving God fail to bring the gospel to them? Inclusivism offers nothing to solve this problem.” [192]

Again, perhaps the answer is simply to say that there are *no such persons* : that God has arranged everything so that all those who *would* respond to the Gospel are those who *do in fact* respond to the light they have. But how is this possible? It seems to involve God in something beyond mere foreknowledge, for it is not sufficient that God simply knows ‘in advance’ [193] what people *will* do, but that He must know what everybody *would* do in every conceivable set of circumstances. But how is this to be understood?

Craig has attempted to reach an understanding of this through drawing on the thought of the Spanish Jesuit Luis de Molina (1535-1600), who developed the notion of “scientia media,” or “middle knowledge.” According to Molina’s teaching, God possesses three types of knowledge: “natural knowledge,” “middle knowledge” and “free knowledge.” Before God creates the universe, or more correctly, logically prior to the moment of creation, [194] God enjoys “natural knowledge,” which means that He has knowledge of all possible universes He could create. If there is an infinite number of universes He could create, He knows about everything that *could* exist or happen in each one, including what every creature with free will *could* do. Next in order comes “middle knowledge.” By this knowledge, God knows about everything that *would* exist or happen in each one, including what decisions intelligent creatures (especially human beings) *would* make. Lastly comes God’s “free knowledge,” by which He knows everything that remains to be known about the world He does in fact create.

The important thing about middle knowledge is that it is the means by which God takes into consideration all the free-will decisions of human beings when He creates the world. At the moment of creation, God knows the free decisions that every single human being would make throughout the history of each and every universe it is possible for Him to create, and it is on the basis of such knowledge that He decides to create *this*, rather than *that* universe. Molina saw in this an answer to the paradox of predestination versus human freedom, for when we hold that God predestines certain people to salvation, we are in fact saying that God knows from eternity, via His middle knowledge, which are those individuals who *would* respond

to His grace were He to create this world. Since God knows these people from eternity, and since He chooses to create this world rather than another, He ensures that these do in fact receive salvation.

The usual objection to this line of thinking is that it compromises God's sovereignty: that it is unacceptable to believe that God is somehow *limited* by the free-will decisions of His creatures.

“Moreover, it is objectionable, because it makes the divine knowledge dependent on the choice of man, virtually annuls the certainty of the knowledge of future events, and thus implicitly denies the omniscience of God.”[\[195\]](#)

But, of course, it can just as easily be argued that God's omniscience must *include* middle knowledge, and that if He is omnipotent He must be able to use this knowledge in the act of creation if He so chooses. It is still His sovereign decision. Molina is not setting a limit on what God can do, he is simply suggesting that this is in fact what God has *chosen* to do.

Through reading the work of Alvin Plantinga[\[196\]](#), Craig saw a possibility for this Molinist position to answer the Soteriological Problem of Evil. Craig's argument begins by recognising that God is omniscient, omnipotent and omnibenevolent. Because of His *omniscience*, God has total knowledge of every possible world that He could create; because of His *omnipotence*, He is able to create any such world He chooses; and because of His *omnibenevolence*, His desire is to create a world in which everyone is saved. But His omnibenevolence, by definition, requires the existence of *persons* who are able to respond to Him in love, and who are therefore capable of free-will decisions. However, this narrows the field of worlds that God can create, because through His middle knowledge God knows of possible worlds in which people would fail to respond to His love, and who would therefore be damned. So God considers a smaller set of possible worlds. But then, it is possible that the field is *so* narrow that there are *no* worlds in which everyone would freely respond to His love. In this case, what is God to do? Is He to hold back from ever creating a world, or is He to choose the world which contains the optimum number of saved persons and minimum number of damned? Craig holds that God has done just this.

The next step proceeds by answering the following objection: Is it not grossly unfair to create persons who will be damned just so that saved persons can exist? Craig answers that it is not unfair, because it is possible that some people would *never* respond to God in *any* possible world, and if this is so, the Molinist can hold that *everyone who is damned in this world would be damned in any other world* - (such persons suffer from “transworld damnation”[\[197\]](#)) - and so God is not unfair to create them, for in whatever world they would find themselves damned, it would be entirely as a consequence of their *own* decision.

