

## INTRODUCTION

THIS IS A BOOK ABOUT A QUESTION that is new to most of us today: Why are there other religions at all? If the true God is the Father of Jesus Christ, why did this God permit the rise and flourishing of other religions?

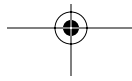
Although this question is new for us, it wasn't new for the biblical authors and early church thinkers. They had thought long and hard about this question, and came up with an intriguing set of answers. We have generally not recognized these answers, or if we have seen the answers, we have not imagined that they were answers to *this* question. Instead, reading with eyes that have been conditioned by the Enlightenment, we have overlooked them or dismissed them as ancient superstition.

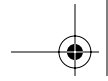
If there is one theme, or red thread, that runs through the following chapters, it is this: the biblical authors and early church theologians saw the religions not simply as human constructions but as spiritual projects as well. The religions are living and breathing beings, if you will, that have inner souls, derived in part from spiritual entities called "gods" by the Old Testament and "powers" by the New Testament. Not every bit of every religion is spiritual or directly linked to spiritual entities, but at least some parts of some of the religions are just that.

This does not rule out the presence of goodness, truth and beauty in many of the religions for the biblical authors and early church Fathers. Nor does it mean that we cannot learn anything of value from the religions.

But it does mean that this spiritual dimension of the religions, which helps answer the question above and which has been generally ignored or dismissed in academic studies of the religions, must be taken seriously if we are to understand a biblical and early Christian view of non-Christian religions.

I am not the first to advance this argument. But while this perspective



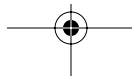


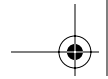
has been addressed—usually tangentially—in many articles and parts of books, I believe this is the first book-length attempt to tackle this question directly and at length. And it may be the first to find this common thread linking the biblical authors and the earliest major theologians. Much of the information I present is neither new nor startling (except to those who are not familiar with these sources), but I think this book shows lines of connection in a new light, which in turn sheds new light on the question we have posed.

Before we go any further I need to clarify something. I have posed my question in a way that will be accessible to you, my readers. The biblical authors and the rest of the ancient world, however, might not have understood talk about “other religions” as if they were distinct from other areas of life (which we call “culture” and “society” and “philosophy” and so on). They did not consider, as we have tended to believe since the Enlightenment, religion to be separate from “nonreligious” concerns. Everything in daily life and society had to do with Yahweh (in the Old Testament) or the Father and Jesus and the Holy Spirit (in the New Testament). This has implications for whether there is truth in “other religions,” a subject we will take up in a few pages, and then repeatedly in this book.

If the biblical authors did not think of religion as distinct from anything at all in life, neither did they think of “other religions” as separated from true religion. By this I don’t mean that they thought other religions were true, but that they typically did not even think in terms of “other religions.” They saw people of other nations as following other gods and therefore failing to know the one true God. We will discuss what they meant by “other gods,” but the point we need to know at the start is that the modern concept of “religion” as a domain somehow separated from the totality of life was unknown or dismissed by the ancient world. Some biblical authors might have believed there are other supernatural beings (called “gods”) in rebellion against the only true God, but none thought of “religion” in the modern sense—as a belief system that is separated from the rest of life, or of rival belief systems that can be considered apart from active loyalty to or rebellion against the true God.

Yet because I am writing for moderns and not ancients, I will talk in terms of “the religions” and hope you will remember this important ca-



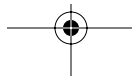


veat. When I speak in this book about biblical and early church ideas about “the religions,” I mean their ancient way of understanding religion as inseparable from all of life, and that no human beings in “other religions” can be considered apart from the real truths of the real God.

I don’t mean to imply that all the biblical authors said the same thing, or that the theologians completely agreed on the religions. There is theological diversity in the Bible on the nature and reason for the religions, and each of the four early church thinkers I consider had different perspectives, largely related to the problems of their own cultural environments. But there is a developing argument, you might say, about the spiritual nature of the religions. By “developing,” I mean it is cumulative, each chapter building on the preceding. Paul builds on what he finds in his Torah, and Justin Martyr develops what he finds in Paul and other parts of the New Testament. Irenaeus uses Justin but then goes in a different direction to try to understand historical dynamics. Clement learns from Irenaeus but innovates significantly. Origen listens to his predecessors, but adds a note of warning. While each of these four theologians has something different to say, and to some ears they might sound discordant, each voice has genuine biblical resonance. In other words, each of these early thinkers could claim, with justification, that he was teaching a biblical approach to the religions.

There are two extremes which often surface in Christian theology of the religions. One is what we might call the fundamentalist extreme. This tends to equate other religions with the demonic, suggesting that other faiths are netherworlds of unmixed darkness that should never be studied and about which there is nothing to appreciate. Christians of this persuasion think the only proper response to the religions is exorcism. Although this book highlights the biblical and early church focus on the spiritual (with emphasis on “darkly” spiritual) nature of the religions, and considers the possibility that some of the religions are animated by rebellious powers, it does not assert that this is the case for every religion, or every part of every religion. I am reminded that the history of Christianity is also interlaced with the demonic. I also highlight in these pages the biblical and early church recognition that God has left traces of his truth and beauty even in religions whose origins were problematic.

