


## CHRISTIAN MONOTHEISM AND ITS CHALLENGERS<sup>1</sup>

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### ABSTRACT

The Christian Trinity is a diversified form of monotheistic faith, since the apostolic faith is rooted in the Old Testament confession, to which Jesus adhered: “the Lord our God, the Lord is one.” Christianity never renounced monotheism, but built on that basis. Recently theologians (including Jürgen Moltmann) have been critical of Christian monotheism, which has overshadowed trinitarianism from Thomas Aquinas onwards. It means that today many Christian believers are practical monotheists and the Trinity has little place in spirituality. However, this is not the main challenge to Christian monotheism in the global world context of today.

**Keywords:** *original monotheism, covenant of creation, idolatry.*

<sup>1</sup> An extract from Paul Wells, *La Grace (étonnante) de Dieu. Une théologie biblique et systématique de l’alliance*, I, (Charols, F: Excelsis 2021), chap. 2.



## Introduction

Religions are legion and, at least for God-doubters, this overabundance undermines their plausibility. The multiplicity of religions seems to justify skepticism about religious practice and raise the question of how there could be one true religion invalidating the others. Since many religions imply much antagonism in ideas and also physical conflict, this factor is the root of other criticisms of religion. Why, indeed, is there such a profusion of religions? This fact explains the apparent rejection of religion itself and, consequently, the religious institutions that accompany them, at least in the West. It is frequently invoked by unbelievers to justify their attitude of disdain about “getting religion.”

Christians sometimes avoid the question of religious affiliation by claiming that faith is personal: “We do not have a religion. We have Jesus,” a statement commonly heard in evangelical circles. However, the right question to ask is: if humanity is one, created in the image of God, and with a sense of divinity, why such an astonishing diversity of beliefs?

## God and Monotheism

A century ago, Herman Bavinck—one of the great theologians of the last century—said that theories about the origin and essence of religion have drawn a blank.<sup>2</sup> It would be foolhardy to say that we are more advanced today. Ideas that recognize the notion of the sense of God take as their starting point the subjectivity of human consciousness, understood to be the driving force behind religious experience. A personal feeling of the divine, hunger for heaven, and awareness of the compelling mystery, symbols, and sacrifices, are all considered as belonging to the holy.<sup>3</sup> However, the origin of these notions is either lost in the mists of time or too present in the pervasive pantheism of “all is in God.”<sup>4</sup> In either case, the problem is that only the human dimensions of religion are envisaged. Where the influence of Immanuel Kant is present, God as such and the metaphysical origin of the sense of divinity is taken to be in another sphere. Saying that there are human thoughts about “God” is hardly a sufficient basis for the independent existence of God.

The influence of Darwinism has also strongly impacted descriptions of the origin of religion, sometimes with the scientific concern of avoiding subjectivism. In the field of theological studies, the influence of evolutionism impacted the historical-critical method that developed in biblical studies and in the interpretation it put forward about the origin of Hebrew religion.<sup>5</sup> How often have we heard the expression “primitive religion” from culturally superior westerners? Religion is taken to be an expression of human culture marked by historical development, progressing from primitive and uncomplicated forms of belief and practice to sophisticated forms. Spirituality and ethics replace the magic and

<sup>2</sup> Herman Bavinck, *Philosophy of Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1953), 159–63.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Rudolf Otto’s concept of the numinous, the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans* in Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1950).

<sup>4</sup> Without going into detail, we are thinking of the efforts made to identify the origins of religion in the wake of the philosopher G.W.F. Hegel: Schleiermacher, Feuerbach, Marx, Freud, Nietzsche, Otto, Eliade, etc. The Dane Kierkegaard reacted against this current which, for him, was far from representing true witness to Jesus Christ.

<sup>5</sup> James Barr, *Fundamentalism* (London: SPCK Publishing, 1977), 184–85; Cf. Paul Wells, *James Barr and the Bible. Critique of a New Liberalism* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2006), 260–71.

fetishism of animism. The terminus is monotheism. The development from the inferior to the superior is often seen as follows:

the magical (*mana*) >> animism >> polytheism >>  
henotheism (a superior god) >> monotheism

Thus, in Israel, monotheism (even if faith in the one God was never totally pure)<sup>6</sup> succeeded a religion in which Yahweh was one among many gods, a progress compared to polytheistic antiquity and fertility religions with their struggling pagan deities.<sup>7</sup>

