

post-World War II collapse of colonialism. The rise of Asian nationalism created a new sense of ethnic and religious pride, while to many, the preternatural Buddhist concept of tolerance seemed more in keeping with mankind's needs in the advent of the nuclear age.

In 1989, Buddhists number 320 million, or 6.2 percent of the world's people. Buddhism is still the predominant belief of much of the Far East, from Manchuria to Java, Central Asia to the islands of Japan.

Matching, and perhaps surpassing, the recent resurgence of traditional Eastern religious belief is the modern mutation known as the New Age movement. A spiritual hybrid, New Age incorporates the essence of Eastern mysticism with diverse occult practices, from clairvoyance to channeling, astral projection to astrology. The New Age movement does, however, reflect a definitive Western orientation, replacing the asceticism of mainstream Eastern ideology with twentieth-century hedonism. For the New Age adherent, worldly success is not incompatible with enlightenment.

Transformation of society is the open goal of the New Age movement, though propagation sometimes employs bizarre techniques. The recent "harmonic convergence" saw participants gathered across the planet in key locations, such as the great pyramids in Egypt. At an agreed moment, a global "hum" arose, in a consciousness-raising attempt to speed the dawn of the New Age.

The New Age movement sees every man as a god. But the world's fastest growing religion, and the one which poses the most serious challenge to Christianity, is noted for its strict monotheism—Islam. It has been argued that the seventh century A.D. Arabian prophet Muhammad's vision was to give his people a contextualized version of the monotheism which he saw among the Christians and Jews living in and around Arabia. But while Christians can say, "The word became flesh," Muslims say in effect "the word became book," that is, in the *Quran*. The word *Islam* means "submission," submission to the will of God.

Islam is the only faith besides Christianity which claims to be a universal religion, and in fact, the one and only true religion. Incorporated in the Islamic belief system is a fervent missionary zeal, which has spread the faith to over nine hundred million followers. The world is 17.5 percent Muslim, with the largest numbers concentrated in countries ranging from Morocco to Indonesia.

Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, and the New Age movement are not the only religious challenges to Christianity at the end of the twentieth century. Another 9.6 percent of the world's population is involved in a variety of other faiths, from various ancient and new Asian religions, to Judaism, Sikhism, and African tribal religions. What is the challenge of these faiths to the third of the world that considers itself Christian?

Before any person can be brought to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ, there must be a penetration beyond religious and cultural barriers. Instead of passing judgment from the outside, Christians need to look beneath the surface and understand other ways of life from within. Beneath the layers of culture, tradition, and dogma, there remains in each person the fundamental desire to know the truth. And across the globe, God's truth is penetrating to the hearts of the people all around us.

THE CHALLENGE OF OTHER RELIGIONS I

The Challenge of Other Religions

Colin Chapman

When we speak about "other religions," we are speaking about people who make up two-thirds of the human race. Since a large proportion of them are poor and hungry, it's hardly an exaggeration to say that two of the most important issues we have to tackle at this Congress are poverty and other religions. In our concern for the two billion who haven't heard the gospel, we have to reckon not only with the situations in which they live, but also with the religions to which they already belong.

But why do we consider other religions a "challenge"? Part of the reason is because they have worldviews which conflict at many points with our own, but also because instead of disappearing or disintegrating, as some of our forefathers thought they would, almost all of them have grown in numbers, and at least one of them has its own vision of winning the world.

How do we attempt to discuss the challenge of other religions? It's not enough to simply work out strategies for reaching people of other faiths. While we set about that huge task, or perhaps even before we do so, we need to do some hard thinking about other religions in general. Their very existence, their numbers, their vitality, and their resistance to the Christian message should force us to wrestle with the difficult theological questions which the church as a whole in the twentieth century has been slow to face. We need cool heads as well as warm hearts!

Where do we begin? Because the subject is so vast and complex, I have prepared some discussion materials to go with this address which suggest ways of mapping out the ground and isolating the crucial questions. It includes case studies from different parts of the world, illustrating some of the dilemmas which Christians face today in relating to their neighbors of other faiths ("Feeling the Dilemmas"). It then addresses how we should interpret the statistics ("Interpreting the Statistics"). The next section deals with deciding what's different and special about the context in which we approach the subject today ("Understanding Our Context"). Finally, we outline a whole range of questions which need to be faced ("Asking the Right Questions").

Let's take four of these major questions and explore briefly how we can use the Scriptures to help us to find relevant and appropriate answers.

What Is Our Theology of Other Religions?