Craig offers this as a *possible* answer to The Soteriological Problem of Evil: ‘What about those who fail to respond to general revelation, but who would have responded to the Gospel?’ His answer is that these people do not exist, because everyone who fails in this life to respond to the Gospel, or the light God supplies, is a person whom God knew from eternity would fail to respond to Him in *any* possible world. And so the ‘advantages’ and ‘disadvantages’[\[198\]](#) of geography and history can be seen as the practical outworking of God's middle knowledge, an answer which finds consonance with Paul's words in his Areopagus address:

“ From one man [God] made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live. God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us.”[\[199\]](#)

In addition, this position is not unrealistically optimistic about the numbers saved apart from the Gospel, and it is consistent with the missionary emphasis of the New Testament. But strangely, it alters the standard view of evangelism away from ‘co-operation with God to rescue the perishing,’ to something a little like the Calvinist position of ‘calling out the elect,’ though unlike it in the sense that the elect have elected *themselves*. It even preserves the missionary imperative of the Great Commission, though again in an altered form, for although it does not see evangelism as a divine tool for the conversion of souls, it

nevertheless views evangelism as necessary, for it is a means by which God, via His middle knowledge, *optimises* the number of saved persons in this universe He has chosen to create.

“...there might well be people in the world who will be saved through those [evangelistic] efforts who otherwise would not have been saved (because they would not have been created)... by our obedience to our Lord’s Great Commission we can help to maximise the number of the saved...”[\[200\]](#)

· As was said, this is only a possible solution. It may prove to be inadequate. There are certainly philosophers who question the logical validity of middle knowledge, and they may finally win the argument. But, even if it finally proves to be wrong, and even if all such complex arguments end up with little more than uncertainty, what they will have demonstrated is that the Mind of God is ultimately beyond human knowledge. There is nothing new in this thought itself, of course, but it has often been seen as a ‘cop out,’ a tacit admission that Christianity is unable to provide the answers. But if, after all the best minds have worked on the problems for millennia, the Infinite still remains impenetrable to human reason, might we not finally accept that Christians have an *intellectually justification for pure trust in the wisdom of God?*

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End Notes

[1] Rom. 10:14b, *N.K.J.V.* Unless otherwise stated, all Bible references are from the *New International Version*.

[2] D. A. Carson, *The Gagging of God*, p. 347.

[3] This is the snappy title of Douglas Groothuis' recent book, which explores the growing cynicism towards the very notion of *truth* in contemporary western culture.

[4] Edward Norman, *Entering the Darkness : Christianity and its Modern Substitutes*, London, (SPCK : 1991), p. 67; cited in D. A. Carson, *The Gagging of God*, p. 348.

[5] "...the church stands on the verge of completing the task of world evangelization..." (William Lane Craig, "Politically Incorrect Salvation.")

[6] Figures from <http://www.adherents.com> (updated 13/06/01).

[7] Harold Lindsell takes this position in his famous book, *The Battle for the Bible*.

[8] See: William Lane Craig, "The Problem of Miracles: A Historical and Philosophical Perspective," *Gospel Perspectives*, pp. 9-40.

[9] This term is associated with Rudolph Bultmann who tried to remove the supposedly mythological elements in the Gospels by reinterpreting them, in the hope that the New Testament would then appeal to modern Man.

[10] Harold Lindsell is such a case. In *The Battle for the Bible*, his well-intentioned attempt to argue for the inerrancy of the Scriptures is snookered by his extreme opposition to criticism. In trying to harmonise the Gospel accounts of Peter's denial of Christ, he proposes the solution that Peter denied Jesus *six* times! See pp. 174-176.

[11] G. L. Prestige, *Fathers and Heretics*, p. 22.

[12] An example is the group of evangelical academics contributing to *Scripture and Truth*, an influential collection of articles exploring the possibility of a marriage between biblical inerrancy and redaction criticism.

[13] Acts 4:12

[14] Rom. 5:12. As to whether Paul's words support the traditional doctrine of Original Sin is still a debated question.

