

1-1-1998

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### Recommended Citation

Grant, Earl (1998) "Religion, The Biblical Gospel, and Conversion," *Quaker Religious Thought*. Vol. 91 , Article 3.

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# RELIGION, THE BIBLICAL GOSPEL, AND CONVERSION

EARL GRANT

## INTRODUCTION

During the closing decade of this century religious pluralism has become the focal point of much scholarly discussion throughout the world. This dominant philosophical perspective has been buttressed in part, but not wholly, by the growing missionary penetration by Eastern religions into nations once regarded as the secure locus of Christendom. New Age thinking supported by contemporary psychological thought has also entered the total fabric of Western society. Indeed, under its impact and appeal some former bastions of evangelical Christianity have tended to water down their commitment to the radical truth of the biblical Gospel. Furthermore, the ferment generated by this has caused many to feel that any critical review of the truth claims of contending religious systems should be replaced by the popularization of the Troeltschian thesis that since each separate religious tradition has adherents convinced of its absolutes, a new approach to religious study should elevate a tolerant relativism that embraces all religious values. "Pluralism seems to be of the very stuff of reality, the way things are, the way they function... there can never be just one of anything." (Hick, 1985:6)

In fact, a popular writer on cultic phenomena, J. Isamu Yamamoto, has summarized the popular mood in the following fashion: "When it comes right down to it, all religions teach the same thing. They all teach people to be good and to believe in truth; they all give people hope for a better life ahead; all religious language ultimately refers to the same reality." Then Yamamoto serves up his highly questionable conclusion: "Therefore all religions are the same." (1984:37)

This present evolution of the world into a "religious market place" where faith encounters faith or no-faith, and where mainline world religions are reaching out to sympathetic ethnic groups outside their traditional cultural boundaries, is notable in that new spiritual

movements are surprisingly effective. Even Rabbi Harold Shulweis feels that the time is long overdue for the leaders of non-Orthodox Jewry to come out of their cherished social separateness and engage in the struggle for converts. And in the midst of the increasing theological ferment that all this religious huckstering has generated, many feel that the Christian Church has its back to the wall and is being confronted as never before by an ancient issue that has taken on strikingly different dimensions of crucial relevance: "Just what is the relation of the Christian faith to the vigorous reality of religious pluralism?"

The object of this paper is fourfold:

1. We shall begin with an overall analysis of religion. Since no simple definition has ever gained widespread acceptance, we shall utilize a descriptive approach instead. Even so, we will contend that all religious systems have a common denominator and can be reduced to a few basic principles.

2. We shall then attempt a brief analysis of the biblical Gospel. The material for this analysis will be drawn from the canonical Scriptures ("a chronicle of redemption"), and not from any particular religious system tracing its roots to either the Old Testament, the New Testament, or to both Testaments. We will contend that the supreme mission of Jesus, the Son of God, was the redemption of the human race by his life of perfect obedience, culminating in his offering of himself on the Cross, and which constituted "a full, perfect, and sufficient sacrifice" for the sins of the whole world.

3. We shall then place religion in juxtaposition to the Gospel inasmuch as Scripture records its clash, a clash that climaxed in the Cross. When the Cross is taken as our focal point, the Gospel becomes the opposite of religion, not merely of false religion, but of all religion. Inevitably, this shall bring to the fore the indissoluble tension that can only be resolved by faith in Jesus Christ, although it is admitted that others have attempted varied avenues of non-biblical resolution.

4. Finally, we shall analyze the phenomenon of the process of biblical conversion. Conversion thus considered is the particular process that leads to the crisis of commitment to Jesus Christ as Lord, and that is followed by a new but related process—the Christ-life—an unending movement of the Spirit-reborn Christian toward spiritual maturity.

## I. RELIGION—A DESCRIPTIVE ANALYSIS

We have intimated above that it is impossible to develop a precise and widely acceptable definition because all definitions involve personal subjectivism and philosophical predilection. But this does not mean we are not able to utilize a descriptive approach and suggest a comprehensive overview of its constituent characteristics. To this we now turn.

### *a. Religion and definition*

The early anthropologists were convinced that religion must be defined by means of their hermeneutic of evolution. Sociologists countered by appealing to the relevance of societal structure and the efforts of its members to achieve social control through providing the values that would hold all together. Then came the psychologists with their contention that religion must be perceived in terms of the complexity of human emotions and unconscious motivations; it is a “projective system, a collective attempt to resolve the guilt and anxiety inherent in the individual personality, or common to the society.” (Freud, 1918) Contemporary anthropologists added to the complexity of defining an acceptable definition when they found themselves increasingly pressed to redefine the key concepts of culture (economic, social, political, legal, and religious) so that explanation systems might be separately developed from each. All which makes the pursuit of an acceptable overall definition a futile exercise. This brings us back to the option of the descriptive approach. We begin with a few basic principles.