The evolutionary pattern implies that humanity slowly emerges from religious infancy. This was a strong point for the death-of-God theologies popular at the end of the last century; the stage beyond monotheism is being free from the idea of God altogether. For this reason, Zen Buddhism was considered to be the most evolved of religions, recognizing the finality of ultimate nothingness. At present, few scholars would hold to a strict evolutionary view of the origin of religion; they prefer more concrete social or psychological interpretations. Two problems exist, however, besides the fact that the construction of a historical development says nothing about the reality of God. Firstly, evolutionism contradicts the biblical idea that there is a sense of the Godhead in human consciousness from the beginning, which is not a development from more primitive expressions. Secondly, in fact, a strictly linear development is not observed in cultures or religions.<sup>8</sup>

## Original Monotheism

Original monotheism is a term that describes the religion of human beings as creatures of God, formed in the divine image at the beginning of time. It was the religion of the Creator-God in the earthly Edenic paradise, and it will be the religion at the end in the light of redemption, in the new Jerusalem, when “every knee shall bow in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue shall confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”<sup>9</sup>

Unlike the historical approaches to the origins of religion described above, the notion of an original monotheism has some bonuses, not the least of which is that it lines up with the historical and cultural development presented in the Pentateuchal narrative (before critical deconstruction and reconstruction).<sup>10</sup> Originally, God encounters man as the Creator

<sup>6</sup> N. T. Wright describes Jewish belief in the 2nd Temple period as a creational monotheism. It presented a God who had made the world, and who was therefore to be distinguished from four other conceptions of divinity that might claim to be ‘monotheistic’, and from at least one conception that did not. N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (London: SPCK Publishing, 2013), 248–50.

<sup>7</sup> According to historical criticism, whose methods are, from our point of view, outdated and open to criticism, monotheism appeared in Israel with the prophets in the 8th century B.C. The critic reconstructs the sources of the Old Testament texts: the J source corresponds to the advent of classical monotheism. The P and D sources are considered late compositions and confirm monotheism in its exilic and post-exilic form. More primitive manifestations of religion are identified in the animistic, polytheistic or henotheistic clues found in the texts, for example, Ex 1:12, 15:11, or in Ps 86:8, 95:3, 96:4, 135:5, 138:1, etc.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Winfried Corduan, *Neighboring Faiths. A Christian Introduction to World Religions*, Downers Grove (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2012), 32–40 for a detailed presentation and critique.

<sup>9</sup> Phil 2:10–11.

<sup>10</sup> The theory of original monotheism was suggested by a German priest Wilhelm Schmidt who developed a cultural-historical method. He published 12 volumes on the origin of the idea of God, *Der Ursprung Der Gottesidee* (Münster: Aschendorff, 1912) summarized in English in *The Origin and Growth of Religion* (London: Methuen, 1931). Cf. Gavin D’Costa, *Christianity and World Religions* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 95–101; Winfried Corduan, *In the Beginning God: A Fresh Look at the Case for Original Monotheism* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2013), 2013; Daniel Strange, *For Their Rock Is Not as Our Rock. An Evangelical Theology of Religions* (Leicester: Apollos, 2014), 101–50.

and covenant partner. Cain and Abel recognized this by offering sacrifices after the fall. The original monotheistic knowledge, which involved personal contact with God, a perception of God in the conscience, and the all-encompassing witness to God in creation, was not obliterated by the fall. Tradition and transmission from parent to offspring, family to family, and tribe to tribe are indicated but the genealogical generations of Genesis. From the first chapter of Genesis to chapter 11, when civilization was developing in the midst of past time, neither polytheism nor idolatrous paganism describes the religious activities of man, according to the testimony of the biblical stories.

The religious observance of human beings after the fall and before the flood exists according to the covenant of creation by recognition of God or, on the other hand, by rebellion against him. Like the disobedience of the first parents, evil proliferates by the creature's opposition and disobedience to God.<sup>11</sup> At the time of the dispersion of the Tower of Babel, which is difficult to fix in a historical chronology because of its sheer antiquity, religious unity exploded, reflected in linguistic disorder.<sup>12</sup> The shift to polytheism enters following Babel, with the appearance of mythological divinities and idolatry. This reconstruction of the development of religions is in opposition to commonly received views today, which have other presuppositions.<sup>13</sup> However, it seems plausible in relation to the biblical narrative, taking into account the principles of development observed in world cultures. If evolutionism contains an element of truth by suggesting progress from the simple to the complex, why suppose, in the religious domain, that polytheism would be its primordial expression and monotheism the complex development? The opposite appears more plausible. Idolatry, whether polytheistic, animistic, or magical, multiplies as it destroys the one into the many. This disintegration reflects how a sinful culture develops. The great civilizations and their cultures decay as a result of disunity and schisms that plague them. The way evil and sin grow in the world follows a pattern and never abates but always deteriorates. As Abraham Kuyper commented: "The antithesis between true and false theology indicates that the true must precede the false, and that idolatry can only be a *deterioration*. As with any deterioration, some elements of the original state of integrity may still remain."<sup>14</sup>

