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

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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**


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,
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.

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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 centers 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