Liberty University
DigitalCommons@Liberty University

Faculty Publications and Presentations

School of Religion

2010

# Review: God's Rivals: Why Has God Allowed Different Religions? Insights from the Bible and the Early Church

Michael S. Jones
*Liberty University*, msjones2@liberty.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/sor_fac_pubs

Part of the Biblical Studies Commons, Comparative Methodologies and Theories Commons, Epistemology Commons, Esthetics Commons, Ethics in Religion Commons, History of Philosophy Commons, History of Religions of Eastern Origins Commons, History of Religions of Western Origin Commons, Other Philosophy Commons, Other Religion Commons, and the Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons

Recommended Citation
Jones, Michael S., "Review: God's Rivals: Why Has God Allowed Different Religions? Insights from the Bible and the Early Church" (2010). *Faculty Publications and Presentations.* Paper 169.
http://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/sor_fac_pubs/169

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the School of Religion at DigitalCommons@Liberty University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications and Presentations by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@Liberty University. For more information, please contact scholarlycommunication@liberty.edu.

possibility of knowledge about religious claims, this prescription is one that we would do well to follow.

Unlike much of the popular-level work published by the so-called new atheists, Wielenberg's book is clear, precise, insightful, and philosophically rigorous. As someone who ultimately disagrees with his conclusions, I also appreciate the respect and charity towards the other side that is present in the pages of this work. I have used this book as a text in my philosophy of religion course, with much success. Anyone with an interest in the philosophical merits of the theistic arguments given by Lewis will profit from carefully reading *God and the Reach of Reason.*

REVIEWED BY MICHAEL W. AUSTIN
EASTERN KENTUCKY UNIVERSITY

*God's Rivals: Why Has God Allowed Different Religions? Insights from the Bible and the Early Church.* By Gerald R. McDermott. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2007. 181 pages. $18.00.

If God wants humans to find religious truth, and if Christianity best represents such truth, then why has God permitted the development and persistence of other religions? This is the question posed by Gerald R. McDermott in the title of his latest book. It is the question that his book sets out to explore and to answer in an admirably direct yet historically informed fashion.

In an earlier work, *Can Evangelicals Learn from World Religions? Jesus, Revelation, and Religious Traditions* (InterVarsity, 2000) McDermott treads similar ground. In that book he argues that the great religions of the world contain truths that can benefit Christian scholars, and that the ultimate source of these truths is God. He sustains this argument with discussions of biblical data, theological considerations, and the positions of leading Christian intellectuals such as Augustine, Aquinas, Calvin, and Barth. But he does not say that the great world religions themselves come from God. Nor does he take a clear stance on the "problem of religious plurality," the issue of the soteriological status of the adherents of non-Christian religions.

One might conclude that, if McDermott believes that the truths contained in the world religions come from God, then he also believes (or he should believe) that the world religions themselves come from God. But that conclusion would probably be a *non sequitur* resulting from a simplistic view of the origins of the world's religions. It is easy to make the mistake of thinking that a religion must be either completely from God or not at all from God. But this view forgets that religions are complex human creations, developed in response to the diverse array of factors that make up the human environment. The theist acknowledges that one of those factors is God. Therefore it should be no surprise to the theist if non-Christian religions

contain theological truth. But this stops well short of saying that the entire religion comes, directly or indirectly, from God.

In *God's Rivals* McDermott argues that there are two extremes to be avoided: the "fundamentalist extreme" that views non-Christian religions as completely the work of demons, and the extreme of "religious relativism" that views all religions as equally true or at least as equally valid attempts at responding to the same supernatural reality. He attempts to avoid these erroneous extremes by taking what he considers to be a middle path laid out by the biblical authors and other early Christians. He argues that early Christian intellectuals were aware of the difficult issues related to religious plurality and formulated sophisticated answers to them. In particular, he sees a "biblical and early church recognition that God has left traces of his truth and beauty even in religions whose origins were problematic" (13).

As in his earlier work, McDermott sustains his position with discussions of biblical data, theological considerations, and the positions of leading Christian intellectuals, this time referencing important figures from the earliest centuries of Christian thought, especially Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, and Origen. His discussion of biblical data occurs in three chapters examining biblical accounts of knowledge of God outside of Israel and Christianity, Old Testament attitudes toward other gods, and the New Testament attitude toward supernatural powers. His main points seem to be that God desires to be known by all people, and therefore he is actively engaged in revealing himself to all. Because of this activity of God, it is not necessary for one to be a Christian (or a Jew, in the Old Testament) to have knowledge of God (see Num. 24; 1 Kings 17; John 1:9; Acts 17:28). Some biblical examples of people outside of Israel and Christianity who had knowledge of God referred to God using names other than the names for God used by Jews and Christians (for example, Melchizedek, who is called the priest of El Elyon, which is the name of a Canaanite deity). An implication of this would seem to be that there is some knowledge of God among some practitioners of other religions. Furthermore, some biblical personalities, including Jesus himself, believed that Jews and Christians can learn truths about God from such people (see Matt. 15:21–8; Luke 17:18).