The proliferation of religions in the world is due to the fracture and disintegration of monotheism. An underlying primitive monotheism sometimes persists behind the polytheism and animism in the tribes of Africa, Australia, or North America, accompanied by a rudimentary belief in the existence of a Creator. Some of the Hindu Upanishads have monotheistic undertones.<sup>15</sup> The religions of Zoroaster or Mohammed are examples of reform movements that are One God-conscious and call for a renewed recognition of

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<sup>11</sup> Gen 6:5-8 speaks of wickedness and violence, but not of idolatry. Babel's project is "to make a name for itself", expresses the pride that characterizes primitive rebellion, Gen 11:4.

<sup>12</sup> Strange, *For Their Rock Is Not as Our Rock*; Cf. the commentary by F. Delitzsch, *The Pentateuch*, vol. I (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1878), 172-76, 179; and John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Ford Lewis Battles and John T. McNeill (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), I.xi.8.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. for example Yves Lambert, *La Naissance Des Religions. De La Préhistoire Aux Religions Universalistes* (Paris: Fayard/Pluriel, 2014).

<sup>14</sup> Abraham Kuyper, *Principles of Sacred Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968), 254.

<sup>15</sup> The Upanishads (originating between the 8th and 5th century B.C.) are the texts of the Hindu religion and are part of the Veda (sacred writings).

the supreme God.<sup>16</sup>

## Monotheism, Religions, and Violence

Religions are often accused of being the root of human violence and animosity; monotheistic religions, it is said, by their very nature, give rise to violent conflict. Is that really the case? Another answer is found in the perspective of the biblical narrative of origins.<sup>17</sup>

In the beginning, there were no *religions* in the plural at the time of creation. There was only one God and one faith in the Creator. Man's rebellion against God results in the multiplicity of religions, forms of devotion, sacrifices, and beliefs that arose after the dispersion of Babel. When, after the fall, in Genesis 4, Cain and Abel brought their offerings to God, they do so in two different manners, one being acceptable to God and the other not, leading to the first murder. This tragedy contrasts two antithetical religious attitudes, between natural religion and spiritual religion. Man in the fallen state, is sinfully sectarian and opposed to God. Harmony both with God and with the neighbor is broken; the multiplicity of religions is the consequence of this sectarianism. Sin is the prime factor in opposition and division, and it expresses itself above all in religious acts.

For Christian revelation, the different religions express man's natural antipathy to God, because they depart from the truth of the covenant established between God and man at the beginning of creation. Monotheistic biblical revelation is the opposite of the noblest forms of religious aspiration. Antipathy towards God results in violence towards others. If the tribalism of premodern societies was a source of violence, and if, in the West nationalism even more than religion has been the cause of war, it is nevertheless undeniable that religions provide a pretext for violence.<sup>18</sup> However popular it may be to make religion the origin and cause of all violence, it smacks of overkill: like nationalism or racism, religion is an *occasion for* conflict and division rather than the *cause* of it. The root of human animosity lies in the opaque mystery of evil. Religious groups do not have a monopoly of violence; it occurs whenever a human being considers the neighbor as a rival and seeks to exploit or exclude them.

One of the most repeated criticisms of Christianity is that the Christian God never really was free of the influence of the Old Testament. The "barbaric Christian God" is emblematic of religion as a major source of violence. However, the biblical account allows for a completely different interpretation of the origin of violence. The original order of creation promotes balanced relations with the Creator, the neighbor, and the ecosphere. Also, in this situation, the primary law is to love the Lord, other human beings, and the creation itself. Obedience in love excludes sacrifice, which appears only after the fall because of sin and the need for atonement and restoration.<sup>19</sup> The prohibition institutiona-

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Strange, *For Their Rock Is Not as Our Rock*, 40–46 for more details.

<sup>17</sup> Paul Wells, *Cross Words. The Biblical Doctrine of Atonement* (Fearn: Christian Focus, 2006), 80–92.

<sup>18</sup> D'Costa, *Christianity and World Religions*, 74 suggests against the theses of "religious violence" that the driving force behind the wars in Europe was not "religion" but the sovereign nation-state.

