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THE SCANDAL OF PARTICULARITY

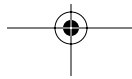
Why Has the True God Come to Only Some People at Some Times?

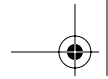
MARY OGBU IS A TWENTY-THREE-YEAR-OLD Nigerian mother of two. One year ago, after wandering into a Pentecostal church in her city, she became a Christian. Her three-year-old son had been very sick, and prayer by an elder at the church healed the boy. Mary believed the elder's testimony that Jesus was the Lord of all the gods, and that she must follow Jesus to be saved.

Now, however, Mary is confused. Her own mother, who is not a Christian, has asked her why she no longer makes sacrifices to the "orishas," Nigerian deities of nature and spirit. "And Mary," her mother asked, "why can't you worship both the orishas *and* Jesus?"

Mary had grown up believing that the skies and earth were full of all sorts of spirits and gods and demons. She had seen their power. People she knew had gotten sick, and some had died, after witch doctors had put curses on them in the name of those spirits and gods. Now that she was a Christian, she believed that Jesus' dying on the cross saved her from hell. But what about all the spirits and gods? Where was Jesus in relation to them? And where did they come from in the first place? Mary was confused.

Shang is a history professor in southern China. His specialty is the history of India and the Middle East. Three years ago, while studying for the second time at an American university in the Midwest, he became a Christian.





Shang had been an atheist before he came to faith. He remembers fending for himself for several years as a teenager during the Cultural Revolution because Red Guards had taken his schoolteacher parents to the countryside to work in the fields. His teachers in high school and university had said that religion is only for the weak-minded, and he believed them. Yet when he came to the American campus many years later, Christians invited him to church. The gospel sounded strange. But he was overwhelmed by the love that these Christians showed—especially when he had lost his wallet, and it was returned with two hundred dollars still inside.

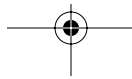
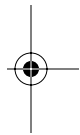
Shang was persuaded that Jesus was God in the flesh two thousand years ago, but he still wondered about other religions. His wife is still a Buddhist. Is she wrong? Or is the Buddha just another version of the same god whom Jesus represents? Someday, he tells himself, he wants to study what Christian theologians have to say about these things. These questions puzzle him.

Sarah is a soccer mom in Virginia. She was raised as a Lutheran all her life, but now she has questions that no one around her, including her pastor, seems able to answer. She was particularly troubled by Christianity's limited historical reach. It didn't start until the first century C.E. What about all the people who lived before then? And further, what about the millions and millions of people who never heard the gospel? Were they all damned because they never accepted a gospel they never had a chance to hear?

Two years ago she took a course on the world religions at a local college. Just for fun, she thought. But it became a source of frustration. It wasn't the work or concepts she had trouble with—she made an A-without too much strain. The problem was that some of the world religions seemed to have some real truth. And some of the representatives of those religions who came to class were really neat people.

All of a sudden, after thirty years of accepting her faith without much question, she was disturbed. Why was Christianity relatively local? Sure, it was the largest world religion. But so many, throughout history, had not been exposed to it. Why wouldn't God have shown it to them if it was the only true religion?

And what about these other religions, which for the first time now





seemed a bit attractive? Not that she would convert, but they had some real truth and beauty—along with elements that seemed really wrong and sometimes evil. If Jesus is the fullest form of God, why had God permitted these religions to rise and flourish? Where was God in all of this?

The Scandal of Particularity

All these questions have to do with what scholars have called “the scandal of particularity.” This means the offense that is caused by the idea that the Christian God did not reveal himself fully in all times and places, but has restricted that revelation to certain particular times and peoples and places.

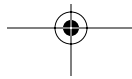
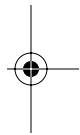
This scandal is not new. More than three centuries ago John Bunyan wondered why such a small proportion of the planet had access to the Christian gospel: “Could I think that so many ten thousands in so many Countreys and Kingdoms, should be without the knowledge of the right way to Heaven?”¹

But this question goes back further than three centuries. In fact, Christian thinkers have wrestled with it since the beginning. This is because religious pluralism was at least as great a problem then as it is now. In its first few centuries the church was confronted by as much religious diversity as exists in a major metropolis today, and its first theologians worked hard to relate Jesus to Greco-Roman religion and philosophy. In the second and third centuries (as we shall see in the chapters that follow) Irenaeus and the Greek apologists (Justin Martyr and Clement of Alexandria) developed theologies of history and revelation that understood God to be at work in non-Christian traditions—and understood Christ, the Logos, to be teaching and saving souls outside of Israel and the church.

Dealing with the Scandal in the Past

Yet for most of the first millennium, most Christians were convinced that *extra ecclesiam nulla salus*: outside the church there is no salvation. As

¹John Bunyan, *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*, ed. Robert Sharrock (New York: Oxford University Press, 1962), p. 31.





