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[sam@cueva.fsnet.co.uk](mailto:sam@cueva.fsnet.co.uk)



## The Church and Salvation: Towards an Instrumental View

Steve Griffin  
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### Introduction

The Evangelical Protestant tradition to which I belong has historically tended to take a negative view of non-Christian religious ends based on a particular view of, and solution to, the human predicament. After all, the Bible, as our tradition's final authority in doctrinal matters, tells of a God who confronts the cultures through his chosen instruments: In the book of Daniel three men refuse to worship an image made by King Nebuchadnezzar, in John's gospel Jesus confronts a religious leader with his need to be 'born again', and in the book of Acts Paul challenges the Athenians to repent and to turn from their worship of man-made images. The good that is in view in each of these cases is a saving work which admits no alternatives: Nebuchadnezzar proclaims that 'no other god can save in this way' when Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego are kept through the fiery furnace (Daniel 3:29), Jesus declares that the one who does not believe in the Son 'stands condemned already' (John 3:18), while Paul implies that failure to repent is to forfeit God's presence on the day of judgement (Acts 17:27-31).

In *The Depth of the Riches: a Trinitarian Theology of Religious Ends*, Evangelical scholar Mark Heim has in recent years invited Christians to consider the possibility that non-Christian religions constitute various forms of fulfilment which God has ordained for different peoples. While he insists that non-Christian religions are not to be regarded as alternative paths to the same divine reality, as John Hick and others have argued, he nevertheless 'celebrates' religious diversity in a way that our tradition never has, to my knowledge. If Hick advanced a 'pluralistic' thesis he did not do so as an Evangelical; in any case he made it fairly clear that he had thoroughly revised (if not abandoned) basic Christian doctrine. Heim, on the other hand, has produced his thesis under the auspices of the Evangelical Scholars' Research Fellowship, and so purports to offer a new Evangelical solution to a question which has troubled the tradition as it has sought to come to terms with its own great modern missionary movement (and the 'post-colonial guilt' which has come in its wake): Are the thousands who never hear the Gospel -- as Mary Thomson wrote in her missionary hymn 'O Zion, Haste' (1868) -- simply and forever 'Bound in the darksome prison-house of sin'?

The question of the possibility of salvation for those who never hear the Gospel is not necessarily the only question to ask given the existence and challenge of religious diversity. However, since that question has been the primary stimulus in the modern debate, in Part I we'll inquire into the principal ways in which key theorists have related the church to salvation (and defined those two realities) as they have sought to address to the challenge.



## Part I

### Celebrating Religious Diversity I: Church as Metaphor for Salvation

Religious 'pluralists' who call for a celebration of religious diversity presuppose a view of individual religions and cultures as 'independently valid'; that is, they deny that ultimate truth can come through a particular culture.<sup>i</sup> Curiously, they invite us to reconcile a basically static view of culture with an apparently dynamic, individualistic, market-driven notion of religious self-determination. As the Dalai Lama declared, 'it is good there is a supermarket of religions where everyone can take what he wants' – although he felt the need to insist that 'civilizations should conserve their own religious tradition' (Caen, France, April 17, 1997, AFP). Given the influence of self-described Christian theorists who share his opinion, we'll begin our overview of the main Christian approaches to religious pluralism with a look at the way in which two theologians adopt a view of the Church as one metaphor among many for Salvation.

In an essay which reads like an evangelistic 'personal testimony', the eminent British philosopher of religion John Hick explains how his early evangelical faith, and confidence in basic Christian orthodoxy, ended when he took stock of the sheer fact of religious diversity (in Birmingham, England) and felt persuaded 'that although the language, concepts, liturgical actions, and cultural ethos differ widely from one another, yet from a religious point of view basically the same thing' was going on in all of the places of worship which he began to visit frequently, whether Jewish, Muslim, Sikh, Hindu or Christian. The common phenomenon was that of 'human beings coming together within the framework of an ancient and highly developed tradition to open their hearts and minds to God' ('A Pluralist View', 38). So, observing that 'kindness, love, compassion, honesty and truthfulness' were 'spread more or less evenly among human beings' (39-40), Hick redefined salvation as 'a gradual transformation from natural self-centeredness . . . to a radically new orientation centred in God and manifested in the "fruit of the Spirit"' (43). This solved the problem of the great religions having to compete with one another; instead, they could now regard them all as complementary, drawing as they did from the same divine Source.

In *God has Many Names*, Hick surveys the development of Christian perspectives on the possibility that non-Christians might be saved apart from the Church, from the purely pessimistic view to the more open one whereby the non-Christian might be saved as a member of the 'latent' (as opposed to 'manifest') church, wherever there is a 'sincere desire for the truth' (32).<sup>ii</sup> Hick finds the first intolerable because according to it all non-Christians are doomed to hell, and the second self-defeating since the proposal that the devout Hindu is an 'anonymous' Christian could be met with the proposal that the Christian is an 'anonymous' Hindu -- in which case one is no closer 'to a conviction which involves an assessment of all other men's convictions' (37).

The need for such a conviction is for Hick self-evident, for he presupposes a vantage point from which all religions worship *manifestations* of the Ultimate, rather than ultimate Reality itself ('A Pluralist View', 50). Here Hick evokes Kant's distinction between the divine noumenon and divine phenomena (*Many Names*, 53), on which basis he re-visits his own Christology and concludes that Jesus was one so supremely obedient to God's will that God could act in and through him. As such, Jesus becomes a 'powerful metaphor' of God



Incarnate ('A Pluralist View', 57-58). What role might the church play, then, in Hick's thought? His conception of Salvation, as defined above, has already ruled out the need for a means of grace located outside the human spirit, but based on analogy with Jesus one might say that the church can be regarded as one metaphor (among many legitimate ones) for Salvation, since he affirms the words of the *Bhagavad-Gita*: 'Howsoever men may approach me, even so do I accept them; for, on all sides, whatever path they may choose is mine' (*Many Names*, 78).<sup>iii</sup>

Raimon Panikkar's approach to religious pluralism would seem to set us on firmer ground since, unlike Hick, he upholds the Chalcedonian definition of Jesus as fully man and fully God, and intends a Christocentrism whereby Christ is the beginning and end of all religious quests. What he has in view is not a 'static' conception of the religions, as one might deduce from Hick's complementary view of the religions, but a dynamic view whereby something new and unpredictable may emerge as the religions interact. As he writes, 'Nobody knows how Christianity will look when the present Christian waters and the Hindu river merge into a bigger stream, where the peoples of the future will quench their thirst – for truth, for goodness, for salvation ('Unknown Christ', 144). Through such a form of interaction Panikkar hopes that the integrity to both religions will be honoured: instead of *inculturation*, in which the beliefs and practices of one are religion introduced neatly into a host culture, he calls for *inter-culturation*, so that the two traditions can meet at a deeper, more existential level ('Eruption of Truth').

We must ask just how consistent Panikkar's approach is, however. His call for the kind of dialogue which 'is not a strategy for making one truth triumphant, but a process of looking for it and deepening it along with others' ('Eruption of Truth') would seem to be a way forward in pluralistic societies. But notice the choice we are required to make: if truth is to come from God it must not come through any particular tradition for the benefit of others, but immediately and directly to all, from below. Panikkar is clear about this: 'It would only be a proof of colonialism to pretend that one religious message, like the New Testament, has the right and the duty to inculturate itself everywhere, as if it were something supra-cultural ('Eruption of Truth').

In principle, then, Panikkar upholds the main tenet of religious pluralism defined at the outset, and promotes an ecclesiology whereby the church is reduced to an illustration of the salvation or 'union with Christ' which is at work in other religions. In the encounter between Hinduism and Christianity, dialogue is facilitated by individuals who belong equally to both – like Panikkar, in fact, who can apply the Chalcedonian formula 'without division, without separation' to his own identity as the son of a Hindu father and a Catholic mother. But he does not demonstrate that religious 'dual-citizenship' is possible: while a person can enjoy dual- or multiple-citizenship with respect to nations, Panikkar reveals his 'mother tongue' religion when he claims that the Christian ought not to speak to the Hindu of Jesus the Son of Mary, but instead of 'the risen Christ' who is already there in Hinduism. Ultimately, a religious 'bilingual' cannot ensure the integrity of both religious languages, but can only serve as a sign or vanguard of a marriage. Ironically, in the vision or anticipation of two religions merging interpreters are laid off – except for those who are required to explain what's going on – in this case that religions are destined, slowly but surely, to merge. But



that would be a particular insight which, according to Panikkar's own conviction, ought not to be inculcated elsewhere.