<sup>19</sup> When God covers the nakedness of the first couple in Gen 3:21, there is no mention of an atoning sacrifice. The word used here for "put on" is not the technical term used in the Law for "covering" sins. There is no mention of the sacrificial institution. The death of the animal must have had significance for Adam and his descendants, as shown by God's acceptance of Abel's sacrifice and rejection of Cain's in Gen 4. Obedience is part of the

lized in the tree of the knowledge of good and evil in Genesis 2:16–17 is not restrictive in its intent; rather, it proposes a positive destiny to the creature (cf. 1:29–31). Human beings are neither replicas nor equals of God, as René Girard puts it; they are his image.<sup>20</sup> The divine order reveals the nature of God as Lord. Lordship means God is so different to man that it rules out the possibility of discord and rivalry. The cycle of human life is oriented towards what is good. Man's original sin, as a transgression of the law of love and justice and a rejection of the good, is consequently an act of sacred violence *directed against God*. Presumption and pride are the roots of the sin of violence. Through rebellion, the human being introduced aggression into God's good creation, overturning its order, and aspiring to power and control of everything. Relationships with the Creator, other humans, and the non-human world are now characterized by exploitation which aggravates sinfulness. This is how Scripture describes the root of social and ecological problems. The problem is in the human affections, in alienation from God, and not in Christianity or any other religion.

Against all expectation, *God himself* is the "first victim" of the violence of sin, even if, in our usual understanding, the word is synonymous with weakness and helplessness. God is the victim of human rejection in an *ethical* sense because the tables are turned against their giver. Evil is injected into the good creation by the expropriation of the Lord's property rights over man and creation. Original monotheism structurally excludes rivalry, but, after the fall, animosity against God and against others rears it the currency of human commerce.

In this way religion too becomes a propitious breeding ground for violence against others; human culture and ideologies fare similarly.<sup>21</sup> Exclusion of the other in sibling rivalry, is the motor: man is a wolf to man, but also mentally to God.<sup>22</sup> This is why religions, in the plural, are idolatrous and an affront to the one true God. The rivalry between multiple human religions is not the *cause of* antagonism and conflict. It is the *consequence* of a sacred rebellion against the one true God. False sacrifices and innocent victims are the litmus tests of the rejection of God's creational blessings of life and peace and of the present human quest for a way back to the garden.

### Three "Religions of The Book"

It is often remarked that Judaism, Christianity and Islam constitute a species different from other religions. Even if all religions have their sacred texts these three are, in a special way, religions of the book, from which they derive their specific character. The book makes known the name of God in divine revelation; it constitutes a founding narrative providing the framework for historical explanation of God's ways with men. Laws to be observed

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created order in the biblical narrative, sacrifice appears after the fall. God desires obedience not sacrifice. 1 Sam 15:22, Ec 4:17, Hos 6:6-7, Am 5:21ff, Matt 9:15, 12:7. Cf. Heb 10:5, 8, Ps 40:7-9.

<sup>20</sup> The French anthropologist René Girard considers the exclusion of the other as the litmus test of religious violence. *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2001) is a good introduction to his thought. Cf. *Violence and the Sacred* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013). For Girard, the first murder of Abel by Cain is the beginning of human history and of a culture of violence. Like other theories on the origin of religion and violence, Girard's theory, despite its positive aspects, goes too far in this direction.

<sup>21</sup> Bernard-Henri Lévy, *Le Testament de Dieu* (Paris: Grasset, 1979) commented on the opposition between monotheism and human barbarity. Monotheistic understanding excludes violence.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Georges Rouault's painting, *Homo homini lupus* (Man is a wolf to man): The Hanged Man, 1944.



and theological applications for faith and life are a consequence of knowing God. “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.”<sup>23</sup>

What are the similarities and differences between these three religions? Can we avoid the suggestion that all three are fundamentally one, or that the important thing is not to seek the truth in one of the three, but acting with sincerity and love towards all? This important question for a multicultural situation was already raised in the 18th century by Gotthold Lessing, with whom Voltaire crossed swords.

Is Christianity, then, simply another religion of the book, or does it have something specifically transcendent that demands our allegiance? Christianity stands historically between Judaism, from which it issues, and Islam, which issues from it. The difference with Judaism and Islam is that the Christian texts of the New Testament complement and extend those of the Old Testament and precede the Qur’an by six centuries.<sup>24</sup> Islam is the only major world religion to have emerged after the coming of Jesus Christ, with Muhammad profiling himself as the last prophet, and the key to the previous ones. Islam stems from Judaism and Christianity; for this reason, it is considered by some critics as a sectarian offshoot. In a sense, Islam stands historically in relation to Christianity as Christianity does to Judaism, although Muslims will find this way of looking at it offensive.