### *b. Religion as a universal*

One often hears it said that people are either religious or non-religious. This is generally understood in terms of whether or not they are in association with some organized religious tradition. Actually, however, we would contend that all people are religious “whether they like it or not, or whether they agree with us or not.” Religion doesn’t necessarily express itself in conventional forms of religious manifestation, but finds expression in many other ways, such as through law, literature, music, history, art, politics, nationalism, and philosophy. Indeed, there is a religious element in all the higher activities of the human personality, whether theistic or atheistic. Even the

most primitive society has its distinct animism and folk-religion. Indeed, religion is universal because it is the expression of a universal need built into the very fabric of the human psyche.

*c. Religion as psychological expression*

There is a common denominator in all religious activity that makes it possible for us to reduce all religious expression to a few basic principles. I am personally indebted to the writings of Rev. Jakob Jocz, Ph.D., an outstanding Jewish Christian theologian (1906-1983) for insight into this dimension behind all religious expression. Jocz contended that the basic element underlying all religion is “the need for security in an unstable and ever changing world.” (1952:82) Because this need for protection (i.e., security and survival) is fundamental to human experience, the need for religion is both basic and universal.

Jocz derived from Rudolf Otto (1909) the importance of the religious experience of the numinous, the mysterious, the inexplicable. From this he developed three fundamentally human postulates: (1) the urge to name or explain the mystery of life and the universe; (2) the need to come to terms with the powers behind the universe to compensate for one’s personal awareness of separateness and incompleteness, guilt and shame, loneliness and helplessness; and (3) the urge for self-assertion in the sense that the ultimate aim of religion is to achieve personal triumph over the world outside by whatever means are available whether by ritual, sacrifice, magic, or manipulation.

People faced with the numinous, the mysterious, the unexplainable may undergo a “religious shudder,” a *Mysterium Tremendum* or sense of the presence and power of the Divine. A case in point would be the incident of Jesus calming the storm (Mark 4:35-41). The disciples are taking Jesus “to the other side” of the Sea of Galilee and a “great storm” comes up while he is sleeping soundly. In stark terror the disciples arouse him with the reproach: “Teacher, are we to drown, for all you care?” Rudely awakened, he addresses the storm with the language of an exorcist confronting the possessed: “Silence! Be muzzled!” With that the winds cease, the waves flatten, and the disciples “feared exceedingly and asked one another: ‘Who can this be?’” They must seek to identify and name the Mystery in their midst, and thereby draw closer to understanding the mystery of life.

Again, the human struggle for survival and existence involves grappling with the unknown, with its uncontrollable forces. Their only resort is to seek to propitiate the mysterious and gain control by means of manipulation or placation, or through recourse to rituals and magic. They cry out: “Is there power outside me?” Then fear surfaces and presses them to ask: “What is the significance of my experience with that which seems to haunt the universe?” The God who is conceived through imaginative thought is always markedly different from the God of biblical revelation. And this tends to multiply the diversities in the propitiatory responses, “either aesthetically by an experience of harmony; or sacramentally through the employment of ritual and magic; or else mystically by the emotional experience of identification and union.” (Jocz 1952:85)

People are more content when a sense of order pervades their lives, and they understand their place in that order. Uncertainty creates anxiety. People with no sense of order become insecure and draw back from becoming involved in life. In part, order lies in the social organizations people create. By structuring roles and relationships, they know their place in society and what is expected of them in it. This enables them to function normally within the framework of human organization.

But order lies also in being able to explain the experiences of life. As Clifford Gertz points out: There is no fear greater than the inability to explain the everyday experiences of life. Hence the importance of one’s sense of orderly causality. Many experiences, however, threaten this. When death, natural disasters, or other crises strike without warning, familiar systems of explanation that have served well in the past often fail, and this causes people to forsake the realm of natural explanation. In the West it is acceptable to turn to science to deal with diseases. But when science fails, many turn to magic or religious ritual. It is then that religion is assumed to provide linkage with the supernatural and with what lies beyond nature, thereby enabling them to gain control over events that were outside of normal control.

