

A Christian Response to Pagan Philosophies and Religions

*Syncretism, Pluralism,
Postmodernism and Hedonism*

David Gooding

A Myrtlefield House Transcript



**MYRTLEFIELD
HOUSE**

www.myrtlefieldhouse.com

Contents

1	Syncretism: the Mixing Together of Views	3
2	Pluralism: the Equal Validity of Every View	16
3	Two Further Issues Related to Pluralism	32
4	Postmodernism and Hedonism	41
	Appendix: Outline and Study Notes	
	Syncretism and Pluralism	48
	Postmodernism	57
	Hedonism	60
	About the Author	62

David Gooding has asserted his right under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988, to be identified as Author of this work.

Copyright © The Myrtlefield Trust, 2019

Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from the ESV® Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved. Sometimes Dr Gooding gives his own translations or paraphrases.

All rights reserved. Permission is granted to reproduce this document in its entirety, or in unaltered excerpts, for personal and church use only as long as you do not charge a fee. You must not reproduce it on any Internet site. Permission must be obtained if you wish to reproduce it in any other context, translate it, or publish it in any format.

Published by The Myrtlefield Trust
PO Box 2216
Belfast, N Ireland
BT1 9YR

w: www.myrtlefieldhouse.com
e: info@myrtlefieldhouse.com

Myrtlefield catalogue no: apl.002/jf

Syncretism

The Mixing Together of Views

Welcome to this first of three seminars, the general title of which is advertised as 'A Christian Response to Pagan Philosophies'. Somewhere between that information being disseminated and the vagaries of my brain, two words were added to the title and it now reads: 'A Christian Response to Pagan Philosophies and Religions', because in the ancient world, as in the modern, it is not always easy to distinguish with knife-edge clarity a difference between a philosophy on the one hand and a religion on the other.

Introduction

These three seminars will deal with four topics. They are syncretism, pluralism, postmodernism and hedonism. Ugly sounding words, I think you will agree, like most 'isms' are. Each one of these four things is a kind of deadly virus that not only confuses the minds of unbelievers when they start thinking about the Christian gospel but are liable sometimes to confuse the minds and practices even of believers.

Ugly things though these spiritual viruses are; yet we do well to consider them seriously. You may tell me, and I do believe it already, that according to John the apostle, we each have an 'unction' from the holy one and 'know all things' (1 John 2:20).¹ So that you have in a sense no need that one teach you, when it comes to the great fundamental things that spell out our relationship with God our redeemer. There is an instinct in the heart of true believers, born of the Holy Spirit, an 'unction' that very often means they can sense instinctively something that is derogatory to Christ, even if they could not explain it intellectually. On the other hand, it is evident from the New Testament itself that these things, some of them at least, can mislead true believers for a while, so we as believers need to think about them intelligently from time to time.

Our other motivation is that in our outreach to the world at large, we should be aware that our modern world, like the ancient world, is in many parts deeply confused by these isms and one thousand and one more isms. So while they listen to us speaking the word of truth in the words that are so familiar to us, they may not be *hearing* what we say, because the words that we use mean something different to them. So we are saying one thing; they are understanding quite another. Therefore we need to understand the confusions that have been wrought about Christianity in general and the gospel in particular, in the minds of the general public outside, so that we can, by God's grace, remove those difficulties.

¹ The ESV renders the same verse: 'But you have been anointed by the Holy One, and you all have knowledge.'

Removing the difficulties will not necessarily bring them immediate regeneration, but it is a very good and profitable thing to move the obstacles out of the way so that then people may come more readily to Christ and be saved. After all that is what John the Baptist said in his loud way. He called upon people to prepare the way of the Lord, to smooth out the rough road, to take the boulders out of the way; where there were deep dips, to raise them up, and where there were difficult mountains, to lower them down (Matt 3:1–3; Isa 40:3). As one would put it: to put the up hills downhill and leave the downhills as they were before. The job of the apologist is to remove the difficulties out of the way so that people may come the more confidently to listen to the blessed Lord himself.

One theme will run through these three seminars, and that is that these isms, which may appear to us as being very modern, are in fact very ancient. There is scarce a heresy or an 'ism' today that is brought against the gospel that is not hoary with old age. Satan simply recycles his opposition down through the centuries.

So now we begin with syncretism. I have listed some notes on the topic, and I shall not necessarily expound all of them in detail. I leave a lot of them for your further study.²

Examples of syncretism

Syncretism is the term we use to mean a combination of elements, beliefs and practices from differing systems of religion and/or philosophies, so that doctrines and practices and beliefs from one religion or philosophy are mixed into another and become a hybrid religion or philosophy. It is a very ancient phenomenon.

An Old Testament example: 2 Kings 17

I quote simply one passage in the Old Testament that talks about this practice. It is in the book of 2 Kings and describes the time when the Assyrians moved the Israelites and transported them to Nineveh, and then brought a lot of the people from Nineveh back to Palestine. The new residents of Palestine brought their own gods with them, and then some of the priests of Israel began to teach them. Before they knew where they were, there was an unholy mixture which the historian here describes in these terms: 'They feared the Lord and served their own gods' (17:33). It was an unholy mixture of truth and error.

A New Testament example: The attempt to add pagan theosophies to the gospel of Christ (Col 2:8–9)

My first example was in Old Testament days, but my next example (point II on the Appendix) reminds us that the believers at Colossae were more than a little influenced by a kind of syncretism, or at least in danger of being influenced by it. Their first danger was that they should add pagan philosophies, actually *theosophies*, to Christian faith. Of course, when they began to do it, they didn't see either its wrongness or its danger. To many of them it was very appealing. The idea came across in this fashion: 'You are a believer in the Lord Jesus? Oh, congratulations! That's a marvellous beginning. Would you like to go further and develop the

² See the [Appendix](#) for the notes for each of the sessions.

spiritual life? Of course you would. Well now, if you really want to go further, faith in Christ is a good place to start, but now we could give you a recipe for the development of your spiritual life. I mean, do you know about all the principalities and the powers and the angels and the demigods and the demiurge?

You'd say, 'No, what on earth are they?'

'Ah, well that's what you'll need to know. If you will rise to God himself, there are many agents that God has created: demiurge and demigods and demisemigods (and perhaps even demi-semiquavers), all the way up, and we can tell you about them and how the nice ones can help you and how you can avoid the nasty ones, if you let us be your spiritual advisor.'

The believers thought this was wonderful. I mean, what believer doesn't want to increase in holiness and in the experience and knowledge of God? But just there was a satanic danger. *Theosophy*, as we now know in this modern world, was a lot of piffle and nonsense. It seemed very impressive, and some of the believers were falling for it. It was not philosophy in the logical sense, but what we nowadays would call theosophy. I'm not going to take the trouble to expound it to you. You must read about it in Colossians and elsewhere if you're interested. My point is simply that the believers in Colossae were in danger of falling into syncretism:

1. Through theosophies added onto Christianity.
2. Through the ritual of Judaism: new moons and Sabbaths, added to Christianity.
3. Through a desire for ecstatic vision. There were people who could tell you what the technique was. 'You want to have a direct vision of angels? Wouldn't that be marvellous? I mean, far better than the boring text of the Bible. If you could bypass the Bible and have a direct experience of angels! Now if you want that, we can tell you the technique for how to get there.'
4. Others of a different mood were falling for what is called asceticism: being hard on the body, sleeping on a stony bed with no blanket, or putting hard peas in your shoes, and using the discipline of a whip to hit your back to help to subdue the flesh (they hoped) in order to bring you nearer to God in spirit.

Of course these things didn't stem from either the Old Testament or the New. They were additions borrowed from the religions and philosophies of men. And Paul has to write his letter urgently to get them to discern what is happening, to discern the nature of this stuff that's being added to Christianity, and to reject it and to stand fast in Christ, in whom are hidden all of the treasures of wisdom and knowledge (Col 2:3).

All-Souls' Day, Halloween, *Psychagogia*, The Hungry Ghost Festival

Point III on my list in the attached Appendix is just a way of reminding you how ancient ceremonies have penetrated the so-called Christian calendar. Consider All Souls Day, for instance, and Halloween. I don't suppose you begin to observe those things in America, so I shan't talk much about them, but if had been talking about them, I would have said as follows!

In the northeast of England, where once I used to live, the dear believers used to have parties come the end of October, I think, or the beginning of November, and beautiful parties they were with good food. Then some of them would get a big old turnip, or a melon or

something, and gouge out the insides and make two holes in it for eyes and then a gash for a mouth. They would put a candle inside the thing and hang it outside the window. 'Oh, what fun!' they said, and had a marvellous party.

They hadn't a clue what it meant. That was a survival of paganism, pure and simple. For widespread throughout the world is the pagan custom, common to many religions, that at a certain time of the year the spirits of the departed ancestors should be brought back and be given a decent meal and talked to nicely. Then after a day or two of rich eating and being talked to nicely, they should be conducted back to the cemetery and persuaded to remain there for the rest of the year. After all, you don't want your grannie always haunting the place, do you? You prefer she stayed back where you buried the dear soul. But this fear of the spirits has led to a widespread ceremony.

You'll find it among the ancient Greeks, they had the *Psychagogia*: the leading of souls. You went out and got the souls, or the spirits (the Greeks called them souls), from the cemetery and brought them back home and entertained them, and then you took them back. Some children, with their way of expressing things, would get a big cabbage and kick that along the street at that time of year, not knowing what they did. The cabbage was meant to represent Uncle George's head that had come off.

You'll find it in Japan. You'll find it all over the place. It's what they call in Malaysia 'the Hungry Ghost Festival'. When Christianity, so-called, first came to Britain, it brought a doctrine of purgatory and the idea that you had to pray for the souls of the dead, that they might be delivered from their torment. So the missionaries, if that's what they were, thought it would be a very good thing to celebrate 'All Souls Day', referring to the souls of the departed. They wanted to have a day of prayer that the departed souls might be released out of purgatory, and they attached it to this pagan Hungry Ghost Festival with the bringing back of the spirits to the cemetery, and so on and so forth. It has led down the centuries to endless confusion. Of course nowadays, evangelicals can be found celebrating Halloween and things of that order, for they simply don't know what it means and are not concerned about it anyway.

In Spain, under Franco, when public preaching of the gospel wasn't allowed, the believers used to take advantage of what we call Halloween, because then in that country, everybody went to the cemetery to pray around the graves of their loved ones and to chant a few prayers so that their loved ones might be released out of purgatory. So the believers used to go. The government couldn't stop that. They would go round the graves of their relatives and preach the gospel to anybody who liked to listen. There is more than one way of achieving your aim, isn't there?

We should be aware, however, how these superstitions come. For many folks it is an integral part of Christianity that they are praying for the departed in purgatory that they may be released from their torments. And if you try to tell people like that that there isn't any such thing as purgatory, and you think you're doing them a good favour, many of them will be sorely put out, because they are *hoping* for purgatory. You may ask them, 'Are you ready to go to heaven? Are you sure you'll be in heaven?'

They'll reply, 'Of course not; not even the Pope is.'

'So you're not good enough to go to heaven? Well do you expect to be there?'

'We hope to be there one day.'

'So, if you're not good enough to get there when you die, what then?'

'Well there's a safety net, of course. If you're not good enough when you die, you can go to purgatory, so long as you're not tremendously bad, and then after you've been there suffering what you have to suffer for who knows how long, you will get into heaven. If only you can get into purgatory, then you're guaranteed getting into heaven eventually!'

So for them purgatory is a marvellous place, a marvellous safety net. If you try to prove it doesn't exist, you'll really get them worried. They don't want to hear that; it's their hope of heaven. Knowing how they think, therefore, and knowing how the old pagan ideas intertwine themselves in the whole thing will help us understand where the people sit and to be able to deliver them, by the grace and power of the gospel, from these frightful superstitions.

The thinking within the Orthodox Church

In point number four I have listed something that in its way is even more serious. I wouldn't bother you with this point were it not for the fact that I hear increasing rumours (you can tell me afterwards if they are true) that many evangelicals in America are going over and becoming members of the Orthodox Church. Even some notable evangelical leaders have in recent years gone over to the Orthodox Church. Perhaps from one point of view it is understandable. Sometimes people have found evangelicalism to be rather shallow and glitzy, more like a performance and an entertainment than anything to do with God and his holiness. For such people the ceremonies and the liturgy of the Orthodox Church can be exceedingly attractive. People feel something has been lost and say, 'Evangelicals don't know much about church history. Here's a church that knows all about it and knows about the great councils that talked about and decided the doctrines of the Trinity and how we should understand the relation of the Father to the Son. Aren't we here getting back to original Christianity in this way?' Then there is the solemnity of the services and the marvellous music, not to mention the incense. These they find very attractive, and they're going over to it. So even Francis Schaeffer's son is in print as saying that if you want to get to heaven, the blood of Christ is not enough. You will need more than that.

Not all of us will come across that type of thing, but some of us may. It is good to know, therefore, what Orthodoxy stands for. It is of course a tremendous mixture. Thank God for the great councils and creeds of the church. We owe a great deal to them, don't we? And in our thinking about the deity of Christ and what we should say about him and his relationship with the Father, and what we should not say about him, we often use language that, whether we know it or not, goes back to the Greek fathers who joined in solemn councils and came out with the creeds. That is good, but there are two very serious things wrong.

The veil that remains

If you go into any Orthodox church, you will see the church is divided into two parts by a wall, right from one side to the other. In it are three doors. The central door is called 'the door of the king', composed of a door and a veil or curtain. The whole wall is called the *iconostasis*. I shall not attempt to explain to you the origin of this. It was never invented to be a veil in our modern sense, but that is what it has become in the liturgy. During the service, the central

door can be opened, but nobody is allowed inside except the priest and his assistants. The people are never allowed in there. That is the holiest of all. In there is the altar where, according to Orthodox belief, the bread and the wine are turned into the real body and blood of Christ. There is no access there for the people, only for the priests. All sorts of superstitions grow up with that, don't they?

I remember being in the fair city of Vancouver. My host and hostess had a business friend, and he was a Greek and a member of the Greek Orthodox Church. He invited my friends to the wedding of his daughter, and they went along and afterward they pointed out to me the church as we passed by. Shortly after that when I travelled to Russia, I wondered if I could find out what a modern Orthodox Church was like, as distinct from the ancient sorts. So I was allowed to go in, and the priest graciously showed me around. I looked at the beautifully painted walls and ceilings. They love images of saints and icons and things, and knowing an odd word or two of Greek, I said, 'Is that Saint So-and-so?'

And he said, 'Yes.'

I said, 'Who's that there? Saint Somebody Else?'

Yes, that was he.

And there of course was the *iconostasis*: a wall across. And the door happened to be open. So I eventually said, 'Can I go and see what's inside that door?'

'Oh,' he said, 'that's special. That's the holiest of all. And nobody's allowed in there except my assistant and me. Anybody who goes in there will get thrown out.' Then he said, 'It's like what they had in the Old Testament.'

I said, 'Well now you mention it, so it is. Yes, I think I remember that. Well, how extraordinary. What do you think of the fact that when our Lord died, the veil in the temple was rent in twain from top to bottom, and the writer to the Hebrews says that we can have boldness to enter into the holy place by the blood of Jesus, "through the veil" into the holiest of all?'

His face clouded over, and he said, 'That's how they had it in the Old Testament and we're going to have it now!'

End of conversation.

That, my dear brothers and sisters, is a denial of the gospel outright. It is the addition to Christianity of an element of Judaism, which served its purpose as an illustration in its day, but now in Christ that veil has been done away (see 2 Cor 3:14). You think of the effect made on generations of people as they come and stand there for three hours to hear the liturgy said and the mass offered, and they see the open door into the holiest of all, illustrating the presence of God, and are told: 'No, you can't go through.'

Those who have combined these elements in this way have *syncretised* things, even when it is one of the things from Judaism. Instead of seeing those elements as having served their purpose and been put aside, they added them onto Christianity when they never ought to have been added on.

Orthodox Spirituality

In Orthodox thinking there is a second error that must be seen clearly, and that concerns its spirituality. This, it is not an exaggeration to say, is based on pagan Greek philosophy, pure

and simple. I shall have to briefly tell you about a pagan Greek philosopher. He was a Neo-Platonist, as we call him, and his name was Plotinus. He believed that there is, well, he would not necessarily have called him 'God'; his phrase was 'the One'. Behind all the multitude of differences in the universe and the detail, there is, so the Greek philosophers held, the One. The question arose of what the One is like? And they pondered that. How would you find out? They eventually developed what they called the negative philosophy, and it went something like this:

'Now is the great One like a stone?'

'Well no, not really.'

'Let's come up a bit higher. Is he like an elephant perhaps?'

'Well no, not really.'

'Is he like man?'

'Well perhaps a little like man, but much more than man.'

And so they worked themselves up and up and up until they could find nothing he was quite like and decided you couldn't tell for certain anything about God whatsoever. You couldn't tell a thing. You couldn't even say that God existed. Why not? Well because to a Greek mind, if you say something exists you are silently implying the possibility of non-existence, and that would make two things: existence and non-existence. So you couldn't even say God existed, because that implied a duality of non-existence. So they decided that you couldn't say anything about God whatsoever, except perhaps that he was there. Don't complain at me that it gets rather complicated; I didn't invent the thing!

Then Plotinus and others said when you come to the desire to see the One it's like being up against an absolute blank wall in a dark cell that is absolutely pitch-black. As far as the idea of God is concerned, you know nothing. Then you will want to concentrate your mind on your desire to see the One, and if you concentrate the right way round, it is possible that this crack opens up in the wall of your cell and, looking through, you see this blazing light and, instinctively, you know it's God, though you couldn't say for certain anything about God. You couldn't understand anything about him; he is incomprehensible. He is therefore also ineffable: you can't say anything about him. But you know it is God, and in the very process of gazing directly on God, you are joined with God and united with God.