We must insist, against Panikkar, and in accordance with the Chalcedonian formula to which he appeals, that Jesus is not a sign of a reality which is more fundamental. The church, on the other hand, *is* a sign. But given that Panikkar distorts orthodox Christology he is no more able than Hick to shed light on the specific kind of sign that the church is called to be.<sup>iv</sup>

### **Celebrating Religious Diversity II: Church as Ark of *Christian* Salvation**

Concern for the 'large gap' between Jesus and 'the Christ' has been voiced by Mark Heim.<sup>v</sup> This is understandable, since Heim is not interested in general principles which can be discerned from a supposed neutral vantage point with respect to the religions, but rather a more post-modern way to celebrate religious diversity. 'There is no "metatheory",' he writes, 'no neutral place that allows us to judge from above the religions rather than among them' (6). While more must be said about Heim's epistemology, for now we can simply note that he rejects the Modern notion that there is some essence to religion as such -- that the same basic reality is at work within the various religions. Heim argues that what God has in mind is not one particular religious end or 'Salvation' for all, but multiple ones ('salvations'). Thus, 'communion with God and God's creatures through Christ Jesus' is the end God has in mind for Christians (19). And this is an ecclesial reality, since to be 'in Christ' is to be 'inextricably part of the Church that is Christ's body' (64).

To a great extent Heim is indebted to Process theologian John Cobb Jr.'s idea that Christianity does not necessarily negate or fulfill other religions -- it's just different. 'The truth and reality offered by other religious traditions are . . . often quite different,' Cobb Jr. notes. 'The several paths do not lead to the same mountaintop, but to the tops of different mountains. If the goal is the mountaintop to which we are led by Jesus Christ, then Jesus Christ is the only way' (Cobb Jr., 748-51). Thus, just as Cobb Jr. 'assumes nothing about the salvific value of other religions' (750), Heim concludes nothing 'from above the religions' regarding the precise way in which Christian salvation is related to other religious ends. This must be his intention, at any rate, for at the end of the day he suggests, e.g., that Christianity may be for some, at least, preparation for a religious end other than the Christian one (215), and presupposes four basic types of human destiny: salvation in the Christian sense, alternative ends which 'grasp some dimension of the triune life', non-religious ends (various forms of idolatrous 'clinging definitively to created reality'), and annihilation (272-3).

It is doubtful that such conclusions have been reached 'from among' the religions. Rather, the presupposition that 'all the religious ends of humanity will glorify God, and will be rooted in the same salvific purpose of God' (77) is based on a particular interpretation of the 'depth of the riches' and inscrutability of God's judgments (Romans 11:33) rather than sustained inter-faith dialogue. Further, even if the 'depth of the riches' belongs to a generous God who wills to have mercy on all, as we read in the preceding verse, on what basis will the disobedience to which God has bound all -- also in the same verse -- be discerned? With Heim we are left with no standard for distinguishing idolatry from true



worship. According to the linguistic model of religions to which he appeals it would make more sense to conclude that the Christian has no access to the meaning of other religions – at least in so far as he or she is not ‘bilingual’ like Panikkar -- and so had better remain agnostic about the merits of non-Christian religious ends. But by implying that the Christian *does* have access to the meaning of non-Christian ends Heim opens himself to the charge that he has not demonstrated how this knowledge is given to him ‘from among’ the religions. Rather, it seems that his conviction is just as much ‘from above’ as Panikkar’s presupposition that Christ is already there in deep experience of the Hindu. We might even push the logic of Heim’s thesis further and ask why, if God has ordained multiple religious ends for different peoples, why not multiple religious ends for different individuals? It becomes hard to see how a strict privatization of religion is not the end result, and perhaps even a guiding principle, of Heim’s thesis. His conclusions have disastrous consequences for the church, in any case: Heim gives enough evidence of an inadequate view of sin, and its consequences for our ability to choose God (189, 254), to render the Church as God’s external means of rescue from sin unnecessary.<sup>vi</sup>

If by ‘salvation’ we mean, broadly, ‘the sum-total of the benefits bestowed on believers by God’ (Marshall, 610), and especially rescue from sin and the blessings which flow from that, it is clear that Hick, Panikkar and Heim reduce or revise the classical meaning substantially. It is also clear that there is little or no place for the church in their treatment of our question. Given that this is less true of the remaining approaches to religious pluralism, I will survey these by stating their arguments primarily positively, leaving a critique for Part III.

### **Church as Ark of Salvation**

It has been argued that the classical axiom *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* had in mind the individual who had experienced God’s grace in the Church and had put his or her salvation in jeopardy by separating from it.<sup>vii</sup> Whatever the original intent, the axiom was later understood to apply generally to all those who were not in sacramental fellowship with the church. So, according to the Council of Florence (1442), ‘those not living within the Catholic church, not only pagans but also Jews and heretics and schismatics, cannot participate in eternal life, but will depart ‘into everlasting fire which was prepared for the devil and his angels’, unless before the end of life the same have been added to the flock.’ Similarly, Martin Luther wrote: ‘Those who remain outside Christianity, be they heathens, Turks, Jews or false Christians, although they believe on only one true God, yet remain in eternal wrath and perdition’ (*Larger Catechism* II.3). Likewise, the *Scottish Confession* proclaimed that the Kirk, ‘out of which . . . there is neither life, nor eternal felicity”, is the visible company of those chosen to believe in Jesus and who accept his doctrine. While there would be tares among the wheat, since those who truly believe are known only to God (Chapter XVI), this fact did not detract from the truth that the church was to be seen as the ark of salvation. It only demonstrated that by the metaphor it was meant that the church *contained* the saved, since the presence of tares only meant that salvation and the church were not to be identified absolutely.



Those who defend the classical axiom in the strict sense today ordinarily do so negatively, i.e. with reference to the problems in alternative views. Ronald Nash, e.g., asserts that only Jesus *and the Christian religion* ‘can bring human beings to the saving grace of God’ (Nash, 107). From John 14:6, Acts 4:12, Romans 10:9-10, John 3:17-18 and Hebrews 9:27-28 Nash argues that ‘evangelicals commonly understand . . . that since the death and resurrection of Jesus, explicit personal faith in Jesus is a necessary condition for salvation’ and that ‘that physical death marks the end of any human opportunity to receive the gift of God’s salvation (108). From there he addresses perceived problems in the so called ‘inclusivist’ position of Clark Pinnock and others (more below), and, having raised doubts about the integrity of that perspective, considers the case more or less settled.

Stated positively, the logic in Nash’s strict view is clear enough, and consistent with doctrinal standards found within Reformed orthodoxy: Given (a) that humanity is dependent on God for the salvation that comes through Jesus’ atoning sacrifice on the cross, (b) that according to his sovereign will God has chosen to save some people out of all the rest, (c) that the benefit of that divine work is applied only through faith in Jesus, and (d) that the message of Jesus presupposes a human messenger, it follows that salvation is found only within the company of Christians (at least in some sense, as we shall see further down). If many in the tradition agree it is not because they remain oblivious to the challenge that it is too ‘exclusive’ or unfair. Rather, they simply assume that God’s reasons for choosing some as opposed to others has not been revealed, and trust that God’s ways are just.<sup>viii</sup>

Unfortunately, the position described here, usually under the heading of ‘restrictivism’ or ‘exclusivism’, evokes such sharp condemnation that critics miss not only its coherence (whatever one might say of its assumptions), but also the important contribution to the debate of those who endorse it in a qualified way. Thus Jacques Dupuis dismisses a key Roman Catholic voice in short order: ‘A long personal experience as a missionary in Japan notwithstanding, [H. van Straelen’s] negative opinions [are] hardly in keeping with the official teaching authority of the Church. He does not hesitate to write that “the Church has always taught that in order to be saved man must accept the Gospel message” and turn to God “as revealed in Jesus Christ”.’ (Dupuis, 13). Clearly, Dupuis’ quarrel here is with church teaching not van Straelen; in any case, van Straelen explains how church teaching is not to be taken to mean that those who never hear the Gospel are simply lost. (We’ll return to van Straelen in Part Two, since his work provides a useful counter-balance to Dupuis’ interpretation of official Roman Catholic teaching beginning at Vatican II.)