#### *d. Religion and God*

The biblically-oriented Christian must contend that religion is far more than a subjective psychological process. Human beings are related to eternity: “God has put eternity into man’s mind.” (Eccl. 3:11) By this we do not mean the Greek concept of “the immortality

of the soul.” Actually, immortality is of the unique essence of God (1 Tim. 6:16). It is God’s gift to those who believe in Jesus Christ. The Scriptures make a sharp distinction between the spirit in reference to man and the Spirit in reference to God. As Jocz states: “The Holy Spirit indwells man only as a guest.” (1952:87) “The Bible knows nothing of the immortality of the soul, though it knows a great deal about life after death...and for Christian theology, this issue is of vital importance. The choice is between Platonism, Realism, and Thomism on the one hand, and the Bible on the other hand.” (1952: 87-89) And yet, we must keep in mind that the God of Scripture is a seeking God. “The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork. Day to day pours forth speech, and night to night declares knowledge.” (Psa. 19:1, 2) The human response is usually to reject this witness to the Creator, but there are those who respond and reach out in prayer, seeking contact with “the Light that lightens every one” (John 1:9), the One “who fills all things.” (Eph. 1:23) A case in point would be the manner in which Cornelius, a Roman centurion, came to Christian faith (Acts 10). He is introduced in Scripture as a “devout man who feared God with all his household, gave alms liberally to the people, and prayed constantly to God.” (v. 2) We do not know what brought him to this point in his spiritual pilgrimage. He certainly was not a believer in Jesus Christ. Quite possibly some contact with the Jewish people awakened his instinct to pray. As he opened his heart to what lay “out there” beyond him, he became increasingly more God-conscious, more reverent, and more eager to assist the poor. And God did not ignore all this, for he always rewards the diligent seeker (Heb. 11:6). In this case God sent Peter to tell him about Jesus Christ. The story ends with God sending the right person with the right information at the right time. Cornelius and his household consciously responded with clear understanding of the Gospel, with genuine repentance and true faith, and the Spirit of God sealed their relationship with God. This brings us to the essence of the biblical Gospel.

## 2. THE BIBLICAL GOSPEL

One cannot adequately understand the radical nature of the Gospel apart from the cumulative witness of both the Old Testament and the New Testament. Without the biblical record of the sequence of Creation, the Temptation, and the Fall, followed by the long and

tragic history of Israel, one is hardly prepared for the New Testament significance of the redemptive achievement of Jesus of Nazareth. Central to this biblical witness are three major elements:

*a. The Universality of Sin*

There was a time when the human race in its innocence was capable of personal relationship and spiritual communion with God. Indeed, following their creation by God, they were capable of positive response to his instruction in righteousness. But when tempted by Satan, the first couple chose to revolt against God in a fashion that was unnecessary, deliberate, and blameworthy. They were deceived into imagining they could thereby live independently of their Creator and set themselves up as the masters of good and evil. Their revolt not only thrust God from the center of their existence, but enthroned themselves instead, an act that drew the whole of creation into their anti-God arrogance.

“And so death spread to all because all have sinned.” (Rom. 5:12) On that occasion (the Fall) an inherent and persistent bias toward sin inevitably invaded each and every aspect of human nature. Even in their thought-life all humans became the victims of jealousy, hatred, dishonesty, greed, etc., over which none could gain control. Subsequently, they all became fugitives from God, tormented by the impulse to sin, and given to evil. And yet despite this they remained inescapably religious. “Dying they shall die” (Gen. 2:17; 3:19) is the divine verdict on their disobedience, and, apart from the intervention of a loving God through the Gospel, they remained without hope in this world or beyond.

*b. The Redemptive Work of Christ*

When we address ourselves to the task of describing the Gospel, we are hard pressed to account for the love of God that motivated him to provide “so great salvation” to sinful people like ourselves. Scripture plainly states that “God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.” (John 3:16) Behind this gift was something totally unrepeatable. All related Bible texts are terse and to the point: “God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them.” (2 Cor. 5:19) “As one man’s trespass led to

condemnation for all, so one man's act of righteousness leads to acquittal and life for all." (Rom. 5:18)

The Judge of All passes sentence: "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." (Rom. 3:23) Then he, the Judge, steps down from the judgment seat and takes the place of all those whom he has condemned. By this act of vicarious substitution, he becomes "the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the whole world." (John 1:29) For our sake the Father made his Son to be sin—he who alone knew no sin—so that in him we become the righteousness of God (2 Cor. 5:21). He embraced the judgment of death as the inescapable penalty for our sin, and was raised from the dead the third day to confirm the Father's acceptance of his sacrifice—the most costly sacrifice the world has ever known. This was efficacious because Jesus of Nazareth was "the Son of God" in whom "the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily." (Col. 1:19) How then could one not bow down before such a Savior with repentance and faith?