Now that was a Greek pagan philosopher. Someone (no one knows who), who professed to be a Christian, wrote a book. He called himself by the name of Dionysius the Areopagite. He was a good man in history. The real Dionysius the Areopagite was one of Paul's converts when he preached at Mars Hill (Acts 17:34). Whoever this author was, he borrowed the name as a penname, a pseudonym, and he wrote a book and professed to be a Christian. And he said, 'Do you know, there are two ways of knowing God. There is the positive way, as God declares his name to us, as he did to Abraham and to the patriarchs and the prophets: whether as "God" or "Yahweh" or "Jehovah Tsidkenu" and right down to the time of Jesus, who declared the name of God to us as no other has ever declared it.'

You say, 'Marvellous.'

Ah, but wait a minute. Then he says, 'But that isn't enough. There remains a second way of knowing God, according to what Jesus said to his followers while he was on earth. He said that one day we shall see his face and be united with God.'

And here the good man (if he was good) took over lock, stock and barrel the old pagan philosopher's views, and recommended to fellow Christians all the way round Europe that this is the way to have a direct vision of God. You start with what is God like.

'Is he like mud?'

'No.'

'Is he like stone?'

'No.'

'Is he like animals?'

'No.'

'Is he like man?'

'Well, far beyond it so it's not a good comparison.'

And so on, until you come to the point where you've decided that you don't know anything about God whatsoever. It's complete darkness . . .

(And that was taught in spite of what Christ has told us.)

'You now end up in complete darkness. You know nothing and can't say a thing about God. Then you want to take a word. A short word will do the best. "God" would be a very good word. Then you say, "God, God, God, God, God, God, God, I wish to see God!" And presently, the darkness will part, and you'll see the blazing light! You'll know it is God and you'll be united with him!'

This is the spirituality that the Orthodox Church recommends to its members. It is serious.

As evangelicals, we can have great sympathy with men and women who have become dissatisfied with modern, commercialized evangelical religion, with its performances instead of worship and experience without knowledge. You can understand how some people then think that in the ceremonies of the ancient Orthodox Church they have found a richness and a treasure about God they never had before. Oh, but it is serious. At the popular level, it is a denial of the gospel. At the advanced level, it is sheer paganism.

The use of yoga-like techniques, breathing rhythms and concentration controls

So I move to point five: the use of yoga-like techniques, breathing rhythms and concentration controls in order to produce supposedly Christian spiritual experience and growth, now adopted by some evangelicals.

I was in the company of two senior believers not so long ago, from a country that I will not name. Over our days together they talked, and as we shared together our experience of the Lord, one of them said how recently a Christian advisor had come their way who was teaching an altogether new level of prayer, and it was marvellous. For this new level of prayer he was teaching them to synchronize the prayer with their breathing. They thought it was very helpful. They hadn't a clue as to what its origin was and what it was in itself.

The Byzantine Hesychasts were enthusiastic folks. You won't have heard of them perhaps. You've no need; forget them as soon as you have, but they were enthusiastic for developing spirituality and the vision of God. Their technique was as follows. They took this Jesus prayer: 'Jesus Christ, Son of God, Saviour, have mercy on me'. It's a lovely prayer, isn't it? Yes, why not pray it? They aimed to pray it 35,000 times a day. Then, under the guide of a spiritual director, they attempted to phase the saying of the prayer in with their breathing and then, at

a deeper stage, to phase it in with the pulsating of their hearts. They warned here that you need a spiritual advisor to do it, because otherwise you could suffer mental damage (in other words go barmy). By doing this, you hoped to arrive at a tremendous sense of peace and well-being and perhaps the very direct vision of God.

The learned Bishop Timothy Ware, an Orthodox Bishop, points out how similar it is to Hindu mantra saying and Islamic chants where they have similar techniques. And the learned bishop says, in effect, 'Well it doesn't really matter its origin. It would be interesting to notice who was borrowing from whom, but in the end it doesn't really matter; it's a jolly good prayer anyway.' But I say it does matter, for these are not techniques that the Holy Spirit teaches us. If we need to know something about prayer, and the Holy Spirit has not told us, that would be a very curious thing. It is the Holy Spirit who groans within us with groans that cannot be uttered and prays according to God and prompts us in our praying (Rom 8:26–27). Oh, do let us beware of these techniques that seem so wonderful and modern and new to many believers. They are as ancient as ancient can be, and they are not of God.

The substitution of pagan Greek philosophic concepts

At the more intellectual level you may care to look at point number six—'The substitution of pagan Greek philosophic concepts of the impassability of God for the True and Living God revealed in the Bible and through his Son'. The word *impassability* means 'incapable of suffering', and it is the fact that, back many centuries, Christian theologians and philosophers would tell you (if you thought deeply) that God is utterly impassable: he cannot experience any emotion. Some of them would have held he can't even think thoughts, because if you start to think a thought, your mental state has changed, hasn't it? Then if you stop thinking that thought your mental state has changed again. So God can't begin to think anything because he never changes.

Where did they get the idea? Well not from the Bible, as you can see. They got it from the Greek philosophers of course. The great Aristotle said that the One, that is 'God' in their terminology, the One behind all the detail of the universe, was utter perfection. Of course you and I will agree: he is absolutely perfect. Ah, yes, but Aristotle would have added that means he cannot change, for if he changes, he will either change for the better or for the worse. If he changes for the better, he wasn't perfect before. If he changes for the worse, he's no longer perfect, and God can't change. Now to have any of what we in our human language call emotion, like anger, is impossible with God, because that implies a change in his heart. So they said God is utterly impassable. Aristotle said the One, or God, is like a beautiful woman that attracts many admirers from among the gentlemen. They are very interested in her, but she has no interest in them whatsoever. That, according to them, was God.

You say, 'How ever did such a frightful idea get in among the Christian philosophers and the theologians?'

Well because, all credit to them, from the third century onwards, the early Christians sought to make the faith acceptable or understandable to the pagan world of intellectuals. It was a good motive. In the process of doing this, they borrowed some of the thought forms from the pagan philosophers. Indeed, this is evident even among the great councils of the church and the creeds they formulated that state the doctrine of the Trinity, among others.

What a tremendous debt we owe them. But you will notice when you read the creeds, as I'm sure you do frequently, that the language and the terms are not ordinary everyday English. It is moderately technical language that was written originally in Greek and Latin. The philosophical terms they borrowed were intended to give a precision of meaning, and that is what they felt they were doing. Therefore when you speak of three *persons* in the Trinity you're not exactly using biblical terms, are you? Certainly God is taught in Scripture as being Father, Son and Holy Spirit, but each member is not spoken of in Scripture using the term 'person'. And the term as it was used then means something rather different from our modern English word 'person', yet evangelicals and others happily go on using it. So, the challenge of putting the truths of Scripture into Greek thoughts has sometimes led Christian theology into difficulties.

We return to this notion that God cannot, in any sense, change. How could you ever reconcile it with the Bible? Of course, in the book of Malachi, God says, 'For I the Lord do not change, therefore you, O sons of Jacob, are not consumed' (3:6). In that sense, God doesn't change; he's as solid as a rock! He is never inconsistent. But does that mean he doesn't feel any emotion, as we call it? Read your Old Testament. 'I'm *weary* of you, absolutely weary. I'm pressed under you, like a cart under a staggering load of harvest sheaves' (Amos 2:13). 'Do you know, I *hate* these things?' says God, talking of certain sins (e.g. Jer 7:10). 'In all their affliction he was . . .' What was he? Not an impassable God who couldn't feel anything: 'In all their affliction he was afflicted' (Isa 63:9). And, tell me what God was experiencing and, if I dare use the term of him, *feeling*, when his Son was on the Cross.

You know, if we want to know what God is like, we can. He's like Jesus Christ, that's what he's like. When you see Christ, you see God. 'Whoever has seen me has seen the Father', says Christ (John 14:9). When we read of Jesus Christ breaking his heart and weeping over Jerusalem (Luke 13:34), longing for people to listen and come to him, then Jesus' attitude is God's attitude; that's how God *feels*! And in all our trials and our sufferings as believers, God is involved. The blessed Lord Jesus understands, though he is God incarnate.

That is a message to take to the world. It is very good when the scientists come round, as many of them now are, to saying that there is an intellect, an intelligence, behind the universe; that is a marvellous step forward. We certainly should take advantage of that when talking to scientists, as John Lennox was saying in his talk. But I think of the scientists that I have known, and one of my colleagues in particular who said to me, 'Yes, David, there must be an intelligence behind the universe, but not a personal intelligence.'

I said, 'Why not personal?'

Well he said, 'How could you account for so much suffering if it's all been created by a personal God? I'm not talking about man's wickedness to his fellow man: that's understandable, but there are a lot of people out there who are hurting because of forces in the world that are not other humans.'

And others will say, 'If there's a God who is personally interested in all of this, then he must be a cruel monster.' Then they say, 'He can't be personal then.'

It is a wonderful thing to be able to come alongside them and talk to them about the God, not of the Greek philosophers: one who can't feel anything, but a God who says of his people in all their afflictions, 'I am afflicted', a God who was not impassibly indifferent, when he gave

his dear Son at Calvary, to die for our sins. Here is God himself involved in the suffering of the world.

I was in Moscow in June and was invited to dinner by a friend of mine, and his wife. He is a very gracious man, a professor and the head of a great psychiatric institution in that city. His wife is a microbiologist in her own right. I talked to them about the existence of God. No, they were confirmed atheists, and then they said, 'But how can you believe in God when there is so much suffering in the world?'

Between them they have seen an enormous amount. It was lovely to be able to tell them the gospel of a God who *cares*, a God who, having made his creatures, owns *moral responsibility* for his creatures. Parents who would bring children into the world and be utterly indifferent to their fate would be immoral. God, by his very act of creation, took upon him moral responsibility. Why the suffering? I cannot discuss it at great length, or at any length at all now, but we are affirmed that God who foresaw the suffering was involved in it, in the giving of his darling Son. He has promised to those that trust him that our light affliction, which is for a moment, works for us a far more eternal, exceeding weight of glory (2 Cor 4:17). We may trust the God who was involved in Calvary. And when we get home to glory it will be the united confession of every believer, no matter how much they have suffered: 'It was worth it all!' They will all with united voice tell you that same thing when they see the glory that God has prepared for them *by that means*.

So then as we begin to think, we, and the theologians particularly, do need to purge our ideas of God from syncretism, from pagan philosophy. Some of the Greek pagans held that there was a supreme deity, and they called him Zeus. The philosophers demythologized Zeus into world forces, but behind it all, in the popular mind and that of many philosophers and poets, there was an idea of a dark power called Fate that even the gods themselves were powerless against. Once Fate had decided it, that was that, and nothing could save anybody. That is a pagan notion, but it can come into Christian thinking as a kind of fatalism. God keeps open the opportunity of salvation to all as long as he can. He is not a fatalistic God.

A gospel of meritorious works; false asceticism, and false permissiveness

A gospel of meritorious works

We shall perhaps not need to be exhorted that we do not confuse our gospel with elements that are common to practically all religions, such as a gospel of meritorious works. It is common to religions that they preach a salvation by works. It is common to some forms of doctrine in Christendom. How easily the gospel slips into being salvation by works; it is insidious.

False permissiveness

At the other extreme we should be aware of false permissiveness, which was a feature in some of the early churches. There came teachers who so expounded the doctrine of grace to mean that if you sinned it didn't really matter at all. That is another insidious idea that creeps into the minds of Christians, isn't it?

‘Well, yes,’ some will say, ‘I’ve sinned, and well, no, you shouldn’t sin, but we are saved by grace anyway, aren’t we? So in the end, whether we sin or not doesn’t really make all that much difference, does it?’

Well doesn’t it? The second chapter of 2 Peter, and the Epistle of Jude, let alone a score of other Scriptures, are concerned to tell us that *permissiveness*, to put a word on this idea, is not of God. It is a denial of the Christian gospel. A gospel that says it’s okay for the sow to turn to her wallowing in the mire, or the dog to return to its vomit (see 2 Pet 2:22), is missing one great chunk out of the heart of the gospel. The gospel says that you don’t just clean up the pig on the outside and be content with that. You put a different nature inside the pig. If you just clean up the outside, the old pig will go back to its wallowing in the mire. God is concerned not to save us in the sense merely of forgiving us. God’s salvation is concerned to make us holy! This is the hope of the gospel, that one day we shall be like the blessed Lord Jesus. And there is something that is true of everyone who really has in his or her heart the hope of being like the Lord Jesus when he comes. The infallible mark that they have that hope in them is that they proceed by God’s grace to purify themselves now (1 John 3:1–3). Oh, yes, we all fail and fall and slip into many a puddle. Sometimes, alas, we enjoy it, but the mark of true believers is they will recover out of the snare of the devil. Everyone who has the hope purifies himself. That is the gospel.

In my little experience, this is one of the great stumbling blocks when talking to Muslims in particular. I think of one now who I met in Jordan. He was a very pleasant fellow, if just a trifle pushy. He insisted on coming and getting me and taking me to lunch and regaled me with all kinds of dainties that I had to get used to eating. When it turned to spiritual matters, I happened to talk about the seriousness of sin. And did sin matter?

He said, ‘It’s no good your talking to me about that. What about your archbishop that has just said that when it comes to sex, he is sexually ambivalent, and your church leaders that are prepared to accept practising homosexuals into the church? Don’t you talk to me about sin as a Christian’.

That kind of permissiveness is not the gospel, is it? We do need to be warned.

Substituting psychology for the gospel

We need also to be warned about substituting psychology for the gospel. Now, we need the psychologists, and we need Christian psychiatrists. Christians sometimes will go to the doctor when they’ve got ulcers in the stomach, and they’re not ashamed to go. The doctor gives them medicine and will tell them it’s the result of stress and strain, worry and various other such mental attitudes.

When you get injuries to the brain, you’d go to a neurologist, wouldn’t you? And if you get various kinds of phobias, you could need some expert help. I’m no expert, or anything like it, but sometimes I get sent believers who suffer from phobias of one kind and another. Their fellow believers tell them if only they had enough faith, they wouldn’t have these fears. Some people have a phobic fear of death. They’ve heard the preachers say, ‘Now, if you become a Christian, of course you wouldn’t be afraid to die.’ And they say, ‘Well I’m afraid of dying, so I can’t be a Christian!’ Then the old turbine of their fear starts inside and wreaks havoc with them.

I think sometimes that I'd like to get those preachers and put them in the middle of a twenty acre field and suddenly put a raging bull two yards behind them, coming at full steam, and then see whether the preacher is afraid of dying or not! He won't stop to work out the theology: 'Now, ought Christians to be afraid of dying in this circumstance?' Nature will take over and he'll run for his very life! It is not a question of being afraid of *dying*. God has built into our nature a fear of dying. What the Bible says is that believers don't fear *death*. They shall not 'see death' (John 8:51). Death is what happens after you die. To wake up on the other side and find yourself lost for eternity, well that is a very healthy thing to fear. For a believer, that fear is gone. For believers, to be absent from the body is to be at home with the Lord (2 Cor 5:8). But when the old brain box goes wrong, and the brain gets wounded, sometimes the old fear starts going and won't stop. Then it is not a spiritual problem: it is a psychological and physical problem. And I've found in my little experience, when dear believers come to face the fact that it is not a lack of spirituality but a few odd wires crossed in the brain through some trauma or something, then they can often start recovering from it.

We mustn't then dismiss the psychiatrists, as though they were somehow, by definition, bad and unspiritual. God give us more Christian ones instead of Freudian ones. But when we've said that, it would be a false thing to preach psychology instead of the gospel, wouldn't it? 'God wants you to feel good, so we shan't remind you of the judgments of God as that would make you feel bad. We want to be user-friendly at this church, so we shan't preach the judgment of God. We want you to feel good and think a lot of yourself and build good feelings up about yourself. As long as you feel good, you're all right.'

That is a false substitute for the gospel. The way to get people to feel good is to preach to them the righteous judgment of God. When they see what a wreck sin has made of them, and that they stand in the wreck, then to tell them that if they're prepared to repent and own they are a wreck and can't put themselves right, God has a Saviour for them, there and then on the spot! We must tell them that if in true repentance and faith they put their trust in Christ, then God is prepared to accept them *as they are*, standing in the middle of the wreck. Then we can assure them that he has received them and will never cast them out, and then, together with Christ, they can start the work of putting the wreck right.

So let's be clear in that. Let us not confuse the gospel with modern psychology, good as psychology can be in its place. Some psychology is good; a lot of it is nonsense. But the gospel is not psychology. As Christians, it is the gospel as such we are to preach.

Our Father, we pray now that thou wilt take our thinking. Help us ever to think and love thee with our minds the more clearly, not simply for knowledge's sake, but that we may love thee, knowing thee ever more closely by thy grace. Save us, Lord, from being infected by any of these spiritual viruses and give us such understanding of the human heart that we may be able with sympathy to convey thy love and thy gospel to the men and women around us, for thy name's sake. Amen.

Pluralism

The Equal Validity of Every View

Our studies so far

As you will now be aware, in these three seminars we are dealing with four isms: syncretism, pluralism, postmodernism and hedonism. It is most unlikely that, in our limited time, we shall get through all the detail that we should get through, hence the notes that you now have in your hand.³ I shall not comment on everything that is in the notes; they were prepared because there might be things there that you might care to consider that are not necessarily covered in the talks themselves.

