

Bruce Nicholls

# Finding God in a Secular World



 **WEA**

WORLD EVANGELICAL ALLIANCE

*Theological Commission*

World of Theology Series 32



Bruce Nicholls

**Finding God in a Secular World**

# World of Theology Series

## Published by the Theological Commission of the World Evangelical Alliance

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**Bruce Nicholls**

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Dedicated to

Rolf Hille

Jonathan Ro

Pioneers of the Gospel beyond global secularism.



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**SECTION ONE:  
SECULARISM IN WESTERN CULTURES**



# Chapter One: The Origins of Secularism

## Introduction

Secularism is both an ideology and a way of life. As an ideology, secularism is the belief that a satisfying and secular life is not dependent upon any belief in the transcendence of a personal and eternal creator God. The goal of the secularist is to personalise the Self beyond the human activities and senses of daily life. The Self is also seen as the Oneness of absolute reality beyond human experience. Such concepts can only be grasped by clear rational thinking and logic, beyond empirical experiences.

Cultures are committed to either maintaining the divide between the secular and sacred or unifying them. In western cultures we review the Greek philosophers, Socrates, Aristotle, Plato and the Neoplatonists then deal with the British and European philosophers from Thomas Hobbes to Immanuel Kant and Karl Marx. In general terms, western cultures give priority to rational thinking and to individual responses, while Asian cultures emphasize meaningful relationships and family and ethnic community decision-making. They recognise the importance of reasoning faith but do not insist on non-contradictory statements.

Secularism as a way of life enables a person to overcome the stresses of daily life. Its goal is inner peace and happiness for the individual, for family life and for society. Secularism, with its global vision of peace and fulfilment, stresses the importance of the eternal Now. It denies that life has a beginning and end in space and time.

One distinctive of Asian philosophy is that it integrates philosophy with religion. This is true even for the Buddhist or Marxist who ignores or denies the existence of a personal God, although each is religious in their own way. For example, Xi Jinping of communist China appeals to the atheistic Chinese to adopt the ethical values of their historical religions of Taoism and Confucianism. In the end, secularism is antichristian.

The goal of secularism, both in the west and in Asia, is for society to enjoy the present life. This is well-illustrated in a slogan I saw written large on the overhead of a railway crossing in Auckland. It said:

There is probably no God.  
Don't let religion divide us.  
Let us enjoy life together.

The Christian reply is that since all people are created in the image of God (Genesis 1:26–27) they have an inherent knowledge of right and wrong, of good and evil. When a set of philosophical and religious values are celebrated over a period of time, this becomes a religious *culture*. Nonreligion creates a spiritual vacuum which only religious faith can fulfil. When western values dominate Asian thinking, evangelism becomes a challenge to the Asian churches. This is seen when Asian Christians go to the west for postgraduate studies and return to their homeland promoting a western approach to the task of evangelism. As a result, converts, if any, are few and church growth is slow.

## **The Pre-Socratic Age**

Pre-Socratic Greek philosophers searched for the roots of their personal identity. They were “god-saturated,” with the gods intervening in all aspects of life, from the weather to mundane details. In the sixth century BC, Thales of Miletus believed water was the single source of everything in the universe. He said it was the divine principle of nature. By contrast, the earlier *Hesid* had centred on the Olympian gods who lived like supernatural individuals and were immortal. They were dominated by Zeus, the chief of the Olympian gods.

*Zenophanes of Iona* (560 to 478 BC) is credited with being the founder of secular Greek thinking which reached its fulfilment in the philosophies of Socrates, Plato and Aristotle. He argued that everything had a rational origin rather than a divine one, and that the gods were powerless. Man, he said, was the measure of all things.

Before we discuss the contribution of Socrates, Plato and Aristotle to secular thinking and practice, we will look at the origins of secularism in *Asian* thinking.

## **The Indus Valley Civilisation**

Around 2600 BC, urban cities developed in the Indus Valley south of the Hindu Kush and on the fertile plains near the convergence of rivers including the Indus and the Ravi. This civilisation flourished for 700 years until it was overwhelmed by the incoming Aryan one. It seems that the Indus Valley civilisation developed parallel to the presocratic Greek one, although neither was known to the other.

Two of the great cities have been excavated, namely Harappa in the Punjab on the banks of the Ravi, and Mohenjo Daro on the banks of the

Indus. These cities had a grid pattern of streets with houses built of baked clay brick and with baths and a well-planned system for water and drainage. The inhabitants were deeply religious, worshipping Pashupati, the lord of the animals, who was a prototype of the later Shiva of Hinduism. Images of Rajarishi, the priest-king, as well as a mother-goddess, have been found in Mohenjo Daro. The origin of the Hindu yogi has been traced to the Indus Valley.

## **Early Chinese Civilisation**

The Chinese Huang He (Yellow River) and the Chang (Yangtze River) civilisations were sources of the early folk religions, Taoism and Confucianism. As these ancient civilisations developed, isolated from the rest of the world, they believed that China was the centre of the earth. They called their land “the middle kingdom.” The Huang River with its loss of yellow soil in the frequent floods, was popularised as the “river of sorrows.”

The Shang dynasty from 751 BC was the first-known historical dynasty. It was religious, with the worship of many spirits and ruled by a priest-king and by warriors who were clothed in armour and rode horse-drawn chariots. Its highest deity was the supreme ancestor, Shang-ti, who was synonymous with Ti'en or heaven. The concept of filial piety, of the later Confucian era, began in this early period. Philosophical beliefs developed later.



## Chapter Two: Socrates and the Meaning of Life

Socrates (470–399 BC) of Athens left no written record of his teaching. For knowledge of him we are indebted to his pupil Plato (427–347) who was 45 years younger but outlived him by 50 years. Later, the historian Xenophon, a pupil of Aristotle, recorded his teaching in his book, *The Apology of Socrates*. However, Plato's interpretation of Socrates' philosophy is widely debated by scholars. In this study we will follow the more widely-accepted views of Plato, as recorded in his *Apology*, *Phaedo* and *Symposium*.

In his one-day trial before the Athenian male citizens, Socrates was purportedly accused of atheism by Meletus. But in fact, he was being tried for corrupting the youth who admired his radical philosophy, for claiming that the local gods were powerless and mistaken, and that sacrifice to the local gods was useless. Socrates did not deny the existence of the gods but said they were irrelevant to life in Athens. In refusing to worship the state gods, he was accused of being a threat to democracy. The jury condemned him to death by drinking a cup of hemlock, which he did with dignity in the presence of his friends.

### Socrates' secularism

Socrates had faith in human goodness and believed that “no one errs willingly.” The good life (*eudaimonia*) motivated all human action. People did bad things only through the lack of knowledge of good and evil. To enjoy the good life was to have knowledge of the truth. As with all secularists, reason, or the lack of it, was the deciding factor in people's actions. Socrates maintained that the good and virtuous life was independent of the gods and that true religion and rational thinking were interdependent. He defined virtue as justice, honour and courage which led to the good life. Without this knowledge, ignorance led to bad actions. This was humanism at its best.

### The Socratic method

The Socratic method was claimed to be only way to achieve the good life. It involved two principles. One was that in developing a dialogue with another person, one must empty one's mind of all prejudices. For Socrates this meant “I only know that I know nothing” a principle that was relevant

in each of his conversations. Socrates' second principle was the need to be self-critical, for "an unexamined life [was] not worth living," a proposition that has been endorsed by philosophers and religious teachers ever since. A critical evaluation of one's own knowledge was necessary to any knowledge of the truth and was a starting point for any meaningful dialogue which sought to discover the meaning of life. It was a philosophical and religious necessity to eliminate all prejudicial thinking and self-confidence in order to know the truth to the exclusion of any other possibility. The method called for humility and a willingness to listen to the other person's point of view. Christians also need to adapt this method of dialoguing with people of other faiths or with those of no faith.