### *c. The Experience of the Spirit*

Inherent in the sacrificial death of Christ is the provision of being "born from above" (John 3:3) or regenerated by the Holy Spirit (1 Peter 1:17-23). This begins to take place when one comes under conviction that the Gospel is true (Ezek. 36:26; 37:14; Joel 2:28, 29) and that Christ died personally for his/her sake. Conviction leads to repentance and faith, the substance of true conversion, and on to the transformation of heart called "the washing of regeneration." (Tit. 3:5) This brings about a new relationship to God (Rom. 8:16, 17), a new orientation to life with Christ as the center (2 Cor. 5:17), and the beginning of actual victory over sin in one's life. Furthermore, this experience of the Holy Spirit in one's life brings the assurance of faith. One has indeed passed from death to life through the Gospel. Indeed, there is now a sense in which God has hereby put his seal of ownership upon us and has provided us with the certainty of our final salvation in the Last Day (2 Cor. 1:22; Eph. 4:30).

## 3. RELIGION AND THE GOSPEL IN TENSION

We have seen that all religious systems represent the search of human beings for answers concerning the Ultimate and for ways in which its devotees might use rituals congenial to their understanding of the

worshipful response the Ultimate desires or warrants. In contrast, as we have seen, the Gospel is God's word to his creatures. There is, therefore, an indissoluble tension between all religious traditions and systems and the Gospel as derived from the New Testament. To this tension we now turn.

*a. The Gospel Against Christianity*

At the outset it needs to be recognized that tension has often existed between Christianity as a religious system and the Gospel as revealed in the New Testament. We dare not forget that the goal of sixteenth-century Protestant Reformation was to separate the Gospel from the Christian religious system that had evolved over the preceding centuries under the influence of its leaders. Christianity in its development "borrowed religious features, symbols, and terminology" from other religious systems, "assimilated much of the pagan world," and has been "exposed to the influences and trends of history." (Jocz 1952:80) It is not a pure system, but rather a humanly devised mixture of biblical and non-biblical sources.

Furthermore, Protestantism has also largely departed from its sixteenth-century creeds and practices. This becomes apparent when one is in contact with Jewish people who have come to the Christian faith and are finding themselves ostracized by family members and by the synagogue because of their loyalty to Jesus Christ and to the Bible. They seek contact with Christian churches, and what do they find? Let a discerning Messianic Jew describe his reactions:

The historic Church has lent herself to ambiguities which are worse than lies; she baptizes infants of pagan parents; gives Christian burial to men and women who have never been inside a church; she marries couples in the name of the Holy Trinity who have never heard of the rudiments of the Christian faith. She protects the State, blesses the army, dresses her clergy in military uniform, and tries to give dignity to the order of this world...but she forgets that the path to salvation is narrow, that many are called but few are chosen, that the love of the world is enmity to God, that the order of this world passes away, and that this world lies in wickedness. (Jocz 1958:185)

No wonder Messianic Jews, who have come to faith, not by birth but by decision, find they cannot but protest against this nominality

and “easy believism.” No wonder they gather with other Messianic Jews and seek to establish distinctly Messianic congregations.

### *b. Jesus’ Witness to Truth and Religion*

Jesus linked all the claims he made concerning himself with the issue of truth. “You call me Teacher and Lord, and you are right, for so I am.” (John 13:13) He spoke his convictions without hesitation, apology, or diffidence. Indeed, with self-conscious authority he claimed to be *the* Teacher and *the* Lord of all people. “My teaching is not mine, but his who sent me.... Why do you call me ‘Lord, Lord’ and not do what I tell you?” (John 7:16; Luke 6:46) And those who confessed him as Lord made no attempt to substitute their opinions for his.

We have no evidence in the Gospels that Jesus ever expressed a judgment about non-Jewish religions. But he was not “broad-minded” in the popular sense that he was prepared to countenance any views on any subject. On the contrary, he engaged in continuous debate with the religious leaders of his day, was not afraid to dissent publicly (Stott 1970:18), often using outspoken language, even to the point of saying: “You are badly mistaken” in his confrontation with a group of Sadducees (Mark 12:24-27). We do well to remember that Jesus’ answer to religious pluralism was to issue the Great Commission and call for worldwide evangelization (Matt. 28:18-20).

Indeed, we cannot believe he would endorse the current popular toleration of religious pluralism, nor would he encourage his followers to regard all religious systems as relative, and to make as their priority the deepening of mutual understanding between them.