This morning we talked about syncretism: the mixing of one religion and/or philosophy with another religion and/or philosophy, and we dealt in particular with some of those instances where pagan philosophies or other religious ideas have been mixed with Christianity during the course of the centuries. The examples I chose were for the most part very bad, of course. I did mention that the great creeds of the church were thought through and then stated in language borrowed from the Greek philosophers and, by and large, that has been a very helpful thing. When we talk about the *persons* of the Godhead, for example, we are using a Latin term, a Latinised word for a philosophical concept. So not all our borrowings from pagan Greece and Rome, and from the philosophers in particular, have been bad; they have been put to good use from time to time in our thinking.

None the less, the great danger of syncretism is, as we stressed this morning, the bringing over into Christianity of things that are pagan in their origin and quite clean contrary to the gospel as revealed to us through Jesus Christ our Lord. Our necessity therefore, as believers, is to be aware of the possibility. The epistles, like the Epistle to the Colossians, point out to us how easy it is for young converts (and not so young) to imbibe doctrines and practices that are not Christian at all but actually pagan, and that to their great spiritual detriment. Most of the epistles are somewhere concerned, not only positively to expound the gospel, to tell us what the gospel is, but also carefully to point out what the gospel is not. Therefore this is not only for ourselves as believers, but in our reaching out to men and women we shall very often find that we need to point out that certain things that they think to be Christian are not in fact Christian at all, and therefore to get them studying God's word, if they are so inclined, to find out exactly what the Bible does say.

³ See the [Appendix](#).

Pluralism: the equal validity of every view

Now we move on to pluralism. In one sense it is the opposite of syncretism. Syncretism is the mixture of Christianity (in this case) with other things, or other things with Christianity. Pluralism goes in the other direction. It doesn't try to mix anything. It says, 'You have your religion, well good for you. We have ours, and yours is as good as ours and ours is as good as yours. They are both equally valid.'

Two senses of the term

Now of course, there is an emphasis of the use of the word 'pluralism' that we are finding increasingly in Britain, and I suspect you find it here. It is used sometimes simply in a factual sense: 'We live in a pluralistic society.' This means that, for example in England where I originally come from, Christianity used to be the dominant religion. There were people of other religions, but in my boyhood Christianity was the main thing, and it was the state religion and taught in the schools. Nowadays in England you will find cities where in the day schools, the majority of people are from another country of origin and they may be, as far as religion is concerned, practising Hindus, Sikhs or Muslims and so forth. Therefore it is simply stating the fact to say that we live in a pluralistic society.

Pluralism, however, is often used with a stronger sense, and that is, according to the so-called authorities, that nowadays we have come to see that all religions should be regarded as equally valid. They are simply different paths up the same mountain to the same goal in the end. So one path goes up from the north of the mountain and reaches the summit. The other goes up from the south of the mountain (it's a very different route; it starts at the bottom on the south and goes up to the summit by the south side), and it comes to the same point in the end. That's how religions are, so it is claimed, and how they should be allowed to be. They are all equally valid.

The Christian response

The claim is false to the facts

I suppose our first response to this claim that all religions are equally valid could well be to say that it is factual nonsense. Ask the religions themselves about the claim, and they will come up with a very different story, because it is plain contrary to the facts. Many religions assert as an essential and indispensable part of their faith that other religions are irreconcilably different from themselves. The Buddha claimed 'there is one sole way for the purification of human beings' and that 'the truth is one, there is not a second'.⁴ Again, some forms of Buddhism, though not all, deny that there is the possibility of any such thing as forgiveness.

I remember a research scientist in my own university. She came from Thailand and was a very intelligent woman. She was doing postdoctoral work in chemistry, and she asked if she could come and see me to talk about religion. She informed me that she wasn't asking for information so she could get converted; she wanted to know about Christianity so she could

⁴ R. C. Zaehner, *The Concise Encyclopaedia of Living Faiths*, pp. 265, 275.

think about it and talk about it intelligently. There followed a long discussion, in the course of which I began to talk about forgiveness and what an important thing that is in my estimate. I said, 'I don't really need to pay a parson or priest to tell me that I should be good. I know that on the whole I ought to be good! My problem is that I haven't been good. So what do I do about that, and how can I find forgiveness that will maintain my own standards and God's standards, ones that won't say sin doesn't matter? How can I find forgiveness that will satisfy my own values, and God's, more importantly?'

To which she replied, 'There is no such thing as forgiveness.'

I used an analogy: 'If you as a mother saw your child do something wrong, you would be willing eventually to forgive that child.'

'No, I certainly wouldn't,' she said. 'Who am I to forgive a child, or anybody? There is no such thing as forgiveness. You can counsel a child not to do wrong, but when the child does wrong, the child will have to bear its own load of consequences and suffer its karma. That is the only way it can be removed, by actually suffering the results, the karma, and the debt incurred by the wrongdoing. And the child will have to suffer that herself or himself. No one can suffer it for the child, and the child will suffer it in this life or in some subsequent reincarnation. There is no such thing as forgiveness!'

She was most indignant that there should be any such thing as forgiveness.

Therefore to say that all religions are leading the same way and are really at heart preaching the same thing is, of course, factual nonsense. And incidentally, you wouldn't actually gain the esteem and respect of serious-minded people who hold to some other faith if you tried to make out that, really, we are all the same and heading in the same direction. An Orthodox Jew who knew his stuff would be sorely disappointed if you compromised over the deity of Christ just to please him. He would expect you to stand by your faith, and he would regard you as horribly insincere if you didn't. So we can pass beyond that very quickly. It's mere popular talk and is very contrary to the sheer facts.

The claims of Christ are exclusive

In our response to the idea that all religions are right and equally valid, that none is completely right or completely wrong, we must also be honest by stating the actual claims of our blessed Lord. They are exclusive, are they not? The New Testament affirms, in the words of the Lord Jesus: 'No one comes to the Father except by me' (John 14:6). In none other is there salvation. There is no other name under heaven by which we must be saved (Acts 4:12).

Nowadays that Christian response is becoming distinctly disliked and, even in Britain, could eventually become dangerous. People in general regard this claim of Christianity to be insufferably arrogant. 'It is insulting to other faiths,' they say. 'How dare you tell a Jew that unless he accepts your Jesus Christ as God there is no hope of salvation for him. That is insufferably arrogant!' And they will also say, 'This exclusive idea of religion has produced repression, persecution, social unrest and violence and ignorance of the true nature of other world faiths. It is totally unacceptable and fundamentalist.' The danger is, at least in Britain because we are a pluralist society and some are quick to complain at any infringement of their rights, that eventually laws will be passed to stop discrimination, and in university premises

you won't be able to say that Jesus is the only way of salvation, because that will be held to be an insult, say to Islam or to Hinduism. It is far from being an innocent little question.

On the other hand, in Christendom itself, there is a growing contention that conversion, that is the attempt to convert sincere Jews, Hindus or Muslims to Christ, is both unnecessary and undesirable. In my experience it has long since been the modern Catholic attitude to missionary work, since Vatican II at any rate, that you don't need to convert sincere Hindus and Muslims.

Bishop Lesslie Newbigin was lecturing in my university some years ago. He served in the church of South India for many years and had much philosophical debate with Hindus and still insists, as a Christian, that Hindus need to be converted. However high and lofty some of their philosophy is, they still need to be saved, and there is salvation only in Christ. As he was lecturing he pointed out that the modern Catholic theory of missions is that now sincere Muslims and Hindus enjoy what they call 'baptism by desire', meaning that so long as they are sincere, God will accept them.

I said to one group of monks that was propounding this theory to me at one stage, 'You mean to say that if people have never heard of Christ, and they sincerely wish to please God and would receive Christ if they heard of him, God will accept them? You're not saying, are you, that if a Hindu knows of Christ and deliberately rejects him, he's all right, so long as he's a sincere Hindu?'

They said, 'Yes, we are. So long as he's a sincere Hindu, he doesn't need to accept Christ.'

Their theory is that the religions of the world are a series of concentric circles. The centre point of course, by definition, is the Pope, understandably. The first circle around that is Catholicism, of course; the second circle is Protestantism; the third is Judaism; the fourth is Islam; the fifth is Hinduism; the sixth is Buddhism. Then come the animists and, if there be any other such things, they come in the outer circles. And that's how it should be and how it should be left. No one needs to convert from one circle to the other. It has moved a long way towards, not the World Council of Churches, but the world *join-up* of world religions.

It is many years ago now that I was invited to attend a congress of world faiths, not the World Council of Churches but the world faiths, and asked to participate and give a lecture. At this congress they had representatives of all the different religions in the world and they put them on the stage, and the young people got silk and threads and tied it all round them as a demonstration that all religions are one and the same at heart really. When I got the invitation I honestly couldn't go; I had another engagement, and I wrote and said so. But I said, 'Had I been free to come, what I would have liked to have known was would I be allowed, in the course of the conference, to say that there is no other name under heaven, given among men, by which you must be saved?' Well my invitation was not extended beyond that point.

Now, how shall we answer these things?

The claims of a modern popular fallacy

I have included there in the notes what I call 'a modern popular fallacy'. I don't propose to spend a long time on it. It is the notion some people have that, in the past, Christianity was the dominant religion in our society and very few people knew much about other religions,

and so they thought Christianity was the only true religion. But now in a pluralist society, we have come to know much, much more about other faiths so that we now can no longer honestly say that Christianity is the only decent religion. They think that because of the spread of knowledge Christianity can no longer maintain its exclusive claims. I point out in section II of your notes that this is built on a fallacy, a wrong idea.

In the world of first century Christianity, the Christians were not ignorant of other world religions. In a society in which any normal Greek or Roman lived, there were thousands of religions and gods of all kinds, shapes and sizes. There were mystery religions, classical religions, worship of the Olympian gods, worship of the Nether gods, objective religions, religions that offered you communion with the gods, and the god could come inside you, so that you were *entheos*, as they called it. That is: 'with the God inside you'. *Theos*, meaning: in, so *entheos*, or 'enthusiastic'. There were all kinds of religions, and when Christians proclaimed Jesus as the only way of salvation, it wasn't because they were ignorant of other religions. It was because they knew all too much about other religions and their bankruptcy to put a soul right with God and to bring peace and acceptance with God.

We should remember that in our modern age, which grows very parochial. People are forgetting the past. They forget, because of all our modern inventions, that when it comes to thinking, the ancients were just as intelligent as we are and many of the ideas in philosophy that we think are modern are in fact as old as old can be. So of course it was with the Old Testament. When the Old Testament declares: 'Look unto me, and be saved, all the ends of the earth: for I am God and there is none else' (Isa 45:22), it is not because the Hebrew prophets didn't know about other religions. They were surrounded with religions of all sorts and kinds and, what is worse, many of the Israelites were constantly sliding into idolatry and taking part and joining in the worship of these idolatrous deities. It was as a protest against those many religions that Abraham was called out from among them and became a believer in the one true God. It was a protest right from the start, for which God raised up Israel to be a testimony against the idolatrous interpretation of the universe.

When we go to Russia, we find the need of bringing this home to atheists. Why should we read the Old Testament? Because it is unique in the Middle East: all of the other nations were involved in idolatry and were accepting the idolatrous interpretation of the universe. The nations lost their grip on the truth, on the absolute basic fact that there is one God, and he is the transcendent Lord Creator of the universe. When the nations rejected it and did not like to retain God in their knowledge (Rom 1:28) they couldn't proceed to believe in nothing. If you prick atheists one or two centimetres beneath the skin, you'll find that they don't believe in nothing; it's very difficult to do. If you reject the true God, sooner or later you will make other gods for yourself. So we pointed out to the atheists in Russia that this is what the ancients did. They deified the forces of nature: the storm-god, the moon-god, the sun-god and psychological urges within the human heart, the god of reproduction, of sex. It led to lamentable results, of course. Then we say that if you ask modern atheists what are their beliefs, what, according to them, are the powers that control our universe and control us, you'll find out that they believe the same as the old pagans. They don't keep idols in their drawing room in a corner and worship them at night, but if you ask atheists, 'What are the ultimate powers that control the universe and control us human beings, that brought us into

existence and will bring us to our end?' they will answer as follows. It is the forces of nature: energy, the strong atomic power, the weak atomic power, electromagnetism, gravity, anti-gravity (if there is such a thing) and biological forces. They don't call them gods, but they might as well. They regard them as the *ultimates* in our universe that control everything.

Modern atheism in that sense is not anything new. This idea of treating the forces of nature, the forces of the universe, as though they were the ultimate powers, is idolatry. And when the other nations were sunk in the idolatrous interpretation of the universe, God raised up the nation of Israel as a protest against it and as a witness to the reality of the one true God Creator.

The claim that there is one true God is not a narrow-minded insult

The next thing I would want to say to folks of other faiths, and do say, is that the Judaeo-Christian claim that there is and can be only one true God Creator is not a narrow-minded insult to people of other cultures. That is a point to be made. In our modern world, at least in my country, you so often hear it said to Christians that, 'Your faith is an insult to the culture of other nations.' That's not true.

It's not true in this sense. No one would dream of saying that you were narrow minded if you insisted that the laws of mathematics, physics, chemistry and biology are universal. One and one make two, generally, the world through. It's no insult to insist on that, is it? It doesn't insult anybody's culture. There happens to be only one universe, as far as we are aware. There are some exotic cosmologists who think there might be alternative universes all over the place. No one has seen any yet and, as far as we know, there is only one universe. It's not an insult to anybody's culture to say so, is it? What is more, the pagan Greek philosophers insisted on a particular understanding of the universe. And here I rejoice in the opportunity to say something good about the pagan Greek philosophers. I gave my professional life to teaching the Greeks; I mean teaching Greek philosophy and drama and other such things. The Platonists, Aristotelians, Stoics, proceeding as they did, not by revelation but by the investigation of the universe, perceived that behind the vast diversities of nature there must be what they called the One, or God.

To insist that there is only one God Creator is not a narrow-minded insult to people of other cultures. It is worth saying, if only to the government when they are inclined to bring in laws that banish you and forbid you from saying in public places that there is only one God, in case you offend the Hindus, for instance.

Even modern scientists search for the one grand, unified theory that will explain the whole universe. It is instinctive to the scientist to say there must be one grand, unified theory accounting for the whole thing. Indeed there are some that claim that certain forms of Hinduism are in some sense a form of monotheism. I quote you the reference in the notes, and you can read the details.

But leaving that now and passing on, I make the observation that even from a merely rational point of view, if there is only one God Creator, and if that God is morally perfect, then he must show no favouritism in his judgment. That is precisely what the New Testament declares: 'God is no respecter of persons' (Rom 2:11; Acts 10:34-35). There is one God of all the manifold nations of men, and if God is without prejudice and without partiality, salvation

will be on the same terms for everybody (Rom 10:12). It is not an insult to anybody to insist upon it.

Incidentally, as we pass by we note that a tremendous attack has been made on the gospel, and particularly missionary work, by social anthropologists. Now I have some social anthropologists that are my friends. I remember walking through my hometown after having been absent for many years and seeing the museum that I used to go to as a boy, and so I went in to see what it was like. There were the giraffes, the elephants and the hippopotamuses, and all the rest of them, as dusty as they ever had been and looking very bored. But there was a new section in this museum, and it was on culture and all the different cultural forms connected with the native religions. And you went by each case that showed you the paraphernalia and the dress and some of the rituals of all the different religions. And then there was a last showcase, and it merely had a lot of information, typed up for the schoolchildren to read when they came with their teachers to see this exhibition, and it said that, unfortunately, at the end of the last century, the Christian missionaries who went out were a very narrow-minded and unbalanced lot who thought that their religion was the only way of salvation for the whole world, and they used their power to try and stamp out these beautiful cultures.

Here was a showcase, and here would come class after class of schoolchildren to be taught about how magnificent these other cultures were and then learn the disastrous effect of Christian missionaries who were supposed to be unbalanced people and extremists who were trying to convert everybody to their religion because they thought it was the only true one. Because that is how things are often taught, it is worthy pointing out now and again in a very Christian and gentlemanly and gentlewomanly fashion, with charm and whatnot, that there are some things in culture that are bad. There are lots of things in English culture that are bad. The cultures that demanded widows immolate themselves on the pyre of their deceased husbands were very bad. The cultures that would ostracise, if not eliminate, a woman for bearing twins, were very bad. And what of that distasteful habit of cooking Englishmen and eating them? People must be very far-gone to eat Englishmen, mustn't they? Why not the healthier flesh of the Americans?

To make out that this is all wonderful, and these cultures are marvellous, is absolutely perverse. Cultures can be as sinful as anything else, and our modern culture with its deliberate murder of little babies is sinful. In this it is like the ancient pagans. The ancient cultures murdered them mostly just after they came out of the womb, our modern ones just before.

Culture is not neutral, is it? All cultures need to be tested by God the Creator's word, and redeemed. There are lots of lovely things in culture. Let's keep all that is lovely. Some is positively bad.

The nature of the one true God and his salvation

The dispute therefore, is not so much about whether there is one God or not; it is about the nature of the one true God and the nature of his salvation.

Here you have two divisions. The one is the self-revelation of God: the God who has revealed himself spoke in times past to the fathers through the prophets, and at the end of these days has spoken in his Son (Heb 1:1-2). He has revealed himself, to some extent, in

creation. He has revealed himself in his doing good to the nations and giving them fruitful seasons (Acts 14:17), but finally he has revealed himself not only through Abraham and his posterity, but through Jesus Christ our Lord. That is on the one side. In the other division are all religious and philosophic concepts of God constructed by man on the basis of his own reason and imagination.