However, while the Socratic Method is a starting point to a meaningful relationship in dialogue, it does not of itself lead to an understanding of truth. Its approach is essentially negative. It only leads to awareness of one's ignorance. By contrast, an understanding of a transcendent truth, or a self-revealing God, is needed. This is the message of Christianity, Judaism and Islam. Each of these religions appeals to their scriptures as God-revealed truth. As already stated, the difficulty with Socrates is that he left no written account of his views, and our knowledge of them is dependent on his followers.

### **Socrates' ethics**

As already stated, Socrates believed in the inherent goodness of human beings, and often claimed that no one erred willingly. For him, good people committed evil only from ignorance. However, he acknowledged the phenomenon of an inner voice, *daimonion*, which kept him from doing wrong and guided him to do what was right. It is not clear if this was the voice of an oracle from Apollo at Delphi or an inner rational response to his conscience, which Christians understand to be God's general revelation to humankind.

Socrates spent his days in the marketplace, talking and debating with everyone he met. He had an unattractive appearance, being poorly dressed and bare of foot. This appealed to students who identified with his freedom and critical thinking. It also appealed to ordinary citizens who were oppressed by their aristocratic rulers.

### **Socrates and politics**

Socrates was often asked his views on politics. The issue sharply divided Athens between most of its citizens, who campaigned for democracy, and

the oligarchs who ruled the state. Socrates was careful not to identify with one side or the other. He believed politics was important in shaping the life of the nation, but only through philosophical debate and not through voting procedures. At the same time, he respected the laws of the city-state and willingly accepted the jury who sentenced him to death, refusing his friends' advice to escape and accept exile. The next morning, he peacefully drank a cup of hemlock and died. He was the founder of both western philosophy and secular ideology, his critical views reshaping both philosophy and religion for the succeeding centuries.

### **Socrates in history**

Socrates had a profound influence on Middle Eastern Islam between the ninth and twelfth centuries. He also influenced early Christian theology especially that of Augustine. In the later European Enlightenment, the German idealism of the eighteenth-century revived interest in Socrates' views. Hegel saw him as the turning point in the history of humanity, with his principle of self-determination. Soren Kierkegaard considered Socrates his teacher, but Friedrich Nietzsche criticised him for turning the scope of philosophy from naturalism to rationalism and intellectualism.<sup>1</sup> He also criticised Socrates for equating reason with virtue and happiness.

In the American independence movement, Benjamin Franklin quoted both Jesus and Socrates as part of the struggle to achieve human justice. Later the English romantic poets, Shelley, Keats and Lord Byron took Socrates as the model of ethical behaviour and compared him to Jesus. Martin Luther King wrote. "To a degree, academic freedom is a reality today because Socrates practised disobedience."<sup>2</sup> So the moral influence of Socrates lives on from generation to generation.

The Christian response to *eudaimonia* is that by ignoring evil in human life Socrates' idealism is inadequate to overcome human greed and hate. However, the Socratic method is still a meaningful bridge to faith in God.

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<sup>1</sup> URL: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Socrates>.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.



## Chapter Three: Plato's Idealism

Plato (429–347 BC) is considered by many to be the most important figure in western philosophy and in secular religion. He incorporated the rational thinking of Socrates including his method of question and answer to reach the truth, with his own social ethic of the Good Life.

In 399 BC, Plato founded the Academy in a grove outside of Athens. It is significant that this school continued for 900 years until it was closed by the Christian emperor Justinian in 529 AD.

### Forms

Plato argued that beyond the realm of the senses, which were constantly changing and therefore unreal, was the unchanging abstract reality called the Forms. These were the universals that determined the standards by which all belief in the senses was to be judged.

The Forms could only be understood by pure reason. This called for faith in reason as the only way to discover the meaning of life. Plato thought of the Forms as symbols of the One impersonal Reality, the One above the many.

### The Allegory of the Cave

Plato's Allegory of the Cave is his best-known philosophical allegory and continues to be used by writers and film directors. Plato's purpose was to show the relationship between true and false belief and the knowledge of reality. He wrote it as a dialogue under the name of Socrates.

From this allegory Plato argued that the world of Forms was the ideal and real world and a knowledge of the senses was only a shadow of it. The Forms were the absolute, nonpersonal ultimate reality. In the Socratic tradition they were secular, for there was no place for an active creator God who ruled the world.

Plato defined the Good as the supreme Form beyond all appearances of good and evil, and applied his idealism to the realism of politics. He agreed with Socrates that democracy led to corrupt rule and oppression, and argued that only those with wisdom and a knowledge of the good had the right to rule. They were the philosopher-kings.

Plato's impact on the future of philosophy and religion, social ethics and politics was immense. He had a deep influence on the early develop-

ment of Christian theology from Justin Martyr to Clement of Alexandria who saw his philosophy as “the schoolmaster to bring the Hellenistic world to Christ.”<sup>3</sup> Augustine (344–430) had an interpretation of Plato that dominated Christian thought for the next thousand years.

In the Arabic world Plato and Aristotle were recognised as the founders of philosophy, which had been absent from Islamic thought. The only work of Plato known in the western world was *Timaeus* which was translated into English from Arabic only after the fall of Constantinople to Islam in 1453. Islamic scholars admired Plato’s idealism until Al-Ghazali (1055–1111) complained that the secularism of the Greek philosophers resulted in a loss of Qur’anic faith. Islamic philosophy never recovered from Al-Ghazali’s massive attack on Greek philosophy.

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<sup>3</sup> URL: <https://www.logos.com/grow/plato-christianity-church-fathers/>.

## Chapter Four: Aristotle's Naturalism

Aristotle (384–323 BC) was Plato's pupil, forty-five years his junior. Contrary to Plato's idealism, he developed his philosophical knowledge from his observation of the natural world. He concluded all knowledge came from experience. He was a realist in arguing that Form and Matter were one, compared with Plato's distinction between the ideal Form and the world of matter. For example, when Aristotle saw a dog, he recognised it as a dog from his experience of seeing many different types of dogs. From these common experiences he developed the concept of "doginess" not because of any innate knowledge of the Form of the dog.

Aristotle's epistemology came from both inductive and deductive reasoning. In this case, the knowledge of justice or virtue came from experiencing it in many situations. It was empirical knowledge, acquired through the senses. He is considered the father of western logic and inductive reasoning, along with a profound knowledge of the sciences, ethics and politics.

Aristotle remained a student in Plato's Academy and was eventually a teacher in it, seeking to explain the harmony of all things. After Plato's death in 348, Aristotle spent twelve years away from Athens, during which time, at the request of Philip II of Macedon, he taught a Philip's thirteen-year-old son who later became Alexander the Great. In 335 Aristotle returned to Athens and founded a rival school known as the *Lyceum*. Here he developed a love for plants and animals and became recognised as a natural scientist, emphasizing biology, botany and astronomy. Charles Darwin in developing his evolutionary theories adopted Aristotle's classification of nature.

Alongside his scientific research, Aristotle developed a moral philosophy based on cause and effect. He analysed four distinct causes, namely material, efficient, formal and final. The final cause explained the purpose of why things existed, using the concept of the *Unmoved Mover*. In this concept, reality was not subject to change and was therefore considered eternal. Aristotle identified the Unmoved Mover with the impersonal Mind or Reason.

Aristotle developed an analytical method of stating a major premise and a minor premise, followed by the logical conclusion of their interaction. He applied his syllogisms and scientific understanding of causes to political life, and advocated democracy as the least harmful form of government. This led him to advocate harmony and moderation in all things

and to avoid extremes, especially in exercising justice and in government. He pioneered a secular view of reality alongside Plato and Socrates, his goal being to synthesize the philosophies of his predecessors. Thus together the three great Athenian philosophers were the founders of both western philosophy and secular religion.

