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A THEOLOGIAN LOOKS AT THE GOSPEL AND WORLD RELIGIONS

JAMES A. BORLAND*

When we exercise our bodies, we stretch our muscles. When we ponder the imponderables, we stretch our minds. When we consider the gospel and world religions, we stretch our hearts and our minds. But when finite mind contemplates infinite Being and when timebound creatures confront a timeless Creator, we grope for truths we can scarcely understand. In a world so religiously diverse in which every wind of doctrine floats past we look for something solid, a truth about which we can be sure, indeed a revelation from God himself.

But so many religious systems vie for our trust. Can we sort out truth from error? Is it possible to differentiate among human claims, religious lore, and what might be absolute truth? If so, how would one go about the task?

I intend initially to ask some questions of four world religions: Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism. To be sure, these may be informed questions, but hopefully they express the common longings of the human heart. Next I want to clarify some of the issues from a theologian's point of view—to explore the theological categories that are traversed when considering the gospel and to contrast the views of our world's major religions. Finally, I desire to raise the issue of the necessity of the gospel and whether adherents of world religions other than Christianity must actually hear and believe the gospel to have any hope of salvation.

I. QUESTIONS FOR ALL WORLD RELIGIONS TO ANSWER

Here is a series of questions that I would like to pose for our major world religions: Where do I stand right now? If I continue as I am—that is, without your religion—will I suffer horrible consequences either now or in the future? Is it imperative that I accept your message or way of life? Do you have what might be termed a “gospel” or “good news”? If so, what is your good news? Are you concerned that I learn about your “gospel”? Is it my responsibility to seek out your good news, or are you

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obligated to spread your faith to me? Can I accept your beliefs voluntarily, or do you force some to become adherents? If I am an infant, can I be made a member of your religion apart from an exercise of my own free will? If I am a woman, will I be able to attain the same spiritual standing before God as a man, both in this life and in the life to come—if there is a future life? What if I am of a different race, color or culture from those who dominate your religion? Will I be considered second class in any way? Will I be able to attain to the highest possible spiritual levels before your God, or Being, or in the life you hold out to me both here and hereafter?

How do I join your religion? What makes me a member? Do I simply make an affirmation, or a financial commitment, or is there something mystical that must transpire? Will there be a spiritual transformation, or is that not necessary? Will new divine life be imparted to me? If so, how do I receive it and when may I expect it? If not, am I on my own to live up to your religious and moral standards, whatever they might be? If I do get new spiritual life, is it permanent or can I lose it?

Am I considered an outcast or a sinner at present? If so, why? Have I offended God, man or nature? If so, is that important, or is it an illusion, an awful pattern of wrong thinking that must be corrected? Can I be forgiven? Is forgiveness total and complete, or is it limited in some ways? Will I be able to tell right away if I have received forgiveness, or must I await a future date or even death?

If I am presently experiencing a gnawing guilt, will it be removed suddenly now, later, or ever? Or is guilt a false emotion to be dealt with or eliminated unilaterally? Will my previous background, social standing, or relative wickedness hold me back now or at a future time?

Now let me pursue another line of questioning: Is your religion exclusive of all others? In other words, is your way the only way, or is it just one among many or several possible ways? Will my future life be open to vast changes or sweeps of possible conditions, or is what you promise now what I get then? Is any of what is promised conditioned upon me, or are your promises unconditional? Is a lapse possible? If so, how much of a lapse and for how long? Is this all up to me, or does God or another have any responsibility to see that I make it?

II. THE GOSPEL AND WORLD RELIGIONS CONTRASTED

Next, as a Christian theologian let me sort out some of the questions related to the gospel and world religions and place them in theological categories. First, the Christian gospel makes several statements. The gospel speaks of Christology, for it was Jesus Christ our Lord who died, was buried and rose again the third day (1 Cor 15:3-4). The gospel also speaks of anthropology and hamartiology, because Christ died for sinful mankind—that is, “for our sins” (15:3), “while we were yet sinners” (Rom 5:8). Soteriology is also addressed in terms of substitution, vicariousness, justification, redemption, reconciliation, propitiation, forgiveness,

union with Christ, aspects of election, sufficiency and security, and in the matter of the uniqueness and exclusivity of this message.