[15] Rom. 5:12-21

[16] Jn. 14:6

[17] 1Jn 5:12

[18] Rev. 20:15

[19] 1Tim. 2:5f., *N.K.J.V.*

[20] An extreme position on this is held by the Jesus Seminar, a group of very liberal scholars based in the U.S., which dismisses over 80% of Jesus' words in the New Testament as unauthentic.

[21] William L. Craig, “‘No Other Name’ : A Middle Knowledge Perspective on the Exclusivity of Salvation through Christ.”

[22] That view is famously argued in the collection of essays: *The Myth of God Incarnate*, edited by John H. Hick.

[23] Jn. 16:12f.

[24] Some argue that the other ‘gospels’, ‘acts’ and ‘apocalypses’ discovered in 1945 near Nag Hammadi in Upper Egypt contain significant material about Jesus not included in the canonical Gospels. Elaine Pagels has popularised this in *The Gnostic Gospels*, but it is widely accepted that the evidence is against this conclusion.

[25] John H. Hick, “The Latest Vatican Statement on Christianity and other Religions.”

[26] David E. Jenkins, *The Glory of Man*, p. 28.

[27] Isa. 66:16

[28] Isa. 56:6f.

[29] E.W. Heaton, *The Old Testament Prophets*, p. 153.

[30] Isa. 45:22

[31] Zech. 8:22f.

[32] David E. Jenkins, op. cit., pp. 30f.

[33] Heb. 11:39f.

[34] Gal. 3:6-9

[35] Rom 3:27-30

[36] Heb. 9:15

[37] ‘The Gospel’ means both the Christian message and its primitive form as entrusted to Abraham.

[38] Rom. 3:9

[39] Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, p. 173.

[40] *Ibid.*, p. 177.

[41] In recent years the terminology has been changing. In order to avoid negative connotations, many now prefer to use the term *particularism* rather than exclusivism, and a distinction is made between particularists who hold to **i**) *restrictivism* (here discussed as 'exclusivism') and **ii**) *accessibilism* (here discussed as 'soft inclusivism'). Although there is much to recommend the new terminology, the older is used here for the sake of familiarity.

[42] Harold Lindsell, *A Christian Philosophy of Missions*, Van Kampen Press, (Wheaton : 1949), p. 117, cited in Brad Johnson, “A Three-Pronged Defense of Salvific Exclusivism in a World of Religions.”

[43] John R. W. Stott, *The Lausanne Covenant : An Exposition and Commentary*, Chapter 3, (1975). Italics in original. It is interesting to note that John Stott's position has changed since 1975: see below.

[44] This is a particular favourite with exclusivists, because it seems to leave no room for disagreement: "there is no other name [than Jesus]...by which we must be saved," and that is that. But, as many writers point out, the ancients used 'in the name of' and similar expressions to mean 'by virtue of the *person*.'

[45] The argument is based on Rom. 9

[46] This is a much-abused verse. Even Don Cupitt makes the classic exegetical error: "...in the First Letter of John, we are told that the words Love and God are convertible." [Cupitt, "All You Really Need Is Love."]

[47] Acts 17:26f.

[48] D. A. Carson, *op. cit.*, p. 309.

[49] It *must* be hyperbole: even the doctrine of "total depravity," despite its name, never denies that humans have *some* good in them.

[50] J.I. Packer, *God's Words*, I.V.P., (1981), p. 210; cited in D. A. Carson, *op. cit.*, p. 311.

[51] Justin Martyr, *The First Apology*, par. 46, in *Writings of Saint Justin Martyr*, tr. Thomas B. Falls, Christian Heritage Inc., (New York : 1948), p. 83; cited in Harold A. Netland, *Dissonant Voices : Religious Pluralism and the Question of Truth*, p. 12.

[52] Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, p. 213.

[53] *Ibid.*

[54] Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Dread*, p. 26.

[55] Rom. 5:12

[56] Rom. 2:14f.

[57] Gen. 6:7

[58] Gen. 9:1-3 recapitulates Gen. 1:28-30.