Moderation, the most important element in Aristotle's ethics, was the Golden Mean of all activity. For some people, this has applied to religious belief and practices ever since. However, an interesting modern alternative was that held by Charles Simeon (1759–1836), rector of Holy Trinity church, Cambridge for 50 years. He preached that truth was found in *holding together* two extremes and not in the Golden Mean between them. When questioned, he said, "To one extreme? No. To both extremes, in turn, as the occasion requires it."<sup>4</sup> As an example, the Psalms are frequently quoted to support the holding together of God's compassion and his justice. Paul in Romans outlined the wrath and the love of God. The cross as an atoning sacrifice proclaimed both God's love and his righteousness. There is no "mean" between God's just wrath and his love and compassion. Both are true.

Aristotle's observations on the sciences of the natural world, their causes and effects, point to a First Cause, which we know as the living God. His inductive and deductive reasoning is a valuable introduction to contemporary science. Muslims are also attracted by it.

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<sup>4</sup> Handley C. G. Moule, *Charles Simeon* (London, Inter Varsity Fellowship, 1892, reprinted 1948), p. 77.

## Chapter Five: Stoics and Epicureans

The philosopher *Zeno* (334–262 BC) of Athens is recognised as the founder of Stoicism. Zeno and his followers met in an open porch known as the *Stoa Poikile*, from which the movement gained its name, stoics being the “Philosophers of the Porch.” Zeno’s best-known supporters were Seneca (4 BC–65 AD) and the Emperor Marcus Aurelius (121–180 AD). For them stoicism was a way of life but it declined when the Roman Emperor Constantine converted to Christianity in 312.

Both the Stoics and the Epicureans had a common goal, “the transformation of the self,” but each had a radically different way of achieving it. For Zeno, happiness was not merely the cessation of desire, pain and the fear of death, as with Epicurus; it was the achieving of virtue and wisdom. His four cardinal virtues were wisdom, courage, justice and temperance (or self-control.) Unhappiness was caused by ignoring the path of reason to achieve these virtues.

Knowledge was obtained through reason. Like the Epicureans, the Stoics sought to avoid excesses in food and sexual relations. They tried to live in harmony with nature and its pleasures, and to avoid suffering and pain in daily life. A wise person was one who was immune to the emotions of fear and anxiety, while self-control was the prerequisite to happiness.

### The Stoics

The Stoics thought of “god” as the active principle of the One that permeated and gave form to passive formless matter and was the ultimate cause of everything. At the same time, the Stoics identified with the Greek gods, in particular Zeus, the most powerful god in the pantheon. The stars were also named as gods, but understood allegorically. In this way the Stoics sought to mediate between the secular monism of Greek philosophy and religious pluralism. It was another example of seeking to reconcile the One and the Many.

Stoics acknowledged that many things in nature were beyond their control, such as pain, sickness, poverty and death. Their response was to call for courage, the moral strength of willpower, patience, and above all, wisdom. Politically, the Stoics —contrary to the Epicureans —encouraged participation in public life as good citizens. We agree with the Stoics that true happiness in life is achieved by wisdom, courage, justice and self-control and not just by avoiding suffering.

The Stoics had a significant influence on early Christianity. The apostle Paul met with Stoic religious leaders in Athens (Act 17:16–34) where their council, the Areopagus, invited him to explain his strange religion. He began by explaining to them that God was the creator of the world and gave life to all human beings who inhabited it. He was not limited to man-made temples, for in God we lived, moved and had our being. As some of their own poets had said, “We are his offspring.” Then Paul pointed to the day when God through the risen Jesus Christ would judge the world. When they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some scoffed but others believed.

Bishop Ambrose of Milan applied Stoic philosophy to his theology, but most of the church fathers considered Stoicism to be a pagan philosophy. However, Aquinas of the Catholic Church and the Orthodox churches of the East accepted the Stoic virtue of courage in the face of adversity.

## The Epicureans

*Epicurus* (341–270 BC) was born in Samos, Greece. In 306 BC he came to Athens, bought a house in a garden outside the city, and set up his own school. At that time Athens was dominated by Plato’s Academy and Aristotle’s Lyceum. Epicurus entered into a debate with them, especially with the Stoics. He and Zeno debated with each other throughout their lives.

While the Stoics sought to relate philosophy to political and public life, and were concerned with poverty and death, Epicurus sought to relate philosophy to the social ethics of the good life and self-discipline. Stoics stressed the path of reason, while Epicureans followed the way of empiricism and human experience in their search for happiness, peace of mind, freedom from fear and friendship within the community.

The ontology of the Epicureans was based on the concept of atoms, the smallest of all particles that oscillated in space, a view of physics that anticipated modern science. He said atoms constantly collided and bounced off one another. Some swerved out of their regular projection of movement and came together to form the material world of the senses. Epicurus argued that when the body died, the soul with the senses also died. Thus he denied the immortality of the soul. He wrote “The most terrible evil, death, is nothing to us, since when we exist death does not exist, and when death exists we do not exist.”<sup>5</sup> He also said the fear of death was the greatest anxiety of human beings and caused the greatest pain.

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<sup>5</sup> URL: <https://dailystoic.com/epicureanism-stoicism/>.

The second unnecessary cause of fear was fear of the gods. Epicurus did not deny the existence of the gods but claimed they were not involved in the world and did not interfere with human pleasure. Epicurus argued that the goal of the good life was pleasure, but it needed to be enjoyed in moderation, avoiding over-indulgence and unnecessary pain. Epicurus divided pleasure into two categories: first, the pleasures of the body (the sensual pleasures of eating delicious food, fulfilling sexual desires and avoiding pain) and secondly the pleasures of the mind, including feelings of joy, the absence of pain, and good memories of the past. Epicurus also divided the desires of the life of pleasure into three categories. First there were those that were natural and necessary, such as enjoying good food and freedom from all pain. Then there were those that were natural but *unnecessary*. These included overindulgence in food and uncontrolled sexual desires. Finally, there were desires that were both unnatural and unnecessary. These included physical desires for wealth and fame, the unnecessary fear of death, and the desire to cause another person to suffer pain.

In order to have a sense of security in the world of suffering and pain, the seeker of the virtuous and good life needed to live simply and frugally. Epicurus lived this out in his garden school, where the members were given only water to drink and barley bread to eat. Gender and racial distinctions were discouraged in the Garden School. Women were admitted to the school and a slave of Epicurus was also admitted.

The Epicureans sought the good life through sensual pleasures enjoyed in moderation. Happiness was achieved at the personal level, and being alone was painful. But Epicurus also saw the need for communal friendships and said, "Friendship runs dancing through the world, bringing to us all the summons to wake and sings its praises."<sup>6</sup>

Epicurus was not opposed to the state, for he saw its necessity, but he did not encourage Athenian citizens to be involved in politics because this only caused stress and pain. Instead he encouraged community friendships to form and meet outside the political state.

Epicureanism came to be accepted in the Roman world. The poets Horace and Virgil were prominent Epicureans. Julius Caesar was also supportive. The arts welcomed the freedom that Epicureanism offered, including the enjoyment of life and the world of nature. The Epicureans' secular lifestyle became the dominant force in both Athens and Greece for the next 600 years until its decline with the rise of Christianity in the second century AD.

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<sup>6</sup> URL: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Epicureanism/Doctrine-of-Epicurus>.