### **Church as Vanguard of Salvation**

Motivated largely by the felt need to be hopeful about the eternal destiny of those who are left outside ‘salvation history’, the so-called ‘inclusive’ view has sought to mediate between what it perceives as two extreme positions. Against the classical view, proponents either assume that salvation may be enjoyed (at least in some measure) on the basis of general revelation (or ‘common’ grace), or that a strict distinction between general and special (or ‘saving’) revelation is artificial. Against ‘pluralists’, they hold that the benefit of what God has done in Jesus is intended for all, as is fellowship in the church as the ordinary means to that end. As such, they envision the church not as an ark which identifies all the saved within



clear institutional or sacramental boundaries, but as a vanguard, first-fruits, or ‘expression’ of the redeemed. According to Roman Catholic theologian Karl Rahner, while ‘Christ and his continuing historical presence in the world (which we call ‘Church’) is *the* religion which binds man to God’ (Rahner, 118), it is also true that

Christianity does not simply confront the member of an extra-Christian religion as a mere non-Christian but as someone who can and must already be regarded in this or that respect as an anonymous Christian. . . . The church will not so much regard herself today as the exclusive community of those who have a claim to salvation but rather as the *historically tangible vanguard* and the historically and socially constituted *explicit expression* of what the Christian hopes is present as a hidden reality even outside the visible church (131-133, emphasis mine).

Thus the non-Christian religions are not simply in darkness, but contain ‘supernatural elements arising out of the grace which is given to men as a gratuitous gift on account of Christ’, and can be considered, to varying degrees, valid ways of salvation (121).

Baptist theologian Clark Pinnock affirms Rahner’s conclusions in a qualified way. He makes use of the same metaphor for the church,<sup>ix</sup> and stresses continuity between Pagan religion and the Gospel in the fact that Paul builds ‘positively on the truths the Athenians possessed in their own scriptures’, and even reckons the Athenians ‘as believers in a certain sense, in a way that could and should be fulfilled in Jesus Christ.’<sup>x</sup> Pinnock grounds this assertion in a doctrine of the ‘holy pagan’, outside God’s covenant family, who was understood to be made right with God not so much because of his religion but because in one way or another he had the fear of God (*Wideness*, 92ff).

While Pinnock remains open to the possibility that God ‘is redemptively at work in the religious dimension of human culture, just as he is in all the other spheres of creation’ (‘An Inclusivist View’, 96), unlike Rahner he hesitates to regard religion *as such* as a path to salvation: ‘Anyone can fall into error and corruption under the guise of religion,’ he writes. ‘Not even receiving messianic light guarantees avoiding religious disaster. . . . Rahner’s theory of lawful religion, the idea that people approach God normally through the religions available in their social context, is naive speculation’ (*Wideness*, 91).

What, then, is salvation according to Pinnock, and what role does the church play in that work? The scope of salvation is wide, since it is about God’s love for the whole world (1 John 2:2), and his desire to heal the nations (Rev 22:2) -- not ‘a secret election to salvation of a specific number of sinners’ (‘An Inclusivist View’, 95-97); the end of salvation is perfect participation in the divine life (115), since God is the ‘creative ground of being, understood as interpersonal love in the light of revelation in Jesus Christ’ (103). The church is the society within which the Spirit works to make all things new in Christ – although not exclusively: ‘A real weakness in the traditional theology of the Spirit’, he argues, ‘has been an almost exclusively ecclesial understanding of his work, as if God’s breath were confined within the walls of the church’ (105). The church, finally, may have no fundamental role to play in the fact that people generally fear God (97), since faith ‘cannot be identified with adherence to Christianity or any other religion. God saves through faith, through a heart response not confined to a religious framework’ (117).



### **Church as ‘Road Sign’ to Salvation**

Pinnock’s concern to note the possibility of deception within the sphere of religion, including the Christian one, leads us, finally, to the classically Protestant model of the church as a herald of the Gospel, called mainly to point, like a road sign, to Salvation.<sup>xi</sup> As John Webster puts it, ‘the active life of the church is best understood, not as a visible realization or representation of the divine presence but as one long act of testimony – as an attestation of the work of God in Christ, now irrepressibly present and effective in the Spirit’s power’ (96).<sup>xii</sup> Evidently, by drawing this sharp distinction Webster reveals a concern not to allow outward signs attract undue attention to themselves. Rather, instead of presuming to contain salvation, Christians ought simply to proclaim that Salvation is by grace, through faith in Jesus, and not through the church, whose sacraments are understood to be signs which *follow* faith.<sup>xiii</sup>

In ‘The Revelation of God as the Abolition of Religion’, Karl Barth begins by setting religion, including Christianity, in strict opposition to Revelation with his famous remark that ‘religion is unbelief’ (299). Until Revelation confronts religion, the latter remains a mere grasping after God, without listening and accepting (302). In this state, religion cannot be said to anticipate its completion in Jesus, for Jesus does not ‘fill out and improve’ the human attempt ‘to think of God and to represent him according to his own standard’ (308). Religion, in its essence, is a human attempt to please, to cooperate with, and to manipulate God, driven by an urge to justify and sanctify oneself (309). To that extent the church would hardly point the traveller to salvation. Barth insists, however, that one can speak of true religion to the extent that one can speak of a ‘justified sinner’: if and when, according to God’s sovereign will, religion is acted upon from without it becomes true, even while it remains a form of unbelief (325). This truth safeguards the priority of God in salvation, lest the faithful imagine that Christianity is inherently ‘upright and holy’ (337). Finally, Barth relates Revelation only to Christianity, which alone is true religion by virtue of the fact that God has freely elected those who put their trust in Jesus and who ‘by the grace of God live by His grace’ (345).

For his purely negative view of religion in the first instance, Barth’s perspective on religious pluralism has been included (and dismissed) as ‘exclusivist’, although the indication in his thought that the electing grace of God might be ultimately effective for all suggests that the term is of limited use in his case. Nevertheless, whatever his conclusions about the ultimate salvation of humanity, or his assumptions about the church’s role in that work, Barth’s remark that ‘religion is unbelief’ has had a profound impact on the thought of evangelicals who invite others to consider a ‘relationship with Jesus’ not a religion. As we shall see in Part III, the choice forced here, which corresponds to Webster’s attestation vs. realization dichotomy, appears to threaten the church’s instrumental role in salvation.



## Part II

### Vatican II

Turning to official Roman Catholic teaching beginning with Vatican II, we ask the same question as above: In light of the challenge of religious pluralism, how is the church to be conceived in relation to salvation? In his 'Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions' (*Nostra Aetate*), Pope Paul VI called for respectful dialogue with members of non-Christian religions now that 'day by day mankind is being drawn closer together' and the need to find common ground is necessary for the sake of 'unity and love among men' (1). The specifically Christian basis for this attitude is the conviction that 'a ray of that Truth which enlightens all men' is often reflected in the behaviour and beliefs of non-Christians (2).

On the 'progressive' wing of Vatican II reception are those who either find (or would like to have found) in this attitude the basis for a positive evaluation of non-Christian religion as such, i.e. that the non-Christian religions might function as 'legitimate paths of salvation for their members' (Dupuis, 170). The case for such an impulse might be sought, initially, with reference to the theme of the Gospel as the fulfillment of various non-Christian religious elements. For instance, the image of the church which stands out in *Nostra Aetate* is that of the church as 'new people of God', which, which stresses continuity between the Church and Israel. As such, the Church is reminded 'that she received the revelation of the Old Testament through the people with whom God in His inexpressible mercy concluded the Ancient Covenant. Nor can she forget that she draws sustenance from the root of that well-cultivated olive tree onto which have been grafted the wild shoots, the Gentiles' (4). The decree *Ad Gentes* underscores the fulfillment theme by applying it more broadly and affirming that, in light of the fullness of divine revelation in Christ Jesus, 'whatever good is found to be sown in the hearts and minds of men, or in the rites and cultures peculiar to various peoples, not only is not lost, but is healed, uplifted, and perfected for the glory of God . . .' (9).