Now I hasten to say that some ideas of God that men have come to by the use of their reason are good. We should not forget it. When Paul was talking to Athenians on Mars Hill and wanted to show that their idolatry was intellectual nonsense, he reminded them of what their own poets had said: 'For we are also his offspring' (Acts 17:28). That was an inadequate statement of man's relation to God, but in as far as it went, it was true. Paul didn't quote it to contradict it, but used it as a basis to draw an implication: 'Since then we are the offspring of God, we ought not to think God is like . . .' (v. 29). So not all ideas of God that men came to by reason were bad by definition. But the test of all, without which we could know nothing certain about God, is the revelation that God himself has made, both through the Old Testament and the New.

Some of the excellencies of the self-revealed one true God

Here it seems to me it would be marvellously good tactics for us to preach the gospel, as we do, but to preach it in the context of some of the tremendous excellencies of the great revelation that God has given us through creation and through his word. What I mean by preaching it in this context, you will see in the points listed in the notes.

The one God is the Creator of all nations

Acts 17:26 says, 'He made of one every nation of men'. There is one God, Creator of all. Not only then are all nations of human beings made by one and the same Creator, but they all spring from one and the same original human being: 'He made of *one* . . .'; that is Adam. Not only are all created by the same Creator but all have been produced from the same original human parent. They are all made of the same stuff, therefore. This immediately outlaws all colour-bars, and caste systems for that matter. There is no super-race. It would have been a good thing if Hitler had believed it. How many millions have died through belief in super races?

There is nothing offensive here against any culture, is there? You feel the redeeming power of the truth, putting man in his true value by the simple true doctrine of one Creator making all mankind out of one original human being.

All human beings are made by the one God in the image of the one God

This is true of all human beings, therefore all human life is equally sacred and inviolable. You think of the horrors when, in earlier days, Germans used to fly over countries of Africa and shoot the pygmies as game. Or think of the curious notion at the discovery of South America, when the explorers brought home people back from South America in those far-off days of the 1500s. People in Europe debated, 'Did they have souls or didn't they? Were they animals or truly human?' If they didn't have souls, you could make slaves of them. Think of

supposedly Christian countries even considering the matter. All human life is sacred and inviolable. Oh, we do not have the right to be proud, in the sense of sticking out our chests, but we needn't be ashamed of this gospel!

Human beings are not the unfortunate creation of some lesser deity who mixed pure soul with unworthy matter

This was a notion of some of the Greek philosophers. It is the notion in many interpretations of Hinduism that there is one great creator and he would never have created anything. He is pure soul. He wouldn't have created matter, but he created other lesser deities, and they also had creatorial powers, and they created still lesser ones. At one stage one of these unfortunate lesser ones (he hadn't been to Harvard, I think) had the stupidity to go and create matter. What a disaster. Then there were human beings with their souls buried, incarcerated, in matter. That's the trouble, according to this view, and we have to try to escape from matter and merge our souls with the infinite world-soul.

That is an insult to the human body, isn't it? That is an insult to the material creation around. We, as Christians, have no need to be ashamed of our gospel that puts such a wonderful worth on the human body. Matter is *good!* The human body is basically *good!* Material things are *good!*

I get a little nervous when I hear preachers denouncing materialism and accusing believers of being driven by it. We know what they mean. What they mean is that some believers are driven by *consumerism*. That is a very different thing. *Materialism* is the false doctrine that says that in this universe there is nothing but matter. That is wrong. God is spirit. Man is more than matter, but there is nothing wrong in matter as such; God made it. There will be eternally a new earth, as there will be a new heaven. Oh, what a lovely thing it is to preach to our race the beauty of the human body, the goodness of matter and the fact that our salvation will involve eventually, not the destruction of matter, but the redemption of the human body! That is no insult to anybody.

The one God offers his salvation to all mankind without distinction

The one God offers his salvation to all and genuinely offers it. The Old Testament says, 'Look unto me and be saved, all the ends of the earth: for I am God and there is none else' (Isa 45:22). And the New Testament speaks of 'God, our Saviour, who wills that all men should be saved . . . For there is one God . . .' (1 Tim 2:3-5). This is the principle that God does not show respect to persons, in the sense of favouritism. 'For there is no distinction between Jew and Gentile: for the same Lord is Lord of all' (Rom 10:12). Let's not forget it. The nations can have gods galore, but God will claim to be their God. He is the 'Lord of all'. He made them anyway. And 'the same Lord over all, is rich to all that call upon him. For whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved' (vv. 12-13). There is one God then.

One God, one mediator, one sacrifice

As 1 Timothy 2:5-6 reminds us, reconciliation with the one God is made possible through the one mediator, on the basis of the one sacrifice. This is marvellous good news! There are not

ten thousand and one deities, and endless evil spirits, that have to be placated. What a marvellous gospel this is. There is only one God, and there is only one sacrifice.

'Isn't that narrow minded to say there's only one?'

No, of course not.

'Why not?'

Because the one sacrifice is enough for everybody; that's why you don't need another one! If one cheque pays off your mortgage, do you find that an insult?

Do you say, 'Couldn't you write a few other cheques as well? If you're telling me that one cheque is enough, no, that insults me.'

Well don't be silly. If one cheque will pay the lot, you don't need any other cheques. And if one sacrifice is enough, you don't need any other sacrifices. That's not narrow mindedness. And another wonderful thing is that you will find in all religions that offer sacrifices it's you paying God. In the gospel that is revealed by God, it is not we ultimately who give the sacrifice; it is God himself that pays it. Marvellous gospel this is—liberating, freeing! There's no insult in it to anybody.

The one true God revealed in the Bible is independent of the universe

This is shown by the fact that God didn't have a beginning. In the beginning, the Word already was, whereas creation came to be. It did have a beginning (see John 1:1). God is not part of the stuff of the universe nor is the universe part of God as in Hinduism, Buddhism, Stoicism and some forms of modern cosmology.

It interests me to see how many modern physicists and cosmologists are coming back to the idea that there is an intelligence behind the universe. But their idea of that intelligence is that it is part of the stuff of the universe; that is a very old idea. The Stoic philosophers held that there is reason behind the universe, but reason is part of the stuff of the universe. 'No, no,' Christianity says, 'it is not so,' and the Old Testament says it is not so.

God is independent of his universe. In that sense, he doesn't need his universe. 'If I were hungry, I wouldn't tell you,' says God (Ps 50:12). He doesn't need anything from us. That means you can't buy anything from God. He doesn't need your cash. 'If you are righteous, what do you give to him?' You don't add to his coffers: 'For what does he receive from your hand?' (Job 35:7). 'Who has first given to me that I should repay him?' says God, 'Everything under heaven is mine' (41:11). That has very important implications when it comes to salvation, as you see. By definition therefore, you can't buy salvation from God. Salvation and acceptance with God cannot be paid for, bought, earned or merited from God by the work of men's hands. It is and must be a free gift from God: by definition that must be so. How could you buy anything from God? Salvation must be free, therefore, and independent of the work of men's hands.

How that vividly contrasts with so many religions, where religion, whether in the crude form or the refined, philosophical form, is a question of either giving the gods something to placate them, or it is the work of your hands in perfecting yourself by your religious disciplines. When all is said and done, it is the work of your hands. The ancient Old Testament pilloried that idea. Isaiah, with his beautiful sarcasm, and God through him, pictures a man, and he's making an idol. This man has great skill in technology. So how will he make his idol?

Well he'll cut down a tree, but not just any old tree. It's no good making a god out of softwood, is it? The wood might get eaten up by worms or something. You can't have your god eaten up by worms and wood mites and things. Nor can it be one that would go rotten and corrupt. No, if you're looking for a god in life, you want something solid! Here is a man expressing his innate instinct: man is looking for something solid, something reliable. This is the yearning of his heart. So he cuts down a tree that won't rot; it's going to be his god.

Then he doesn't want just any old bit of wood. I mean he's got an aesthetic sense. Beauty to him is everything in life. If not everything, it's nearly everything: in the beauty of music and the beauty of art. So his god will have to be beautiful. He gets out his compasses, and he decides on the design of it, whether it be standard and conservative, or modern idealism. Or will it be some fearful shape of something he can rave at when he gets down to worshipping it? Halfway through he gets hungry. Well there are some branches of this same tree around, so he puts them on the fire and cooks his breakfast with them. Out of the rest of it he makes a god, says Isaiah. That's a bit sarcastic, don't you think? Anyway, then the man puts it in its place. Oh, but it looks like somebody could come and knock it over. It wouldn't do if your God got knocked over, would it? So he makes chains and chains it down (40:18–20; 44:12–20).

He's looking for security, stability and beauty. Having made this idol and put it in its place; he falls down and worships it. What's he doing? Isaiah says he's worshipping the work of his own hands. He sees the things he desires and the things he thinks are valuable, but his own hands turn them into gods. He worships them, and they are as powerless to give him what he wants as ultimately he is himself. Oh, the pathos of it!

Isaiah, in another passage, God behind him, pictures a scene where the nation of Babylon has been defeated, and they are running away as hard as they can. They have been defeated by their foes, and they've packed all their household belongings onto the household donkey (poor old beast), and they're ready now to run off to escape the invading enemy when they turn around, and there are their gods. Oh, dear, can't leave your household gods behind, can you? So, quickly as they can, they hoist the old gods off their pedestals and put them on the beast. Well his legs are already trembling. Loaded up with one or two gods as well, he nearly collapses, the poor thing. Instead of helping them to escape, their idols are a burden to them and make escape more difficult (46:1–2).

'That,' says God, 'is the essence of idolatry. It's the work of your hands; it's you trying to save yourself. If that's what you're doing, then you have to carry your gods.' Oh, what a comment that is on religion. Religion as such is so often that: man's effort to save himself. But if man could save himself, he wouldn't need salvation, would he? He's got to the place and the mess he's in because he can't save himself. How could the labour of his hands ever fulfil God's law's demands? And the glorious gospel is they don't have to! 'It is the gift of God, not of works, lest any man should boast' (Eph 2:8–9). It's not an insult to anybody to say so.

When listening to broadcast services, as I do from time to time, it is a sad thing to hear the liturgies from even Protestant churches, let alone the sacramentalist churches, as they offer what they call the sacrifice of the mass upon the altar. First comes the offertory, when the people bring in the bread and the wine and offer it to God, and in the phrasing of the new liturgies they say something to this effect: 'Blessed are you, Lord God of all creation. Through your goodness, we have this bread to offer, which earth has given and human hands have

made. It will become for us the bread of life . . . we have this wine to offer, fruit of the vine and work of human hands. It will become our spiritual drink.’⁵

Oh, how is it those words don’t shout in the ears of the people? What your hands have made is going to be taken by God and turned to the means of your salvation. That is idolatry, pure and simple, in the technical sense of the term.

The hope of the blessed gospel of the blessed God

Then of course, there is the blessed hope of the gospel itself. How marvellously superior it is to what religion normally offers; it is not an uncertain hope for the future.

Hope for the individual

It is true that salvation by faith and not by works certainly leads to moral effort and spiritual progress. It leads to those things, but those things are not the condition of salvation. When a baby is born, the baby cries, yes? The doctor or the midwife gets hold of the poor innocent infant (having done nobody any wrong) and holds it up by the legs (or they used to do that at any rate) and smacks it on the hindquarters, for some unaccountable reason, and the baby gives out an enormous yell, and everybody’s delighted to hear the baby cry! It will be different later on, but now they’re delighted, because crying is the *evidence* that the baby is alive. It’s not the condition of having life, is it? The baby didn’t *get* life by crying.

ACCEPTANCE WITH GOD NOW

Salvation is by faith, yes; salvation is a gift. Salvation as a gift through faith leads to moral progress and endeavour. It’s a bad thing if it doesn’t, because if there’s no moral progress, nor desire, then the evidence is lacking that the person was ever born again. But our progress can never be the grounds of our acceptance with God. The question therefore is: where along the line can a person know that he or she is accepted with God?

Most religions can be graphically represented by a gate through which you enter at the beginning, a path along which you progress, and a gate at the end. In most religions, the gate at the beginning is some initiatory ceremony: baptism, circumcision or something of the kind, and you enter through that gate. In religion that doesn’t mean you’re accepted with God then and there; you’re simply in the running. Then there is the pathway, along which you’re supposed to make progress. Then there is the final gate, which is the final judgment. And if you ask folks of that simple religious frame of mind: ‘Now at what point along that pathway will you know whether you have been finally accepted by God?’ their answer is: ‘You can’t know until you’ve passed the second gate.’

It’s like how it is with students in universities, isn’t it? Well I don’t know how it is here, but in my part of the world if you want a university degree, you first have to get into a university. You don’t get a degree without that step. In order to get into the university, you have to pass sundry examinations, whether hard or easy, who knows? They who succeed in passing the examinations get admitted to the university. They are not thereby given a degree, nor can they be absolutely certain they will get a degree. Of course we lecturers are very kindly people, and we go out of our way to help students, and none is more pleased than we are if

⁵ Roman Missal, Alcester and Dublin, 1974, p. 512.

they behave themselves and get a degree! But even we can't guarantee the student that he's going to pass. He can only be sure he's got the degree when he has passed the finals.

Many people and religions represent man's position like that. You enter into the religion by some initiatory process through the first gate. Then there's the road of effort, trying to improve yourself by the help of the church, or the gurus or whatever, and through your self-discipline. But then you can't be sure that you've succeeded until the final gate.

Therein lies the immense difference between religion in that sense and the gospel of our blessed Lord Jesus Christ. Yes, there is an introductory gate: 'If anyone enters by me, he will be saved . . .' (John 10:9 ESV). Yes, there is a pathway. The gospel is not that you just trust Christ today and live as you like for the rest of your life, and it doesn't matter how you live. No, there is a pathway of spiritual progress. But if you raise the question: at what point is acceptance with God to be had? Is it after the final judgment—the judgment seat of Christ? No, no, says Scripture! '*Being* justified by faith . . .', the moment you are justified, you have 'peace with God through Jesus Christ our Lord' (Rom 5:1), now and forever. That is magnificent news, isn't it? Why should we be ashamed of the gospel of Christ? It is the power of God to salvation (1:16).

WHAT THIS SALVATION IS NOT

What of the salvation in question? Here again we've nothing to be ashamed of, have we? It is not escape from the body, as in Platonism and Hinduism and Buddhism. That is not the goal. It is true that, for the believer in Christ, to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord, but in a condition that Paul describes as being naked. He states he would prefer to be further clothed with a body that is from heaven (see 2 Cor 5:1–10). The final goal of salvation in this respect is not the destruction of the body but its redemption. Oh, what a magnificent gospel! For the sake of you and you and you, the second person of the Trinity, blessed be his name, who originally was not human, has become human and taken a human body. In that body he will remain human, with a glorified human body forever! Oh, what a compliment God himself has paid to the human body. This is nothing to be ashamed of.

Salvation is not the loss of self either, as in forms of Hinduism and Buddhism, where the self is submerged in the universal soul. The truth is that we shall be in the body of Christ, no longer completely an independent, solitary, individual personality, but a redeemed human personality joined in one spirit with all other members in the body of Christ, but retaining personal identity. We shall be conformed—body, soul and spirit—to the image of God's dear Son.

Hope for the universe

As far as the gospel's hope for the universe is concerned, matter is not an illusion. It is good for Christianity to blow its trumpet sometimes and for the Old Testament likewise. Matter is not an illusion, as in Christian Science. Nor is it eternal, as in the ancient doctrines of Epicureanism. Nor is the material universe an unending cycle like a wheel, as in Hinduism: going round forever and getting nowhere. Nor is the universe oscillating: increasing, decreasing and rebounding, as in some modern theories, or indeed in some sense in ancient Stoicism. Nor is nature doomed to eventual extinction, as in much hopeless atheism.

You would be tempted to think that we're the only sane people under the sun in our attitude to the basic goodness of the universe around us. It is true that, at present, earth is not the best of all possible worlds as Stoics thought and taught. It has fallen and groans, and 'we who have the firstfruits of the spirit groan within ourselves' (Rom 8:23). Something has gone catastrophically wrong, yet the end is not pessimism or despair. Creation herself shall be delivered from her bondage to corruption (v. 21). There shall be a new heaven *and* a new earth.⁶

This is our gospel, and only some of it of course, as represented to us in God's revealed word. We have no need to be ashamed of it, no need to think that we are being fascist or domineering over other cultures. This is God's revelation. We didn't invent it. We take no credit for it. It is not because the Americans were specifically clever in this direction and they invented Christianity as a Western religion. No, no. We were given it. It is revealed by God who loves all his creatures. We can take no credit, and it is for all mankind.

A comment on Islam

Now I have said that the difference is basically between those who invent religion by dint of use of their intellect—their moral thinking, their philosophy, or whatever means they use—on the one hand, and revealed truth on the other. There are two notable exceptions, aren't there? One is Judaism, and the other is Islam. I just make a comment on Islam before we end this session.

Islam believes that it is a religion revealed by God. As you know, it regards itself as superior both to Christianity and to Judaism, as a specially revealed religion revealed to the Prophet Muhammad. What shall we say about the fact that it claims to be God's revealed truth? Well I'm no expert in Islam, or a missionary to Muslims, but I notice that the Qur'an advises all the followers of the prophet to respect the Old Testament and to respect the people of the book, that is, the Jews. And it says when they want to know something about the meaning of the book, they ought to consult the Jews, because they were the people to whom God gave it. I notice that the prophet bade people respect the *Injil*. That is, the gospel preached by the Christians: the New Testament. They claim, of course, that the revelation to their prophet is superior, but they get that far: they are prepared to admit the Old Testament came from God and the New, though they say it has been changed. They do hold, however, that you cannot be sure of the grace of God.

I was in Jordan just nearly two years ago with a couple who are there as doctors, thus making an entrée into the country for their witness for the Lord. When I went to visit them, they introduced me to a number of their colleagues in medicine who are Muslims. They were very gracious and very willing to talk with none of the bitter rancour that sometimes you find. One of them said, 'Oh, yes, I'm saved by God's grace.'