### *Epicureanism in the Enlightenment Era*

John Locke (1632–1704) was born in Somerset, England and was considered the father of European liberalism. In the *Age of Reason* he identified the mind with the conscious self and said knowledge was gained by experiencing the senses. In his book, *Concerning Human Understanding* (1689), Locke sought to discover the limits of self-knowledge. He argued that the senses were the only way to experience the external world and that human beings were dependent on their senses alone for all true knowledge—a concept known as *empiricism*. In a real sense, Locke was the precursor of modern European secularism. He replaced biblical revelation with the natural law of self-determination and appealed for freedom of thought, believing that all humans were created equal and were of equal worth. Locke's concept of the freedom of the self-influenced all future political developments in Europe. It marked the beginning of the social contract theory which was further developed by Rousseau and others. He campaigned for freedom from slavery and child labour.

Immanuel Kant (1704–1805) was a German philosopher who argued that we cannot know things in themselves. Our minds impose their own understanding of the experiences of life. A transcendental God is unknowable because he is beyond human experience. Although towards the end of his life Kant struggled to find a place for God in his ideology, he believed that only pure reason could understand the moral issues of life, since only the mind was real.

Further, he argued that our experiences of nature are based on the laws of cause and effect. In his major work, *The Critique of Pure Reason*, he tried to reconcile the empiricism of the Scottish philosopher David Hume with the rationalism of Newton and Descartes. Kant urged people to think for themselves since all had the free will to make moral choices. His anthropology had no place for revealed truth or religious scriptures. He saw Jesus as a valuable teacher of ethics for the unenlightened. Kant marks the high point of European secularism.

Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770–1831) was a German idealist who believed that only the mind was real and that everything else was an expression of it. Ultimate Reality was the impersonal Absolute which is the common belief of all secularists. He argued that Absolute Reality was manifested in human consciousness, with the material world being identified with that reality. *Geist* or Spirit encompassed the nonmaterial world which was constantly changing, as was seen in the development of history. Hegel's idealistic process began with the notion of thesis and its contradiction, antithesis, resulting in the synthesis of both. An example of this was

the rule of a tyrant which conflicted with the notion of freedom. This was synthesised as the just rule of law. Thus consciousness was a state of becoming.

Karl Marx (1818–1883) accepted Hegel’s idealism and interpreted it as a materialistic dialectic of politics and social change, leading to the class struggle. Marx called for a classless society. In *Das Kapital* (1876) he criticised the exploitative nature of capitalism which resulted in the oppression of the working class. He saw this as a stage in the dialectical progress of history, in which he believed capitalism would collapse and a revolutionary philosophy of socialism and communism would replace it. There was no need for a personal creator-God in this dialectical process, for only the material world was real. This was secularism in modern economic and political life. For Marx it had to be global in order to achieve the goal of a perfect humanity. The economic and political histories of Marxist Russia and China, with their tragic consequences, are the fruit of his secular ideology and ruthless practices.

### *Epicurus and Secular Modernity*

The United States Declaration of Independence (1776) made famous its goal of “the pursuit of happiness.” Thomas Jefferson called himself an Epicurean. In the British Empire, epicureanism was already well-established with John Locke whose writings influenced the American revolutionaries and the British philosophers, Thomas Hobbes, David Hume and Adam Smith. Locke’s philosophy of pleasure and freedom inspired Jean-Jacques Rousseau and the French revolutionaries.

Professor N. T. Wright, one of the best-known English theologians, argued that the modern church had internalised the Enlightenment’s secular dualism of deism and theism, resulting in impotence and irrelevance. He said, “I see the Enlightenment not just as a secularist movement but actually as Epicureanism—a modern retrieval of an ancient philosophy.”<sup>7</sup>

Secularism has become a global movement in modern society, both in the west and in the world of eastern religions. It is significant that Sadiq Khan, the present mayor of London, is a British-born Muslim of Pakistani descent. As a Muslim he has to live with the tension between his religious faith and British secular society. On several sexual ethical issues he is ambiguous. Rishi Sunak, the former Prime Minister of Britain, is a practising Hindu who keeps an idol of Ganesh on his desk.

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<sup>7</sup> URL: <https://lawliberty.org/n-twrights-epicurean-enlightenment/>.

Paul Tillich (1886–1965), was born and educated in Germany. He opposed Nazism and became a United States citizen in 1940 at the age of 47. He taught in several universities including Union Theological Seminary, Columbia University and Harvard Divinity School, and is best-known for his books, especially *The Courage to Be* (1953) and his three-volume *Systematic Theology* (written between 1951 and 1963).

Tillich rejected biblical theism and history, replacing them with the philosophy of Reality as the Ultimate Concern, beyond all conscious existence. He called for courage to overcome the human predicament by identifying with faith in this Ultimate Concern. His philosophy is experiential, seeking to answer the human quest for personal identity, for salvation and for destiny beyond death. He argued that God as Being itself is the only non-symbolic entity. The biblical concept of God as a personal creator, incarnate and redemptive, was to be understood symbolically (as Rudolf Bultmann did), and therefore was not ultimately real. An example of this view is to see the wrath of God as an emotional symbol for love.

Tillich adopted the method of correlating truth in which he resolved the conflict between atheism and theism. For him, a personal God did not exist, for existence implied a category of dependence which did not fit a creator-God. God, as Being itself, was beyond all categories of being and nonbeing. Faith was in Ultimate Concern, beyond the theistic idea of God. The source of courage was to believe in “the God above God.” He argued that because atheism was the ultimate concern for truth it was within the framework of universal salvation. In this sense Tillich was both atheistic and pantheistic. Being itself was comparable to the concept of reality as Oneness, as understood by the Greek philosophers and by the Neoplatonists. I attended a lecture Tillich gave at the Princeton Theological Seminary in 1960 and it seemed to me that his message had more in common with Buddha’s Enlightenment nontheistic belief than with biblical faith.

I conclude that Tillich was a thorough-going secularist in the tradition of the secularists who preceded him, beginning with the Greek philosophers to whom God was abstract and symbolic. Tillich reasoned that philosophy eliminated any biblical and Qur’anic understanding of life both now and in the future.

## Chapter Six: Neoplatonism and Islamic Philosophy

*Neoplatonism* is a modern term coined by nineteenth century German scholars. It was based on the work of Plato, but differed from it. It combined Plato's idealism with a mystical philosophy, along with Aristotle's existential realism and the Stoics' rationalism.

The Jewish scholar *Philo of Alexandria* (20 BC–50 AD) anticipated Neoplatonism, and his life overlapped with that of Jesus of Nazareth. His doctrine of religious mysticism and ecstasy was later developed by Plotinus. Philo adopted Plato's idealism but rejected the rationalism of Aristotle and the Stoics.

*Plotinus* (205–270 AD) is recognised as the founder of Neoplatonism. He was born in Egypt and lived in Alexandria from 232 to 245. He studied philosophy under the Hellenistic Ammonius Saccas and later became interested in Persian and Indian Islamic thought. He joined the Roman army for its Asian contacts, later settling in Rome for most of the rest of his life (except for a final year in Sicily) and established his own school. Plotinus sought to synthesise the Hellenistic traditions of Plato, Aristotle and the Stoics, and was influenced by Persian and Indian philosophers as well as by Maimonides, the Jewish scholar. Although he made some reference to Christianity, his disciple and successor *Porphyry* (c. 234–305) became anti-Christian, as seen in his book, *Against Christians*. He was probably a Christian who converted back to Platonism and was called an apostate by Augustine.

Neoplatonism dominated western philosophy from around 245 AD until the Byzantine emperor Justinian closed the last neoplatonist school in 529 AD, 284 years later. During this period, neoplatonism had a profound influence on early Christianity, from Justin Martyr to Augustine and later to Origen. Through mediaeval Christianity neoplatonism impacted the Cambridge platonists who have influenced modern Europe. It has also influenced the Eastern Orthodox church to the present. It has had a profound influence on Islamic thought and religion from the Muslim conquest of Syria and Egypt, beginning with al-Kindi (800–870 AD) and ending with the attack on it by al-Ghazali (1058–1111).