At this point our attention would be drawn to *Lumen Gentium* 16, which spells out concrete ways in which non-Christians are related, in one way or another, to God's people: after Jews, with whom the Church has a special relationship, God's 'plan of salvation includes . . . Mohamedans, who, . . . along with us adore the one and merciful God', and 'those who in shadows and images seek the unknown God'. Here the council addresses the question regarding those who never hear the Gospel head on: as long as their ignorance is not through their own fault, some may find salvation if they seek God with a sincere heart 'and moved by grace strive by their deeds to do His will as it is known to them through the dictates of conscience'.

Finally, it might be suggested that the diversity of metaphors for the church in *Lumen Gentium* 9 indicates a desire to supplement, and in some measure correct, the metaphor of church as ark outside of which there is no salvation. Thus, here the church is conceived primarily in images that stress not its strengths or inherent powers, but its dependence on God: it is a 'flock' nourished by the Good Shepherd, a 'vineyard' whose true vine is Christ, 'the building of God' whose foundation is Christ, a 'bride' who awaits her Bridegroom, 'the



spotless spouse of the spotless Lamb' whom Christ nourishes, and a pilgrim people in 'exile' who set their minds on heavenly things.

As a representative of the 'hopeful' view Dupuis mentions K. Kunnumpuram, who argues that once it is recognized (a) that the positive values in non-Christian religions are a divine work (since they reflect the 'secret presence of God' according to *Ad Gentes* 9), (b) that despite the error contained in them non-Christian religions may contain supernatural elements and faith insofar as they are a preparation for the Gospel (*Lumen Gentium* 16, evidently), and (c) that salvation is to be conceived as a social and not strictly private matter (*Ad Gentes* 3), it follows that members of non-Christian religions can be saved in and through their respective religions (Dupuis, 168). Dupuis claims that the council marks the point at which 'ancient prejudices and negative assessments are destroyed' now that religions *as such* are seen to contain positive elements (160), but laments the council's excessively 'ecclesiocentric' attitude, for which it hesitates to contemplate non-Christian religions as 'legitimate paths of salvation' (170).<sup>xiv</sup>

Van Straelen speaks for those who find basic continuity between the classical Roman Catholic teaching on the subject and that of Vatican II. Beginning with *Nostra Aetate*, he insists that the declaration is not 'a dogmatic and theological evaluation of the non-Christian religions', but a call to dialogue which contains an indication of how one should proceed in that venture (277). He adds that according to *Lumen Gentium* 16, the positive elements within non-Christian religions are forms of preparation for the Gospel at best, since Pagans in general are seen to be on the wrong path (275).<sup>xv</sup> This is clear, van Straelen notes, in Paul's sermon to the Athenians (Acts 17), in which we learn that Pagan religions are 'wrong and the product of ignorance' and that 'a natural religion cannot be more than a groping for the truth' (270). *Ad Gentes* 3 lends support:

This universal design of God for the salvation of the human race is carried out not only, as it were, secretly in the soul of a man, or by the attempts (even religious ones by which in diverse ways it seeks after God) if perchance it may contact Him or find Him, though He be not far from anyone of us (cf. Acts 17:27). For these attempts need to be enlightened and healed; even though, through the kindly workings of Divine Providence, they may sometimes serve as leading strings toward God, or as a preparation for the Gospel.<sup>xvi</sup>

Further, van Straelen notes that according to Romans 10:17 'access to salvation is limited to the extent that the acquisition of faith – apart from exceptional cases of direct intervention by God – is dependent on a human instrument, the messenger of faith' (272). Again, *Lumen Gentium* 14 seems fully consistent with this view, since, on the one hand, the church is understood to be necessary for salvation in a way that rules out the possibility that non-Christian religions might serve as alternative ways of salvation:

the Church, now sojourning on earth as an exile, is necessary for salvation. Christ, present to us in His Body, which is the Church, is the one Mediator and the unique way of salvation. In explicit terms He Himself affirmed the necessity of faith and baptism and thereby affirmed also the necessity of the Church, for through baptism as through a door men enter the Church.



On the other hand, the affirmation does not, remain unqualified: ‘Whosoever, therefore, knowing that the Catholic Church was made necessary by Christ, would refuse to enter or to remain in it, could not be saved’. In this sense, as Gavin D’Costa points out, the teaching sustains the original intent of *extra ecclesiam nulla salus*, which was to affirm ‘that all grace, and thereby salvation, is related to Christ and thereby the church’ without concluding that ‘all non-Christians are unredeemed’, since it acknowledged that some non-Christians before Christ were saved. In any case, believing that the world was already permeated by the Gospel message, defenders of the axiom had in mind those who had fallen away from the Gospel having heard it (as noted above), and not the status of non-Christians or their religion as such (‘Extra ecclesiam’, 130).

*Lumen Gentium* 16 lends support, finally, to van Straelen’s concern to emphasize the deception and demonic element in Pagan religion, since according to Paul ‘the sacrificial worship of Greek religions is the worship of demons (1 Cor 10:14, 20)’ (270). As we read, often men, deceived by the Evil One, have become vain in their reasonings and have exchanged the truth of God for a lie, serving the creature rather than the Creator. Or some there are who, living and dying in this world without God, are exposed to final despair. Wherefore to promote the glory of God and procure the salvation of all of these, and mindful of the command of the Lord, "Preach the Gospel to every creature", the Church fosters the missions with care and attention.

There is wisdom, therefore, in not offering the hope that non-Christian religion might save, for neither does the New Testament contain ‘a single text which teaches that people who live upright lives can be saved by practicing a pagan religion’ (273).

## **Post-Vatican II**

Since Vatican II, *Redemptoris Missio* (1990) and *Dominus Iesus* (2000) express papal endorsement for the council’s reluctance to speak of non-Christian religions as paths of salvation, and on that basis to clarify what is meant by the conviction that the church is the ‘sacrament’ of salvation (*Lumen Gentium* 48).

In *Redemptoris Missio* 17, Pope John Paul II speaks directly to the threat to the Gospel presented by those who would reduce salvation to a good which remains ‘within the confines of the kingdom of man’, i.e. to strictly human efforts for liberation, even when the agenda is called a ‘kingdom centered’ one. By restricting the work of the church to the promotion of peace, justice and dialogue which aims merely at mutual enrichment, this ‘theocentric’ approach reveals (a) its mistaken assumption that ‘Christ cannot be understood by those who lack Christian faith, whereas different peoples, cultures and religions are capable of finding common ground in the one divine reality, by whatever name it is called’, and (b) its determination to reduce the church to a mere sign of salvation – ‘for that matter a sign not without ambiguity’.

If the ‘pluralist’ thesis is being rejected at this point in the encyclical, so is the ‘inclusivist’ approach elsewhere. Although it is acknowledged that salvation is granted ‘not only to those who explicitly believe in Christ and have entered the Church’, it is still true that salvation is possible only on account of Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross, and that the external



means of that grace remains ‘mysterious’, known to God alone (10). On this basis, John Paul II states that the church is understood as the ‘sacrament’ of salvation, which affirms both that there is a real possibility of salvation through Christ for every human being and that the church is necessary for salvation (9), and calls the church to the kind of dialogue which is ‘conducted and implemented with the conviction that *the Church is the ordinary means of salvation* and that *she alone* possesses the fullness of the means of salvation’ (55).<sup>xvii</sup>

In *Dominus Iesus*, Cardinal Ratzinger develops John Paul II’s concerns, beginning with a sharp critique of the relativistic assumptions which guide the ‘pluralist’ hypothesis. What motivates those who would understand fundamental truths (e.g. the definitive character of the revelation of Jesus Christ, or the ‘subsistence of the one Church of Christ in the Catholic Church’) to be superseded, he argues, is the erroneous presupposition that what might be true for some might not be for others, or that the Incarnation represents ‘a mere appearing of God in history’ (4).<sup>xviii</sup> In this regard he reminds us of John Paul II’s insistence that ‘Christ is none other than Jesus of Nazareth’ (*Redemptoris Missio* 6). Against the suggestion of alternative ways of salvation apart from Christ and his church, Ratzinger affirms the secret nature of the salvation of individual non-Christians with reference to *Ad Gentes* 7, but notes that while ‘the various religious traditions contain and offer religious elements which come from God’, one must not ‘attribute to these, however, a divine origin or an *ex opere operato* salvific efficacy, which is proper to the Christian sacraments. Furthermore, it cannot be overlooked that other rituals, insofar as they depend on superstitions or other errors (cf. *1 Cor* 10:20-21), constitute an obstacle to salvation’ (*Dominus Iesus*, 21). Instead, with the coming of Jesus Christ, ‘God has willed that the Church founded by him be the instrument for the salvation of all humanity’ (22).