I said, 'Marvellous. What is his grace like exactly? Is it, so to speak, reliable? Can you know of it in advance, and whether you will be saved and God will exercise grace or he won't?'

'Well no,' he said. 'You can't know in advance.'

Here we are. This is religion.

⁶ See, e.g. Isa 65:17; 2 Pet 3:13; Rev 21:1.

Talking to other medics there, I raised the question of life: how did they, as medical scientists, define life? They said they didn't try. God made life, and it's not for us to interfere in that and try and find out; they were just medics.

One thing followed another, and eventually they said, 'You know, we all believe the same thing. We shouldn't be persecuting each other like they do in some Muslim countries. All religions are the same really. We're all aiming the same end, aren't we?'

I said, 'That's marvellous if we are.'

They said, 'Yes, only the trouble is that you Christians changed the Bible.'

'Oh,' I said, 'is that so?'

'Yes, because you will have it that Jesus died on the cross, won't you? And he didn't die on the cross. You changed the New Testament to say that Jesus did die on the cross. Whereas things like the Gospel of Thomas and those kinds of Gospels, they say he didn't, and that God substituted somebody else so that the Prophet Jesus didn't die on the cross.'

I said, 'Is that so; we changed the Bible?' So I fished out my little Bible from my pocket and said, 'I tell you what, if you'll allow me, I'd like to read you something. This comes from a book written seven or eight hundred years before Christ. We Christians didn't write this bit, and we certainly haven't changed it. I'd like to read it to you, if I may.' And I read, of course, from Isaiah 53: 'He was wounded for our transgressions. He was bruised for our iniquities, the chastisement of our peace was upon him, and by his stripes, we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray . . . and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all' (vv. 5-6).

Said one doctor, 'You're going to say that's Jesus, aren't you?'

I said, 'Well I was eventually, but not just yet. I was just going to point out that we Christians didn't write it, and we certainly haven't changed it. It was written these long centuries before Jesus was born. Listen to it. You Muslims believe in the book of the Old Testament, don't you, and the people of the book? And this is God, telling us centuries in advance what the solution to the problem of human sin is. It's like the Old Testament sacrifices; when people sin they're allowed to bring a sacrifice.'

They said, 'Yes, but what good did those animal sacrifices do?'

I said, 'Precisely! They did no good whatsoever really, as another psalm tells us in the Old Testament.' And I read them Psalm 40: 'Sacrifices and burnt offerings, you will not require. Then I said, "Behold, I come . . ." (vv. 6-7). This was God, centuries before, showing what his solution to the problem of sin would be: the offering of the great sacrifice of the Son of God himself, for our sin.

Yes, they've gone astray, haven't they, but here is a way to get at them without denying what they are claiming, except in this, that the Old Testament prophesied the death of the Messiah for our sins. Therein is the difference. It is a standard difference between God's revealed salvation and religion thought up by men.

Let's pray before we break.

Bless our meditations, we beseech thee, Lord, that, given an understanding a little more deeply of the world's problems and all its efforts to find peace and salvation, we may come to a greater and enhanced appreciation of the glory of thy gospel.

And, filled with the sense of the majesty and wealth of thy gospel, grant us to be impelled by the compassions of Christ, to go out to preach it to men and women that sincerely seek, but hitherto have not found, the way. Through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

Two Further Issues Related to Pluralism

*The Charge of Anti-Semitism
and*

The Question of Those Who Have Never Heard of Jesus

In our session this afternoon, I attempted to say some things about pluralism. As I was compiling the notes that you now have, it seemed to me that there were two major topics related to this question of pluralism that ought to be mentioned at least in the notes, if not in my actual talking in the sessions. They are, in the first place, the charge of anti-Semitism that is now levelled against Christianity. The other is the question: if Jesus is the only way to God, are those who have never heard of Jesus lost?

Summary of the charge of anti-Semitism

If one says that there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved (see Acts 4:12), one is increasingly liable these days to be charged with being responsible for the horrors of anti-Semitism, the Holocaust and other related atrocities. The charge comes because people will say generations of Christians have taught their children in Sunday school and in the home that 'the wicked Jews crucified Jesus' and have thus instilled into the hearts of Christians of many centuries a hatred of the Jews that, from time to time, has flared up at the Inquisition and the pogroms and more recently in the Holocaust.

Of course that anti-Semitism is still virulent in various parts of the world. The last time I was in Poland I could see the Star of David plastered on the walls and vulgar things said about it. Similarly in Russia, the existence of the Pamyat is for the sake of attacking and persecuting Jews.⁷

The result is that people argue these days that it is indecent of Christians to dare to preach Christianity to Jews and to try and convert Jews. It is said that Judaism is an equally valid way to God as Christianity is. How can you say that God-fearing Jews who believe the inspired Old Testament are going to hell simply because they can't believe that Jesus is the Messiah, when to believe that Jesus is the Son of God seems to them an outright blasphemy and contradiction to the Old Testament?

Particularly in intellectual circles, but in many churches of Christendom, it is thought that any attempt to say that Judaism is not valid as a way to God is both wrong and insulting and

⁷ Pamyat is an ultranationalist organization whose name can be translated as 'memory' and has long been accused of anti-Semitism.

is bordering on fascism — the same spirit that produced the Holocaust. It arises in university departments of theology. There is such a department in Britain, a member of which has recently published a book entitled *Is John's Gospel True?* His answer is: 'No.' The fourth Gospel, he maintains, is rabidly anti-Semitic and has Jesus telling the Jews they are the children of the devil, and this is the very kind of spirit that led to the Holocaust.⁸

You will find many who will say now that Jews are alright by themselves, let them be; they'll find their own way to God. It seems to me, therefore, we have to be prepared to deal with this question of anti-Semitism in various circumstances. It is one of the big topics one must be prepared, in certain circumstances nowadays, to discuss with non-Christians, including with Jews.

Summary of the question of those who have never heard of Jesus

The other topic is the great question that if Jesus is the only way to God, what about those who have never heard of Jesus? Are they lost? In particular, what of those who lived during the long centuries before Jesus was born at Bethlehem, the myriads and millions who never heard the name 'Jesus'? How could they have heard it? Not even Joseph knew it until he and Mary were told. So those who never heard of Jesus must by definition be lost. That, to an unconverted person who thinks, would seem to suggest a God who is, well, a tyrant to say the least, and hideously unrealistic.

So these are questions that would have to be dealt with if you are arguing with people who are contending with you against your idea that Christ is the only way to God. I shall not get time to do justice to them, important as they are, because I want to say a little bit about postmodernism. It is more virulent here in the United States, as far as I can gather, than perhaps it is yet in Britain, though we suffer from it to some extent. And then I do want to say something about hedonism. But let me just sketch in one or two things on these two topics, beginning with anti-Semitism.

The charge of anti-Semitism

I've listed the contention in your notes in Chart 1, section V. B. The things I've mentioned under that heading are a mixture of truth and false deduction.

The contention

First we are told that, in the light of the Holocaust and the misappropriation of the victims' gold by the Allied, so-called Christian, nations, it is obscene for Christians to try to convert Jews. Since so many of these nations were engaged, up to their very necks, in doing this and keeping it secret, people say it is obscene for Christians to tell Jews that they need to be saved and only the Christian God can save them. The first part is true, of course. The second part is not true.

⁸ Maurice Casey, *Is John's Gospel True?* London/New York: Routledge, 1996. See also a rejoinder, by Stephen Motyer in *Your Father the Devil?* See publisher's details cited in the notes.

Similarly, we are told the idea that Christianity has superseded Israel and there is no future for Israel is insufferable conceit. Well, I want to agree with that, though large sections of evangelicals, let alone others, have for centuries said that there is no future for Israel and that the church has simply superseded Israel. I would want to disagree. I would want to say there is a future for Israel anyway. I like to tell the Jews that, and they like me because of it.

Then some will say Judaism is an equally valid approach to God as Christianity. No, of course, it isn't, on its own showing.

We had a little informal club in my university at one stage. We called it the Christian Forum. We were a motley group. We met at lunchtimes occasionally and invited people to come and address us: atheists and agnostics and all kinds of colourful people. They came and told us what they believed, and then we allowed ourselves the luxury of questioning them. At one stage, we had a young rabbi. He had just been appointed as Chief Rabbi in Northern Ireland. He was a young man, and he was not unconscious of the majesty of his position. So he came to talk to us, and his contention was that Judaism was true. He said, 'A lot of it was invented when our ancestors were in the desert, and the laws were suitable for people in the desert, but not suitable for people who are living sedentary lives in cities. But the glory of Judaism is that we've kept the laws unchanged all down the centuries; nothing has changed whatsoever!' And he held forth on this at some great length.

When it came to question time, in as Christian a fashion as I could and with all gentlemanliness, I said, 'Did I get you right that Judaism has changed nothing?'

'Absolutely nothing,' he said.

So I said, 'I don't quite understand. Do you still offer animal sacrifices?'

'Ah, well,' he said, 'no, no, but that's not a change. We don't offer them now.'

I said, 'How is that?'

Well he said, 'Our rabbis say that in the ancient times, when a person sinned he had to bring an ox, and that cost a lot of money. So now we do away with the ox; we don't have oxen, we just pay the money.'

I didn't really need to say anymore, so I didn't.

In contrast to that, I was once lecturing to the Christian Union in Cambridge many years ago and was trying to expound as best I could the books of 1 and 2 Kings in a series of Saturday night lectures. After one lecture, a student came up to me and said, 'Excuse me, may I talk with you?'

I said, 'Yes.'

He said, 'I do find it very moving to hear a Gentile like you expounding our Scriptures,' from which I gathered he was a Jew.

I said, 'Well I'm pleased to hear that. Don't your rabbis expound them?'

'No,' he said.

I said, 'Why ever not? It's a thing that has puzzled me. Why don't your rabbis get up and preach us some Isaiah? We Gentiles need Isaiah, especially with all our modern idolatries. Don't you care for us Gentiles? Why don't you come and preach to us Gentiles lovely bits of Isaiah against our modern idolatries?'

Well he didn't know why they didn't. Anyway, it resulted in a friendship, and he came to dinner on a couple of occasions. In the course of those dinners, I remarked at one stage: 'You

know, I am a Gentile, but I do admire your Old Testament, particularly the law and its tremendous standards and the way Judaism has stood for this: that morality matters and behind morality stands God, and when men sin, there's a penalty to be paid. I admire that tremendously.'

Well he was pleased about that.

I said, 'My trouble is this: I haven't kept the law. I'm very interested to see that your Old Testament says that when people broke the law, God provided a way for dealing with it and sacrifices so they could get forgiveness of sins.'

He said, 'That's right, yes.'

I said, 'Tell me about those sacrifices. Did they actually do any good? I mean, did they put away sin?'

He said, 'No, they didn't.'

I said, 'They were symbols then, weren't they?'

'Yes,' he said, 'they were symbols.'

I said, 'Of what?'

'No,' he said, 'don't press me on that. That would spoil our friendship.' Then he said, 'But I'll tell you something. You'd never guess. We had the chief rabbi here, and he came up to Cambridge to address our group.' (His was a very liberal Jewish group.) He said, 'You'll never guess what the topic of the rabbi's talk was.'

I said, 'No, how could I?'

He said, 'Well I'll tell you. He was telling us Jews we need to find a substitute for the atonement!'

They have a law, with its penalties. Now nothing else is left. I said, 'It interests me that you had those sacrifices until a very critical moment in history. It was very soon after Jesus Christ was crucified that the temple was destroyed, wasn't it?'

'You mustn't press it further,' said he.

It is not an insufferable conceit, is it, to stress that Judaism itself pointed to the one great sacrifice for sin? That is obvious and makes sense.

The response

To confess and condemn Christendom's disgraceful treatment of Jews in the past

Nonetheless we should also be prepared to confess to our Jewish friends the disgraceful part that Christendom has held in anti-Semitism. I have listed some of the things here in the notes in the Appendix. The classical Roman emperors protected Judaism and made special laws, in relation to military service and so on, because of the Jews' keeping of the Sabbath. And later emperors renewed the legislation. The beginnings of trouble for Judaism started when the church was taken over, or joined up with, the Roman state under Constantine. By the time you come to Justinian, the church can be seen using its power with the emperor to get discrimination against Jews and eventually positive persecution.

We should remember what Luther said about Jews. Our great Christian hero, Luther, rightly emphasized justification by faith. But in his treatise *On the Jews and Their Lies*, he calls synagogues 'nothing but a den of devils', urges Christian to exercise 'a sharp mercy' by setting

fire to synagogues and schools, destroying Jewish homes, confiscating all their sacred books, prohibiting teaching, forbidding all travel, impounding all their money and enforcing forced labour on them until they become Christians.⁹ Protestants have a lot to answer for, haven't they, for their anti-Semitism? This has been, of course, in complete disregard of Christ's own prohibition on the use of force, either to protect or to advance his kingdom (see John 18:36).

We should agree, surely, with C. E. B. Cranfield, when he writes in *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on The Epistle to the Romans* of the widespread and long-current 'ugly and unscriptural notion that God has cast off his people, Israel, and simply replaced it by the Christian church'.¹⁰ God has done no such thing. Here again, not only political, but evangelical voices, have served to preserve a great stumbling block for the Jews.

To be careful not to accuse the whole nation of ancient Israel

We should be careful in our preaching, or if we're talking to Jews, not to accuse the whole nation of ancient Israel of being responsible for the death of our Lord. The leaders in Jerusalem were involved in getting the Romans to execute him. Thousands of Jews living in the dispersion at the time only heard about the crucifixion months or years after it had happened. If you look at the way Peter and Paul address their various congregations, you'll find they are much more careful in their language. Talking to the Jerusalem Jews, Peter accuses them of crucifying Jesus: 'You did it, in ignorance, as did also your rulers' (Acts 3:17). Talking to the Jews of the dispersion, he says that it was the Jerusalemites and their rulers who did it (13:27). It's a very important distinction, isn't it?

To explain the deeper 'cause' of the death of Jesus Christ

The Jewish leaders were agents, but *unwitting* agents in carrying out God's purpose that his Son should die for the sins of the world.

I had a Jewish friend in Belfast who has now passed away. He came to some lectures I gave on the Bible in the extramural department of our university. They were non-aligned, in the sense that I wasn't supposed to be preaching the gospel; these were university lectures. I did Christianity's background in Israel and went through the Old Testament. He liked that very much. The next year the class asked if I would deal with Genesis in the first half of the year and the book of the Revelation in the other. So I did that, and he kept on coming and found to his astonishment that the New Testament was a Jewish book. Then he came to dinner many times. He always would bring up this topic of: 'You Christians caused the Holocaust by teaching people that the Jews crucified Jesus,' for he came from Vienna and had only just managed to escape the gas chambers under Hitler.

I used to say to him, 'Otto, old boy, do you know who killed Jesus?'

'What do you mean?' he would say.

'Well, who really killed him?'

'Well who then?'

I said, 'I did.'

He said, 'What do you mean? How could you possibly?'

⁹ Cited from Stephen Motyer, *Your Father the Devil?* Carlisle, Paternoster Press, 1997, pp. 2-3.

¹⁰ Vol. 2, Edinburgh, T & T Clark, 1979, p. 448.

I said, 'Well you see, we Christians believe that when Jesus died, the reason why he died was that he was sent of God, and he bore my sins in his body on the tree. That's why he had to die, Otto. Yes, some of the Jews, for their own reasons, particularly the rulers, agreed to get him crucified, scarce knowing what they did. But behind that was God and his mercy to you and to me to provide someone to die for our sins. I would never accuse you of causing the death of Jesus, except in the sense that I caused it.'

That was news to him, but there are many Jews like it, and we need to be wise in our preaching to them. Of course, there is no salvation apart from the death of Christ. Isaiah 53 is enough to tell them.

To show to our Jewish friends our delight at being ourselves Abraham's seed

I am delighted to tell my friends: 'I am one of Abraham's seed anyway.' Galatians says, 'If you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's seed and heirs, according to the promise' (3:29). I like to remind them that I, as a Gentile, don't believe in just any old god. I don't believe in Zeus, for instance, or Fate. I believe in the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob! I point out to them the wonder of Christ: 'You can say what you like about Jesus; he brought millions of us Gentiles to believe in your God: the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. What other Jew has done anything like it?'

To preach to Jews the glorious gospel of forgiveness and assurance from their own Scriptures

I was in Tbilisi in Georgia. That's not your Georgia, but Eurasian Georgia. There was an American there, a brave woman she was, who had gone in faith to Georgia, feeling the Lord would have her there as a missionary. She worked in very difficult conditions. Even a professor in the university would have been earning the equivalent of \$17 a month, with a loaf coasting half a dollar. When she was able to get any work she wouldn't be getting perhaps more than \$8 a month. She eventually got a job in the office of Shevardnadze, the President, as a secretary. And she had opportunity to teach the Bible in the schools.

At great expense from her own pocket, she put on a lovely dinner for some of her colleagues at work. That very day we arrived she was going to have the dinner. She asked us if we'd go, so we went and we sat down with these people, about fifteen or more of them. I didn't know who any of them were. We hadn't been there five minutes when a rather forceful lady from the other side of the table demanded to know why I was in Georgia. I said, 'Well among other things, I've come to look at biblical manuscripts in the Institute of Manuscripts.'

'What manuscripts?'

I said, 'Well manuscripts of the Bible. You see, they've got some famous ones there.'

'Dead Sea Scrolls?' she said.

I said, 'No.'

'What do you think of the Dead Sea Scrolls?'