### *c. Paul, the Powers and Religion*

Paul maintained the same position as Jesus regarding religion, although he went on to expose the part “the powers” play in the religious activity of people. When Satan, along with other invisible spirit intelligences, challenged God’s sovereignty, one subsequent result of their fallenness was that they incarnated themselves within the creaturely existence of human societies, and particularly invaded all religious patterns. And yet, when Paul discusses false religion in his epistle to the Romans (1:16-32), he neither mentions Satan or the powers, but rather attributes false religion to the human heart.

After pointing out the universal relevance of the Gospel that God offers to all peoples—but to the Jews first! (vv. 16, 17)—Paul speaks of the wrath of God bringing all peoples under judgment because of their sin (v. 18). He then raises the issue of the whole of God’s creative activity as the vehicle whereby God deliberately discloses “his eternal power and glory” and shows that the only worthy response of people should be worship and obedience (vv. 19, 20). But they have resisted this witness despite its “plainness before their eyes” and “suppressed” its implications by driving it down into their subconscious (vv. 18-21). In reaction God has given people up to the destructive dynamics of their reprobate minds (vv. 24, 26, 28). Hence all subsequent religious activity becomes human preoccupation with the distortions that have surfaced in their minds following their suppression of all evidence of the Creator. Their preoccupation focuses on his creation rather than on him (v. 23). In time their self-deception and self-exaltation spawns all manner of immorality, perversion, non-social behavior, and implacable hatred toward God himself (vv. 24-31). This evil is persisted in even though all people down deep inside recognize the rightness of God in judging the human race for their evil conduct (v. 32).

#### *d. Religion, the Opponent of the Gospel*

All who seek to “do the work of an evangelist” (2 Tim. 4:5) find that religion is their most formidable problem. Indeed, it is the most bitter enemy of the Gospel, and to state this is not to denigrate its positive values. Religion has enabled many societies to survive, and even to develop. There is much that is true, good, beautiful, and of human value in religion. It has stimulated such culturally enriching values as art and music, philosophy and architecture. The divine image within non-Christians, although marred by sin, has yet managed to be surprisingly productive. Even so, there are non-Christians who are decent and ethical, loyal and socially sensitive, and many have a real concern for social justice. Indeed, because many people have this capacity for justice, democratic societies are possible in which the majority rules but the rights of minorities are protected. Some have wisely observed, however, that because the same people have the capacity for injustice, democratic societies are mandatory.

But to return to our basic thesis: The Gospel is the opponent of all religion. The more highly developed the religion, the more vigorous its opposition to the Gospel. One hears Jewish leaders speak of

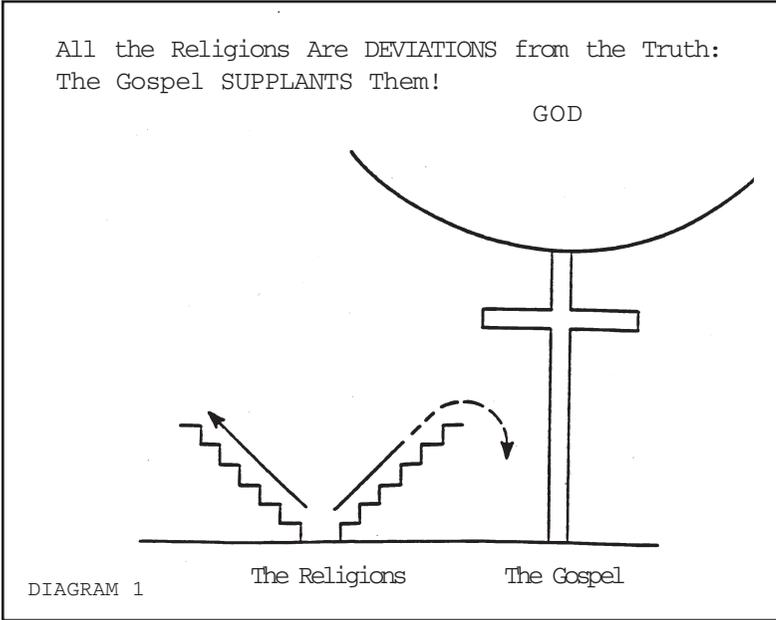
Judaism as the most perfect religion in the world because of its “ethical monotheism,” a system that is most comprehensive in its instruction and concern for all aspects of the Jewish people’s personal and communal life. It glories in their achievements, and we rejoice and are grateful for all they have contributed to Western culture and civilization. But we cannot but contrast this with the way in which the Gospel glories in God’s achievements, in his “grace” to a rebellious human race. Judaism does not grapple seriously with the corruption of the human heart and the alienation of people from the living God who alone gives meaning and purpose to life, and certain hope regarding the world to come. It is no surprise that Judaism is highly resistant to the Gospel. A case in point would be the Pharisee Saul who became the Apostle Paul. He was an intensely religious Jew, utterly devoted to God and to what he termed “the Jews” religion. He confessed that with great intensity he “persecuted the church of God and tried to destroy it.” (Gal. 1:13, 14) Many commended him for his righteous life, his obedience to the Law, and his defense of the Religion of his fathers (Phil. 3:1-11). But none of this religious activity gave him any real sense of acceptance by God or developing relationship with God. It was not bad things that kept Paul away from Jesus, it was good, religious things. He had to be confronted by the living Christ on the road to Damascus to learn what the Gospel was all about (Acts 9:22; 26). We might say he had to lose his religion in order that he might find salvation and life in Jesus Christ.