[59] Others of interest include Job, and the widow of Zarapheth in 1Ki. 17:9-24. Although the writer of the Book of Job was an Israelite, the character of Job, whether historical or fictional, was not. Job 1:1 places him in the "land of Uz," a large area east of the Jordan. Nevertheless, he is described as "blameless and upright" and as one who "feared God and shunned evil." The widow of Zarapheth was from a town in the Ball-worshipping region of Tyre and Sidon, and yet she seems to have prior knowledge of God (v.12). After Elijah's prayer has revived her son, she does not say, "Now I know that your God is God," she implies prior knowledge: "Now I know that you are a man of God, and that the word of the Lord from your mouth is the truth" (v.24). She is also predisposed both to hear from God and to obey Him (v.9).

[60] Gen. 13:15, 15:7

[61] Gen. 15:5

[62] Gen. 15:6

[63] Gen. 15:17f.

[64] Rom. 4:3f.

[65] Heb. 11:39f. Even so, this is still because of Christ's work.

[66] Gen. 14:18

[67] *The N.I.V. Study Bible*, p. 27.

[68] Gen 14:22

[69] That does not mean that the Scriptures approve of pagan religions.

[70] Although the Old Testament does not *say* that Melchizedek was ever to enter God's Kingdom, the use made of him in Psalm 110 and Hebrews 7 makes it very difficult to believe otherwise.

[71] It might be argued that Melchizedek became acceptable only after association with Abram. But the writer to the Hebrews sees Melchizedek as a type of Christ even *before* he meets Abram.

[72] Were that not so, Abram could have seen no similarity between their beliefs. The designation "Most High God" *itself* contains known information.

[73] Here, special revelation would be the provisional Gospel announced to Abram. Another alternative is that God revealed Himself directly to Melchizedek.

[74] Psalm 19:1-4a

[75] Rom. 1:19f.

[76] John H. Hick, *Philosophy of Religion*, p. 23.

[77] William Paley, *Natural Theology*, Chapter One: "State of the Argument."

[78] *Ibid.*, Chapter Five: "Application of the argument continued."

[79] David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, Part VII, p. 49.

[80] John Passmore, *Hume's Intentions*, p. 69.

[81] The Anthropic Principle is the term for the idea that the universe must have been *fine-tuned* from its beginning, given the fact that the initial energy balance of the universe, and many other details, had to be 'just right' for intelligent life to develop. And if it was *fine-tuned*, then the watch analogy gains new force.

[82] Behe uses the term 'irreducibly complex.'

[83] See: Michael J. Behe, *Darwin's Black Box*, and William A. Dembski, *The Design Inference*. These writers do not deny *evolution* as such, their argument is that the process must have been *planned*.

[84] Dembski is impatient of 'God-of-the-gaps' accusations: "...the design theorists' critique constitutes a genuine challenge for contemporary theology, and is not rightly dismissed by one-liners like, 'Design commits the god-of-the-gaps fallacy' or 'Design violates the rules of science.'" (William A. Dembski, "What Every Theologian Should Know about Creation, Evolution and Design.")

[85] Ibid.

[86] C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, p. 17.

[87] Acts 17:26

[88] Acts 17:27

[89] Millard J. Erickson, "Hope for Those Who Haven't Heard? Yes, but..." in *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 11 (April 1975): 124; cited in Harold A. Netland, *Dissonant Voices*, p. 270.

[90] Ibid., p. 125; in Harold A. Netland, p. 271.

[91] John R. W. Stott, *The Authentic Jesus*, Marshall, Morgan & Scott, (London : 1985), p. 83; cited in Harold A. Netland, p. 274.

[92] D. A. Carson, *The Gagging of God*, p. 279.

[93] John R. W. Stott, *The Authentic Jesus*, p. 83; cited in Harold A. Netland, p. 274.

[94] Hans Küng, *Christianity and the World Religions*, p. 27.

[95] *The Qur'an*, Surah 4:171

[96] *The Qur'an*, Surah 4:157

[97] "And whoever does evil or acts unjustly to his soul, then asks forgiveness of Allah, he shall find Allah Forgiving, Merciful." (Surah 4:110) However, it is not clear how far Allah's mercy extends: Surah 4:17 says that He forgives only *unintentional* sin, which is comfort to no-one except the self-righteous: "Repentance with Allah is only for those who do evil in ignorance, then turn (to Allah) soon, so these it is to whom Allah turns (mercifully), and Allah is ever Knowing, Wise."