In addition God's attributes of wisdom, holiness and love come up for consideration. Indeed the gospel is not in a nutshell but is a bombshell with supernatural implications. Paul declares that the gospel of Christ "is the power of God unto salvation for everyone who believes" regardless of race, culture, sex, or any other differences (Rom 1:16; 1 Cor 1:18; Gal 3:28).

Let me now proceed to examine these theological categories, draw out some of their implications, and compare the Christian gospel with the message of the most prominent world religions. First, in the matter of God's attributes Christianity teaches that the triune God is all-wise and that his plan of salvation was in place from eternity (Eph 1:4). God's holiness demands righteousness of his creatures, whom he wisely allowed to fall into sin in accordance with his eternal redemptive plan. Man's predicament is that he cannot in any way save himself. God's love, however, balances the equation with a provision of imparted righteousness given freely to all whom he can wisely persuade to repent and believe.

But none of this theology has a familiar ring to the ear of a Muslim, Hindu or Buddhist. Islam's God is far different from the Christian's. No Trinity exists, and God's gracious redemptive provisions are overshadowed by Allah's power, justice and inscrutable determinism.¹ The Hindu and Buddhist primarily do not see sin in terms of relationship to a personal and moral God.² For the Hindu, salvation is primarily a "separation of the eternal soul from the phenomenal world."³ It is not something God does for you but something you do for yourself. The Buddhist in turn seeks nirvana, the loss of all individual consciousness and existence by absorption into the impersonal all.⁴

The second theological area deals with the nature of man. Christianity teaches that man was created a perfect finite creature, a mixture of material and immaterial. By choice he is now fallen but is still redeemable. He has but one life on earth and will be resurrected bodily (Heb 9:27). He will either spend eternity with God and the redeemed, or else he will exist in conscious everlasting torment with the fallen angels and the rest of unredeemed mankind. Since man has offended God, man must bear the penalty of death. But here the love of God and his exacting holiness come together. As Anselm notes in *Cur Deus Homo*, Christ had to become man for that very reason. Man must suffer the deserved retribution of God, but only God himself could bear such a penalty.

Again, Islam somewhat approaches the Christian doctrine of the nature of man, but not in the part God plays in man's atonement. The

¹ N. Anderson, "Islam," in *The World's Religions* (4th ed.; ed. N. Anderson; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976) 115.

² B. J. Nicholls, "Hinduism," in *The World's Religions* (ed. Anderson) 145.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ D. Bentley-Taylor and C. B. Offner, "Buddhism," in *The World's Religions* (ed. Anderson) 176.

Hindu and Buddhist doctrines of continuous reincarnation differ fundamentally from the Christian view of bodily resurrection, judgment, and the conscious eternal state.

That brings us to the third category: Christology. Christianity teaches that Jesus was no ordinary man. He was the eternal God, the Creator, in human form (Phil 2:6-7), expressing all the fulness of the Godhead bodily (Col 2:9), the exact image of God's person (Heb 1:3). There can be no doubt about Christ's virginal conception (Matt 1:22-23; Luke 1:35), which though not necessary to affirm for salvation cannot be consciously denied.

His sinless life (Heb 4:15; 7:26) was also a prerequisite to providing a sacrificial atonement for a fallen race. His historical death, burial and resurrection are constantly affirmed in the gospels, epistles and the apostolic preaching recorded in Acts. His resurrection is totally unique in the annals of all time. In addition Jesus, in view of his finished work of salvation, has ascended into glory, from whence we look for his imminent appearance to usher in the next stage of his divine plan.

In stark contrast to this "the Qur'an depicts him [Jesus] as expressly disclaiming deity and seems to deny that he ever died on the cross."⁵ While Jesus is accepted in Islam as a former prophet, he is beneath Muhammad and has no supreme part to play in the future. Although the Hindu religion is eclectic and syncretistic, it takes only the ethics and ideals of Christianity while discarding the merit of the person and work of Christ.⁶ Mahatma Gandhi, for example, "expressed great admiration for the ideal Christ, [but] he had no interest in the incarnation, atonement and resurrection of the historical Christ. To him the cross was an eternal event symbolizing self-sacrifice."⁷ For the Buddhist, the life and death of Jesus Christ are irrelevant to what he must attain, and the teachings of Christianity are diametrically opposed to the key concepts of karma, impermanence and nirvana as taught in Buddhism.⁸

Fourth, the encompassing category of soteriology looms before us. Christianity teaches that man's salvation was provided entirely by God. No amount of good deeds, large or small, can fit into the equation of man's salvation. Christ's death on the cross was a complete substitution for man. His sacrificial death was the propitiation that secured forgiveness and reconciliation to God for everyone who casts the destiny of his soul upon Christ's finished work.