#### *e. Attempts at Resolution: Gospel and Religion*

In recent years there has been a tendency among students of religion to challenge the unique authority of the Bible, especially its rejection of salvific value in non-Christian religion. At the same time students of theology moved by this challenge began to question the biblical revelation of the nature of God. Was his love not such as to move him to appreciate more fully what he encountered in the religious motivations of all peoples? These “larger views” generated several types of speculative schemes that claimed the possibility of bringing the religions and the Gospel together without violating their distinctives, and in ways a loving God would honor and accept. They follow.

1. Traditional Biblical Exclusivism. This approach contends that the Gospel of Jesus Christ is the unique and true revelation of God. It alone provides “the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith.” (Rom. 1:16) All religions are human intrusions created by

fallible people, and hence are unable to bring sinful people into vital relationship with the one holy and living God (diagram 1).



2. Religious Preparation to Inclusivism. This approach holds that the biblical Gospel is the true faith and alone brings people into salvific relationship to God. Even so, it affirms that the religions are only partially true. Rather than being mere human intrusions, however, they have value but are inadequate in themselves. Instead of supplanting them, God regards their devotion as preparatory for the Gospel, and makes up for their inadequacy through the merits of Jesus Christ (diagram 2).

3. Cooperative Universalism. This approach regards the Gospel and non-Christian religions together caught up in the overarching love of God. He regards their varied devotion as expressive of salvific truth, and by the Gospel enables all, individually and not by amalgamation, to achieve their separate aspirations and objectives. God saves all who seek him, without reference to Christ. Hence, the Gospel must cooperate with the truth they variously represent (diagram 3).

All the Religions Are PREPARATIONS for the Truth:  
The Gospel FULFILLS Them!

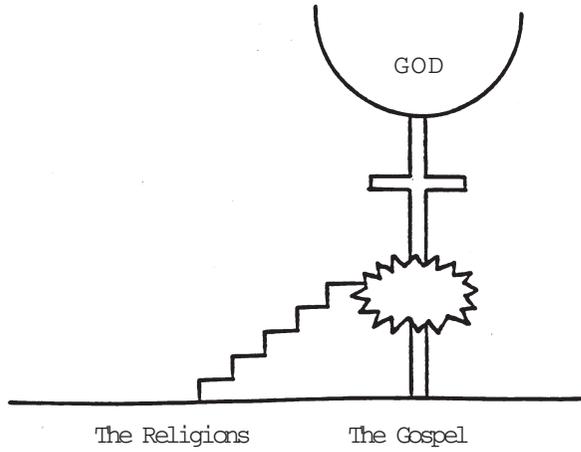


DIAGRAM 2

All the Religions Are EXPRESSIONS of the Truth:  
The Gospel COOPERATES with Them!