McDermott expends considerable effort showing that the Bible indicates that there are supernatural powers other than God, though they are far inferior to God. Some of these powers are ministers on God's behalf, but others do not submit to God. He indicates that these powers are sometimes the impetus behind other religions mentioned in the Bible. He concludes that, in general, the biblical attitude towards other religions is one of judgment based upon their serious moral, spiritual, and theological inadequacies, but he also argues that there are acknowledgements of some truth in other religions and occasional hints that the God that some religious people are seeking is the God of the Bible. Perhaps this is seen most clearly in Acts 17,



where the apostle Paul seems to equate the "unknown god" of the Athenians with the God of the Bible and quotes approvingly the theological statement of two Greek philosopher/poets (see McDermott's discussion of Paul on pages 80–83). Hence one part of the biblical answer to the question Why has God allowed different religions? is, on McDermott's reading, that God has allowed them as a way of communicating theological truth.

In his discussion of the attitudes of early Christian thinkers towards other religions, which constitutes about half of the book, McDermott argues that development is visible from the views on other religions found in the Old Testament to the views found (successively) in Paul, Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Clement, and Origen. Paul sees the religions as at least in part a result of the desire of fallen supernatural beings to thwart the plans of God, but also believes that God can (and sometimes does) co-opt their efforts in order to accomplish his own goals, which include revealing himself to all people. Justin Martyr takes this a step further and argues that all truth comes from Christ, and therefore all philosophies and religions that teach any truth are to some extent following Christ. Irenaeus believes that God is in charge of all history and is using the development of the world religions to prepare their adherents to receive greater religious truth. Clement of Alexandria agrees with Irenaeus and sees the religions as stepping stones to Christ. But while these thinkers take an optimistic view of the religions, they do not see them as equal to Christianity or as alternative ways of salvation. For them, all salvation is through Christ. Origen, while accepting much of this tradition, warns that while the study of world religions is fruitful for the scholar, it is potentially dangerous for the neophyte. Non-Christian philosophies and religions must be handled with great caution, for they contain much error.

McDermott, too, adopts an optimistic attitude towards the world's religions. He acknowledges that they contain error, but recognizes that they also contain truth. "God as well as the devil is present in the religions" (164). He agrees with the church fathers that God is working through the religions to accomplish his purposes, and argues that "the world is a happier place than it would be without these religions" (166). And he affirms that the adherents of other religions "are not our enemies" (165).

Finally, like the church fathers he discusses, McDermott disavows that the religions provide an alternative path to salvation. They provide theological truths, but only Christ provides salvation. If there is salvation for the adherents of the world's religions, it is the same salvation that is in Christianity, and was accomplished by the same savior: Jesus the Christ. Thus on the problem of religious plurality McDermott seems to be a very conservative inclusivist. He sees God at work in every culture, calling and leading people to himself. But this work is always accomplished by and through the Christ, whom the Gospel of John records as saying, "And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto me" (John 12:32).

*God's Rivals* is a well written, easily followed yet extremely thought provoking look at an issue of great significance. McDermott is a committed and conservative Christian, and therefore he approaches the issue with a high regard for the Bible and Christian thought. Nonetheless some of his arguments and conclusions will come as a surprise to many Christian readers. But McDermott is not coy or obscure in his argumentation: he states his case clearly, and lays out his arguments for all to see and evaluate. And that is exactly the response that this book should get: it deserves to be read, and its arguments need to be considered. For as others have noted, evangelicalism is in need of a theology of religions.

REVIEWED BY MICHAEL S. JONES
LIBERTY UNIVERSITY

*Tactics: A Game Plan for Discussing Your Christian Convictions.* By Gregory Koukl. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009. 207 pages. $14.95.

In an earlier review in this journal (vol. 8, no. 2), I reflected on the apologetic task, comparing it to the medical profession. Doctors must have a huge amount of background knowledge that comes from work in the lab, but the practice of medicine is largely about diagnosis, which begins with listening to the patient. In the same way, the evangelistic task of apologetics requires a good deal of knowledge, but its application also begins with listening and diagnosing the specific challenges in an individual life.

Many apologetics books treat only that part of apologetics that concerns research into the various arguments for Christianity. *Tactics* is a book about careful application. It presents listening and diagnostic skills that enable even the new believer to engage her friends in the defense of the gospel with confidence and gentleness. In introducing the use of tactics, Koukl makes the important point that the goal in employing such tactics in conversations is to help the conversation partner take the next step towards Christ. Even if a person is far from seeing the truth of Christianity, helping her take the next step counts as significant progress. Koukl also repeatedly warns the reader that the tactics can be powerful tools that can be misused if we are not careful to embody the love and gentleness proscribed by the Scriptures. He introduces the tactics, not to help us manipulate others or to win arguments, but to help us enter into more fruitful dialogue with those around us.

The book is divided into two parts. The first part ("The Game Plan") introduces the notion of using tactics and then develops The Columbo Tactic. The second part ("Finding the Flaws") helps the reader diagnose common conceptual mistakes in the way people challenge Christian claims or articulate alternative beliefs. Each chapter ends with a short section called "What We Learned in This Chapter." The central points are summarized in a manner