Well I said, 'The scholarly opinion is divided, isn't it? I mean, if you are a liberal . . .'

'I'll never be a liberal!' she said. 'I was brought up Orthodox.'

'Oh,' I said, 'that's very interesting.'

'I'm Orthodox,' she said, 'but I think God is horrible. You see, that's how my father brought me up. God is sitting up there in heaven, waiting to bash you the first thing you do. Think of poor old Moses in the wilderness. He only had to do one sin after all those forty

years, and God bashed him: “You can’t go into the promised land.” I think God is horrible, but I couldn’t be anything other than an Orthodox Jew, and I’m still an Orthodox Jew.’

So I told her about my Jewish friend in Belfast and how I used to sit with him and read the Bible to him sometimes. I said, ‘I used to read that lovely thing: “The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not want . . .”’

‘You can’t quote that at me,’ she said, ‘that’s Christian!’

‘No,’ said the folks around the table, ‘No, it’s not Christian, my dear. That’s your Jewish Old Testament.’

‘Oh, is it?’ she said.

I said, ‘I particularly like that last verse, “Goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.” I used to ask my Jewish friend: “Have you got that hope? I’m only an old Gentile, but I’m reading your book. I know what this means! I’ve got this hope. I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever”.’

And there I got the opportunity in front of all those folks, some of them high-ranking members of the government, to say, ‘My dear, have you got the hope?’

She said, ‘You have to have hope in this life.’

I said, ‘Yes, but when life is done?’

Oh, what a lovely opportunity. How God honoured the faith of that American lady to put that meal on and have a funny old guy like me just there, and guide the conversation on Dead Sea Scrolls by a Jewess the other side of the table. She was there exploring the oil fields of Bacau, on behalf of her family company, and just at the right time.

What a lovely thing to be able to preach the gospel from their own Old Testament. Of course it means that, if they reject the Saviour, there can be no salvation for them, but there are many in Christendom that likewise reject him. There is no salvation for them either.

To remember nominal Christianity is an enormous stumbling block

We ought also to be aware when we talk to them, however, that the true Orthodox Jew is disgusted with the leaders of Protestantism. Lord Jakobovits, an earlier chief rabbi in Britain, and a member of the House of Lords, will get up and protest against the compromise with practising homosexuals, and against abortion on demand, while the bishops of the church sit by and won’t say anything. If you try to preach the doctrines of salvation by grace without the works of the law, when they think that these bishops represent the gospel, then you’ll find you have some explaining to do, won’t you?

We mustn’t come in any boastful spirit, but with all meekness when we seek to reach them for Christ. But this is a thing that you may have to deal with in certain circles, even if you’re not talking to Jews. It is to be found amongst modernist theologians, of one sort and another in various places, who have now come round to the view that it is wrong to try and convert Jews.

The question of those who have never heard of Jesus

This other question is an embattled area because, unfortunately, Christians are sharply divided over what should be the answer. Most believers are afraid, and all should be afraid,

of (a) any ideas that would detract from the absolute uniqueness and exclusive claims of Christ, and (b) anything that would diminish missionary motivation.

For my part, I would want to assert, and I hope you agree with me, that no one from the beginning to the end of time has ever been, or will ever be, saved apart from the work of atonement accomplished by the death, burial and resurrection of the Lord Jesus. Some hold, however, that to be saved a person must actually hear the name of Jesus, and learn about the historical fact of his birth, death, resurrection and ascension, and put personal faith knowingly in Jesus. They will quote the verse from Romans: 'How shall they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how shall they believe in him whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher' (10:14).

I would therefore like to raise a number of questions. I'm not going to go through them this afternoon, for my time forbids it, but I have raised them here in the next few pages of the notes for your thoughtful, prayerful consideration. They are not meant to be frivolous points, but serious ones. And you, I am sure, will give them your considered answers in due course, for I think they are things to be considered. Let me take just a few sample questions of those I would want to ask.

Who is Jesus? Did Jesus begin to exist at Bethlehem? Or is the one we call Jesus, the Word of God incarnate who was the Word of God and was one with the Father from all eternity? When, for instance, it is said that Abraham believed God, was that God composed of a Trinity in those days: the Father, the Word and the Spirit? When Enoch walked with God, did he only walk with the Father, but not with the Word? What would you say to that? Who do you think Jesus is? That's what I'm getting at.

You can't be sure that Enoch heard the name 'Jesus', can you? But that he walked with God and God was triune and God included the Word: that surely is certain. When Abraham 'believed God and it was counted to him for righteousness' (Gen 15:6; Rom 4:3) did the fact that he didn't know that the name of the second person of the Trinity would one day be Jesus invalidate his faith? Hardly.

Romans 3:25 is a crucial verse, isn't it? It says, 'God passed over the sins done *aforetime*,'¹¹ that is, before Bethlehem, and the passage argues that God was just in doing so. So in the case of those 'Old Testament saints', as we call them, God did not immediately visit their sins upon them. Why not? How was he just to forgo punishing their sins? Was it because one day they would come to hear about Jesus and believe him? Well most of them didn't, did they? Or was it that they repented and believed and put their faith in God, and God justified them? Was it that God, knowing that one day his dear Son would pay the penalty of sin and be the propitiation for all their sin, and by being the propitiation for their sins, would justify God in having refrained his wrath from them in the days gone by? Which interpretation of that verse would you give?

Then I want to ask certain other questions.

In Acts 17, Paul says that God so appointed the bounds of the habitation of the pagan nations that they might feel after him, if perhaps they might find him (see v. 24-27). Granted, the Greek word means 'to grope', somewhat like a blind man would grope his way to

¹¹ ESV: 'former sins'.

something, yet it is actually said that God positively appointed the bounds of their habitation with the deliberate purpose of moving the Gentiles to grope after him, if they might seek him. Did God do that wishing that they would find him, or did he do it knowing that for multitudes there would be no hope of ever finding him anyway, because they hadn't heard of Jesus?

Romans 2:4 says that the goodness of God is intended by God to lead people to repentance. I ask, is that true of Gentiles as well as Jews? Was God's goodness to the pagan nations outside of Israel, in Old Testament times, intended to lead them to repentance? Surely it was. But tell me, was God doing this to lead them to repentance, but there was no hope of their ever being saved, because they didn't hear of Jesus?

There are big questions, aren't there?

Have we any positive indications as to what God's attitude to the people of those times was? Consider 2 Chronicles 6. For those who lived near enough at least to hear about the God of Israel, Solomon prays that, 'The stranger that is not of your people, when he comes from a far country for your great namesake . . .' That is, this stranger has heard the reputation of God, and he comes to the Jewish temple and prays to this house. 'Hear what the stranger asks for and give it to him.' For this reason: 'that all the peoples of the earth may know your name and fear you' (vv. 32-33). This is God's evangelical programme for the nations in the time of Solomon. Did he want them to fear him, but with no possibility of them being saved?

In regard to the remoter nations, Isaiah 45 says, 'there is no God else beside me; a just God and a saviour; there is none beside me. Look unto me and be saved, all the ends of the earth: for I am God, and there is none else' (vv. 21-22).

I therefore ask the questions. You will see in what direction my heart goes: that the basic conditions of salvation in the Old Testament are laid down by the case of Abraham, which is a precedent. How is a man right with God? 'Abraham believed God and it was counted to him for righteousness.' God was righteous to do that, because one day his Son would bear Abraham's sins and therefore justify God for justifying Abraham. The condition was Abraham believed God, and the God he believed, whether Abraham knew it or not, was the Father, the Son (the Word) and the Holy Spirit.

You will have some problems still. I, with all humility, put these questions to you. It is, as I suggest, a topic that we should think through very carefully, for it will affect what we have to say to people who feel that the Christians are saying that anybody born before Bethlehem was hopelessly lost. 'How could God arrange any such thing?' they say. You will need to be ready with some answer, will you not?

Postmodernism and Hedonism

Postmodernism

Definitions and comments

I want to come to the final two isms, and I have deliberately left very little time for them.

The term *postmodernism* is used in contradistinction to *modernism*, which isn't surprising. Modernism is now getting old fashioned (so it may seem a funny thing to call it *modern-ism*). In its heyday modernism was, and still is, the basic assumption that *reason* is the sufficient and only guide to the discovery of truth. Reason is the final arbiter as to what is true and what is not true.

In theological terms therefore, reason must be allowed to stand over the Bible. Man's reason has to decide what, if any, parts of the Bible are true. Reason cannot simply accept the Bible as God's revealed truth and seek humbly to understand it: that is the old modernist claim. Many students were brought up in their theological faculties under the domination of modernism: that was the whole approach to the Bible. Anybody that believed in a miracle because the book of Kings said one took place, was thought to be intellectually incapacitated. Reason was to be the arbiter.

Now we have moved, in some circles at any rate, into postmodernism, which at least has the goodness in it that it confesses that modernism's claim is not true. It says reason is not adequate to discover the objective truth about anything, let alone whether there is a God or not. So you may applaud the fact that postmodernism says that reason *by itself* is not sufficient and cannot find out eventually the objective truth about anything. In so far therefore as it contradicts modernism it is good, but then it gets even more disastrous as it goes on, for now it tells you that in the area of religion there is no objective truth. We couldn't know it even if it were there. All we can have are our opinions. You think it's this way? Well you're entitled to your opinion so long as you don't say that my opinion is wrong. Yours is equally wrong, or right, who knows? You can't say for certain. And my opinion is equally right or wrong. So you are entitled, because you are a human being with civil rights, to believe what you like. It would be wickedness of me to say you were wrong. That is not to be tolerated. That is the one thing that isn't to be tolerated, but otherwise, everybody's view is to be tolerated. All views are equally wrong or equally right; you can know no certainty about anything.

Now when applied to religion and when taught in the schools that is devastating, isn't it? It is applied by certain theologians to the study of the Bible, for this doctrine has exercised itself very prominently in the area of the interpretation of literary texts. Amongst the literary critics it is said nowadays that you cannot know what the intention of any author was when

he wrote his work; you can't know that. There is no one opinion about the meaning of the work. Every person is entitled to his and her view. There is no one right opinion; it's anybody's guess, and you can't say anybody is wrong. It's good news for students, I suspect. They could pass university degree examinations and tell their examiners that the examiners' views didn't matter; they were entitled to their own view. Marvellous, isn't it?

When that is applied to the Bible it becomes exceedingly serious. This idea says we cannot know what the author's intention was, and we cannot be sure that any interpretation is the right one. Any interpretation is right or wrong, as you please.

A Christian response

That is an extreme view, of course. What is the Christian response? Well if you had the time, you could point out that, in fact, so far from being modern, that view is as ancient as ancient could possibly be. Though it is now the latest craze it is a form, gone wild, of scepticism, which was long ago advocated by certain Greek philosophers. I cite some of them for you in the notes including Xenophanes and in particular Pyrrho from the fourth century BC.

Pyrrho declared that things are equally indistinguishable, immeasurable and indeterminable. For this reason, neither our acts of perception nor our judgments are true or false. Therefore we should not rely upon these things, but suspend judgment and come to no final conclusion about anything. That is what the sceptics said all those centuries ago. Postmodernism is another version of that, but it isn't modern at all! *Pre-ancientism* would be a good word for it!

Julián Marías, an historian of philosophy, points out in his book on Greek scepticism that postmodernism as a philosophical thesis, like scepticism, is contradictory since it *affirms* the impossibility of knowing truth. It says you can't know the truth but then claims itself to be true.

It says to you, 'You can't know the truth about anything.'

Marvellous, but what you've just said: 'You can't know the truth', is that true?

Philosophically it defeats itself. It is a nonsense. Marías concludes: 'Thus scepticism as a thesis refutes itself in the very act of being formulated'.¹²

In practical life postmodernism is false. The fact that we do not know everything, say about the universe or about our family, does not mean that we can know nothing for certain about them. Even you married men don't know everything about your wives, do you? You don't even know what they're going to give you for your next birthday. But to say that on that ground you can't know anything would be just plain stupid, wouldn't it? Life would become impossible if you tried to apply this philosophy to the practicalities of life.

When it comes to the Bible, of course, postmodernism is false again. The one major thing to be said at once is that the Bible is not the record of man's trying to find out about God and coming to his own opinions. It is the record of God's self-revelation to man. And God has the infinite ability, being God, to communicate and get his message across. That is point number one.

¹² *History of Philosophy*, New York: Dover Publications, 1967, p. 96.

We ought to have the humility to observe that Christians disagree over a number of things, including our interpretations of the Bible. What does that mean? It does not mean that there is no objective truth. It means that we are limited in our capacity to understand and must be patient and humble as we constantly seek to understand more nearly and more closely.

We can certainly know what the author's intention was in many books because the authors tell us what their intention was. You will notice it in John 20:31, 1 Peter 5:12, Luke 1:3-4 and so forth. You can also notice it by the sheer power of their logic: the flow of their thought. And in literary historical books you can come a great deal towards their purpose by studying the literary structure of the book. But I don't propose to say anything about that.

It is a very abstruse philosophy. You should know, however, that if your children attend literary studies in their schools in their senior years, they may well be taught postmodernist methods of the interpretation of literature. They will have this laid down to them as the real up to date thing. Now they've found out the reality about things: that you can't know anything about the meaning of a book. Of course, people will then transfer what they've been told at that level of dealing with literature to the Bible. We need to inoculate some of our young people before they meet the poison. We need to show them the absurdities of the position, logically and educationally. And we need to show them the other and positive side, namely that the Bible is God's word, and God has given us his Spirit that we might know the things that are freely given to us of God (see 1 Cor 2).

Hedonism

I come finally to talk about hedonism. In the course of my talks today, and especially in the first one, I maybe gave the impression that anything that comes from paganism is by definition bad. So when I talked of syncretism, I talked of things that had been taken over into Christendom from paganism, and the things I mentioned were bad. Somebody very acutely and intelligently asked me afterwards about my methodology: 'Are you saying that if anything is from pagan sources it is bad by definition? Are there no good things that come from paganism?'

Well my answer is there are lots of good things that come from paganism. I spent many years teaching it anyway. I mentioned even in my first lecture that some of the terms and the concepts that people used in the third, fourth, fifth and sixth centuries, when thinking about the Trinity and the relation of Father to Son, which we as evangelicals still use, were taken from Greek philosophy.

English wasn't the invention of Christians, but I find it very useful to know. When it comes to the whole logic of thinking: for instance, what is a definition as distinct from a description? How would you define something? In Europe at any rate, it was the Greeks who taught us how to begin to systematize our thinking, wasn't it? If somebody said to you, 'Please define what an ice cream is' it's no good saying, 'Well an ice cream is something that little boys like.' It's perfectly true, but that's only one of the things about ice cream. It isn't a definition; it's just a description. How would you define it? And when in the spiritual area of theology we want to make definitions, it's good if we know what a definition is, as distinct from a description.

It was the Greeks, particularly the Greek philosophers who first taught us to think in that way. It is a marvellous and great heritage we have from them.

The Greek philosophers also thought a lot about morality. Indeed it wouldn't perhaps be an exaggeration to say that some of the Greek philosophers thought more about morality than Christians do, at least more than some Christians do. When the Bible says on the one hand, 'There is none that seeks after God' (Rom 3:11; Jer 5:1), it is not meant to be an absolute statement, is it? For there are other passages such as we quoted: 'God appointed the bounds of habitation that men might feel after God and find him' (Acts 17:26-27). The Greeks are evidence of it. They sought, and some of them sought very hard, to find the truth about the universe and then the truth about morality. They asked how a man could live a just and a moral and an upright life.

The highest good: *summum bonum*

An interesting topic therefore, among the Greek philosophers was what is life's highest good? The Latin for it is the *summum bonum*. I throw that in without further charge. What is life's highest good? If you're going to be sane in life and sensible, the Greek philosophers taught, you must have an aim in life, and surely the most sensible thing is to aim at the *highest* good. But then what is the highest good? How would you recognize it if you saw it?

Aristotle said you could start by arguing this way: the highest good is a something that you would seek as an *end* in itself and never as a *means* to an end. For example, money is not bad, is it? I hope it isn't. No, it's not bad, and we have to go and make money and seek money, but nobody in his right mind seeks money as an end in itself. You seek money as a means to get other things that you think are good. You need money to buy a car, but you don't buy a car just as an end in itself, surely you don't. You buy a car because you want to get to places. Yes, you want to get to work for instance. Why do you go to work?

You say, 'I go to work to get money.'

Oh, wait a minute. I see. You had to have money, to buy the car, to get to work, to get the money.

'No,' you say, 'I go to work to get money to buy food and clothes.'

Oh, I see. Well why do you want food?

'Well,' you say, 'to keep alive. You get very weak if you don't get food.'

I see, and why do you want to keep alive?

Well you say, 'I have to go to work.'

Well wait a minute.

'Ah, no,' you say, 'no, no, I go to work because I need money to get the children educated.'

Oh, I see. Yes, that's a very good thing. Why do you want to get them educated?

'Well if they're not educated they won't get a good job, and if they don't get a good job they won't get any money, and if they don't get any money they won't be able to buy a car. And if they don't have a car they won't be able to go to work to get the money . . .'

We seem to be going around in circles, don't we? You see, you can seek for one thing, and it's good, but now you find it isn't an end in itself; it is only a means to some other end. What is the thing that you seek as an end in itself? And if there are several such things that are ends in themselves, what is the highest of those, the *summum bonum*?

Aristotle said the *summum bonum* was happiness, though he had a very strict definition of what happiness was. The Stoics said the chief good in life was to live according to reason. The Epicureans said the chief good in life was pleasure.