[98] Syed Mahmudunnasir, *Islam, Its Concept and History*, (New Delhi : 1984), p. 3; cited in Chris Marantika, "Justification by Faith : Its Relevance in Islamic Context," in D. A. Carson, ed., *Right with God*.

[99] Neither can he be confident that Allah will continue to forgive, for sins, once acknowledged, can no longer committed in ignorance.

[100] The exception being Jesus Christ.

[101] Rom. 3:20

[102] See: Chris Marantika, "Justification by Faith : Its Relevance in Islamic Context," in D. A. Carson, ed., *Right with God*.

[103] Even the word 'law' has connotations of a Lawgiver, but that notion is absent on the whole.

[104] Hans Küng, *Does God Exist?*, pp. 589f.

[105] It is frequently pointed out that Hinduism is not *a* religion, but an umbrella term for the many beliefs and practices the Indian peoples.

[106] Viṅvakarman is the "all-worker," the creator of the universe.

[107] Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan and Charles A. Moore, eds., *A Source Book in Indian Philosophy*, p. 18.

[108] E. Conze, *Buddhism. Its Essence and Development*, Oxford University Press, (1953), p. 40; cited in Hans Küng, *Does God Exist?*, p. 597.

[109] See Hans Küng's discussion on the positive qualities of the Void in *Does God Exist?*, pp. 596-600.

[110] Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 1.2.340; cited in Masao Uenuma, "Justification by Faith : Its Relevance in a Buddhist Context," in D. A. Carson, ed., *Right with God*, pp. 243-255.

[111] A Bodhisattva is an enlightened human who is on the threshold of Nirvana, and thus exalted from earthly life, but who chooses to postpone full entry into Nirvana in order to help others.

[112] Masao Uenuma, op. cit., in D. A. Carson, ed., *Right with God*, p. 246.

[113] 'Salvation' is probably a more suitable word than 'liberation' in Amida-Buddhism, for the ultimate grace that Amida can bestow is 'Paradise,' a word which is laden with *positive* connotations.

[114] What distinguishes *sin* from mere *transgression of law* is the element of *offence* against a personal God.

[115] Ninian Smart, *The Religious Experience of Mankind*, pp. 53f.

[116] Keith Ward, *The Turn of the Tide*, p. 143.

[117] Karl Rahner was "a theological expert at the Second Vatican Council, and, in almost all accounts but his own, one of the shaping influences upon it." (Karen Kilby, *Rahner*, p. xi)

[118] Karl Rahner, *The Christian of the Future*, Chapter 4, § "God's salvific will includes all who seek him with upright heart." Italics in original.

[119] 1Tim 2:4

[120] Karen Kilby, op. cit., p. 32.

[121] Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, VI 391, cited in Kilby, *Rahner*, p.33. Italics added.

[122] Karen Kilby, op. cit., p.34.

[123] Mark Fischer, *Paraphrase of Karl Rahner's Foundations of Christian Faith*, Introduction, Part 3E, "Unthematic Knowledge of God."

[124] Karl Rahner, *The Christian of the Future*, Chapter 4, § "The Church is the sacrament of the world's salvation."

[125] According to Vatican II, God is not "far distant from those who in shadows and images seek the unknown God... Those also can attain to salvation who through no fault of their own do not know the Gospel of Christ or His Church, yet sincerely seek God and moved by grace strive by their deeds to do His will as it is known to them through the dictates of conscience." (*Lumen Gentium*, Article XVI)

[126] Again, Vatican II believes that "the plan of salvation also includes those who acknowledge the Creator. In the first place amongst these there are the Mohamedans, who, professing to hold the faith of Abraham, along with us adore the one and merciful God, who on the last day will judge mankind." (Ibid.)

[127] Vatican II: "Nor does Divine Providence deny the helps necessary for salvation to those who, without blame on their part, have not yet arrived at an explicit knowledge of God and with His grace strive to live a good life." (Ibid.)

[128] Mark Fischer, op. cit., Introduction, Part 3E. Italics added.

[129] Karl Rahner, *The Christian of the Future*, Chapter 4, § “New understanding of the mission: anonymous Christianity.”

[130] Keith Ward, op. cit., p. 143.

[131] Ibid.