## Principles of Plotinus's Metaphysics

Plotinus's metaphysics consisted of three ideas: the One, the Intellect or nous, and the soul. His genius is in how he related each to the other and as a whole.

### The One

The concept of the One as the total transcendent Ultimate Reality is absolute idealism. The One is beyond all attributes or categories. It is beyond Being and Nonbeing which imply activity. The One can only be described in negative terms, "the not-this not-that" of the Hindu Brahman. It is beyond all time and space and beyond God as the creator of everything. This concept of the One is the foundation of secular ideology, common to all natural religions and philosophies. It offers a comforting alternative for those who deny the awesome justice of a holy and compassionate creator God. The concept of the One has its origin in the ideas of the Greek philosophers, Socrates, Plato and Aristotle. It can be compared to the secularism of the nondual Vedanta of Hinduism. While the One cannot be rationally known, many mystics of the world claim to experience it. The poet Rumi of Islam belongs to this mystical tradition.

### Emanation

Plotinus's response to the relationship of the One to the many was his ingenious concept of *emanation*, as a way that did not lessen his concept of the One. For him emanation was an internal activity at each of three levels—the One, the Intellect and the Soul. It was a self-contained activity which did not change the existence of the One. However, this internal activity generated an external activity that created the next lower level of existence. The first emanation was from the One to the next level of intellect or nous, which Plotinus related to Plato's concept of the forms. Then the intellect emanated to a lower level of the material body—the soul. This principle of emanation enabled Plotinus to maintain the total transcendent simplicity of the One but still explain how the "many" came into existence.

The weakness of his argument, as with all philosophers, is that he was unable to account for the *origin* of emanation. Charles Darwin faced a similar problem when he tried to explain the origin of evolution as a process of natural selection. Christians recognise that science can explain the how of origins but cannot explain the why or the purpose of them, which only

revealed religion can do. The Christian alternative to the theory of emanation is that God creates all things. For Paul, Jesus is the image of the invisible God in whom all things were created and in whom all things hold together (Colossians 1:15–17).

## The Intellect or Nous

Intellect is an alternative term for *nous* or reason. The *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* calls the intellect “pure and absolute consciousness.”<sup>8</sup> Pure consciousness can be understood as a bridge between experiencing intellect and experiencing the soul at its next lower level. The One needs the intellect and the intellect needs the One. The intellect is the initial cause of the One and its activity is equated with the plurality of Plato’s Forms. The intellect as reason is the inner activity of the One and the outward activity of the soul.

## The Soul

Plotinus’s *soul* emanates from the level of the pure consciousness of the intellect, to become the material universe. This consciousness begins in the ideal world soul from which all material souls emanate. Soul is the inner activity of the consciousness of the intellect and the outward activity of becoming the world of nature. Time and matter have no beginning and no end and are therefore eternal. Plotinus owes this concept more to Aristotle than to Plato. However, Plotinus believed that the ideal world soul could exist without a body, and that it was immortal. This issue was vigorously debated by early Christian theologians who believed that time and matter were created by the eternal God. For Plotinus, when the body died, the soul was released from consciousness and died.

The soul was the level of human self-conscious desire. At its highest level, the soul was *eudaimonia*, true happiness, which was beyond desire. This perfection was achieved by reason and by contemplating the One as the Good. For Plotinus, evil was the absence of the good and the absence of order in the world of matter. Augustine was deeply influenced by the neoplatonist view of evil. He taught that evil was the absence of good and that *eudaimonia* was the quest of the wellbeing of the human soul. When the soul contemplated itself it was contemplating the cosmic world soul. To achieve this goal of consciousness Plotinus strove to integrate the philos-

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<sup>8</sup> “Pure and Absolute Consciousness”, URL: <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/neoplatonism/>.

ophies of his predecessors. This is done today in contemporary secular philosophy. For Plotinus religion was not a major issue. He never discussed Christianity, although as we have seen, his disciple, Porphyry, was strongly opposed to it. The dying words of Plotinus were “Try to raise the divine in yourself to the divine in all”—words which summarised the essence of his religious philosophy.

## The Influence of Neoplatonism

Neoplatonism began as a coherent system when Porphyry collected Plotinus’s lecture notes, edited them and published them in the *Enneads* in six volumes of nine sections each. Porphyry claimed that Plotinus attained an ecstatic union with the One, comparable to *eudaimonia* or pleasure, four times during the years he knew him. This experience can be compared with Buddha’s Night of Enlightenment when he meditated under the Bo tree and he saw life “as it is” in relation to the Ultimate Reality of the impersonal and mystical One. Buddha was overwhelmed with this experience of peace, and it changed his life. For the next 45 years he travelled across north India, preaching his Four Noble Truths and the hope of nirvana. New Age practices of meditation and yoga are contemporary examples of this search for inner peace.

## Origen

The Christian philosophic tradition began with Origen, whose life overlapped with Plotinus by nearly 50 years and with Porphyry by 20 years. Origen was born in Alexandria of Christian parents and devoted his life to the exposition of Scripture. He was undoubtedly the most influential theologian of the early church, and for some even today. His book, *First Principles*, was the first systematic exposition of Christian doctrine. His *Contra Celsum* was his rebuttal of the pagan philosopher Celsus who identified with the Greek philosophers from Socrates to Aristotle. Origen’s book, *Hexapla*, was a massive interpretation of the Hebrew Bible. He also wrote commentaries on several books from both the Old and New Testaments.

Because Origen’s life was full of controversy, he was never called a church father but taught as an independent theologian. He was condemned and imprisoned by Demetrius, the bishop of Alexandria, who was jealous of his influence, and was only released upon the death of the bishop in 232. Origen then settled in Caesarea, Palestine, where he established his school and met Plotinus on a visit to Rome.

Porphry recognised Origen's wide influence and travelled to Caesarea to listen to his lectures. He then criticised Origen for putting Scripture above philosophy. Martin Luther rejected Origen's understanding of salvation, and banned his books, although Erasmus (1456–1526), the Renaissance scholar, put Origen's teaching above that of Augustine. Origen's empiricism influenced the mystical emphasis of the Christian poets Coleridge and W. B. Yeats.

## **Greek Philosophy and Islam from Al-Kindi to al-Ghazali**

*Al-Kindi* (801–873) was born in Kufa (now in Iraq) and throughout his life was inspired by Aristotle. He pioneered the sciences of mathematics, medicine and astrology and was a talented musician. He was educated in Baghdad where he was appointed to the House of Wisdom. Al-Kindi was the first Islamic scholar to apply Greek philosophy to Islamic theology and to use logic to interpret the Islamic faith. He argued for the immortality of the soul and upheld the distinction between revealed and human knowledge. Of Arabic descent, he became known as the father of Arabic philosophy. He was known for his work on demonstrating the compatibility of Aristotelian (and to lesser extent Platonic) philosophy with the natural theology of Islam. He argued that divine revelation was above rational thinking. His efforts to show that philosophy had a place in Islamic theology were further developed by Avicenna and Averroes.

*Al-Farabi* (873–950) spent most of his life in Baghdad and was known as the “second teacher” (Aristotle being the first.) He influenced both philosophy and science for several centuries, as well as Maimonides, the Jewish theologian. Al-Farabi adopted Plotinus's concept of emanation as the first cause of reality which became the perfect intellect. Contrary to al-Kindi, he held reason to be superior to revelation, and so answered questions that Islam was failing to answer. As with the Greeks, happiness was the goal of the perfect life. Drawing from Plato's *Republic*, he argued that the philosopher was the perfect man and should rule the state.