Evangelical Christians tend to emphasize passages in Scripture which present other

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religions in a negative light. In the Exodus, for example, God brings judgment on the gods of Egypt (Numbers 33:4). At Sinai he declares, I am the Lord your God, . . . You shall have no other gods before me” (Exodus 20:2–3). The people are not to copy the religious practices of the Canaanites “because in worshiping their gods, they do all kinds of detestable things the Lord hates” (Deuteronomy 12:31). And the psalmist knows that “all the gods of the nations are idols, but the Lord made the heavens” (Psalm 96:5).

Is the total picture throughout Scripture as clear-cut as this? Genesis 1–11 teaches a theology of the nations, in which Yahweh is no mere tribal God, but is concerned with all seventy nations. Melchizedek is described as a “priest of God Most High” (*el elyon*), and Abraham seems to identify Melchizedek’s God with Yahweh when he speaks of “God Most High, Creator of heaven and earth” (Genesis 14:18–22). This same God of Abraham communicates with an outsider like Abimelech in a dream. And Job, who lives in the land of Uz, perhaps during the time of the patriarchs, has no contact with them, and yet has personal dealings with Yahweh (Job 38:1; 40:1; 42:1). Several of the prophets have to challenge the attitudes of arrogance, superiority, and complacency which often go with convictions about uniqueness. Amos, for example, says that while the Exodus was a unique event, it doesn’t mean that God has only been at work in the history of Israel, and not in the history of other peoples (Amos 9:7). Jonah is a reluctant missionary, who finds to his surprise that people of another faith are more responsive to God than his own people (Jonah 3–4). And Malachi shocks his listeners when he suggests the sacrifices offered by their pagan neighbors may be more acceptable to God than their own careless worship (Malachi 1).

Similarly, the disciples of Jesus find their attitudes toward people of other races and faiths need to be changed. As a result of what happens to Cornelius, Peter says, “I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism” (NIV), “but in every nation any one who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him (RSV)” (Acts 10:34–35). Cornelius needs to respond to the gospel before he can experience salvation. The word *acceptable* (*dektos*) doesn’t mean “justified” or “saved.” But it says something significant about the status of individual people of other faiths who have the fear of God in their hearts.

What then is our theology of religions? We can hardly say that other religions are simply “satanic delusions,” or simply “human attempts to find the truth,” or simply “preparations for the gospel.” If we are to relate all we know about other religions today to all we find in Scripture, our theology of other religions will have to be flexible enough to include elements of all three of these explanations.

What About People Who Have Never Heard the Gospel?

This difficult question is raised partly because there is some uneasiness with the answers that have been given in the past, and partly because many liberals suspect that we’ve never really faced the dilemma or tested the logic of our answers.

In its simplest terms, the question is this: Is salvation *only* for those who consciously and openly profess faith in Jesus Christ? Are people of other faiths, before and after the time of Christ, who haven’t heard the message, excluded from the possibility of salvation?

Putting the question in these terms helps us understand why the current debate is much more complicated than it used to be. In the past, it seemed as if we had a simple choice between the traditional Christian answers and the universalism which says that everyone will be saved. But now the number of options has increased:

1. *The exclusivist* believes Christ is the only path to salvation.
2. *The inclusivist* believes that while Christ is the final and definitive revelation of God, his presence and saving activity are also found in non-Christian religions. The salvation offered by Christ can, therefore, be mediated in and through faiths other than Christianity.
3. *The Pluralist* believes that all religions provide ways of salvation which are equally valid, and that Christianity cannot claim to be either the only path (exclusivism) or the fulfillment of other paths (inclusivism).

All of us who subscribe to the Lausanne Covenant affirm that salvation comes only through Christ, and, therefore, probably place ourselves firmly within the exclusivist position. But we don’t all agree when we come to work out its implications for those who don’t have the opportunity to hear the gospel. We all agree that salvation is an undeserved gift of God’s grace which is received through repentance and articulated in response to the proclamation of the gospel. Others, however, without wanting to go the whole way with the inclusivists, have at least some sympathy with their concerns, and believe that God must have his own way into the human heart and know where there is evidence of genuine repentance of faith, even when they are not expressed in words. I hope we are willing to allow differences of this kind within our shared conviction that salvation is found in no other name (Acts 4:12).

Where do we go in the Scriptures when we feel perplexed about these difficult questions? Among other places, we go back to the promise of God to Abraham, that his descendants would be as numerous as the dust of the earth, the stars in the sky, and the grains of sand on the seashore (Genesis 13:16; 15:5; 22:17). Remember also how Jesus answers the question, “Lord, are only a few people going to be saved?” He refuses to reply in terms of numbers, and instead challenges us to make every effort to enter through the narrow door, and beware of an unhealthy concern about numbers. People from every corner of the earth will be at the feast, and there are going to be some surprises in heaven (Luke 13:22–30)!