In what sense, then, does ‘outside the church, no salvation’ remain true? Cardinal Ratzinger stresses that the *fullness* of salvation is to be found only in sacramental fellowship with the Church Catholic. He teaches that ‘The Church is the “universal sacrament of salvation”, since, united always in a mysterious way to the Saviour Jesus Christ, her Head, and subordinated to him, she has, in God’s plan, an indispensable relationship with the salvation of every human being’ (20). That ‘indispensable relationship’ entails ‘announcing the necessity of conversion to Jesus Christ and of adherence to the Church through Baptism and the other sacraments in order to participate fully in communion with God, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit’. The fullness theme is stressed again in the same article: ‘If it is true that the followers of other religions can receive divine grace, it is also certain that *objectively speaking* they are in a gravely deficient situation in comparison with those who, in the Church, have the fullness of the means of salvation’ (22).

In sum, against theologians who claim, in the ‘spirit’ of Vatican II, that non-Christian religions are paths to salvation in their own right, Popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI not only challenge the relativistic presuppositions behind any notion that would reduce the church to a metaphor for salvation, but confront the model of the church as vanguard of salvation with a more properly sacramental model which we must appreciate and engage below.



### Part III

In *Trinity and Religious Pluralism* (2004), Veli-Matti Karkkainen takes us only so far with his claim that the basic divide in the present debate is between ‘pluralists and the rest’, since he leaves unexplored the ‘outward works of the triune God in the world’ (182). Given that Karkkainen devotes little attention to ecclesiology, and that he somewhat uncritically includes Vatican II teaching among ‘inclusivist’ approaches on the assumption that the Council leaves open the possibility that non-Christian religions may provide ways of salvation (32), the need arises to postulate a further basic divide. On the one hand, there exists a conception of the church which gets us nowhere in the present debate because it so stresses the church’s invisible (or perhaps cosmic<sup>xix</sup>) reality that there is little point in considering an external or particular entity through which the reality is effected. On the other hand, the emphasis on the church as a called out and visible ‘sacrament of salvation’, as in Roman Catholic ecclesiology, implies divine initiative and thereby the need for instruments in God’s redemptive work. In any case, it is clear that in the present debate about religious pluralism what emerges is the need to address the fundamental question about the church as a sign. This is consistent with Fiorenza’s claim that mission is not simply a topic within ecclesiology, but a ‘fundamental theological issue’ which is bound up intimately with the question of the church’s religious identity (xv, 195).<sup>xx</sup> In *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (1989), Lesslie Newbigin focusses on the church’s self-identity similarly with his call for congregations ‘to renounce an introverted concern for their own life, and recognize that they exist for the sake of those who are not members, as a sign, instrument, and foretaste of God’s redeeming grace’ (233).

With a renewed emphasis on the church’s specific nature as a sign comes a question regarding the nature of salvation. Pope Benedict XVI, for example, insists that salvation must not be reduced to a question about who gets to heaven. Rather, Christians should ask ‘what heaven is and how it comes upon earth’, since ‘future salvation must make its mark in a way of life that makes a person “human” here and thus capable of relating to God’ (*Truth and Tolerance*, 205). Newbigin expresses the same sentiment when he argues that

Being saved has to do with the part we are playing now in God’s story and therefore with the question whether we have understood the story rightly. It follows that our dialogue with people of other faiths must be about what is happening in the world now and about how we understand it and take our part in it. It cannot be only, or even mainly, about our destiny as individual souls after death (179).<sup>xxi</sup>

The dual emphasis on what God is doing in the here and now through the church, as opposed to what humans might attain to in the future through a faith often conceived in hidden or immediate terms, provides a basis for an *instrumentalist* critique of the material covered thus far.

### Church a mere ‘expression’ of Salvation?

The fundamental problem with the vanguard model of the Church is that it views the church as the sign of a reality which is latent or implicit in human culture. That it is not just *a* sign of such a reality, but *the* sign, is of course what preserves this model from the pluralistic error. Nonetheless, by itself it clearly presents a threat to the church’s instrumental role with



respect to the world, for rather than proclaiming a Word which comes from beyond the world's own resources it appears simply to draw out what is already there.

Pinnock asserts, we recall, that the Athenians to whom Paul preached in Acts 17 were 'premessianic' believers, i.e. that their religion, or at least elements within it, represented a positive anticipation of the Gospel which rendered them holy pagans. An individual 'holy pagan' like Job, of course, serves as a sign of the truth that God was not bound by Israel, his covenant people, when it came to reaching his elect. But it does not follow that Paul regarded the Athenians *as such* as believers, possessing true knowledge of God so as to worship him aright. Similarly, Rahner's assertion that the revelation that comes to the Pagan through the preaching of the Gospel is the 'expression in objective concepts of something which this person has already attained or could already have attained in the depths of his rational existence' (Rahner 131) threatens to reduce the Gospel to a natural process.<sup>xxii</sup>

In the final analysis, Rahner and Pinnock fail to provide a substantial critique to the pluralist's inability to offer a standard for right worship. As it turns out, worship *as such* appears to be authentic. Rather than being judged by Jesus, it merely awaits its completion in him. While a legitimate concern in vanguard ecclesiology might be, simply, to affirm that God can use whatever means he likes to make his will known, the impression given is that faith is something basically secret, an impulse of the heart which, while ideally explicit, is not dependent on anything external to the individual.<sup>xxiii</sup> Of course Pinnock or Rahner might reply that this religious impulse is the result of 'prevenient' grace, and therefore not simply an impulse, but a response. But this fails to resolve the matter, since the final cause of faith is located once again in human choice. As Aquinas noted, it does not follow from the fact that one person 'may be more perfectly enlightened by grace than another' (*Suma* I-II 112.4) that the final cause for faith is located in man, for 'even the good movement of the free-will, whereby anyone is prepared for receiving the gift of grace is an act of the free-will moved by God' (*Suma* I-II, 112.2).

### **A Sign after the Fact of Grace?**

While the road sign model explored above avoids the pitfalls of the vanguard model, it tends to give the church a more or less incidental role in salvation, at least in principle. A consistently 'high' Protestant view, according to which Christianity is understood as the only saving religion (as Nash affirms), would of course reflect the ark model. However, where the sacramental theology of the same tradition has encouraged a less than instrumental view of Baptism and the Lord's Supper (i.e. that they are signs which follow *after* grace), it has had the tendency to raise other signs, like the personal, public decision to repent and turn to Jesus, to near-sacramental status. Thus, while Baptism has become for many of us a means to proclaim that we *have been* saved, we respond to the 'altar call' in order *to be* saved. In other words, the call becomes the external means of our repentance. However, if Paul teaches that to partake of the Supper is to proclaim the Lord's death until he comes (1 Cor 11:26), then surely that proclamation too can be God's means to work faith in us. In sum, in our reluctance to consider an instrumental view of the sacraments we have come to believe that while explicit faith in Jesus is necessary for salvation, the church as the external means to that end is theoretically optional.



The inconsistency here is reflected in our ambiguous conclusions regarding the destiny of those who never have the opportunity to enter into visible fellowship with Christians (since, at very least, the relationship through which one person receives the Good News from another, no matter how minimal or occasional, would presumably be necessary for salvation). Where we've not been impressed with the teaching that many are lost through 'accident of geography', we have softened the restrictive view with a 'light received' doctrine, according to which God will judge the individual who never heard the Gospel (or never heard it properly or 'existentially') according to the degree of illumination that was granted to him or her. While this would seem to be a constructive way forward, we have not encouraged the possibility that this inner or extraordinary illumination might be especially effective.<sup>xxiv</sup> Perhaps as a consequence, some of us, while acknowledging that we are prone to distort the light we receive (Rom 1:23), have noted with gladness that God has not dealt with us as we deserve (Rom 11:22), and so have grown more optimistic.<sup>xxv</sup> But since we know of no external means of faith apart from the preaching of the Gospel we have gone about our business of evangelism presupposing that salvation is only through explicit faith in Jesus *except when it isn't*. In the meantime, we have encountered confusion for asking a question for which only God has the answer (Newbigin, 177), while making little progress in our reflection on the semiotic question which is our basic concern.