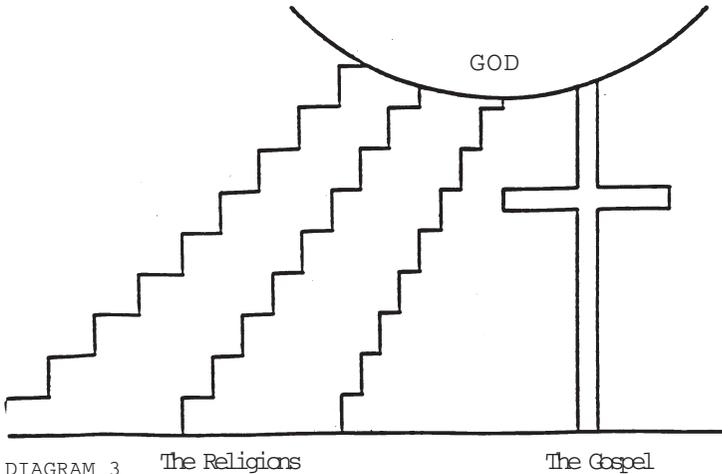
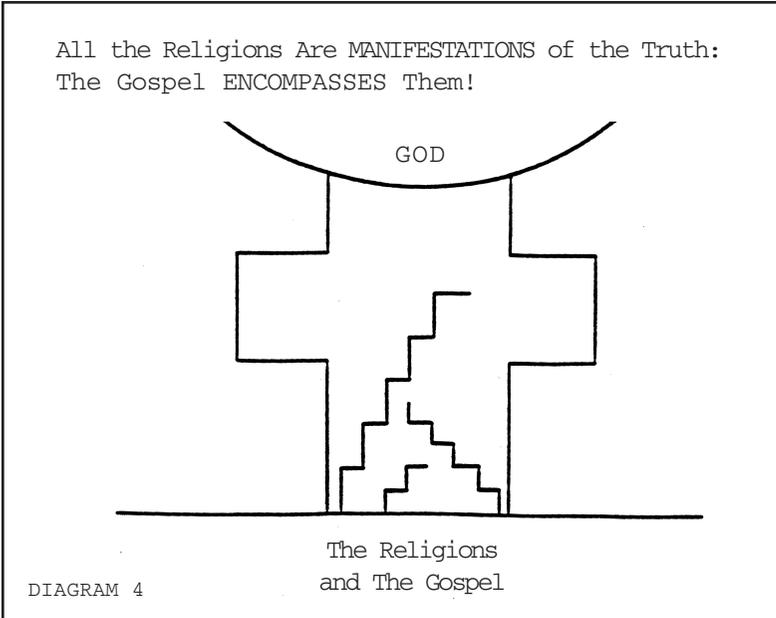


DIAGRAM 3

4. Gospel Inclusive Universalism. This approach contends that God’s sovereignty and grace lead him to accept all religions, each on its own terms. He does not regard any as preparation for or deviations from the biblical Gospel. Indeed, people can believe in Christ without even knowing it (e.g., as “Anonymous Christians”) or without having any explicit, overt, or conscious Christian faith (diagram 4).



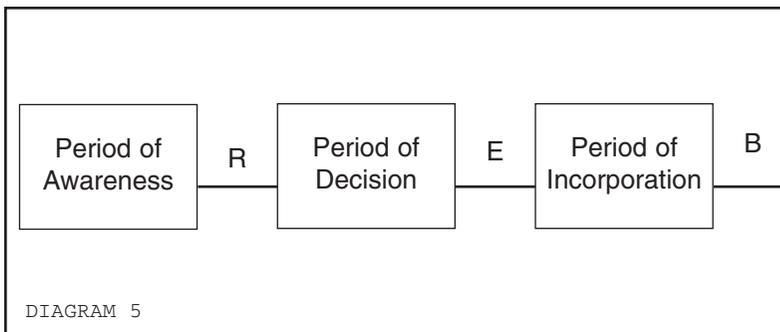
#### 4. CONVERSION: AN ABSOLUTE NECESSITY

John the Baptist, Jesus Christ, and the apostles all issued the call to conversion during the course of their varied ministries. As one studies the details of their varied expressions of this central theme we find that three elements were invariably included: repentance, faith, and obedience. Conversion necessitates the individual’s spiritual reorientation: turning from all unworthy allegiances to the acceptance of the lordship of Christ. Paul described the founding members of the church in Thessalonica as those who upon hearing the Gospel “*turned* to God from idols to *serve* the living and true God, and to *wait* for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead—Jesus,

who rescues us from the coming wrath.” (1 Thess. 1:9, 10) To this complex process we now turn.

### *a. The Sequence of Conversion*

The process of conversion begins with a growing awareness of the love of God contained in the message of the Gospel. At first, one may be totally ignorant of the Gospel but in time through further exposure to its details, an awareness grows of its “good news” and its “righteous demands.” Then follows what may be a long and involved process during which one comes to the point of realizing personally the full implications of the Gospel. This awareness process in turn is followed by the process of decision, which is nothing less than a true encounter with the living God. Again, this may be a lengthy process. One is driven by a sense of need or by a sense of drawing at long last to a loving God and being enfolded by him. When this takes place a desire begins to arise in one’s heart to give expression to the desire to serve the Lord as an expression of gratitude to him (Acts 22:10). The conversion experience of receiving spiritual linkage with the Lord is followed by seeking incorporation into the life, worship, and service of a local community of people of “like precious faith.” Consult the following diagram (diagram 5), developed by Prof. R. Tippett and particularly note how he describes the totality of the conversion sequence (1969:101, 102).