The closeness of the religions of the book is, however, more apparent than real, even if they seem to outsiders like sibling enemies. When examined, they have different conceptions of God, revelation, divine law, sin and the fall, man, salvation, and the future. The major break lies in the incarnation and resurrection of Jesus, fundamental events that distinguish Christian revelation from both Judaism and Islam. The central reality of the New Testament is not so much a founding event, although it is that, as a *person*. The biblical story progressively focuses on the historical figure of Jesus, his life, passion, crucifixion, and resurrection. It was on the cross that Jesus put a seal on his ministry when he proclaimed that everything had been accomplished. Subsequently, on two occasions after his resurrection—to the couple of disciples on the road to Emmaus and then to all his gathered disciples—he interpreted his work as the fulfilment of what had been written earlier in the Old Testament.<sup>25</sup> A historical and personal perspective is specific to the witness of the New Testament, which does not formulate a list of moral principles or insider wisdom, but a word that announces the coming of the end times in Jesus.

No one claims that Muhammad fulfilled the Qur’an or Buddha fulfilled the sacred texts of India, and no one, except Christ, claims to have fulfilled the Old Testament. That is the central witness of Jesus himself throughout the Gospels; he acts to fulfil his Father’s purpose, even in the words spoken at Golgotha. Orthodox Judaism still awaits the coming of the promised Messiah to bring about the reign of God and to deliver his people. For Islam, Jesus is not the last prophet, but the penultimate one of many. The specific claim of

<sup>23</sup> Pr 9:10, 1:7, Job, 28:28, Ps 111:10.

<sup>24</sup> Muslims believe that the Qur’an was revealed verbally by God to Muhammad, through the angel Gabriel, over a period of about 23 years, beginning on December 22, 609 CE, when Muhammad was 40 years old, and ending in 632, the year of his death. As well as this, the traditions, *Hadith*, elaborated subsequently are also important.

<sup>25</sup> Jn 19:30, Lk 24:44, 25-27.

Christianity is that it is based on a revelation fulfilled by a person. Therefore, the Christian faith is more than a religion of the book or a different form of monotheism; it is a personal appropriation of faith in one God.<sup>26</sup>

All religions seek to make the world intelligible, its origins, its *raison d'être*, the problem of man, and immortality. In the monotheistic religions, the intelligibility of the world is an expression of the intelligence of the Creator. The human being can participate in this intelligibility and play a part in it, as written revelation invites them to. However, the three monotheistic traditions, Jewish, Christian, and Muslim, differ in their understanding of the unity of God, of human sin, and of present and future salvation. The Christian faith testifies to a triune God, to trust in Jesus, dead and risen again, and to a fundamental need to be reconciled, to be healed, in him.

These fundamental differences impact the way of being and acting in the world and are expressed in the development of different cultural expressions.

## Idolatry

Wherever the majority religion is monotheistic, two interrelated and complementary problems soon show up in the culture. The first problem is diluting the confession of the one true God by idolatry and polytheism. The Lord knew of these dangers, which explains why, at the beginning of the ten words of Exodus 20, there is not only the self-identification of God and what he has done, but also a prohibition: "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt ... you shall have no other gods before my face. You shall not make for yourself a statue or any other representation ..." monotheism carries with it the temptation of slipping away into the polytheism of false gods, though making of visible idols, and eventually into pantheism.<sup>27</sup> Maintaining the confession of one God from corruption is a constant challenge, especially when mysticism is involved.<sup>28</sup>

The visibility of idolatry the Bible presents has largely disappeared from "advanced societies, or so it is thought; it is considered to belong to "primitive" religions which, for some Protestants, survive in the worship of saints or Roman Catholic relics.<sup>29</sup> This is a misunderstanding of the subtlety and subversive character of idolatry. Idolatry is the religious expression of a culture that rejects the sovereign God and substitutes forces that become objects of worship and service, whether visible or not, recognized or not. Past representations of natural realities symbolized the spiritual forces that control the cycles of the visible world. The worship of Yahweh, without images or representations, indicated that not only is God above nature, but also that he is not bound to its cycles. Hence the disgust expressed in the Old Testament polemic against the religions of the nations, which

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<sup>26</sup> Cf. Gerald Bray's remarks on this subject, Gerald Bray, *God Is Love* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2012), 432–38.

<sup>27</sup> The religions of the book all show tendencies towards pantheism. Let us think of Baruch Spinoza for Judaism, of William Blake or Paul Tillich (panentheism) for Christianity, and for Islam of mystics like ibn Arabi in the 13<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>28</sup> For a critique of mysticism in religion see Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1952), chapter IV.