Part of the reason why many Christians today take this thoroughly





negative approach to other religions is because they take a modern approach to “religion,” which, as I have already suggested, separates religion from other aspects of life. These Christians can acknowledge truth or beauty in non-Christian “culture” or “philosophy,” and are often quick to add that because “all truth is God’s truth,” God is ultimately the source of this truth and beauty. Therefore (they would say) God can show us his truth and beauty through Plato and Mozart (who were not orthodox Christians) and non-Christian scientists—but not through non-Christian religions, lest it be suggested that people can be saved through other religions.

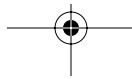
Now, I am an orthodox Christian who believes salvation comes only through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. There is salvation in no one else (Acts 4:12). But the question of who can be saved has nothing to do with the questions of where we can find truth and where that truth came from. To restrict truth to culture and science and other areas is to use a modern definition of “religion” which the biblical authors would not recognize. They did not distinguish religion from any other area of life. There were no neutral domains that provided truth or beauty apart from the one true God.

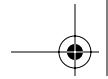
Even we moderns recognize this at least at a tacit level. When we try to distinguish what is “cultural” from what is “religious,” we often have difficulty. How can American respect for law and order, for example, be distinguished from America’s Christian heritage which prized a God who revealed his laws and judgment against those who broke them? How can East Asian emphasis on respect for elders be separated from the Confucian teaching about filial piety?<sup>1</sup>

Religion and culture, then, are not easily separated. Even moderns (and modern conservative Christians) who think religion is separated from culture concede that many things in culture are rooted in religion or have a religious dimension. At the same time they recognize some truth and some beauty in culture. This suggests there might be truth and beauty in other religions, for two reasons: (1) much, if not all, of culture

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<sup>1</sup>Some might argue that Confucianism is more ethical than religious, but the religious dimension is clear in Confucius’s *Analects*. Confucius said that Heaven was the author of his virtue and object of his prayers (7.23; 3.13; 7.35) and that nature was under Heaven’s control (16.8; 10.25).





is rooted in religion, and (2) if God is the author of truth, then all truth—no matter where it is found—must come, at least indirectly, from God. Another way of putting this is to say that if we see both truth and error in various cultures, we should not be surprised to see truth and error in various religions—since religion and culture are so intimately connected.

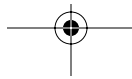
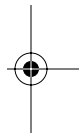
The other extreme that appears in Christian theology of the religions is what I would call “religious relativism.” This is the position that every major religion is equally true and equally false, or at least similarly imperfect in their crude approximations of the divine. No one religion, as this position would put it, is more true than another. Folks who take this position also tend to say that God is not a person who has revealed himself, so we cannot know that one religion is the true one. Instead, various human societies over time have constructed their own theologies based on their own religious experience, and the latter is always so conditioned by historical particularities that no objective knowledge of the divine is possible. At best we can say that the divine exists, but we are on very thin ice when we try to say what the divine looks like.

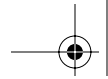
I reject this extreme as well. The real event of Jesus of Nazareth in human history and his historically-attested death and resurrection declare to the world that God has indeed revealed Himself in definitive fashion. These events also show that we can know God by knowing Jesus Christ. And by knowing Jesus Christ, we can know something of the relative truth of other religions. (This, by the way, is the key to discerning what is true and false, right and wrong, in all the religions—by measuring them against the truth of Jesus Christ.)

Each of these two extremes would cut out significant portions of the biblical and early church approach to the religions. The fundamentalist extreme would deny that anything of value can be seen in the religions, while the religiously relativist perspective would dismiss the existence of other “gods” or “powers” as pre-critical superstition.

Neither option is open to us, since those things which both options reject are found in Scripture. The Bible attributes positive significance to some aspects of other religions, while it also points to darker powers. This is why the early church theologians could discuss the religions in both positive and negative terms.

In other words, there is tension in the Bible. There are biblical reasons





for learning about and from the religions (see chap. 2). There are signs that God has used the religions to protect people from greater evil (see Clement's argument in chap. 7), and indications that the Logos has scattered seeds of beauty and truth in some of the religions (see Justin's proposition in chap. 5). There are also biblical reasons for being wary of the religions (see Origen's warning in chap. 8), because of the demonic nature of some dimensions of some of the religions (see Paul's suggestion in chap. 4). Problems come, for both biblical theology and Christian relations with non-Christian neighbors and friends, when that tension is dissolved. Either the extremes of fundamentalism and relativism resurface, or other distortions arise.