No other condition is imposed but faith. Convicted by God's Holy Spirit, the helpless sinner, who sees his need and the full provision made by Christ, does an about-face. He realizes that Christ is no mere man but Almighty God, and he trusts Christ Jesus completely to redeem him from the awful consequences of sin.

Christianity also teaches that the believing sinner is spiritually transformed immediately upon placing his faith in Christ. Jesus called this the

⁵ Anderson, "Islam" 100-101.

⁶ Nicholls, "Hinduism" 137.

⁷ Ibid. 164.

⁸ Bentley-Taylor and Offner, "Buddhism" 174-177.

new birth (John 3:3). Paul termed it a new creation (2 Cor 5:17). New spiritual life is imparted (2 Pet 1:4) as one is united to Christ spiritually, thus partaking of all that Christ accomplished for him through his shed blood, physical resurrection and bodily ascension. That union is eternal, immutable, vital, spiritual and personal. Christ did the saving, and he will not undo it. Nor can the believer ever break the new spiritual bond through any contemplated or actual lapse into sin.

Though following different models Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism teach that salvation is found in man's working to keep certain precepts rather than in God's imparting new life on the basis of Christ's finished work for us. Initiation into the Muslim faith is fairly simple, the majority of Muslims holding that "a mere recital of the creed [There is no God but God, and Muhammad is the Prophet of God] is enough to enroll a new convert."⁹ But a plethora of rules follows for the faithful to keep.

Hinduism teaches that salvation comes from "self-purification and self-realization."¹⁰ To accomplish this a process of many reincarnations is maintained, aided by yoga used to produce a detachment from the physical arena and a oneness with divine mind. For example Buddha, who began as a Hindu, thought it had taken him 550 separate reincarnations to achieve what he finally did. At three score and ten for every imperfect reincarnation that would occupy nearly forty millennia, and it is assumed that most might take a bit longer than did Buddha himself.

Similarly, Buddhism's four truths and its eightfold path of right views, right aspirations, right speech, right conduct, right mode of livelihood, right effort, right awareness, and right concentration base salvation totally on human effort. The goal of nirvana is somewhere between annihilation and continued existence. Nicholls suggests: "If this goal seems unattractive, it should be remembered that to the Buddhist the curse from which he longs to escape is life itself, which is inextricably tainted with suffering."¹¹

The world religions are in total antithesis to the Christian doctrine of salvation. How different from this simple dictum: "But to him who does not work but believes on him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is accounted for righteousness" (Rom 4:5)! Hear it again in Titus 3:5a: "Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy he saved us." Again, the one who has entered into God's rest, like a Sabbath, "has himself also ceased from his works as God did from his" (Heb 4:10).

III. EVERYONE MUST HEAR AND BELIEVE THE GOSPEL TO BE SAVED

Is it possible to be saved apart from believing the gospel of Christ? Can Christ save a good Hindu through his Hinduism? Are there "ascended

⁹ Anderson, "Islam" 118.

¹⁰ Nicholls, "Hinduism" 164.

¹¹ Bentley-Taylor and Offner, "Buddhism" 176.

masters" from all religions in heaven today? Can other religions be termed "saving structures" because they in some way direct people to the "cosmic Christ," as Raymond Panikkar teaches?¹² Is Cantwell Smith wrong to claim that the non-Christian religions are "channels through which God Himself comes into touch with these His children"¹³ and that "both within and without the Church, so far as we can see, God does somehow enter into men's hearts"¹⁴

Norman Anderson states: "I have no doubt whatever that the presentation of the gospel, by voice or writing, is the normal way by which people are reached and won." But is he correct when he continues by saying that "I do not believe that we have any biblical warrant to assert that this is the *only* way"¹⁵ He further claims: "On the contrary, I believe there is much, in the Bible and experience, to point to the fact that God *can*, and sometimes does, work directly in men's hearts to convict them of sin and prompt them to throw themselves on his mercy."¹⁶

Robert Brow, who agrees with Anderson, summarizes: "Anderson argues that humble repentance and faith indicate a true work of God in the heart, and that to those who have this kind of faith, Christ's sacrifice is applied, whether before or after the crucifixion. We need not deny, therefore, that there could be a saving work of God among men who have not heard the preaching of Christ crucified."¹⁷

At this juncture I must register my dissent from Anderson's viewpoint. I find nothing in the Bible to support his contentions. In fact, God's Word continuously presents many disclaimers. Jesus was fairly emphatic about the absolute impossibility of reaching heaven apart from himself. The English translation of John 14:6 preserves the precise original word order with its usual emphases: "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."