<sup>29</sup> Robert Bartlett, *Why Can the Dead Do Such Great Things? Saints and Worshippers from the Martyrs to the Reformation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013).



linked the divinity and man in the same natural cycle.<sup>30</sup> Idolatry usurps the rightful place of the one God and replaces him with natural forces, sometimes of a satanic nature.<sup>31</sup>

However, cultural functions may express more subtle forms of worship and control that idolatrously exclude the one true God. Far from the crude representations of the past, the idol may symbolize the hold of evil forces over culture by concentrating worship on certain ideas, lifestyles, or stuff. Human beings are still in thrall to the elemental forces of the universe. They begin to resemble what they worship, becoming their replica.<sup>32</sup> Instead of looking up, they are obsessed with what is not God, as creaturely activities become false absolutes that replace the Creator God.<sup>33</sup>

This is the reason why separation from the world and its culture, freedom from the domination of idols by obedience to the God's law, was vital for Israel, and remains so for the Christian Church. The religion of Israel was, first of all, *decontextualization* from the dominant idolatrous culture of the pagan nations and their false gods. The peril was corruption by contamination.

It is dangerous to consider that idolatry no longer exists, under the pretext that we are no longer "primitive." On the contrary, people become primitive and obsessed whenever they replace the true God with false imitations, at the beck and call of the creature and not the Creator. It is hardly necessary to refer to sex, drugs, and rock 'n' roll to highlight the idolatrous spirit of the modern world; there are more subtle and pernicious temptations. Max Weber, in his study on *Domination*, pointed out a century ago the religious character of the power of the new "charismatic" political leaders who were to dominate the 20th century.<sup>34</sup> The *Führerprinzip* defines the saviour-leader as a sovereign authority to whom a mythological cult is dedicated as the redeemer of the nation, in a political religion. The ideologies of marxism and fascism of Lenin, Stalin, Hitler, Mussolini, Franco, Pol Pot, and Mao, were forms of idolatry demanding unquestioning obedience and the suppression of opposition. These were the idols that led the world to disaster during the last century as the "Caudillos" and "Helmsmen" led their slaves to the slaughter. Today, power is still an idol, and even if it takes different forms, it is still the Evil One who leads the dance. Nature abhors a vacuum, as the old saying goes, and so does the human heart. God created human beings to live in communion with him and when the heart is not filled with praise, it is quickly filled with substitute gods. People focus their lives on things that attract them in this world, to the point where they become our absolutes, idols, supplanting the one true God. Sinners are certainly not aware of this, or that idolatry is the source of enslavement. The heart is filled with what cannot satisfy. On the other hand, to confess and honor God's name is to recognize and serve the King of all things in willing service, with gratitude for

<sup>30</sup> Ps 115:4-8, 135:15, Isa 40:18-25, 44:15-17, Jer 10:3, Hab 2:18.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. Strange, *For Their Rock Is Not as Our Rock*, chapter 5; Calvin, *Institutes*, I.xi, 61-75.

<sup>32</sup> Gregory K. Beale describes how in *We Look Like What We Worship. A Biblical Theology of Idolatry* (Leicester: Apollos, 2008).

<sup>33</sup> Herman Dooyeweerd, *In the Twilight of Western Thought* (Toronto: Paideia Press, 2012), 187ff. Cf. Bob Goudzwaard, *Idols of Our Time* (Leicester: InterVarsity Press, 1984). Also the section on the perversion of the relationship with the Absolute and the formation of idols, which is close to Dooyeweerd's analysis, in Wilfried Daim, *Transvaluation de La Psychanalyse. L'Homme et l'Absolu* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1956).

<sup>34</sup> Max Weber, *Domination* (Paris: La Découverte, 2015). Weber develops a distinction between three major modes of exercising power and authority: traditional domination, bureaucratic domination, and charismatic domination. The latter promotes the "great helmsmen" of totalitarianisms.

what he has done, including in others, in our own persons made in his image and in lives lived to his glory. The fruit of this worship is God's blessing, as David expressed in Psalm 37:25: "I have been young, I have grown old; and I have not seen the righteous forsaken, nor his seed begging for bread."

## **Which Way to God?**

Other than the seduction of idolatry, the second issue for Christian faith as a monotheistic religion over against other religions, is the challenge of polytheism. Can the claim that there is only true religion, an attitude that easily becomes a fundamentalist exclusivism, be maintained? It seems implausible, intolerant or even dangerous, at a time when the egalitarianism of "political correctness" banishes any form of cultural superiority. Can a religion pretend to a monopoly on the truth? Is there only one way to God? Can an exclusive interpretation about the truth of the cross of Jesus Christ be credible in light of the many world religions? Has the "one way" discourse passed its sell-by date?

Inclusivism, pluralism, and exclusivism are three basic positions that present different answers to these questions about the number of paths to salvation. The first two are quite recent to Christianity, which has traditionally expressed a preference for the third position.