I once had a class of students in the university at a very humble level. I was trying to teach them elementary Greek philosophy from an historical point of view. We came across this question of the *summum bonum*. I did my best to explain what a *summum bonum* was thought to be and what it means, and I had several believers in the class. I thought this was an opportunity for these dear believers to witness for the Lord, so in kindly fashion I said, 'Now, if that's what a *summum bonum* is, would anybody here confess to having a *summum bonum*? What is the *summum bonum* in life? What should it be? What is the thing that life is all about—the highest good that you seek for its own sake?' And I was hoping my Christian students would get up on their hind legs and say . . .

Well, what would you have said?

Ah, yes, to please the Lord. This is surely the highest good that we seek for its own sake: to please God. 'Man's chief end is to glorify God and then to enjoy him forever.'¹³

What Epicurean's meant by pleasure

What did the Epicureans mean by pleasure, however? You should notice that they weren't a lot of debauched people. They were very gracious people, on the whole: very sedate, quiet, lovable, kindly people. Their idea of pleasure was to avoid all activities that would lead to a disturbance of your mind and emotions and lead to unrest and anxiety. So they didn't engage in politics. They largely withdrew from the world. They were very cultured. Of course they had a lot of slaves to see after them, and they enjoyed great tranquillity. On the philosophical side, they chose the doctrine of the early Greek atomic theorists, like Democritus and people that like, who first thought of the idea that the whole universe is composed of atoms and space. The early atomic theorists were the early preachers of evolution.

The atomic theory was a marvellous discovery, and just to think up such a theory with their brains! It was rather less sophisticated than our modern atomic theory, but hundreds of years before Christ the Greeks thought it up. The Epicureans took this over, and they came to it because they saw in it a release from fear.

The atomic theorists taught that man's body and soul are made up of atoms, and at death the atoms fly apart and there's nothing left; there's no soul living on to face a final judgment. It was the glory of the system that there was no god to be feared and no final judgment, and man could live in pleasure without fear of the gods and the torture of conscience. That was their idea of fear.

There are many folks nowadays who live in the world, and they're not debauched either, but they do hope in their hearts that there's no God. Therefore they like the theory of evolution, because in the end, there's no God and no final judgment to be faced. What would you say to them? You wouldn't say, would you, 'Well these people like pleasure, so let's emphasize the fact that has God has a lot of pleasures for them'?

¹³ Question 1 in the Westminster Shorter Catechism.

Or, perhaps you would. Yes, God loves pleasure! God is a lovely God, isn't he? Think of all the pleasures he's given us—multitudes of things to enjoy, and not only the pleasures of satisfying our hunger or other desires, but walk down the street and suddenly you'll get a beautiful fragrance from a rose that you weren't expecting. You weren't desiring it, but God gives that beautiful fragrance to you all of a sudden, all for nothing. What for? Well just for the sheer joy of it, the pleasure of it. God's like that, isn't he? He loves giving us pleasure.

But you could also point out to the Epicureans there must be a judgment. Why? Because God believes in pleasure.

You say, 'How does that follow?'

Well, because in this life, millions of people have been robbed, not only of pleasure but of their very lives. Does it matter? How can anybody accept that it doesn't matter? There will therefore be a judgment, and you ought to clap your hands at that. One day there will be a judgment, and earth's wrongs will be put right.

It's not only the unconverted that need to listen to Greek philosophers here, is it? It's we Christians too. What is our *summum bonum* as Christians? It is true that 'at the right hand of God there are pleasures for evermore' (Ps 16:11)? That's true, isn't it? And it is not wrong if we seek them. I want to suggest to you in these closing moments, somewhat arbitrarily, that here there lurks a little danger.

It could happen in our modern world that we get influenced by the attitude of the world. The Bible says that in the last days, not that men shall be lovers of pleasure; it says they shall be 'lovers of pleasure *more than* lovers of God' (2 Tim 3:4). That's the trouble. It's not the pleasure but the fact they love the pleasure more than God. We could be beguiled by ordinary natural pleasures, couldn't we, and to go for the pleasure rather than God?

Even within our spiritual experience, we could go for the pleasure and judge our church life, our spiritual life, first and foremost by whether we get pleasure out of it. So the whole thing is organized to give pleasure. And should God at any one stage begin to be a bore, and start talking about boring subjects like theology, well too bad for God, because our *summum bonum* is pleasure. That would be a mistake, wouldn't it? We must never make the pleasure the supreme good.

True pleasure comes when we are seeking something else, and that something else must be the will of God. Witness our blessed Lord, upon whom all our eternal pleasures depend. He delighted to do God's will, in general. When it came to Gethsemane, he did not come skipping into the garden saying, 'I enjoy being made sin, you know! I've been looking forward to this. I do love this.' Of course he didn't. For our sakes and for God's sake, he put first the will of God, whether it brought pleasure or pain, life or death. And in our modern age we need to recapture the vision, don't we? When so much evangelicalism is falling to the temptation of thinking they will keep the young by entertaining them with pleasure, first and foremost, and letting it be the criterion, instead of making the will of God the criterion and the pleasure to come in consequence.

Conclusion

Thank you for your attention. I hope that the notes may be helpful to you. Read them as best you can with an open mind and, where you see I'm wrong, pray for the sinner that he might be converted from his ways.

Shall we pray.

Our Father, we thank thee for this opportunity to think together about thy word and some of the issues involved. We pray now that thou wilt give us grace in it all, to love thee with all our minds and to seek thee with all our hearts and to serve thee with all our strength.

Make us in our day and generation people that know the will of God and know what the people of God should do. Help us to take to ourselves the whole armour of God that we may stand in the evil day and, having done all, to stand. Infuse us, we do beseech thee, with the glory of thy person and the wonder of thy salvation, that unashamedly we shall be moved to take it to the world.

Give us some understanding, we pray, and compassion for the lost: a desire to understand them and to know where they sit, that we might frame our words as we preach thy word, words taught us by thy Spirit that will be understood of men and women and get to their hearts and get to their conscience, and be used of thee in a great harvest of redeemed. We ask it through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

APPENDICES

1

First Topic: Syncretism and Pluralism

I. Definitions and Comments

A. Syncretism: The combining of the characteristic teachings, beliefs and practices of differing systems of religion and/or philosophy

Examples

1. Old Testament: 'They feared the LORD, and served their own gods, after the manner of the nations from among whom they had been carried away' (2 Kgs 17:33).
2. New Testament: the attempt to add pagan theosophies to the gospel of Christ (Col 2:8–9).
3. All Souls' Day, Halloween, *Psychagogia*, The Hungry Ghost Festival.
4. Orthodox spirituality: the attempt to attain to a direct vision of God and to union with God, using the teachings and techniques of the pagan neo-Platonist philosopher, Plotinus, introduced into Christendom by Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, and (in the English speaking world) by the work entitled *The Cloud of Unknowing*.
5. The use of yoga like techniques, breathing rhythms and concentration controls in order to produce supposedly Christian spiritual experience and growth: now adopted by some evangelicals.
6. The substitution of pagan Greek philosophic concepts of the impassability of God for the true and living God revealed in the Bible and through his Son.
7. Gospel of meritorious works; false asceticism, and false permissiveness.

Causes

1. Inadequate evangelization: Christianizing (or Judaizing, as in 1. above) instead of true conversion.
2. False acculturation: deliberately tagging Christian 'festivals' onto pagan festivals and ceremonies; or preaching current psychological theories and techniques instead of repentance and faith.
3. Ignorance of what the Bible teaches on the part both of unsaved and of converts.

Results

1. Compromise and corruption of the gospel.
2. Confusion in the mind of the general public as to what the gospel is.
3. Impoverishment and stumbling of true believers.

Necessary counter tactics

1. To de-confuse people's minds as to what Christianity is: to teach them both what it is and what it is not, according to the Bible itself. Compare Paul on Areopagus in Acts 17:22, 24–25, 29 (note the negatives), and most of the epistles.
2. To teach the whole counsel of God 'unto all riches of the full assurance of understanding' (Col 2:2).

B. Pluralism

1. **Weak sense:** the simple fact that there are many different religions and philosophies in the world, and in our own countries.

The Christian reaction to this state of affairs: we should allow to all others the same religious freedom as we claim for ourselves. Contrast the denial of freedom to Christians in hard line Islamic states. Christianity does not demand a sacral state such as was ancient Israel.

2. **Strong sense:** all religions should be regarded as equally valid: they are simply different paths up the same mountain to the same summit.

The Christian response to this claim: it is plainly contrary to the facts; many religions assert as an essential and indispensable part of their faith that other religions are irreconcilably different from themselves. The Buddha claimed that 'there is one sole way for the purification of human beings' and that 'the truth is one, there is not a second'¹⁴. Some forms of Buddhism deny that there is any such thing or possibility as forgiveness; Christianity glories in forgiveness. Islam will never accept Hinduism's millions of gods. To Orthodox Judaism Jesus' claim to deity is blasphemous. Christ's claims are exclusive of all others: 'no one comes to the Father but by me' (John 14:6); 'in none other is there salvation . . . no other name . . . wherein we must be saved' (Acts 4:12).

Popular modern reactions to the Christian claim

1. **In general:** this element in Christianity is insufferably arrogant, insulting to other faiths, productive of repression, persecution, social unrest and violence, ignorant of the true nature of other world faiths, totally unacceptable, and *fundamentalist*.
2. **In Christendom:** a growing contention that the conversion of, e.g. sincere Jews, Hindus and Muslims to Christ is both unnecessary and undesirable. Compare the modern Catholic attitude to missionary work.

II. A Modern Popular Fallacy

The claim that salvation is to be found in Christ alone arose in the ancient world where Christianity was the official religion of a monolithic culture, and where Christians knew very little about other world religions. But since nowadays we live in a global village and a pluralist society, and know about other world religions, the exclusive claims of Christianity are no longer credible or acceptable. BUT . . .

- A. 1. The world into which Christianity was born was thickly populated with religions and philosophies of every kind.

¹⁴ R. C. Zaehner, *The Concise Encyclopaedia of Living Faiths*, pp. 265 and 275.

2. The average Greek or Roman first century Christian knew from personal experience or by daily contact infinitely more about other religions than the average Christian in the West does nowadays.
 3. In the days when Christians first preached the exclusive claims of Christ, they were a small, often persecuted minority; Christianity was not the official religion of a dominant culture.
- B.
1. When the Old Testament declared: 'Look unto me, and be ye saved, all the ends of the earth: for I am God, and there is none else' (Isa 45:22), this was not because Israel's prophets were ignorant of the religions of the other nations: they knew all too much about them.
 2. Abraham was called out of the Gentiles as a protest against their idolatries (Josh 24:2).
 3. The nation descended from Abraham has never been, and still is not, a dominant world culture, in the sense that Christendom and Islam eventually became.

III. A. The Judaeo Christian Claim That There is, and can be, Only One True God Creator, is Not a Narrow Minded Insult to People of Other Cultures

1. No one is insulted by the fact that the laws of mathematics, physics, chemistry, biology, etc. are universal and the same for every nation.
2. There is only one universe (that we know of).
3. The pagan philosophers, Platonists, Aristotelians, Stoics, etc. proceeding by rational investigation of the universe (not by revelation), perceived that behind the vast diversities of Nature, there must be what they called 'the One' (or, 'God').
4. Modern (even atheist) scientists search for one grand unified theory that will explain the whole universe.
5. Some claim that even Hinduism is fundamentally monotheistic: 'the world is presided over by a high God, on whom it depends' though 'it is governed by him with the aid of many lesser gods, who are thought of by the theologians as manifestations of him in his various aspects or as emanations from his being' and for educated Hindus 'the lesser gods have much the same status as the saints and angels of Catholic Christianity'¹⁵.
6. And even from a merely rational point of view: if there is only one God Creator, and if that God is morally perfect, then he must show no favouritism in his judgment (Rom 2:11; Acts 10:34–35) and so salvation must be available to all on the same terms (Rom 10:12).

III. B. The Dispute is Over the Nature of the One True God and the Nature of His Salvation

1. And here the all-important difference is between the self-revelation of God (who spoke in times past to the fathers through the prophets, and at the end of these days has spoken in his Son, Heb 1:1–2) and all religious and philosophic concepts of God constructed by man on the basis of his own reason and imagination.

¹⁵ 'Hinduism', by A. L. Basham in Zaehner, *The Concise Encyclopaedia of Living Faiths*, p. 224.

2. If Christianity were the invention of men, it would certainly be arrogant if its inventors claimed it was the only true religion in the world. But it is not arrogance to proclaim God's self-revelation.

IV. Some of the Excellencies of the Self-revealed One True God

1. ONE GOD, the creator of ALL the nations: 'He made of one every nation of men' (Acts 17:26). Not only are all nations of human beings made by one and the same Creator, but they all spring from one and the same original human being. They are all made of the same stuff! This at once outlaws all colour bars. There is no super race. There is nothing here offensive to any nation or culture.
2. ALL HUMAN BEINGS are made by the ONE GOD in the IMAGE of the ONE God (see Gen 1:26–28 and, in spite of the fall, 9:6).
 - a. All human life is equally sacred and inviolable.
 - b. Human beings are not the (unfortunate) creation of some lesser deity who mixed pure soul with unworthy matter, e.g. in Hinduism, Mahayana Buddhism, Platonism, Neoplatonism, and those who teach the transmigration of souls and reincarnation.
3. THE ONE GOD offers his salvation to ALL MANKIND without DISTINCTION.

Old Testament:

 - a. 'Look unto me, and be ye saved, all the ends of the earth: for I am God, and there is none else' (Isa 45:22).

New Testament:

 - a. 'God our Saviour, who wills that all men should be saved . . . for there is ONE GOD' (1 Tim 2:3–5).
 - b. 'For there is no distinction between Jew and Gentile: for the same *Lord* is Lord of all, and is rich to all that call upon him: for, whosoever shall call on the name of the Lord shall be saved' (Rom 10:12–13).
4. RECONCILIATION with the ONE GOD is made possible through the ONE MEDIATOR on the basis of the ONE SACRIFICE (1 Tim 2:5–6).
 - a. There are not ten thousand and one deities and spirits, principalities and powers that have to be placated.
 - b. The sacrifice has been provided by God, and the ransom paid by God incarnate; we do not have to pay it.
 - c. The ransom is for all.
 - d. There is only ONE sacrifice because it is ENOUGH for the whole world: none else is needed (Heb 10), none other (adequate) is on offer, even in Judaism and Islam, let alone in Hinduism and Buddhism.
5. The one true God revealed in the Bible is independent of the universe.
 - a. The universe had a beginning: God did not.
 - b. God is not part of the stuff of the universe, nor is the universe part of God as in Hinduism, Buddhism, Stoicism and some forms of modern cosmology.
 - c. God never has been, and is not, in need of any created being or thing (see Ps 50:12).

'If you are righteous, what do you give to him, or what does he receive from your hand?' (Job 35:7).

'Who has first given to me, that I should repay him? Everything under the whole heaven is mine' (Job 41:11).

'Neither is he served by men's hands, as though he needed anything, seeing he himself gives to all life, and breath and all things' (Acts 17:25).

- d. By definition, therefore, salvation and acceptance with God cannot be paid for, bought, earned or merited from God by the work of man's hands. It is, and must be, a free gift from God.

Contrast: all 'religion', where man has to merit, or achieve, salvation by his own efforts.

Contrast: Liturgies of the Eucharist current in Christendom, such as 'Blessed are you, Lord, God of all creation. Through your goodness we have this bread to offer, which earth has given and human hands have made. It will become for us the bread of life . . . we have this wine to offer, fruit of the vine and work of human hands. It will become our spiritual drink'.¹⁶

- e. Faith in the work of one's hands is the essence of idolatry; and idols cannot save: they do but add to life's burdens, and above all, are an insult to God (see Isa 44:10–20; 45:20–46:7; Exod 20:3–5).

6. The hope of the gospel of the blessed God.

a. For the individual:

- (1) Acceptance with God now: not, as in 'religion' a vague, uncertain hope for the future. Salvation by faith not by works certainly leads to moral effort and spiritual progress. But the question is: at what point in the process can one be sure of acceptance with God, and on what grounds? The answer is, right from the start, on the grounds of faith, not works.
- (2) Not escape from the body as in Platonism, Hinduism, Buddhism, etc. but salvation and glorification of body, soul and spirit.
- (3) Not seemingly endless reincarnations, in order to work off the consequences of evil deeds done in previous incarnations.
- (4) Not the loss of self and the immersion of the soul into 'The One' as in Hinduism and Buddhism; but union with Christ and the redeemed in one body, with each personality perfected and glorified.

b. For the universe:

Matter is not an illusion (as in Christian Science), nor eternal (as in ancient Epicureanism), nor is the material universe an unending cycle like a wheel (as in Hinduism), nor is the universe oscillating, increasing, decreasing and rebounding (as in some modern theories, or in ancient Stoicism), nor is earth and nature doomed to eventual extinction (as in much, hopeless, atheism). Nor is the present earth the best of all possible worlds, as in Stoicism. But creation shall be delivered from her bondage to corruption (Rom 8); there shall be a new heaven and a new earth (Rev 21).

¹⁶ *Roman Missal*, Alcester and Dublin, 1974, p. 512 [8].

V. The Charge of Anti-Semitism Levelled Against Christianity

A. The charge:

1. By teaching generations of children that the wicked Jews crucified Jesus, Christians have produced and fostered anti-Semitism.
2. The New Testament has contributed to this, e.g. the fourth Gospel (8:44) has Jesus denouncing the Jews as children of the devil.

B. The contention:

1. In the light of the Holocaust and the misappropriation of the victims' gold by the Allied (so called Christian) nations, it is obscene for Christians to try to convert Jews.
2. The idea that Christianity has superseded Israel, and that there is no future for Israel, is insufferable conceit.
3. Judaism is an equally valid approach to God as Christianity.