[132] Rom. 1:20

[133] Rahner expresses something similar when he says, “a right orientation towards God can be accomplished in the concrete, “subjectively”, even where extremely grave errors are present regarding particular specific maxims of morality and religion.” (Karl Rahner, *The Christian of the Future*, Chapter 4, § “New understanding of the mission: anonymous Christianity.”)

[134] Jn. 8:31f.

[135] Jn. 1:9

[136] Jn. 1:10f.

[137] Jn. 8:12 and Jn. 12:46

[138] “Perhaps some do access salvation by means of general revelation, but if we take Scripture seriously we must admit that these are relatively few.” (William Lane Craig, “Politically Incorrect Salvation.”)

[139] Karl Rahner, *The Christian of the Future*, Chapter 4, § “The Church as the visible form of what is already interiorly binding.”

[140] Rom. 10:9

[141] Rom. 10:14

[142] Matt. 28:19 and 1Tim. 2:3f.

[143] Keith Ward, op. cit., p. 143.

[144] Raimon Panikkar, *The Unknown Christ of Hinduism*, Darton, Longman and Todd, (London : 1964), p. 54; cited in Stephen Travis, “The Life of the World and Future Judgement,” *Churchman* vol. 97 no. 1 (1983), p. 37.

[145] Stephen Travis, “The Life of the World...,” p. 37.

[146] Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, vol. 5, p. 120; cited in Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, p. 174.

[147] Stephen Travis, “The Life of the World...,” pp. 37f.

[148] Ibid.

[149] Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, p. 156.

[150] Ibid., p. 175.

[151] John H. Hick, *God Has Many Names*, Macmillan, (London: 1980), p. 2; cited in Keith E. Johnson, "John Hick's Pluralistic Hypothesis and the Problem of Conflicting Truth-Claims."

[152] *Ibid.*, p. 5.

[153] John H. Hick, "The Latest Vatican Statement on Christianity and Other Religions."

[154] John H. Hick, "Interfaith and the Future."

[155] *Ibid.*

[156] John H. Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, Yale University Press, (New Haven, Conn.: 1989), p. 348; cited in Keith E. Johnson, *op. cit.*

[157] John H. Hick, *The Second Christianity*, p. 86.

[158] Irving M. Copi, *Introduction to Logic*, Macmillan, (New York : 1986), p. 306.

[159] Hick, "Interfaith and the Future."

[160] Clearly a duck cannot *be* a rabbit, but a picture can *represent* many things simultaneously.

[161] Netland discusses a possible objection to this: that identifying the Real as personal and impersonal does *not* present a contradiction, because each description is a subset of the set of all true propositions about the Real, (pp. 212-215). But he dismisses this on the grounds that what the world's religions seek to describe by these terms is precisely the *fundamental nature* of the Real. If the Real is *fundamentally* personal, as a Muslim would insist, how can that be squared with the Taoist's insistence that the Real is *fundamentally* impersonal?

[162] Francis Schaeffer, *The God Who Is There*, in *The Complete Works of Francis A. Schaeffer*, vol. 1, pp. 61-63.

[163] John H. Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, p. 350; cited in Harold A. Netland, *op. cit.*, p. 216.

[164] John H. Hick, "The Latest Vatican Statement on Christianity and other Religions." Italics added. Whereas virtually everyone will agree that God is necessarily beyond human concepts, in the sense that we as finite beings will never be able to know *all* there is to know about Him, it is not true that *nothing* can be known about Him.

[165] *Exist* is here used in the sense of *Being*: it includes no sense of time or space.

[166] Fung Yu-Lan, *A Short History of Chinese Philosophy*, pp. 220-221.

[167] Keith E. Johnson, *op. cit.*

[168] Hick counters this with the argument that, although we are unable to say anything *positive* about the Real, we are nevertheless able to say what It is *not*. But, as Netland argues, the 'via negativa' is only informative if something positive is already known about the Absolute: to say that a *table* is 'not round' conveys information, but to say 'not round', 'not square' ad infinitum., does not. (See Harold A. Netland, *op. cit.*, p. 218.)