*Rushd Ibn* (1126–1198), known in the west as *Averroes*, was more influential in mediaeval Europe than in the Islamic world, with his works being translated into Latin and Hebrew. He argued that Aristotle, as the teacher of philosophy, was the best guide to religious faith for only logic could give certainty to philosophy. He was the last Islamic scholar to promote Greek thought.

*Al-Ghazali* (1055–1111), of Persian descent, wrote in both Arabic and Persian. As a teacher of Islamic orthodoxy, he was considered by many to be the greatest teacher of Islam since the Prophet Muhammad. He made

several important contributions to philosophical debate, and his major work, *The Revival of Religious Sciences*, covered the fields of philosophy, religion and science. Noted for spreading Sufi-ism as an integral school of Islam, he was a mystic at heart but he also strengthened the acceptance of sharia law in religious life. He was known as the pioneer of the “Golden Age of Islam.” He vigorously rejected the influence of Plato and Aristotle in religious life and attacked those who tried to integrate Greek philosophy into Qur’anic theology. He attacked al-Farabi for his Aristotelian belief in the eternity of creation, seeing it as being contrary to the Qur’an. He saw creation as an act of the divine will and argued that the influence of Greek philosophy would result in a loss of faith in Islamic belief and practice.

Islamic philosophy never recovered from al-Ghazali’s massive attacks. So the experiment with secular ideology and practice came to an end.

## **SECTION TWO: SECULARISM IN ASIAN CULTURES**



## Chapter Seven: Secularism in Primal Cultures

Primal people are religious. They are not secular—without belief in God—but are totally committed to life in a world of good and evil spirits. (In fact, they are more committed to the spirit world than many Christians are.)

They live in constant relationship with the spirit world, believing it controls the natural world of storms, floods, droughts, earthquakes and volcanic explosions. But since they have no knowledge of the God of creation, primal people are *secular* as Asians understand the word. Some turn to magic to control the spirit world, but it is not clear that magic is a religious concept.

Most primal peoples live in the mountainous and forested regions of the earth and on islands which are totally dependent on the surrounding seas for their livelihood. The *good* spirits who inhabit the natural world may be supportive of these primal, tribal people, but *evil* spirits can be the agents of disease and death.

Primal people have developed their own ways of placating evil spirits by offering the fruit of the land or by sacrificing animals whose blood cleanses the earth and satisfies them. The objects of their worship may be stars, trees, water or rocks.

Their understanding of the high God, the creator of heaven and earth, and of the need for sacrifice to appease the spirit world, are limited reflections of monotheism. Their understanding of an atoning sacrifice reflects the early chapters of Genesis, written by Moses about 3500 years ago. Primal people are deeply aware that death does not end life. Their religious rituals are designed to respond to human death. In summary we might claim that the primal religions of the world are a degeneration of the Genesis story (chapters 1–11).

The growth of Christianity in Asia has been greater among primal people than among any of the developed religions of Asia. The one exception, surprisingly, is Islam in several countries of Asia. For Islamic belief is closer to biblical truth than to any other Asian religion.

### The World of Spirits<sup>9</sup>

Professor Harold Turner of New Zealand has described the religion of the tribal (primal) people of the world as including the following:

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<sup>9</sup> Harold Turner, "World of the Spirits," in *Eerdman's Handbook to the World's Religions* (Grand Rapids, MI, Eerdman's, 1991), pp. 128–132.

### 1. *The Spirit World*

Basic to primal religions is belief in a world where spirit beings are stronger than human beings. Some are friendly, to be thanked by prayers and offerings. Others are evil and need to be placated by sacrifices from the nature. All tribal people of Asia have multiple gods who ensure the continuity of good over evil.

### 2. *The High God*

In addition to the many gods, tribals elevate one god as supreme above the others.

### 3. *The Living Dead*

Those who die become ancestral spirits who, though dead, are living, and must be treated with the same honour as the living. On physical death the spirits return to their ancestral home.

### 4. *Myths and Dreams*

Primal religions depend on myths about how the world was made and how life is to be lived, protected from natural and human disasters. They define what is sacred and to be avoided (*tapu* in Maori.) Individuals may be possessed by powerful evil spirits through ecstatic dance or through visions and dreams. The Maori *tohunga* are men with special training and powers to interpret myths and dreams, to heal, and to divine the future. In the northeast Asian religions they are known as *shamans*.

### 5. *Appeasing the Gods*

Primal religions offer prayers of thanksgiving to their gods with offerings of food in a communal meal. Their worship is deeply spiritual. Some of their worshippers may be self-centred. They may ask for material blessings or victory by killing their enemies.

Evil spirits and demons who are feared need to be appeased by the sacrifice of animals and by the mutilation of the human body. Their warlike bodily decorations are designed to ward off evil spirits, as well as to defeat one's tribal enemies. Their hope of returning to their homeland after death

depends on their satisfying the good spirits through liturgical worship and on appeasing the evil spirits by sacrifices.

### **A Case Study: the Maori of New Zealand**

The Maori share the religious practices of their Polynesian ancestors of the South Pacific. Claiming that their homeland was Hawaiki, generally thought to be near the Easter Islands, they discovered New Zealand through a series of sea voyages, guided by the currents, the winds, the stars and the flight of birds early in the thirteenth century.<sup>10</sup> They called the country *Aotearoa*, the “Land of the Long White Cloud.” Ethnically, they differed from the Melanesians of Papua New Guinea, Fiji and the Solomon Islands. The Maori came in large canoes, landed in different coastal regions of New Zealand, and developed into separate tribes. Today many of them can trace their ancestry back to their original canoe. The tribes claimed large areas of New Zealand’s coastline and land, which sadly became the source of inter-tribal conflict over the following centuries, only to be peacefully overcome by the arrival of Christian missionaries after the 1820s. The Treaty of Waitangi in 1840 was between the British Crown and the tribal leaders. By then most of the Maori who signed the document had become Christians or been influenced by Christian values.

Many Maori tribes were deeply religious, depending on the spirit world for their food, the control of their land, and their victory in warfare. They were not secular in the western sense of the word, separating their daily life from religion. As with other primal peoples, they had no scriptures and were guided by their myths and oral traditions. The specially-trained *tohunga*, or priests, possessed spiritual powers to foretell the future of people’s lives and to warn of natural events such as volcanic eruptions. *Tohunga* were both honoured and feared in their own village.

### **Tribal Myths**

The stories of how the world and its people were created are multiple, with each tribe having its own account. The most accepted Maori myth is that their first parents were the gods *Rangi*, the sky father, and *Papa*, the earth mother. They were locked in deep embrace and their sons were born but kept in darkness. One son, Tane, forced his parents apart and became the god of the forests, while Tangaroa became the god of the seas, Rongo the

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<sup>10</sup> See James Irwin, “Case Study 7: ‘The Maoris’” (Tring, UK, Lion Publishers, 1982, reprinted by Eerdmans in *Handbook to the World’s Religions*, 1991), pp. 151–154.

god of agriculture, and Whiro the god of evil. The brothers formed a female from the earth. Tane took her as his wife, and their children started the human race. Thus from these myths came the Maori relationship to the whole of nature.

## **Io, the High God**

Maori tradition is that of the many gods, one, *Io*, was the ultimate source of supernatural power. He lived in the highest heaven and was known only to the chosen few (all Maori). The first Christian missionaries to the Maori gave little attention to their search for the supreme god and to the symbolic meanings of their liturgical practices. The truths of their spirituality were ignored. However, more syncretistic movements have tried to bridge the gap between Christianity and Maori mythology. The two best-known Christian sects are *Ringatu*, founded by Chief Te Kooti, and the *Ratana* church, founded by the prophet Wiremu Ratana who is often referred to as the “mouth of God.”

## **The Power of Mana and Tapu**

*Mana* is often referred to as status; a person with mana had presence. While mana was inherited, individuals could also acquire, increase or lose it through their actions. Part of the belief about mana was that those of lower rank might not touch those of higher rank, at the risk of death.