### **Outside the Church, no Fullness of Salvation?**

In *Truth and Tolerance* Cardinal Ratzinger focuses our attention on the semiotic question by suggesting that we do better to approach religions not as entities which exist in 'one single form' (53) or as 'a network of institutions and ideas we have to hand on' (54), but as a complex of traditions which may or may not be related to the Gospel. He writes: 'Today, for example, we see before us quite clearly various ways in which Islam can be understood and lived out – destructive forms and forms in which we believe we can perceive a certain proximity to the mystery of Christ' (53-54). As such, the *direction* of a religion is more important than its shape in the present:

Can or must a man simply make the best of the religion that happens to fall to his share, in the form in which it is actually practiced around him? Or must he not, whatever happens, be one who seeks, who strives to purify his conscience and, thus, move toward – at the very least – the purer forms of his own religion? . . . The Church of the Gentiles could develop only because there were 'God fearers', people who went beyond their traditional religion and looked for something greater (54).

With Barth and Bonhoeffer, Ratzinger includes Christianity among the religions which are not to be canonized as they already exist, as if to excuse the faithful 'from any deeper searching' (54). In light of this he can assert that 'salvation does not lie in religions as such, but it is connected to them, inasmuch as, and to the extent that, they lead man toward the one good, toward the search for God, for truth, and for love' (205).

A similar dynamic is at work in Gavin D'Costa's quest for the 'ecclesial significance of the presence of other religions' (*The Meeting of Religions*, 12). Given that according to *Gaudium et Spes* 22 some non-Christians may be saved in a way known only to God (109),



and that according to *Redemptoris Missio* 29 the Spirit's universal work is 'not to be separated from his particular activity within the body of Christ, which is the Church' 108), D'Costa suggests that the Spirit's work in the world is ecclesiological in the sense that it is *through* non-Christian religions that 'She' (the Spirit) wishes to challenge, develop and deepen the Church's devotion to God (117). Here we might recall the 'transformational' model of Cobb Jr., Ninian Smart, and others who suggest that Christianity might find its fulfilment through dialogue with other religions.

While there is a certain instrumental logic which is welcome here (especially in Ratzinger's notion that salvation is not to be located in religions as such), the claims that through God's secret work the religions are being led toward one another (*Truth and Tolerance*, 45) and along a path of sanctifying and not merely 'preserving' grace (*The Meeting of Religions*, 116) are puzzling. Given that the religions present a 'mixed bag' (which D'Costa affirms, 117), it seems a stretch to suppose that because God might use this or that element within non-Christian religion to draw his elect to Himself that the religions *as such* are directed by the Spirit towards a salvific end. There is deception and 'perverse aberration' in religion understood as man-made, as van Straelen notes (260), just as natural religion according to Paul in Acts 17 'cannot be more than a groping for the truth' (270). Perhaps, however, having affirmed that the Roman Catholic church contains the *fullness* of salvation, and that its Sacraments enjoy an '*ex opere operato* salvific efficacy' (*Dominus Iesus*, 21), as compared with non-Christian religions whose rites and beliefs may possess divine origins but not the same efficacy, one is bound in the end to attribute to non-Christian religions at least a positive, if imperfect, instrumental role in salvation. In any case, the possibility that the Church itself shares with non-Christian religions a 'mixed bag' nature remains to be explored, since as things stand the Roman Catholic Church is to be approached as an entity which simply contains the plenitude of God's riches – as the Ark of the fullness of salvation -- rather than as an instrument through which God may (or may not) impart his grace according to his will.<sup>xxvi</sup>

### **Church as Instrument of Salvation**

According to *Lumen Gentium* 9, the church is used by Christ 'as an instrument for the redemption of all, and is sent forth into the whole world as the light of the world and the salt of the earth'. I have argued that clarity in the present debate might come through greater attentiveness to the nature of the church as a sign, and that an instrumental view of the church presents a challenge, at least to some extent, to every model examined thus far. In conclusion, as a basis for further study and dialogue I shall sketch the basic shape and implications of that approach.

Regarding the question of the nature of salvation, the instrumental view commends itself in that it confronts the individualistic conception which is at work in the 'restrictive' view (or Ark model) with which it otherwise identifies. So, while salvation is surely a great rescue operation on God's part, the instrumental view holds that if that work is conceived merely as the rescue of individuals out of creation, then the dominant Biblical pattern of



election has been missed. As Newbigin argues, God's election of a people is not the basis of a claim on God which excludes others, but rather the ground of a special vocation: God's 'love and commitment are to Israel as the instrument of God's purpose of love for all the nations'. Salvation is therefore not to be conceived as a private affair, even though God addresses us personally; rather, salvation is about 'opening the door to the neighbor whom [God] sends as his appointed messenger' (80-88).

On the question of the nature of the church as a sign, the instrumental view seeks to situate external signs in proper relationship to God, who is sovereign. As such, outward signs are not to be marginalized, as though God wished to work salvation in a strictly direct, secret way, bypassing instruments. At the same time, external signs are not permitted to attract the kind of attention that is due to God alone. Paul's encounter with the Athenians brings out his hosts' confusion on both counts. On the one hand, the rejection of his message by some reveals that the men of Athens insisted on having God immediately, i.e. strictly from within their own culture. On the other hand, while Paul affirmed their poets' notions that God is near and that we are his offspring, he challenged their interpretation of these metaphors by insisting that God does not inhabit our temples (in other words, He is also far off), and by implying that there is a sense in which we are not God's offspring (since he made everything). Thus Paul could say: 'In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent' (Acts 17:30).

Regarding the matter of the 'final outcome', the combination of an urgent call with the recognition of God's patience suggests a third advantage of the instrumental view of the church with respect to salvation. If Paul could say to the Roman Christians 'consider the kindness and sternness of God' and admonish them not to assume that Israel was beyond redemption (Romans 11:17-22), so we should remain agnostic about the final numbers.<sup>xxvii</sup> Let us note that even Calvin modified the classical *extra ecclesiam nulla salus*, claiming that outside the church there is *no hope* of forgiveness of sins or salvation (*Institutes* IV. i. 4).<sup>xxviii</sup> While the difference may seem inconsequential, the qualification lays the stress on our inability to affirm, on the basis of Biblical and apostolic tradition, that what God has to offer is to be found apart from the company of his people.<sup>xxix</sup>

In sum, if salvation, by God's design, involves believers in other people's lives, the church will not be conceived primarily as an institution with clear boundaries, distinguishing the saved from the lost, but as a lighthouse which serves those in and beyond the immediate vicinity. This is not to rule out the need for church membership, for God's covenant family remains the only realm in which we can be assured of God's love and forgiveness. At the same time, what the instrumental view recognizes is the promise in, e.g., Acts 16:31 ('Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved -- you and your household'), that individual trust in Jesus may have a social impact which we cannot measure. In other words, some may be finally saved who never had the personal assurance in this life that they were among the saved. This is not a question of getting in by sheer association, but of embracing what God is doing even if faith is dim on account of human weakness (*Second Helvetic Confession*, 17).<sup>xxx</sup>

What does this mean for those who never come within the sound, as far as we can tell, of 'salvation history'? If God's grace can reach them in an extraordinary way, can we

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then adopt a hopeful view of their natural religious inclinations? The truth in Karl Barth's claim that religion is unbelief has to do with the fact that religion, as a system of signs that reflect and give rise to a particular creed, code and cult, is something from which we have constantly to be rescued because we inevitably confuse *our* words, work and worship with revelation and grace itself. While there is danger in drawing a sharp distinction between the religious and 'secular' spheres of life, we might suggest that it not necessarily in and among gathered worshipping communities as such that we are to assume that God's saving grace is at work. As Cardinal Ratzinger asks, 'How do we know that the theme of salvation should only be tied to religions?' (*Truth and Tolerance*, 53). We note, too, that it was not in specifically religious contexts that Rahab embraced what God was doing, that Moses' parents hid their baby boy, or that the Israelites crossed the Red Sea (Heb 11). Rather, these and other members of God's elect were attentive to divine revelation, and so engaged in the activity which alone, according to Barth, renders Christianity 'the true religion' (326). On this basis, salvation is never our initiative, but always 'from above'; it is the grace to welcome what God is doing in and through his instruments.