[169] Hick explains that critical realism began in the philosophy of science, and "was the view that we do perceive a world that exists independently of our perceiving it, but not it as it is in itself, unperceived, but always and necessarily only as humanly perceived." (John H. Hick, "A Note on Critical Realism.")

[170] Don Cupitt is the most famous ‘religious non-realist.’ In his plenary talk to the 1999 Sea of Faith U.K. Conference, he first denies God’s existence: “I am asked, first, to answer the question: *What is your conception of God or the Ultimate?* I answer, briefly, that there is no Ultimate...The human world is outsideless,” and then secondly, sees some sort of religious practice as useful: “God becomes *an ideal standard of perfection* by which I judge myself and am judged...Commitment to God becomes resolved down into commitment to and belief in *life*.” (Don Cupitt, “The Radical Christian World-View.”)

[171] John H. Hick, “The Latest Vatican Statement on Christianity and other Religions.”

[172] Ibid.

[173] Ibid.

[174] John Hick “Is Christianity the only true religion, or one among others?” He quotes Professor Charles Moule, Canon Brian Hebblethwaite, Archbishop Michael Ramsey and Professor James Dunn.

[175] C.F.D. Moule, *The Origin of Christology*, Cambridge University Press, (Cambridge : 1977), p. 4; cited in Netland, *Dissonant Voices*, p. 246. Italics in original.

[176] Part of the reason for its current success is that it feeds upon a relativist view of truth that has become increasingly fashionable in the post-modern West.

[177] The title of Julian Huxley’s 1927 book, in which he prophesies a new humanist religion that will inspire Modern Humanity to productive and co-operative living.

[178] Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, pp. 1025-1028. The first suggests that universal salvation shall come through world-wide preaching of the Gospel, but this is not true Universalism because it does not address the fact that many people have already died without hearing the Gospel, and it gives no guarantee that every person will respond anyway. The second merely holds that Jesus died for *everyone*, rather than for just the elect, but, again, there is no guarantee of response. The third is identical to soft inclusivism, and so is not truly Universalist.

[179] James E. Talmage, *A Study of The Articles of Faith*, p. 133.

[180] If there is no attempt to be systematic, we are in danger of seeing incompatible ‘theologies’ in the various books of Bible, which ultimately erodes the view that the Bible has a single Author.

[181] Heb. 9:27

[182] Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, p. 794.

[183] 2 Cor. 5:18f.

[184] 2 Cor. 5:17

[185] Origen, *De Principiis*, 1.6.2.

[186] “And when all things shall be subdued unto him, then shall the Son also himself be subject unto him that put all things under him, that God may be all in all.” Col. 15:28 (K.J.V.)

[187] Origen, op. cit., 1.6.1.

[188] There is, however, much debate among scholars as to whether the New Testament word ‘destruction,’ used with respect to Hell, means ‘conscious punishment,’ or ‘annihilation.’

[189] Although the discussion centred in Millard Erickson's five points, these were used only as an example of this type of approach. There is no reason to suppose these points are the only ones which could be considered, and there is no knowing what criteria actually exist in the Mind of God.

[190] William Lane Craig, "Middle Knowledge and Christian Exclusivism."

[191] William Lane Craig, " "No Other Name" : A Middle Knowledge Perspective on the Exclusivity of Salvation Through Christ."

[192] William Lane Craig, "Politically Incorrect Salvation."

[193] To use temporal terms is a convenience, for as John Wesley says: "[I]f we speak properly, there is no such thing as either foreknowledge or afterknowledge in God. All time...is present with him at once, so he sees at once, whatever was, is, or will be, to the end of time." (John Wesley, "On Predestination," Sermon 58.)

[194] "...[T]here is no temporal succession in God's knowledge, nonetheless there does exist a sort of logical succession in God's knowledge in that His knowledge of certain propositions is explanatorily prior to His knowledge of other propositions." (William Lane Craig, " 'No Other Name' ...")

[195] Louis Berkhof, op. cit., p. 68.

[196] Alvin Plantinga, *God and Other Minds*.

[197] William Lane Craig, " 'No Other Name' ..."

[198] There is nothing ethnocentric in this thought. To live in the West is no guarantee of spiritual advantage.

[199] Acts 17:26f.

[200] William Lane Craig, "Middle Knowledge..."

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