The apostles of Christ are not evasive in this regard either. The apostle Peter, said to be filled with the Holy Spirit, boldly stated: "There is no salvation by anyone else, for no one else in all the wide world has been appointed among men as our only medium by which to be saved" (Acts 4:12).

The apostle Paul declared: "For no other foundation can anyone lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ" (1 Cor 3:11). Again he stated: "For there is one God and one Mediator between God and men, the Man Christ Jesus" (1 Tim 2:5).

The apostle John plainly said, "This life is in his Son. He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life"

¹² R. Panikkar, *The Unknown Christ of Hinduism* (New York: Humanities, 1968) 54.

¹³ W. C. Smith, *The Faith of Other Men* (New York: Harper, 1972) 136.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* 140.

¹⁵ N. Anderson, *Christianity and World Religions: The Challenge of Pluralism* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity, 1984) 175.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ R. Brow, review of N. Anderson, *The World's Religions*, in *Christianity Today* 15 (July 2, 1971) 25-26.

(1 John 5:11b-12). John's gospel contains equally plain and strong statements as seen below.

Christ and the apostles taught that in order for one to appropriate the provision of Christ personal faith or belief was a necessity. Furthermore faith cannot be nebulous but must have an object—a correct object if one aspires to a certain goal. The ultimate provision for salvation has always been the death of Jesus Christ. The means of securing salvation has always been faith. But the actual content of faith—that is, what must be believed—has changed with the progressive nature of God's revelation.

Abel's faith, for example, was exhibited in that he "offered *the God-appointed sacrifice*."¹⁸ The content of Abraham's justifying faith, as stated in Gen 15:6, was that God would fulfill his promise of many descendants.

Since Calvary, the unchanging required content of one's faith is the gospel. Nothing else saves, while all else damns. No substitutions, additions or imitations are permitted. Any other gospel is not another that can save. It only brings with it an anathema (Gal 1:6-9).

I take issue with Anderson's idea that it is "through the basic fact of God's general revelation, vouchsafed in nature and in all that is true (including, of course, the truth there is in other religions), and the equally fundamental facts of our common humanity, that the Spirit of God, or the 'cosmic Christ,' brings home to men and women something of their need."¹⁹ Anderson's suggestion is that this conviction may be enough enlightenment to result in salvation apart from ever naming the name of Christ.

Is this possible? If it were, then it seems strange for Paul, who understood so much about general revelation in Romans 1-2, to insist several chapters later that men cannot "call on him in whom they have not believed. . . . And how shall they believe in him of whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher? And how shall they preach unless they are sent?" (10:14-15a). Indeed Paul declared: "So then, faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God" (10:17).

Christianity's founder and writing apostles unanimously state the absolute dictum that faith during this dispensation must be placed in none other than Jesus Christ and his finished work on Calvary.

Several examples of cross-cultural conversion in our dispensation are recorded in the NT. Each demonstrates hearing the special revelation of the gospel and placing faith in Christ, not a nebulous repentance and faith based on general revelation.

Philip traveled to Samaria, "preached Christ unto them" (Acts 8:5), and "when they believed the things concerning . . . the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized" (8:12). If they could have been saved without hearing the gospel, why was Philip so concerned to go there? Later an educated court official from Ethiopia was reading Isaiah, perhaps in Hebrew or Aramaic. An angel directed Philip to Gaza. Once he arrived

¹⁸ A. Saphir, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (7th ed.; Loizeaux: 1943) 738.

¹⁹ Anderson, *The World's Religions* 236.

there, the Holy Spirit had him join the inquiring Ethiopian. Philip “preached unto him Jesus” (8:35). This man’s conviction and desire to know prompted God to send a prepared messenger to announce the gospel content necessary for salvation.