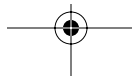
A common approach to these biblical themes in the last century has been to try to "get behind" the text to what was "really" there. For example, there is common agreement among scholars that ancient Israel believed, at least in its earlier history, in a "divine council"—other heavenly beings with whom Yahweh consulted or at least to whom He delegated certain functions. Much scholarly work was devoted to the question of which ancient Near Eastern myths this belief came from, or how it morphed over the centuries into the "myth" of rebellious gods and angels.

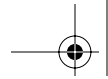
I am not concerned with those questions. My concern is to show that many biblical authors, in both Testaments, believed in the real existence of other beings or powers, and that the divine council is part and parcel of this belief. I am interested in the fact that they considered these powers to be involved in the genesis and ongoing existence of other religions and that the early church picked up and developed this view. In other words, I take a literary and theological, more than a critical-historical, approach. It matters less to me what critics think "really" happened than what the biblical authors themselves thought was happening.<sup>2</sup>

Since I believe that the Bible is the Word of God, and the Spirit therefore speaks to us through its view of other religions, I think these biblical and early church convictions cannot and should not be dismissed, and

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<sup>2</sup>In later chapters I discuss briefly the influence of surrounding cultures on certain biblical authors and the development of the Bible's treatment of the divine council. But while some critics try to determine how and why these themes developed, and distinguish confidently the mythical from non-mythical, my intent is simply to note the presence of these themes and their meaning for other religions.





that they can in fact shed new light on how Christians today can understand and relate to other religions and their devotees. And, not unimportantly, they can also tell us a little something about why there are other religions at all. At the same time, like other questions such as why God permits evil, there is far more to that question that is shrouded in mystery.

Not only is there mystery, but complexity as well. I will suggest in this book that the Bible and the early church were on to something when they pointed to the spiritual dimension of all religions. But I do not want to imply that that is all there is to the religions. Human agency and imagination are also involved. As for any phenomenon, there are several levels of explanation.

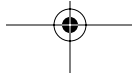
Take a lie, for example. At one level, Christians believe Satan might have had something to do with it, since he is the “father of lies” (Jn 8:44). But a human being also has a will and therefore chooses to lie. If we blame Satan, we must also blame the individual. But we can also blame the surrounding culture, if at another level it reinforces the lie with what sociologists call “plausibility structures.” So if there are untruths in other religions, they cannot be blamed solely on spiritual powers operating in or behind those religions. There are also real human choices and larger social forces.

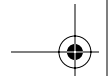
This also means that religions are caused by both natural and supernatural factors. All are ultimately under God of course, as we said before when we talked about the ancient view of “religion.” But even the ancients recognized that things happen not only by the permission and power of God but also by the will and imagination of human beings. The New Testament authors, for instance, said that Jesus was killed by the Romans and the Jewish leaders (Acts 2:36) but also by God’s will (Rev 13:8). The natural and supernatural work together in history and in the same historical events.<sup>3</sup> So too in the religions. If there are supernatural causes, there are also natural causes.

While this book focuses primarily on the supernatural powers that shape and manipulate religions, I do not mean to imply that religion is

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<sup>3</sup>I do not mean to suggest that the natural and supernatural always cooperate as distinct powers. Often, as in human willing, it is impossible to separate the divine from the human: “For it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure” (Phil 2:13).





the only domain<sup>4</sup> in which these forces operate. As Origen suggested, there may be supernatural powers at work—and in nefarious ways—in education, entertainment, politics and other kinds of culture. But this book does not discuss those possibilities.

I should also add that my treatment of these texts and issues reflects my Reformed theology. In other words, I believe in a big God who works in ways that burst all of our conceptual boxes—with contrasting approaches which sometimes seem paradoxical or even contradictory to us but which for him are no problem. Hence, the rebellion of angels who were intended to be dutiful servants was neither a surprise nor an obstacle to a God who sovereignly superintends everything for his ultimate purposes. The development of new religions that use some of his truths for purposes opposed to his declared designs—even these are woven into his ultimate design.

This also shapes my view of biblical inspiration. Because God is a big God, he can use pagan thinking to influence biblical authors in such a way that the final result in the biblical text is still exactly what he wants. If all truth is God's truth—and it is—then God can direct pagans toward light and then direct the biblical authors to use that “pagan” light in precisely the way that God wants.<sup>5</sup>

Finally, the reader will notice that I use the masculine pronoun for God. Rather than take undue space here to explain why, I have added an appendix at the end of the book for those who are curious.



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<sup>4</sup>Because I speak to moderns in a modern context, I find it nearly impossible to avoid language that suggests religion is a domain separate from other aspects of reality—a notion inconceivable for the ancients and difficult even for moderns who consider the problem. But the reader should note my earlier qualifications of such language.

<sup>5</sup>I do not mean to suggest that the Bible is simply reworked paganism—only that where there are signs of influence from other cultures, God is still the final author.