At this point it may be objected that while election remains hidden, there is still a fixed number of chosen ones who are given the grace to be attentive and responsive to God's work, however mediated, which implies that those who are 'passed by' are eternally lost. At this point Newbigin draws our attention back to Romans 9-11, and argues that God has not chosen 'to save some and to destroy others'; rather, according to 11:32 'He has consigned all to disobedience in order that he may have mercy upon all' (85). In this case, the question is no longer 'can the good non-Christian be saved?' (176), but can anyone at all be saved, which when asked implies that what matters is not what we can do as humans but what God has done in Christ and through his instruments. For Newbigin -- to whom we give the last word, since his thought on, and experience of, proclaiming the Gospel in a multi-faith world has done much to stimulate the instrumental approach which I have advocated -- the question of a 'final outcome' becomes a very personal one. Holding together a doctrine of special election, the instrumental vocation of God's elect, the possibility that the elect may reject God's love, and God's relentless pursuit of his own in spite of that possibility, Newbigin confesses: 'If I know that God in his limitless grace and kindness has chosen and called me to be a bearer of his grace for others, my trust in him will not exclude the awareness that I could betray his trust in me, and that very awareness will drive me closer to him' (88).



## NOTES

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<sup>i</sup> Ford, 751; Netland, 11. D'Costa notes that the typology coined by Alan Race – exclusivism, inclusivism, pluralism -- breaks down because 'pluralists' advance their own set of exclusive claims about truth and its criteria ("Impossibility"). Nevertheless, the terms are useful at least as a starting point (see D'Costa's more recent *The Meeting of Religions and the Trinity*, 2000).

<sup>ii</sup> The latent vs. manifest distinction was drawn by Paul Tillich (see note 23 below), although the notion is there in Schleiermacher (see note 3 following).

<sup>iii</sup> Not unlike the 'pluralists' of our day, Nicholas of Cusa (in *De Pace Fidei*, 1454) 'celebrates' the rites of multiple religions as imperfect signs of true worship of the One God, persuaded that since God is named by different names in the various religions it follows that He remains unknown to them all. Unlike today's 'pluralists', however, he envisions an end in which the one true religion is the Christian one, although the rites which reflect the religious aspirations of the various cultures are to be incorporated into common worship. Similarly, Schleiermacher strikes an 'inclusivist' chord when he describes Christianity as the most highly developed religion (38), although with an appeal to the distinction between knowledge of God as he is in himself (which we cannot know) and knowledge of God in his relations with humans (52), he posits an immediate knowledge of God (18) and makes revelation and grace inherent in the natural historical process (63). Thus while Schleiermacher is not easily classified according to the received typology, his high view of human nature is consistent with a view which marginalizes the church in the divine economy, rendering it a mere metaphor for a latent spiritual reality whose outward manifestation is to be superseded as the historical process moves forward.

<sup>iv</sup> Paul Knitter leaves us in the same predicament. On the one hand, he claims that a confessional approach 'will be both certain and open-ended. It will enable Christians to take a firm position; but it will also require them to be open to and possibly learn from other positions. It will allow them to affirm the *uniqueness* and universal significance of what God has done in Jesus; but at the same time it will require them to recognize and be challenged by the *uniqueness* and universal significance of what the divine mystery may have revealed through others' (*No Other Name?*, 203). On the other hand, since he has already argued that genuine dialogue cannot happen as long as traditional Protestants insist that Salvation is 'by faith alone, through Christ alone', and traditional Roman Catholics on the 'final normativity of Christ' (142), clearly the actual content of the Christian's confession has been revised. Gregory Baum is clear that the church is called to be a servant of salvation, although salvation appears to be reduced to an end within this world, while the church is perhaps one instrument of that end among many: 'The church's mission [is to follow] Jesus by becoming a servant of humanity, bearing the burden with those who suffer injustice . . . and supporting them in the effort to create a more just, more peaceful and more compassionate society. . . . The church is not sent 'to convert' to the Gospel believers who are rooted in the great religions of the world. The respect we have for [them] and the realization that God's grace is present to them forbids us to look upon them as potential converts' (*Ecumenist*, Winter 2001).

<sup>v</sup> 'I do not accept the large gap Panikkar introduces between Jesus Christ and a Christic principle of which he is an exemplification (perhaps the exemplification)' (Heim, 165). Just how firmly Heim avoids Panikkar's tendency is unclear, however, since he argues that Jesus cannot be an exclusive source for knowledge of God (Heim, 134), and implies an adoptionist and near-Nestorian Christology with the claim that the 'human Jesus does not become the second person of the Trinity, but becomes one with that person' (201; see Farrow, review, *Neue Zeitschrift für Systematische Theologie und Religionsphilosophie*, 2001, 391).



<sup>vi</sup> Perhaps the fact that Heim devotes two passing references and three footnotes to the church lends substance to this claim.

<sup>vii</sup> See, e.g., D'Costa, '*Extra ecclesiam*', 130, and Dupuis, 88f.

<sup>viii</sup> In any case, they tend to point out to their opponents – as long as these hold that humans cannot turn from their unbelief apart from grace and that not all are finally saved – that while God may knock at the door of every person's heart some are more willing than others to open it, and that the final cause for that remains hidden from us (See comment on Aquinas in Part III)

<sup>ix</sup> 'Scripture encourages us to see the church not so much as the ark, outside of which there is no hope of salvation, but as the vanguard of those who have experienced the fullness of God's grace made available to all people in Jesus Christ' ('Inclusivism', 110).

x. C. Pinnock, *A Wideness in God's Mercy: The Finality of Jesus Christ in a World of Religions*. Zondervan, 1992, 32.

<sup>xi</sup> See A. Dulles, *Models of the Church* (Gill & MacMillan, 1987), chapter V.

<sup>xii</sup> Webster is apparently anxious to avoid the charge that such a view presupposes a suspicion of outward signs as such, i.e. that in the case of the church the outward marks obscure the spiritual reality they point to. He insists that knowledge of the church is dependent on the Spirit: 'only through the Spirit's agency are the phenomena to be grasped as phenomena of the *church*' (103).

<sup>xiii</sup> 'Testimony is astonished indication. Arrested by the wholly disorienting grace of God in Christ and the Spirit, the church simply *points*. It is not identical or continuous with that to which it bears witness, for otherwise its testimony would be self-testimony and therefore false. Nor is its testimony an action which effects that which it indicates; the witness of the church is an ostensive, not an effective, sign; it indicates the inherent achieved effectiveness which the object of testimony has in itself' (Webster, 106).

<sup>xiv</sup> Dupuis' own proposal does not fit neatly into any of the models outlined so far. While moving beyond a Church as vanguard model based on the confidence that the positive values found in non-Christian religions cannot be regarded as mere 'seeds' or 'stepping stones' eventually to be superseded by Christianity, but as 'additional and autonomous benefits', Dupuis nevertheless rejects the 'pluralistic' alternative by arguing that 'Jesus Christ and the Christ event are "constitutive" of salvation for the whole of humankind; in particular, the event of his death-resurrection opens access to God for all human beings, independently of their historical situation. Put in other words, the humanity of Jesus Christ, God's Son made flesh, is the sacrament of God's universal will to save. Such uniqueness must not, however, be construed as absolute: what is absolute is God's saving will. Neither absolute nor relative, Jesus' uniqueness is "constitutive"' (Dupuis 387-88; 305f.). How successfully does Dupuis stay clear of the 'pluralistic' paradigm? His view of salvation as 'salvation/liberation' (so as to include the religious end of all the major religions) resembles that of Hick, while his conviction that the various religions lead to the common goal which is 'personal union with God as revealed in Jesus Christ' (313) is not substantially different from Panikkar's presupposition that Christ is to be found in the deep experience of Hindu religion. Dupuis' critique of Panikkar's Christology, 149f, falters in that it does not address, by way of contrast, the concrete and historical way in which Jesus is to 'constitute' salvation for all. It appears, rather, that Jesus and the Christ event simply *illustrate* salvation. We might say that Dupuis does not manage to free himself from 'ecclesiocentric' assumptions either, for salvation is still understood to be obtained through membership in a concrete community (as opposed to secretly or immediately).