Cornelius’ story in Acts 10 is similar. A Roman centurion, he was a devout and just man who feared God and even prayed to God. The text also makes it clear that he was lost. Yet God would not save him apart from his hearing and believing the gospel. In a vision an angel instructed Cornelius to send for Peter “to hear words” (v. 22), and Cornelius later recalled: “When he comes, he will speak to you” (v. 32). Peter in Acts 11:13-14 recounts concerning Cornelius: “And he told us how he had seen an angel standing in his house, who said to him, ‘Send men to Joppa, and call for Simon whose surname is Peter, who will tell you words by which you and all your household will be saved.’”

What were Peter’s words? After proclaiming the gospel he exhorted “that, through his name, whoever believes in him will receive remission of sins. While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit fell upon all those who heard the word” (10:43b-44).

Every heathen who has ever gotten saved has had to believe that same gospel. The eunuch was saved that way. Cornelius was saved that way. The jailer at Philippi was saved that way. I was saved that way, and so were you if you name the name of Christ. And I do not believe we have any warrant to claim that God is doing things differently today, no matter how frequently it may be surmised.

The NT makes it abundantly clear that saving faith must be focused on the person and work of Jesus Christ. Ponder some of Jesus’ own words in John’s gospel: “Whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life” (3:15). “Whoever drinks the water that I shall give him will never thirst” (4:14). “You are not willing to come to me that you may have life” (5:40). “This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he sent” (6:29). “I am the bread of life. He who comes to me shall never hunger, and he who believes in me shall never thirst” (6:35). “Everyone who sees the Son and believes in him may have everlasting life” (6:40). “He who believes in me has everlasting life” (6:47). “Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you” (6:53). “He who believes in me” (7:38). “I am the light of the world. He who follows me shall not walk in darkness but have the light of life” (8:12).

“If you do not believe that I am he, you will die in your sins” (8:24). “I am the door. If anyone enters by me, he will be saved” (10:9). “I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me, though he may die, he shall live. And whoever lives and believes in me shall never die” (11:25-26). “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (14:6). “And when he has come, he will convict the world of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment: of sin, because they do not believe in me” (16:8-9).

Jesus’ final words on the necessity of faith being directed in him are in his high-priestly prayer: “I do not pray for these alone, but also for those who will believe in me through their word; that they all may be one, as

you, Father, are in me, and I in you; that they also may be one in us, that the world may believe that you sent me" (17:20-21). Notice carefully how Jesus looks down across the centuries with the same plan of salvation in view. No changes are contemplated.

The apostles never moved away from the precept that saving faith can only be in Christ. Paul again and again proclaimed faith in Christ as the only way of salvation. In Galatians, one of Paul's earliest writings, he said, "Knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law but by faith in Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, that we might be justified by faith in Christ" (Gal 2:16).²⁰ John, who penned the last books of the NT, said, "But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name" (John 20:31). "He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life" (1 John 5:12). "He who believes in him is not condemned; but he who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God" (John 3:18).

Were the apostles a bit too idealistic to hold that all are condemned who do not personally name Jesus on their lips and believe his gospel? Not at all. They were simply following orders, Jesus' marching orders for the Church as found in the great commission. It was Jesus who said, "Make disciples of all the nations" (Matt 28:19). It was Jesus who said, "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature. He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned" (Mark 16:15-16). It was Jesus who said, "It was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead the third day, and that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem" (Luke 24:46-47).

IV. CONCLUSION

If it was necessary to go then, why not now? If preaching the gospel is required to reach those who are near at hand, why should it not be required to reach those in far-flung lands? Let me pose the question in reverse: If God can save people in faraway places without their hearing and believing the gospel, why can he not accomplish the same everywhere? If taking the gospel to every creature was a concern of Christ's two thousand years ago, why should his *modus operandi* be abandoned now, especially without a word from him to that effect?

Are we more enlightened than our Master? Do we know something that Jesus failed to understand? Our methods can be improved, but our message never. Our methods can change, but our mission is unchanging. To hold out the possibility of any other way of salvation does not add to God's greatness but depreciates his Word and the work of the Church through the ages. To teach any other way of salvation for the heathen diminishes missionary zeal and leaves the helpless hopeless.

²⁰ See also Gal 2:20; 3:22, 26; Phil 1:29; Rom 10:9-13.