To Dialogue or Not to Dialogue?

Part of the problem is that the word *dialogue* means different things to different people. For some it simply means a conversation between two or more people, while for others it implies a particular open-ended attitude to other faiths. To open up the question, we will begin at an unexpected place—with Luke’s description of Jesus in the temple at the age of the twelve (Luke 2:46–47). Jesus is with some of the religious leaders, sitting among them, listening to what they’re saying, and asking questions. His audience is amazed at his understanding and his answers.

The value of this picture is that it shows what’s involved in *any* genuine meeting of minds in dialogue. “Sitting among them” means working through our fears and trying to relax in the company of people of other faiths. “Listening to them” involves hearing their testimony, reading what they write, and watching what they present on television. We ask questions because we want to understand their worldview, and appreciate their hopes and fears. We need to pray constantly for the special discernment which enables us to see where we have common ground and where we differ, so when we have opportunities to speak of Jesus, our testimony is related to *their* questions and not only to ours.

What happens later when Jesus enters into dialogue with the religious leaders during his public ministry? The Synoptic Gospels reveal the main issues over which he is challenged, and many of these are still relevant to our discussions with people of other faiths. The Gospel of John, however, recounts dialogues of a slightly different kind which focus on the one fundamental objection to the claims of Jesus, "You, a mere man, claim to be God" (John 10:33). In this way, the fourth Gospel makes it clear that for Jesus dialogue is much more than "mutual sharing," because ultimately it leads him to the cross.

If we need an example of Paul practicing dialogue, we can't find a better one than the way he explores common ground with his audience in Athens. Although he's deeply distressed by the idolatry that he sees all around him (Acts 17:16), he doesn't begin his address on a negative note. He isn't mocking their beliefs or pouring scorn on their practices when he describes the Athenians as being "very religious." Throughout the address, he chooses his words carefully, deliberately engaging with each of the different groups in his audience. He certainly challenges some of their ideas when he says, "We should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone" (v. 29), and proclaims without apology that God "commands all people everywhere to repent" (v. 30). But Paul recognizes what is genuine in their worship and searching and begins his proclamation there, "Now what you worship as something unknown I am going to proclaim to you" (v. 23) or "What you worship but do not know—this is what I now proclaim" (NEB).

These models of Jesus and Paul in dialogue convince us that it's nonsense to try to separate proclamation and dialogue. Does our dialogue with people of other faiths ever lead in the same direction as the dialogues of Jesus and of Paul? With these examples before us, is there any reason to be afraid of the word *dialogue* or to be reluctant to practice it?

How Should We Pray About Our Witness?

Paul's prayer at the end of Ephesians has special relevance for the way we pray about the challenge of other religions. When he speaks of "the mystery of the gospel," he uses the word *mysterion*, which comes straight out of the mystery religions of his day. But for Paul the Good News about Jesus is not a mystery to be shared only with the initiated; it's an open secret to be shared with the world.

Paul then uses the word *parrhesia*, which comes out of Athens with its tradition of free speech. And he asks others to pray that he will have the courage to speak fearlessly and have the wisdom to find the right words to communicate the Good News to each different audience (Ephesians 6:19–20).

There's another context in which a whole group of Christians pray for this same gift of *parrhesia*—when Peter and John lead the Jerusalem church in prayer. They ask God to release them from their fears and loosen their tongues, "Enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness" (Acts 4:29). At the same time, they realize that their words are limited and ask God to act in his sovereign way to reveal his power, "Stretch out your hand to heal and perform miraculous signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus" (4:30).

Whatever we think about the so-called "charismatic question," I trust that we all recognize the special relevance of the Apostles' Prayer to our prayer for people of other faiths. It's often a special demonstration of the power of God mediated through Jesus that has brought Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, and people from traditional religions to trust Jesus as Lord. And if all our churches were praying regularly in these terms, we might perhaps develop a greater sense of expectancy, and begin to look for those ways

in which the Holy Spirit is working among people of other faiths and pointing them to the person of Jesus.

I want to close with a short and simple prayer, based on this and other passages of Scripture, which sums up how we can respond in prayer to the challenge of other faiths. Our thinking about the challenge of other religions should lead into prayer, and the way we pray will affect the way we act on our theology. And perhaps at the end of the day, our prayer will be the truest test of our theology.

O God, Creator, Savior, and Guide, we thank you that you have created all people in your image to seek after you and find you, and have sent your Son Jesus that we may know you as the only true God.

Look upon the people of our world in all their need, and forgive us for our failure to show your love and proclaim your truth.

Enable us, your servants, to speak your Word with all boldness, while you stretch out your hand to show your power, through the name of Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior. Amen.