Cyprian (d. 258) put it, “You cannot have God for your Father if you don’t have the Church for your mother.”² Cyprian could say this because he shared the prevailing presumption that the gospel had been promulgated everywhere and that everyone had the opportunity to accept it. Even Augustine (354-430), who knew some African tribes had not yet heard, generally restricted salvation to the church: he believed that God had foreseen that those Africans would not accept Christ if he were offered to them.

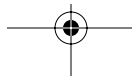
In the second millennium attitudes began to change. Abelard (1079-1142) spoke of pagan saints such as Job, Noah and Enoch. Pope Gregory VII (d. 1085) conceded that Muslims who obey the Qur’an might find salvation in the bosom of Abraham, and St. Francis (1181-1226) referred to Muslim “brothers.” Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) introduced “implicit faith” and the “baptism of desire” for those who have not heard but would have embraced the gospel. Dante’s *Divina Commedia* (c. 1314) places Avicenna, Averroes (Muslim philosophers) and Saladin (a Muslim ruler) in limbo, along with Greek and Roman sages and heroes from antiquity. Some Anabaptists (16th century) talked about an interfaith church of spiritual Semites with three covenants: Jewish, Christian and Muslim.

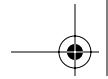
The discovery of the New World and its teeming millions of unevangelized souls stimulated new thinking about how non-Christians could be saved—by special illumination at the point of death, for example, or by evangelism after death. On these and other grounds, the likes of seventeenth-century Reformed divine Richard Baxter allowed for some outside the church to be saved.

By the nineteenth century Pius IX had redefined *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* to refer only to those *culpably* outside of the church. Vatican II (1962-1965) proceeded further to say that the religions contain seeds of the Word and “may sometimes be taken as leading the way (*paedagogia*) to the true God and as a preparation for the Gospel.”³

²*Extra ecclesiam nulla salus*, “outside of the church there is no salvation” (Cyprian *Epistles* 73.21). And a note on a similar line in *Epist.* 4.4. For a more detailed treatment of this and other related texts, see Francis A. Sullivan, *Salvation Outside the Church?* (New York: Paulist, 1992), pp. 18-24.

³*Ad Gentes* 1.3.





More Recent Christian Thinking About the Religions

For much of the twentieth century Christian thinking about the religions was dominated by the question of salvation: can non-Christians be saved? In 1983 Alan Race developed a typology that has been used to understand this question until recently: pluralism, inclusivism and exclusivism (also known as restrictivism). Pluralism is the position that there are many saviors, and Jesus is just one of them. Exclusivists contend that Jesus is the only savior, and explicit confession of Jesus as savior is necessary before one dies.

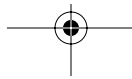
Inclusivists maintain that while Christ is the only way to the Father, explicit knowledge of him is not. They believe “good” Buddhists can be saved by Jesus if they recognize their inability to save themselves and cry out for mercy. Inclusivists say these Buddhists are casting themselves upon Christ, who is God’s mercy—but without knowing his name.

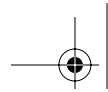
More recently this typology has collapsed, and the question of salvation has now taken a radical turn. Joseph DiNoia was the first prominent scholar to signal this new turn, and S. Mark Heim has given it its fullest explication.⁴ They have argued that inclusivism is incoherent because the religions have different goals. Inclusivism seems to suggest that other religions seek a goal similar to that of Christians: union with an infinite, personal God.⁵ How then is one to make sense of Theravada Buddhists, who don’t believe in such a God and have no such goal?

Not only is inclusivism problematic in view of the plurality of goals in the religions, but closer inspection seems to indicate that all the religions are exclusive (restrictivist, in a sense) in their claims. That is, if we look at all the philosophical and moral and liturgical dimensions of the religions, we find they all teach that their religious goals can be met by following their religion alone—by adopting their methods during this life. Hence each religion is a “one and only,” the only way to its kind of salvation. So inclusivism does not seem coherent because it assumes there

⁴Joseph DiNoia, “The Universality of Salvation and the Diversity of Religious Aims,” *World Mission*, Winter 1981-1982, pp. 4-15; S. Mark Heim, *Salvations: Truth and Difference in Religion* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1995).

⁵Of course, most inclusivist scholars are not so naive as to think that systems such as Advaita Vedanta (a Hindu philosophy) are theistic. The point that DiNoia and Heim make is that the ends of the religions are so radically diverse that it is impossible to think of them as leading by different routes to the same destination.





is only one salvation to be pursued by all the religions, when in reality there are many.