## **Inclusivism**

Because of relativism with regard to truth, particularly in the present "post-truth" culture, many people, including some within Christianity, are inclined to inclusivism, which implies a compromise of the confession of monotheism. Certainly, there is one true God; no one is saved who is not saved by him. However, the conditions and ways of access to this one salvation are thought to be numerous. Religions offer many paths, but all lead to the same summit. God is the final goal of every sincere and honest quest. We can pray together with those of other faiths, because even if religions have different expressions, prayer is addressed to God, who welcomes all. Inclusivism is universalist; all will be saved, for God is love, and Christ is somehow behind the all the aspirations to salvation.<sup>35</sup> The perspective of this mountain is pleasing to many. It recognizes the importance of human effort required to make the climb, and it supposes that those who make the effort will reach the destination.

## **Pluralism**

Pluralism is slightly different, because it is more subjective than inclusivism. It recognizes the value of all religions, without exception, and concludes, against monotheism, that there are many different valid revelations. It is the religion of "my truth." The divine reality at the summit of all the mountains is hidden by the fog, God being mysterious and ultimately unknown. Each and every person pursues their own path up the mountains;

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<sup>35</sup> This attitude is very often present in the texts of the Ecumenical Council of Churches since 1970, in the interreligious dialogue, after the end of the Barthian period.

Christ is one path alongside many other paths. Spiritual inspiration is important and rewarding across the board, and since all are equal, there is something to be learned and appreciated in every religion. Religious pluralism advocates openness. We can pray together with others, but each to their own in addressing God. Syncretism tolerates and respects the traditions of others.<sup>36</sup>

## Exclusivism

Few words are more distasteful than exclusivism which evokes a shut-door situation. Because of misunderstanding, it might be best not to use it even though we have no theoretical quibble with it, and replace it with “open Christ-centeredness,” which is a little more complex, but has practical advantages. The words of Jesus in John 14:6 provide the key text: “I am the way, the truth and the life; no one comes to the Father except through me.” It is difficult to avoid an exclusivism of *means* and *ends* in this statement: Jesus is the only way to go, and the Father is the only end of this way. Consequently, Christ alone implies faith in him alone. Jesus is the only one who saves, and Jesus is the only one who *claims to save*.

However, this faith implies no restriction as to how many are called. Christ is for the world, the apostles are sent into the world, and the invitation to the cross is universal, being for all. It is, therefore, urgent to respond and find oneself “in Christ” by faith. However, if the Gospel is for all, it must be recognized that not all have faith and that it is those who claim and confess it who are on the one path. Believers will only pray in the name of Christ, and with those who confess his name and salvation. Two decisive moments are to be distinguished: the *accomplishment of salvation* and the *reception of salvation*.

Christ-centered exclusivism implies openness in the call (a free offer of the Gospel) and the necessity of reciprocation in faith. If the first has a universal aspect, it is not the case with the second; the reception of salvation is only through personal faith in Christ. Reciprocation in the acceptance of the call is serious business.

This does not mean that Christians are inclined to denigrate the religion of others, to have an intolerant attitude towards them, or to look down on their life experiences. One may recognize glimmers of truth everywhere as a result of the presence of the Holy Spirit. These elements of truth are echos of the fact of creation in general revelation and conscience, and are the fruit of God’s common grace to all.<sup>37</sup> As Henri Blocher states: “Religions *as ways* do not lead to salvation, even if glimmers of truth shine in them. Those who are touched by redemptive grace in availing themselves of the witness of general revelation may be helped by these glimmers, but they are saved in *spite of* their religion taken as a whole, as a way.”<sup>38</sup>

<sup>36</sup> For example, Yann Martel’s novel and the movie “The Life of Pi”.

<sup>37</sup> Barthian missiologist Hendrik Kraemer’s classic book *The Christian Message in a Non-Christian World* (New York: Harper, 1938) presents this position.

<sup>38</sup> Henri Blocher, “Le Christianisme Face Aux Religions: Une Seule Voie de Salut?,” in *Conviction et Dialogue: Le Dialogue Interreligieux*, ed. Louis Schweitzer (Charols: Excelsis, 2000), 169.

Finally, Christian monotheism must remain consistent with itself. Every human being is continually in the presence of their Creator, whose unique witness summons them to bow the knee in acknowledgement of the presence of the one true God. One God monotheism does not imply many revelations, but rather one revelation in creation and in the redemption of creation. As the apostle Paul says: "One Spirit ... one Lord ... one God and Father of all."<sup>39</sup> That is why there is one body, one faith, and one baptism and why "God is above all, among all, and in all." Divine unity is reflected in the unity of salvation and of Christ's people who live in hope.