### *b. The Sequence of Gospel Presentation*

The question is often asked as to how to present the Gospel to a person with a view to becoming a participant in the process. When the

Apostle Paul was called to the role of “Apostle to the Gentiles” he was given an evangelistic mandate (Acts 26:18) that reflected the sequence Jesus himself followed during his earthly ministry. This involved five successive steps:

First, “*Open their eyes.*” People are spiritually blind (2 Cor. 4:4) and need to be made conscious of their need. This is accomplished by sharing the Gospel with them in ways relevant to their personal experience and lack of biblical knowledge.

Second, “*Turn them from darkness to light.*” Non-Christians have their backs to Jesus, hence their spiritual darkness. They need to turn around and confront Jesus through the Gospel, share his claims as the indispensable solution to all the needs people have. He pardons the guilty, brings peace to the heart, purpose in life, and eternal salvation.

Third, “*Turn them from the power of Satan to God.*” Jesus offers all people newness of life, but the first word of his Gospel is “Repent!” There has to be the deliberate confession of oneself as “the sinner.” This involves the deliberate dislodgment of oneself from the solitary throne in the heart and the enthronement of Jesus as lord. Without this conscious transfer of authority from self to God, Jesus has no salvation to bestow. The full implications of 1 John 5:19 must be taken seriously!

Fourth, “*Receive the forgiveness of sins.*” After repentance comes faith. Pose the question at this moment: “Has God forgiven you your sins?” Look for signs of the beginnings of appropriating faith, based on the promise of forgiveness. Then follow through with: “Why don’t you right now thank Him for this?”

Finally, the exhortation is to “*Receive a place among the sanctified.*” This involves accepting one’s relationship to the family of God by seeking admission into a local congregation of Christians through submitting to baptism and thereby entering their life, worship, and service.

### *c. Conversion and the Kingdom of God*

The dominant theme of our Lord’s earthly ministry was the Kingdom of God (Luke 16:16). By this Kingdom he shall completely regain all that was lost through the Fall when the human race abdicated responsibility for this world and settled for a life of selfishness and independence from God. By means of the Gospel Jesus is recruiting today a

new citizenry to participate with him in the world's reclamation now, and particularly in the world to come. All his gathering people are "signs of God's tomorrow in the world of today." They are "signs of hope" in a world that has lost hope, since they embody in the lives and service the values and distinctiveness of God's bright tomorrow. But how is one to enter that Kingdom and become a co-laborer with him? Scripture has but one answer, and Jesus gave it to an exemplary religious person. He told Nicodemus that apart from the conversion experience that leads to the "new birth" one "cannot see," much less "enter into the Kingdom of God." (John 3:3-5) Other supporting texts demand reflection: Jesus said: "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." And the apostles he chose and taught confronted the religious leaders of the Jewish Sanhedrin with those courageous words: "Nor is there any salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved." (Acts 4:12) Conversion to Christ is the one great indispensable need of the human race, whether religious or not.

### CONCLUSION: SOME DEFENSIBLE EVANGELICAL POSTULATES

When one considers the diversities that make up the world scene with its cultural and religious pluralism, its inability to rise above the dreary and tragic sequence of "wars and rumors of wars," and the varied ways in which people are coming to Christian faith and expressing their faith in ways consonant with their cultural situations, what might we conclude as to the posture Christians should assume as they seek to live, serve, and witness "Under God and for His Glory?" I would suggest at least three evangelical axiomatic postulates arising from our loyalty to Jesus Christ:

First, I should be open to the values that arise from cultural pluralism. I should seek to identify with all those who bear the image and likeness of God, regardless how marred that image has become because of human fallenness. This means that I must stand against racism and nationalism, and labor for peace and justice in today's world. I am a *pluralist* when it comes to the human race!

Second, I should be a faithful follower of Jesus Christ, but only as he is revealed in Scripture. Indeed, I know no other Christ, but I

must be aware of his warnings against “false Christs,” which I would take to mean human constructions not based on Scripture. His confidence in the unity, integrity, and authority of Scripture convince me that I will not be deceived by heeding the Word of God, living and written. I am a *loyalist* when it comes to Jesus Christ and His Word.

Third, I must avoid ecclesiastical parochialism, and make sure I receive all whom God has manifestly received, but not without making sure that the church or congregation in question represents basic commitment to Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior “according to the Scripture.” David’s example attracts me: He was “a friend to all who fear God, to all who follow His precepts” (Ps. 119:63). I am an *inclusivist* when it comes to the household of faith, “the Body of Christ.”