Pluralism doesn't make sense either, because it is crypto-inclusivist. It claims to believe in many goals but actually believes in only one: for John Hick, it is reality-centeredness; for Paul Knitter, orthopraxis that pursues liberation from social oppression; for Wilfred Cantwell Smith, universal common rationality and a universal quality of faith.⁶ Each of these goals is very different from what real practitioners of the religions say they are about. While real believers from different religions say very different things about the divine and how to reach it, pluralists insist they are all talking about the same thing. In effect, then, pluralists deny any pluralism of real consequence. Like inclusivists, they say there is only one end for all. For example, Gavin D'Costa has shown recently that while the Dalai Lama tells the world that no religion is the best, he also believes that only his dGe lugs school of Tibetan Buddhism sees reality in its fullness, and that one can achieve the highest level of enlightenment only by Tibetan Buddhist practice.⁷

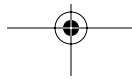
Different Salvations?

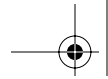
If the typology of pluralism/inclusivism/exclusivism no longer works, now what? Some Christian theologians are proposing a new way to look at whether or how non-Christians can be saved.⁸ They are saying not only that the religions teach different goals or salvations, but that there may actually *be* different salvations. These different ends are not for the same person at the same time but for different people, or for the same person at different times. And this reality of different ends may be "providentially" provided by God. In other words, Theravadin Buddhists may indeed experience nirvana, and Muslims may indeed find Paradise. But they won't experience the fullness of the triune God.

⁶John Hick, *The Myth of God Incarnate* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1977); John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1989); Paul Knitter, *No Other Name?* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1985); Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *Faith and Belief* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1979); W. C. Smith, *Towards a World Theology* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1981).

⁷Gavin D'Costa, *The Meeting of Religions and the Trinity* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 2000).

⁸S. Mark Heim, *The Depth of the Riches: A Trinitarian Theology of Religious Ends* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000).





So, they say, there are three types of religious fulfillment: lostness, imperfect and partial religious fulfillment through a non-Christian religion, and communion with the triune God—the last of which only Christian faith may provide.

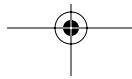
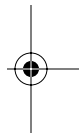
What are we to make of this new way of thinking about whether non-Christians are saved? It seems to relieve us of the tormenting idea that all those who don't confess Jesus are doomed to eternal punishment. It also helps us explain our intuition that there are all sorts of "middle" people—those who don't reject God and in fact seem to love truth and/or God, but for many diverse reasons never reach personal faith in Christ.

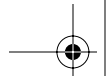
On the other hand, these theologians make very little appeal to Scripture. They make philosophical and theological arguments based on the Neoplatonic Great Chain of Being and its concept of plenitude (the idea that the cosmos must have a near-infinite number of levels and degrees of happiness). They also refer to the Christian doctrine of the Trinity that functions as a "template for diversity" (since God is differentiated among three different persons with different roles, it makes sense that there would be different kinds of salvation). They refer to Dante's circles of Paradise, in which each soul receives its dearest desire and where there are degrees not only of damnation but also of salvation.

But while this new model has some resonance with what the Bible teaches, there are problems. For example, the New Testament proclaims that every human being is a sinner and needs to be reconciled with the triune God, and that apart from such reconciliation there is "gnashing of teeth" (Mt 8:11-12; Lk 13:27-28). Yet this model suggests happy reconciliations apart from Christ. The most noted of these theologians, S. Mark Heim, also implies there is knowledge of God without the mediation of Jesus. Yet the New Testament points to Jesus Christ as the source of all true knowledge of God (Jn 1:9).⁹

The principal result of the scandal of particularity has been the worry that undeserving people would be damned. Even if we agree that we

⁹Heim claims that "the Trinity teaches us that Jesus Christ cannot be an exhaustive or exclusive source for knowledge of God nor the exhaustive and exclusive act of God to save us." Yet Heim does not wrestle with biblical texts (e.g., Jn 1:9; Acts 4:12) that suggest that Christ is the mediator of all knowledge of God and the only savior (*Depth of the Riches*, p. 134).





are all undeserving, it still seems unfair or disproportionate that some are damned for rejecting a gospel they never had a chance to accept. Most of the debate, in other words, has focused on the question of salvation.

Other Questions

But there are other questions that the scandal has raised. One is whether God is interested in those beyond Israel and the church: Does the fact that God sent the gospel only to some people at some times in history mean that he was not interested in other people in other eras?

This book is about the answers that both the Bible and the early church gave to this and the earlier questions about salvation, particularly the question about why God allowed other religions in the first place. Many readers may be surprised to learn that (a) the biblical authors and early church thinkers struggled with these questions, and (b) they came up with some sophisticated answers.

In chapters three and four we will look at how the Old and New Testaments contended with these problems. Then we will move on to early church thinkers: Justin Martyr (chap. 5), Irenaeus (chap. 6), Clement of Alexandria (chap. 7) and Origen (chapter 8).

But before we get to the Bible's answers to these questions, let us first turn to the Bible for some surprising positions its authors take on some more general questions about the religions: whether those outside the church and Israel knew anything true about God through their religions and, more provocatively, whether God's people had anything to learn from people outside the church and Israel.