*Tapu* is a powerful spiritual force in Maori life. A person or an object can be declared *tapu* or sacred. To violate this can result in sickness or death. For example, food cooked by a person of high rank may not be eaten by a person of lower rank. In this way tapu protects the honour of mana. The status of *Noa* means one is freed from tapu. Mana and tapu become important in funeral rites on the *marae*, the courtyard of the Maori meeting house, where the priest says the correct funeral prayers (*karakia*). The deceased is then farewelled to join their ancestors in Hawaiki, travelling via Cape Reinga, the northern tip of New Zealand.

*Matariki* is an annual Maori festival which the government of New Zealand has now recognised as a public holiday. It celebrates what westerners know as the Pleiades, the mother-goddess of the seven-star constellation of that name. It is now celebrated as a food festival, enjoyed by both Maori and non-Maori. Many Maori have become secular in their lifestyle, so that Matariki has become a goodwill community event rather than a religious one. No reference is made to God as the creator of all things, including human beings. Hence Christians ought to celebrate Matariki with caution.

## Chapter Eight: Secularism in Hindu Cultures

The term *Hindu* is derived from *Sindhu*, now called the Indus River. For Hindus, this river symbolises the meaning of life—it never ends. Its source is Mount Kailash, in western Tibet, and it empties into the Arabian Sea near Karachi. To meditate on its ever-flowing water gives one a sense of timeless eternity. Hindus call their religion *sanata dharma*, the eternal religion. It has no single founder or prophet, and no one creed. Hinduism is a culture, a meaningful way of life. There are no boundaries to its meaning, for Hinduism transcends time and space. It has no need for an eternal creator, for life never ends. K. M. Sen writes: “Hinduism is more like a tree that has grown gradually than a building that has been erected by some great architect at some definite time in history<sup>11</sup>—an obvious comparison with Christianity. All other religions can be traced to the evolution of Hindu thought.”<sup>12</sup>

In 1977 the Supreme Court of India said of Hinduism:

“In principle, Hinduism incorporates all forms of belief and worship without necessarily the selection or elimination of any; the Hindu is inclined to revere the divine in every manifestation, whatever it may be, and is doctrinally tolerant, leaving others—including Hindus and non-Hindus—to whatever creed or worship practice suits them best. A Hindu may embrace a non-Hindu religion without ceasing to be a Hindu, and since the Hindu is disposed to think synthetically, and to regard other forms of worship, strange gods and divergent doctrines as inadequate rather than wrong or objectionable, he tends to believe that the highest powers complement each other for the wellbeing of the world and humankind. Few religious ideas are considered to be finally irreconcilable. The core religion does not even depend on the existence or nonexistence of God, or on whether there is one god or many. Since religious truth is said to transcend all verbal definition, it is not conceived in dogmatic terms. Hinduism is, then, both a civilisation and a conglomerate of religions, without a beginning, a founder, a central authority, a hierarchy or an organisation.”<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> K. M. Sen, *Hinduism*, (Harmondsworth, MX, Penguin, 1961), p. 14.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15.

<sup>13</sup> 1977, NLJ, p. 5.

Hinduism is thoroughly secular as Asians understand the term. It is inclusive of *all* beliefs and practices, whereas western secularism is the exclusive separation of daily life from religious beliefs. For a Hindu, the claim that there is only one way to God, as both Christians and Muslims believe, is inadequate, false and unnecessary. Hinduism is neither an exclusive monotheism nor a strict pantheism. A better concept is to think of a Hindu as a pan-*entheist*, in which everything is God and God is everything. For the Hindu, final Truth is indescribable and unknowable. It is *neti neti*, not this, not that.

Hindus have no need of a saviour. Those who convert to Hinduism are only returning to the true and universal faith.

## The Assumptions of Hinduism

Although Hinduism gives meaning to life as a comprehensive path to Reality as the impersonal and absolute One, it has a number of dogmatic assumptions which are unconsciously accepted by every Hindu. There are basically three, *karma*, *samsara* and *moksha* or *mukti*.

*Karma* is the willed action of everybody in life, past, present or future, whether good or evil. As a Hindu, a person becomes good by good actions, and he becomes evil by evil actions. He has the freedom to choose. In biblical terminology, “a person reaps what he sows” (Galatians 6:7). Karma is an inclusive moral way of life, integrating the past life and the present and future one.

*Samsara* is endless rebirth. It is a corollary of the law of karma. The actions of a Hindu’s present life are determined by his actions in his previous life, while actions in his present life also determine his actions in the next, for all life is a continuous and unending stream of behaviour. Hindus assume that the death of a body is the door to the soul entering another body. Thus birth, death and rebirth are an endless cycle until *moksha* is realised.

*Moksha* or *mukti* is freedom from the bondage of karma and *samsara*. It is freedom from the desires of the self. The path to this freedom begins with renunciation of the self and leads to *ahimsa* (nonviolence) and asceticism. *Ahimsa* was the centre of Mahatma Gandhi’s striving for *moksha*. It is the centre of the Jain religious way of life. *Moksha* is the way to eternal peace which is the longing of every human heart.

The *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* (1:iii:28) has this beautiful, universally accepted prayer:

From the unreal lead me to the real;  
From darkness, lead me to light;  
From death lead me to immortality.

This prayer is repeated daily by many Hindus as the longing of their souls, but it does not point to a personal God. Rather it points to the Oneness of life.

*Caste* as a system is rooted in these Upanishadic assumptions. It developed in the multicultural, multiracial nature of evolving Hindu society. The conquering Aryans felt superior to those of the Indus Valley civilisation and to those of the Dravidian race whom the Aryans drove towards south India. This racial identity was found in their differing languages. It led to the caste system, ranging from the superior and politically dominant Brahmins, down to those outside of caste, now called Dalits, and began in the Vedic period. When the sacrificing Brahmin priests became corrupt and aggressive to the lower communities and were progressively rejected by them, they then became political as well as religious.

Within Hinduism there are several opponents to the caste divisions. The *bhakti* (devotional) movement developed in opposition to caste. This is seen in the Bhagavad Gita (18.66). It is also reflected in the songs of the Tamil Alvar poets of the sixth to the eighth centuries AD who were of low caste and emphasised *bhakti yoga*, the way of devotion. About 4000 of their Tamil poems were collected, and their appeal was to common people. Ramanuja recognised their poems as the Vedas of the Vaishnavas (worshippers of Vishnu.)

Western secularism in modern Indian society appeals to equality and social justice and is opposed to caste-ism. William Carey's protest against racial discrimination, and especially his opposition to *sati* (the burning of widows on the pyre of their deceased husbands) had a profound influence in West Bengal. Alexander Duff founded the University of Calcutta, John Wilson founded the university of Bombay, and William Miller founded Madras University, where the secular and Christian values of each one appealed to the educated class.

The preamble to the fourth amendment to the constitution of India in 1955 stated that India was a secular nation. The state was separate from religion, and state-owned educational institutions were forbidden to teach it. However, the Indian constitution permitted the state to manage certain areas of political life, including the abolition of caste-ism, and gave partial support for religious schools and Hindu temples.

Historically, political secularism in India has had a checkered history. Although Emperor Ashoka, who ruled India from 272 to 232 BC, converted to Buddhism, he supported other religions in India and Sri Lanka and made no clear distinction between religion and the state. This policy radically changed with the entry of Islam to India in the Mughal era. While Akbar sought to unite the religions of India, his successor, Aurangzeb, imposed

Islam as the state religion, destroyed Hindu temples, and reimposed the *jizya* tax on minority religions.