C. Response:

1. To confess and condemn Christendom's disgraceful treatment of Jews in the past.
 - a. The disastrous effects of the joining up of the church with the state under Constantine: 'what had begun under Constantine as an attempt to protect Christianity from Judaism while at the same time safeguarding the Jews' own religious rights had developed by the time of Justinian into the start of serious oppression of Judaism by the government in the name of Christianity'.¹⁷
 - b. Martin Luther in his treatise *On the Jews and Their Lies* (AD 1543) calls synagogues 'nothing but a den of devils' and urges Christians to exercise 'a sharp mercy' by setting fire to synagogues and schools, destroying Jewish homes, confiscating all their sacred books, prohibiting all teaching, forbidding all travel, impounding all their money and imposing forced labour on them until they became Christians.¹⁸ All this, of course, in complete disregard of Christ's prohibition of force either to defend or to propagate his kingdom; and founded on the unfortunate idea that Christianity was meant to be a sacral State, as ancient Judaism was, in which every member of the State must be a member of the church, by compulsory baptism of all infants, and all heretics must be punished by the State.
 - c. The Inquisition, pogroms, etc.; the Holocaust; the present revival of anti-Semitism in the CIS and Poland.
 - d. The widespread and long current 'ugly and unscriptural notion that God has cast off his people Israel and simply replaced it by the Christian Church'.¹⁹
2. To be careful not to accuse the whole nation of ancient Israel of being responsible for the death of the Lord Jesus.
 - a. Certainly their leaders were involved in getting the Romans to execute him, and incited the local mob to shout for his crucifixion.
 - b. But the thousands of Jews living in the Dispersion at the time only heard about the crucifixion months or years after it had happened.

¹⁷ E. Mary Smallwood, *From Pagan Protection to Christian Oppression*, Belfast, 1979, p. 7.

¹⁸ Cited from Stephen Motyer, *Your Father the Devil?* Carlisle, Paternoster Press, 1997, pp. 2–3.

¹⁹ C. E. B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on The Epistle to the Romans vol. 2*, Edinburgh, T&T Clark, 1979, p. 448.

- c. NB. Peter to the Jerusalem Jews: 'you did it in ignorance, as did also your rulers' (Acts 3:17).
 - d. Paul to Jews of the Dispersion: 'the Jerusalemites and their rulers did it in ignorance' (see Acts 13:27).
- 3. To explain the deeper 'cause' of the death of Jesus Christ.
 - a. The Jewish leaders and the crowd were unwitting agents in carrying out God's purpose that his Son should die for the sins of the world.
 - b. I have told Jewish friends that I would not think of charging any Jew with the death of Jesus Christ except in the sense that my sins too, as well as his or hers, were the cause of Messiah's death.
 - c. But Jesus is the suffering servant of Isaiah 53, and there is no forgiveness or salvation for Gentile or Jew without him.
- 4. To accuse Jesus and his apostles of anti-Semitism is nonsense.
 - a. They were all Jews themselves!
 - b. Their denunciations of the sins of the Jews were the same as those of the Old Testament prophets.
 - c. Christ's denunciations of the sins of Christendom are no less severe (Rev 2–3).
- 5. To show to our Jewish friends our delight at being ourselves Abraham's seed, heirs according to promise (Gal 3:29), and that we believe, not in any old god, but in the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.
- 6. To preach to Jews the glorious gospel of forgiveness and assurance from their own Scriptures (e.g. Ps 23:6; 32:1–2; and of course, Isa 53).
- 7. But since the Lord Jesus is God incarnate, no Jew once enlightened can reject him and still rightly claim to believe in God (Acts 23:1; 1 Tim 1:13).
- 8. But do remember that Orthodox rabbis take a much more biblical stand against such things as abortion on demand and homosexuality than the leaders of nominal Protestant Christendom do. To these Jews nominal Christianity is an enormous stumbling block.

VI. The Much Debated Question: What About Those Who Have Never Heard of Jesus?

1. This question cannot forever be avoided in talking to serious unbelievers who have genuine difficulties when confronted with the truth that 'there is no other name [than that of Jesus] . . . whereby we must be saved' (Acts 4:12).
2. Unfortunately, Christians are sharply divided over what should be the answer to this question.
3. Many believers are (and all should be) afraid of any ideas that would:
 - a. detract from the absolute uniqueness and the exclusive claims of Christ, and
 - b. diminish missionary motivation.
4. Let us re-assert here, therefore, that no one from the beginning to the end of time has ever been, or will ever be, saved apart from the work of atonement accomplished by the death, burial and resurrection of the Lord Jesus.
5. Some hold, then, that to be saved a person must actually hear the name of Jesus, and learn the fact of his birth, death, resurrection and ascension, and put personal faith knowingly in Jesus.

6. Moreover they ask, 'How shall they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how shall they believe in him whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher?' (Rom 10:14).
7. Let us, therefore, consider the case of those who lived before Christ was born.

Questions arise

1. The antediluvians, Abel, Enoch and Noah, were certainly believers in God (see Heb 11). Did they personally and knowingly put their faith in Jesus?
2. The Lord Jesus was, and is, the eternally existent Word who was ever with God, and was God. When Enoch walked with God, was not the Word with God? Is there any similar meaning between Genesis 4:26 and Acts 2:21?
3. When Scripture says that Abraham believed God and it was counted to him for righteousness, the God he believed in was in fact the Holy Trinity of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, was he not? Was Abraham's faith not valid for justification, because he did not *know* that God was a Trinity?
4. Romans 3:25 points out that God was just in not visiting his wrath on those who sinned in the ages before Calvary (and that will include believers, whose sins like anyone else's deserved God's wrath: see 3:23). But how, according to the context, was he righteous in this? Was it:
 - a. simply because God had already purposed that Christ Jesus would eventually offer the adequate propitiatory sacrifice? Or
 - b. because, in addition, all believers in those days knew that eventually God himself in the person of his Son, Jesus Christ, would take upon himself the wrath due to their sins? Did they in fact know this? All of them? (Abraham may have: John 8:56).
5. Romans 1:20–21 declares that the darkness of mankind in general was brought on by their wilful rejection of the knowledge of the true God which they originally had. Does that mean that no Gentile thereafter ever thought anything true about God at all? What about Acts 17:28–29?
6. Does the solemn phrase 'God gave them up' (Rom 1:24, 26, 28) imply that all Gentiles without exception lived debauched lives, and never had any right thoughts about morality? What about Romans 2:14–15: 'Gentiles who . . . do by nature the things of the law'? What about the high morality of the ancient Greek philosophers?
7. In the guarantee: 'Those who seek me diligently shall find me' (Prov 8:17), the 'me' is wisdom. Does this refer only to natural wisdom, or to the divine wisdom as well? Does Romans 2:11 mean that no Gentile ever sought God? After the call of Abraham out of the Gentiles, did no Gentile ever 'seek God, if perhaps they might feel after him, and find him, though he is not far from each one of us'—as God intended they should (Acts 17:26–28)?
8. There is no salvation in any pagan religion or philosophy; but then there is no salvation in Christianity as a mere 'religion'. Many people who believe the fact that Jesus died for the sins of the world, are not saved. Only personal faith in the living God saves.
9. Romans 2:4 says that the goodness of God is intended by God to lead people to repentance. Acts 14:17 indicates that God showed this goodness to the Gentile nations as well as to Jews. But what would have been the point, all down the pre-Christian ages, of leading people to repentance, if no salvation was available to them if and when they did repent?

God's attitude to the Gentiles in times BC

1. To those who lived near enough to hear about the God of Israel: 'the stranger, that is not of thy people Israel, when he shall come from a far country for thy great name's sake . . . when they shall come and pray toward this house: then hear thou from heaven . . . and do according to all that the stranger calls to thee for; that ALL THE PEOPLES OF THE EARTH may know thy name and fear thee, as does thy people Israel' (2 Chr 6:32–33).
2. To the remote nations: 'there is no God else beside me; a just God and a saviour; there is none beside me. Look unto me and be ye saved, all the ends of the earth: for I am God, and there is none else' (Isa 45:21–22).
3. An eternal gospel: do you see any connection of thought between Acts 14:15–17 and Revelation 14:6–7?
4. The mark of any Gentile, (as of any Jew) who genuinely repented, put their faith in the living God and *did the truth*, would be that if and when they were presented with God incarnate, they would 'come to the light that their works might be made manifest that they have been wrought in God' (John 3:21).
5. With the coming of the Son of God, who always was the light of men (John 1:5), the light which lights every man, has come into the world (John 1:9–10). To be charged with hating the light and refusing to come to the light, a man must have seen or heard of the light, much or little. How could one be charged with hating what one has never seen (John 15:22–25)?
6. Final thought: if Simeon had died before he saw the Son of God incarnate, he would surely have been saved. What was there so wonderful and important in letting him see and know that the Saviour had come (see Luke 2:25–32)? If God had not shown him, would you have thought it important to go and tell him?
7. None of this should be taken to imply that nowadays there are millions of people who not having heard of the Lord Jesus have repented and cast themselves on the mercy of the true God. But it is certain that there are millions who have not repented and put their faith in God; and they certainly need missionaries to go and preach to them.

Second Topic: Postmodernism

I. Definition and Comments

1. The term *postmodernism* is used in contradistinction to *modernism*.
2. *Modernism* was, and is, the basic assumption that reason is the sufficient and only guide to the discovery of truth, and the final arbiter as to what is true and what is not. Reason, therefore, must be allowed to stand over the Bible, to decide what, if any, parts of the Bible are true. Reason cannot simply accept the Bible as God's revealed truth, and seek humbly to understand it.
3. *Postmodernism* now confesses that modernism's claim is not true: reason is not adequate to discover the objective truth about anything, let alone whether there is a God or not.
4. So far so good. But the serious thing is the grounds upon which postmodernism denies the possibility of certain knowledge of objective truth. The argument is: none of us is able to approach anything with a completely open and unprejudiced mind. Our minds are all incorrigibly 'pre-set' by our culture, temperament, etc. We cannot, therefore, see or know anything 'as it is in itself'. All we can say is how a thing appears to us.
5. The implications of this are:
 - a. We cannot say that there is any such thing as objective truth: things are simply as they appear to us to be.
 - b. However different somebody else's view of a thing is from ours, we cannot say his view is wrong; nor can he or she say that ours is wrong. All views are equally valid (or invalid).
6. Postmodernism has concerned itself particularly with the interpretation of literary works. It maintains that:
 - a. We cannot know what the author's intention and meaning were.
 - b. The meaning of the work is not what the author may have intended to say but what his readers (or hearers) may have understood him to say.
 - c. No modern reader can say that his interpretation is right and someone else's is wrong.
7. When postmodernism is brought to bear upon the interpretation of the Bible, its conclusions are far reaching:
 - a. The biblical writers are not telling us any objective truth about God, but simply how God (or morality, etc.) appeared to them.
 - b. We cannot tell what meaning these writers intended to convey. All we can say is what their writings mean to us individually. There is no *correct* interpretation, (nor *incorrect*, for that matter). All is subjective opinion.
8. When it comes to religions, therefore:
 - a. No one religion can claim to be objectively true.
 - b. No one can say someone else's religion is false.

- c. For anyone to claim that his religion is objectively true and must be accepted by all is an attempt to impose his culture by force on other people. Such religious imperialism ought to be stopped.

II. A Christian Response

- A. Postmodernism is neither a new idea, coherent as a thesis, nor practical in daily living.
 1. Though it is the latest craze, and appears to be new, postmodernism is not really new at all. It is a form of *scepticism* long ago advocated by certain Greek philosophers, e.g.:
 - a. **Xenophanes:** 'That which is wholly clear no man has seen, nor will there ever be a man who has intuitive knowledge about the gods and about everything of which I speak. For even if he should chance to speak the complete truth, yet he himself does not know it; what occurs concerning all things is seeming.'²⁰
 - b. **Pyrrho:** Fourth century BC: He apparently declared that things are equally indistinguishable, unmeasurable and indeterminable. For this reason neither our acts of perception nor our judgments are true or false. Therefore we should not rely upon them but be without judgments.
 2. Postmodernism, like scepticism, as a philosophical thesis is contradictory, 'since it affirms the impossibility of knowing truth, although this affirmation itself claims to be true. Thus, skepticism as a thesis refutes itself in the very act of being formulated'.²¹
 3. In practical life, postmodernism is false: the fact that we do not know everything, say, about the universe, or about our family, does not mean that we can know nothing for certain about them. On the basis of postmodernism, life itself would become impossible.
- B. Postmodernism is false in regard to interpretation of the Bible.
 1. The Bible is not a record of man's theorising about God; it is the God inspired record of God's self-revelation to men.
 2. 'In the beginning was the Word' (John 1:1). The WORD is not only the title, but the function of the second person of the Trinity, which is to make God known. He has divine ability to communicate truth to his creatures (John 1:18; 17:2-3, 6-8).
 3. Believers are not left to themselves to understand this communication: 'we are given . . . the spirit which is of God; that we might know the things which are freely given to us by God' (1 Cor 2:12).
 4. While it is true that at present we know in part, it is not true that we can know nothing for certain: 'we know that the Son of God has come, and has given us an understanding, that we know him that is true, and we are in him that is true, even in his Son Jesus Christ. This is the true God, and eternal life' (1 John 5:20).
 5. We can know a biblical author's intention (John 20:31; 1 Pet 5:12; Luke 1:4).
 6. It is a false exaggeration to say that because God has conveyed his written word to us through men of a different culture from ours in long ago centuries, we cannot know what they meant. Different cultures are bridgeable, if for no other reason than that all human

²⁰ *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker*, ed. H. Diels and W. Kranz, 1903, 21B34.

²¹ Julián Marías, *History of Philosophy*, New York, Dover Publications, 1967, p. 96.

beings are human beings. To say that we can know nothing of what Plato, Euclid or Homer meant, because they lived a long time ago in a different culture, would be nonsense.

7. Postmodernism is one more of modern man's attempts to escape, not only from truth, but from The Truth, the Great Reality (Rom 1:18–21).

Third Topic: Hedonism

I. The Highest Good: the *Summum Bonum*

1. There are many good things which we seek and enjoy in life. But what is, or should be, the highest good, the chief good, the *summum bonum*?
2. Aristotle said that it must be that which we seek as an end in itself and never as a means to some other end; and it must be the supreme such end. For example, money can be a good thing, and we rightly work to earn it; but we do not seek it as an end in itself, but only as a means to achieving some higher good, like food, clothes, house, etc.

II. What Then is, or Should be, the *Summum Bonum* of Life's Existence and Activities?

1. Aristotle said it was happiness, and he defined happiness as the activity of the soul in accordance with virtue.
2. The Stoics said it was to live in accordance with reason—reason being the purest substance that lies at the heart of the universe, a spark of which is in everyone.
3. The Epicureans said it was pleasure.
4. Hedonism is the name we give to the doctrine that the pursuit of pleasure is the highest good.

III. What Epicureans Meant by Pleasure

1. Not wild self-indulgence.
2. A life of tranquillity, peace of mind, absence of disturbance and fear; and therefore all pleasures of body and mind that are conducive to such a life.
3. One way in which they sought to attain such a peace of mind was to banish all belief that after death comes the judgment, and so to get rid of all fear of God or the gods.
4. They adopted the atomic theory, which states that all things are made of atoms. But they interpreted it to mean that at death the atoms of a man's soul, as well as those of his body, fly apart. Nothing is left. Death is the end. There will be no judgment to face.
5. It seemed not to concern them that if there is no final judgment after death, millions who have been unjustly treated and deprived of pleasure in this life, will never get justice in the life to come, nor pleasure either! Their doctrine undercuts all true values in life.

IV. The Christian Response

- A. In the world:

1. To affirm that God gives his creatures richly all things to enjoy. There is no wrong in pleasure in itself: such as the pleasure in satisfying a need like hunger or thirst; or the pleasure of smelling the fragrance of a rose which God has invented for us, not because it is necessary to keep us alive, but simply to give us pleasure; or any other genuine and healthy pleasure.
 2. But to remind people, as Paul reminded the Epicureans, that there can be no true pleasure without God and without justice; and for that very reason there will be a day in which God will judge the world in righteousness (Acts 17:31).
- B. In the church, and in our own spiritual lives:
1. It is wonderfully true that at God's right hand there are pleasures for evermore (Ps 16:11); that the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy and peace (Gal 5:22); that we can even now (on times!) rejoice with joy unspeakable and full of glory (1 Pet 1:8).
 2. But though such pleasure is good, we should not make it our *summum bonum*, our chief end. It is a by-product, not the supreme good which we seek for its own sake.
 3. Our chief end, our *summum bonum*, is God; to serve the will of him who created and has redeemed us (Rev 4:11; 5:9–10).
 4. Second Timothy 3:4–5 reminds us that in the last days men shall be 'lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, having a form of godliness, but denying its power'.
 5. There is a very real danger, then, that in our own spiritual lives and in the church, we become tainted with the outlook of the world, and make our pleasure the main goal to be aimed at, and the criterion by which all is assessed. God himself, his word, his work, will then be given a secondary place, while our pleasure becomes the dominant goal—to God's displeasure and our profound impoverishment.
 6. We need, therefore, constantly to ask ourselves: what is my *summum bonum*?

About the Author

DAVID W. GOODING is Professor Emeritus of Old Testament Greek at Queen's University, Belfast and a member of the Royal Irish Academy. His international teaching ministry is marked by fresh and careful expositions of both testaments. He has published scholarly studies on the Septuagint and Old Testament narratives, as well as expositions of Luke, John 13–17, Acts, Hebrews and the New Testament's use of the Old Testament.