Lesslie Newbigin tried to reach a reasonable compromise. We leave readers to judge how satisfying this is:

It has become customary to classify views on the relation of Christianity to the world religions as either pluralist, exclusivist, or inclusivist... [My] position is exclusivist in the sense that it affirms the unique truth of the revelation in Jesus Christ, but it is not exclusivist in the sense of denying the possibility of the salvation of the non-Christian. It is inclusivist in the sense that it refuses to limit the saving grace of God to the members of the Christian church, but it rejects the inclusivism which regards the non-Christian religions as vehicles of salvation. It is pluralist in the sense of acknowledging the gracious work of God in the lives of all human beings, but it rejects a pluralism which denies the uniqueness and decisiveness of what God has done in Jesus Christ.<sup>40</sup>

## Conclusion

Human beings are perplexed by the thought of the afterlife, caught between hope and uncertainty that engenders fear. Consequently, they are troubled by religious belief, either to reject it virulently, or to seek out a belief that appeals to personal aspirations. Human beings are by nature religious, driven to believe in a god, to worship, and to look to faith to give meaning and direction to life. The history of humanity bears witness that religion is a quasi-universal phenomenon until quite recently; even denial of it enhances its importance in a strange way. The quest for God has been and remains formative in the stages and scenes of life, offering hope of immortality and proposing codes that distinguish good from evil in people groups. This is the case because all religion echoes the religion of the Creator, the one true God.

However, monotheism does have inherent limitations. The Old Testament revelation is not complete, because it lacks the glorification of Jesus Christ. Its coherence comes from symbols, types, and prophecies of salvation still future. It is not the full revelation of God, which is trinitarian, and consequently personal. Monotheistic religion in itself seems to stimulate obligation, ritual, guilt, and fretfulness about satisfying God, who is holy; its downside falls to formalism through which human nature seeks security. Trinitarianism, on the other hand, confesses the divine in a personal way and stimulates enjoyment and

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<sup>39</sup> Eph 4:4-6.

<sup>40</sup> Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (London: SPCK Publishing, 1989), 182-83.

delight in God, which elevates the human spirit to new heights.<sup>41</sup> The holy Trinity, one God in three persons, encourages not only the glory of God, but also holy enjoyment, something which escapes the monotheistic apprehension of an unknown God. Enjoying God is something different, as John Piper has stated so strikingly in his meditations on desiring God.<sup>42</sup> This is not a law, but a gospel duty, arising from a vision of the glory of God and the greatness of his love. When the human spirit is raised to behold the glory of God, *the consequence* is to enjoy, delight, and take pleasure in it. God is fully enjoyed when he is glorified.<sup>43</sup> Joy that begins in this life ends in eternity, where it will be complete in inexpressible happiness. However, we can make a little start here and be satisfied with that.

There are four fundamental ways of glorifying God and growing pleasure in it: (1) confessing who God is, recognising his name in a spirit of praise, resumed by the apostle in the doxology of Romans 11:36—“*From him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory*”; (2) receiving God’s revealed Word seriously, with its instruction;<sup>44</sup> (3) worshipping with God’s people glorifies God’s salvation; (4) praising God through right and sober appreciation and use of his creation.

The disposition to enjoy this does not come naturally to us, since sin has deadened the conscience of God’s glory, pleasure in it, and how to get it. Just as prayer has to be learned, so also sinners have to learn how to appreciate God. Believers are called to work at this all their lives through spiritual exercise and discipline. Three formative attitudes that stimulate learning to delight in God are:

- (1) admiring how great God is. Savouring his greatness, particularly revealed in Christ, his divinity and humanity. As J. I. Packer once said in a lecture—“Thinking great thoughts of Christ.”
- (2) delighting in God’s glory. As has been referenced, “Fear of the Lord is beginning of wisdom.” When we see that this awesome God is our Saviour, intimacy transcends fear in a profound appreciation and respect for all God is, his ways, and works. Enjoyment is found by taking pleasure in being able to know and have communion with *this* God.
- (3) thankfulness to God. All that God gives us we aspire to receive with thankfulness and joy: happiness and hardship alike. We are to count it all joy, even when we are put to the test for the sake of the Gospel. Even in the bad times, God is found to be supremely good. The valley of Baca, of dearth and drought, becomes a spring, and God’s children go from strength to strength before finally appearing in Zion.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> The monotheism of the Old Testament is not a rigid but a variegated or diversified monotheism. It expresses a principle of oneness, but allows diversity in practice, as illustrated by the presence of God, the Spirit and the Word in the first chapter of Genesis. The Trinity will be presented in chaps. 13 and 14.

<sup>42</sup> John Piper, *Desiring God: Meditations of a Christian Hedonist* (Colorado Spring: Multnomah Press, 2003).

<sup>43</sup> Enjoyment as a *consequence* is different from enjoyment as an *instrument of* or a *means to* the glory of God. I rather think that Piper instrumentalizes enjoyment as glorifying God.

<sup>44</sup> Ps 73:24-28.

<sup>45</sup> Ps 84:5-7.



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