<sup>xv</sup> This is not inconsistent with the patristic notion that Reason could serve as preparation for the Gospel. As Clement of Alexandria wrote, 'For philosophy was a "schoolmaster" to bring the Greek mind to Christ, as the Law brought the Hebrews. Thus philosophy was a preparation, paving the way towards perfection in Christ' (*Stromateis* I, v. 28, as cited in *Documents of the Christian Church*, Selected and ed. H. Bettenson, New York and London, 1947). Van Straelen notes that the seeds of Logos theology (in, e.g. Justin Martyr) supports the idea that 'some philosophers had reached insights which contain a partial truth. But the idea of canonizing pagan religions was totally alien to them' (276).

<sup>xvi</sup> On this point van Straelen differs sharply from Karl Rahner, whose desire to move beyond Paul's 'pessimism' regarding the salvation of non-Christians is made clear in his remark that 'as Christians of this century in the church we can no longer think so pessimistically of the salvation of non-Christians as Paul could within the religious outlook of his age' (van Straelen, 271, quoting Rahner, *Mission and Grace*, v. 3, London 1966, 6). Van Stralen notes that the council did not accept Rahner's position (277).

<sup>xvii</sup> 'The fact that the followers of other religions', writes van Straelen, 'can receive God's grace and be saved by Christ apart from the ordinary means which he has established does not thereby cancel the call to faith and baptism which God wills for all people' (280).

<sup>xviii</sup> That this is no less 'exclusive' an approach to religious knowledge is brought out in Ratzinger's *Truth and Tolerance* (2004), where he cites Radhakrishnan as one who presupposes 'the absolute value of imageless spiritual experience, to which all else is relative' (31).

<sup>xix</sup> Origen's cosmic conception of the church is linked to a cosmic view of the Incarnation (D'Costa, "Extra ecclesiam", 133), in which case the axiom has no real content.

<sup>xx</sup> 'The church is more than a lobbying group, more than an agent of social welfare. It has a distinctive religious identity, and if it is to be church, its religious identity must come to the fore in its style of commitment to social justice and in its commitment to human liberation' (Fiorenza, 212).

<sup>xxi</sup> Newbigin's definition of salvation stresses the priority of God's work over the human response. The question is not in the first instance 'how can I be saved', but 'how can God be glorified', for 'Salvation . . . is the completion of God's whole work in creation and redemption, the summing up of all things with Christ as head (Eph. 1:10), the reconciling of all things in heaven and earth through the blood of the cross (Col. 1:20), the subjecting of all hostile powers under the feet of Christ (1 Cor. 15:24-28)' (178-9).

<sup>xxii</sup> A closer look at Paul's sermon is instructive. In the first place, the text itself presupposes a negative evaluation of the Athenians' worship of many gods. Right at the start, Paul is 'deeply distressed to see that the city was full of idols' (v. 16). The basis for this condemnation of their religion is Paul's teaching that God is in not in things, as such. Yes, he is not far from us, but he is not to be confused with anything in creation, since he's the one who *made* all things. For this reason the shrines around the city did not function as mere pointing signs (or as aids for prayer and reflection, as we might say today), but objects which were held to *contain* the divine, or at least divine energies. Therefore, Paul is not inviting the Athenians to inscribe Jesus' name on their altar to the unknown god, as it were, for that would be to add one more divinity to their pantheon. Neither is he suggesting that their worship is somehow authentic because it's framed within the recognition that 'we are God's offspring', as the poets taught. While he finds a point of encounter with his audience, Paul still lets them know what this metaphor *cannot* mean if it's to remain true. In declaring that we are his offspring we do not mean, he implies, that we *emanate* from God, like rays from the sun, as the same poets taught. Rather, since we belong to the category of things made not begotten, we mean that we are children *by adoption*. So why, then, does Paul use the fact of the altar to an unknown god as a bridge, a point of contact? Precisely because the occasion required that he bring knowledge of an unknown god, as Calvin noted in his Romans commentary. That's what the Athenians were after.



They had heard him speak of Jesus and the resurrection (*anastasis*), which they presumed to be two new gods, and invited him to speak. But, as they learned, Paul was not ultimately inviting them to *complete* their religion with Jesus. After finding a point of contact with their culture, he presented the challenge to repent.

<sup>xxiii</sup> Paul Tillich understands the church's mission to be that of making a latent reality explicit: 'Many people, even today, are still living before the event of Jesus as the Christ; others, those who have accepted Jesus as the Christ, are living after the center of history. The period before the manifestation of the center of history either in history universally, or in particular individuals, nations and groups, can be called the period in which the bearer of the Kingdom of God in history is latent. It is the period of latency of the Church, the period in which the coming of the Church is prepared in all nations. This is true of paganism, of Judaism, and of humanism. In all three groups and forms of human existence, the church is not yet manifest, but it is latently present, and it prepares for the coming of the center of history. . . . Missions is that activity by the Church by which it works for the transformation of its own latency into its own manifestation all over the world' ('Theology of Missions').

<sup>xxiv</sup>. See, e.g., Netland, 321-323. Another way to soften Protestant 'restrictivism' is to posit a post-mortem opportunity to turn to Jesus, as G. Fackre does in Sanders, ed., *What About* (71-95). But his argument appears to rest heavily on an evangelistic view of Jesus' descent into hell in a text which is generally considered to be ambiguous on that score (1 Peter 3-4).

<sup>xxv</sup> John Stott, for example, writes: 'I cherish the hope that the majority of the human race will be saved. And I have a solid biblical basis for this belief' (in J. Stott, in D. Edwards and J. Stott, *Essentials: A Liberal-Evangelical Dialogue*. Hodder & Stoughton, 1988. 327).

<sup>xxvi</sup> The conviction that the Roman Catholic Church contains (the fullness of) salvation is of course consistent with *Lumen Gentium* 8, for example, which declares that 'by no weak analogy, [the Church] is compared to the mystery of the incarnate Word. As the assumed nature inseparably united to Him, serves the divine Word as a living organ of salvation, so, in a similar way, does the visible social structure of the Church serve the Spirit of Christ, who vivifies it, in the building up of the body'. Clearly, as Christians we should pray for and desire nothing less than the fullness of what God has for his people – although the question of the means to that fullness of salvation lies outside the scope of this essay, since that must be first an inter-confessional question before it is made an inter-faith one.

<sup>xxvii</sup> J.I. Packer writes: 'No limits can be set to the dealings of the merciful God with individuals, even within non-Christian religions, but supernatural revelation sets forth Jesus Christ as the only Saviour from sin . . . .' (*The Thrity-Nine Articles*, 73).

<sup>xxviii</sup> 'As Calvin notes elsewhere, in his teaching that all salvation is from the Jews, Jesus 'both condemns all pagan religions as false and gives the reason that under the Law the Redeemer was promised to the chosen people alone. From this it follows that no worship has ever pleased God except that which looked at Christ. On this basis, also, Paul declares that all heathen were "without God and bereft of hope of life" (Eph. 2:12p)' (II vi. 1). 'Apart from the Mediator, God never showed favour toward the ancient people, nor ever gave hope of grace to them' (II vi.2).

<sup>xxix</sup>. Bullinger's treatment of the subject carries the same nuance. Just 'as there was no salvation outside Noah's ark when the world perished in the flood, so we believe that there is no *certain* salvation outside Christ, who offers himself to be enjoyed by the elect in the Church" (*Second Helvetic Confession* 17, emphasis added).



<sup>xxx</sup> ‘The Church is Not Bound to its Signs: Nevertheless, by the signs [of the true Church] mentioned above [i.e. the ministries of Word and Sacrament] we do not narrowly restrict the Church as to teach that all those are outside the Church who either do not participate in the sacraments, at least not willingly and through contempt, but rather, being forced by necessity, unwillingly abstain from them or are deprived of them; or in whom faith sometimes fails, though it is not entirely extinguished and does not wholly cease; or in whom imperfections and errors due to weakness are found. For we know that God had some friends in the world outside the commonwealth of Israel.’ (*Second Helvetic Confession*, 17):

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