Then India came under the rule of the East India company and British rule with its policy of “divide and rule” over separate religions and castes. The British eliminated corrupt religious and political leaders and controlled the civil laws regarding marriage, divorce and inheritance within each religion. Their separatist policies led to Hindu social activism and the plea for self-rule. Led by Mahatma Gandhi, political independence was achieved in 1947.

From Independence in 1949 until the rise of the *Bharatiya Janata Party* (BJP) in 2014, the secular state again supported religious schools, Hindu temples and personal marriage laws. During the 65 years of democratic rule, secular India had upheld equality in citizenship and respect for different religious policies and laws. India’s first president, Jawaharlal Nehru, was openly secular, though born of a Brahmin family. Then Dr Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, who became the second president of India (1962–1967), was a staunch Hindu, upholding the *advaita vedanta* way of life. At the same time he supported democracy in India and harmony between the religions. He was a professor of philosophy at both the Madras and Oxford Universities and the author of many influential books on politics and religion, becoming a well-known bridge between India and the west.

The future of secularism in contemporary India is full of uncertainty. The *Bharatiya Janata Party* (in English the Indian People’s Party) envisages India as a monolithic national state, as distinct from a multicultural one. Narendra Modi, leader of the party and prime minister since 2014, has clearly stated that his goal is to be able to declare India as a Hindu *rashtra* (state).

The BJP’s roots are the *Bharatiya Jana Sangh* (India People’s Association), founded in 1951 as the political wing of the radical pro-Hindu RSS party. Modi’s goal is to unify India with a Hindutva ideology of Hindu values, which includes banning the slaughter of cows, stripping Jammu and Kashmir of their autonomy, and promoting the policy that only Hindus can be Indian citizens. This involves oppressing the 200 million Muslims in India and other minorities including Christians. On the positive side, Modi has used his executive power to develop the country’s economy and encourage private investment.

As of 2024 the political future is uncertain. Opposition to BJP’s extreme Hindutva is growing. Minority groups, Muslim and Christian, are gaining increasing respect and their political rights are being acknowledged. Caste politics which have shaped Indian culture throughout its history are again emerging as a political force. However, while India continues to have a sem-

blance of democracy, the role of the judiciary is critical to any constitutional change. Attempts are being made to weaken democracy under BJP rule.

The growing strength of regional political parties, based on language distinctives, is challenging the BJP Hindutva rule. Most of these parties have a charismatic leader who aspires to become an MP if he is not one already. The issue has now become, "Can the regional parties work together to defeat the BJP?" The General Election of May 2024 returned the BJP Party to rule, but with a reduced majority and power. It is now dependent on the support of two minor parties.

The future influence of the Indian National Congress, known as the Congress Party, is also in doubt. From independence, the Congress government was a champion for democracy and secular rule. Religious minorities were well represented in the country's regional and national elected assemblies. However, with the rise of Hindu nationalism under the BJP government, the National Party, under the present leader Rahul Gandhi, has weakened its secular stand by seeking the support of Hindu nationalistic institutions which are nominally identified with the BJP. Rahul Gandhi has visited dozens of temples and represented himself as a disciple of the Hindu god Shiva by wearing the sacred thread worn by upper class Hindus (his Kashmiri family have a Brahmin heritage.) He adopted the BJP belief in the sacredness of the cow. In these actions he is seeking to counter the BJP accusation that the Congress is a Muslim party.

This pro-Hindu trend of the Congress Party has weakened its secular image and caused dissension among its leaders. The Muslim and other minority parties are beginning to shift their alliance from the Congress Party to regional state political parties. If the Congress is again to be a force for democracy it needs new leadership committed to its secular policies, defending the rights of minority communities, and strengthening the independence of the judicial courts. Religious diversity has been the unique strength of the nation of India throughout most of its history, and many Indian citizens want to build on it for the future of their fragmented political world. Many if not most Indians do not wish to be restricted to one religious culture. They are multi-ethnic and pluralistic in religious beliefs and practices and are appealing to democratic institutions to support their appeal for social justice and for national and global peace.

In the past, national civil codes have given freedom to religions to develop their own rules for marriage, divorce, inheritance and property ownership. Prime Minister Modi is pressing for a uniform civil code whereby the Government will replace the individual laws with national laws applied to all citizens, independent of their religious distinctives. Such a code will end India's historic secular policies and threaten its democratic future.

## Mystical Traditions in Hinduism

Hindu secularism is Asian secularism. It is grounded in ideology, not history. Hindus don't deny the existence of the gods. In fact, they worship them in their temples and homes. However, they are not thought of as historic beings but only as mental perceptions. Some idols reflect the beauty of their gods, especially goddesses, while others are ugly caricatures of hate and violence. Some of the mental images of the gods and goddesses may have been based on a semi-historical event such as Krishna in battle, or Ram rescuing his wife who had been kidnapped in Ceylon. These links are now replaced by the mythical actions of their perceived gods.

All this contrasts with western secularism where daily life is clearly separated from religion. The latter is ignored or relegated to the margins, no longer having any influence on economics, society or politics. Some secularists are atheists, for whom a personal creator-God does not even exist.

In Hinduism the concept of *avatar*, the descent of the deity, is a mystical faith which sees Vishnu, as Krishna, coming down to destroy evil in the world. This moral act is seen in the war between two families, in which Krishna, disguised as King Arjuna's charioteer, advises the king to go into battle against his relatives, provided he has no self-conscious motive. The word *avatar* is not found in Vedic literature or in the principal Upanishads. It is suggested only in Puranic literature, especially in the Bhagavad Gita where Krishna says to Arjuna, "Whenever righteousness is in decline, unrighteousness appears. Then I send myself for the protection of the good, the destruction of evildoers, and to establish righteousness on a firm footing. I manifest myself from age to age." (4.7-8—a free translation).

Of the ten best-known avatars of Vishnu, one is a fish, three are animals, five are humans, and the tenth, Kalki, will come at the close of the corrupt Kali Yuga (age). To counter the separation of Buddhism from Hinduism, the historical Buddha is added as the eighth avatar. In response, Christian theologians are careful to distinguish the incarnation of Jesus, born of the Virgin Mary, from the myths of avatar.

Hindus have a strong understanding of the personification of evil in the spirit world, symbolised by the grotesque images of their idols. The Vedas were clearly henotheistic, worshiping many gods of nature while choosing one as their supreme god, a reflection of the Genesis story. Hinduism then progressed to the *advaita* monism of the Upanishads, in which the human Self is absorbed into Absolute Being, the union of Brahman-Atman. This movement was then followed by the epic poems, *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* and especially the Bhagavad Gita, the "Song of Love." These epics out-

line three *margas* or ways of defining life's meaning, namely *karma marga* of action, *bhakti marga* of devotion, and *jnana marga* of knowledge. The Bhagavad Gita expounds these three *margas* again and again without any clear order. For example, the best-known *marga* texts are in chapters 4 and 18.

Christianity also has its mystical tradition, with the personification of nature in the Psalms, especially in 98, 104 and 148. The bodily resurrection of Jesus from the dead and his ascension to heaven emphasises the supernatural nature of biblical revelation. The apostle Paul emphasised the Spirit living within the believer and the believer being part of the body of Christ, a mystical reality. (Galatians 2:20, Ephesians 5:30).

### The Development of Hindu Mysticism

In mediaeval Europe Christianity developed strong mystical traditions, as exemplified in the experiences of Juliana of Norwich, Teresa of Avila, John of the Cross, and more recently in India, Narayan Vaman Tilak and Sadhu Sundar Singh. In the parallel Hindu mediaeval period (1200–1750) there is a flood of Bhakti and mystical poets expressing their love for Rama and for Krishna. The Muslim weaver Kabir (1440–1518) preached the union of Islamic sufism with Hindu bhakti (path of devotion) from village to village. This led his disciple Nanak to found the Sikh faith.

*Tulsidas* had an intense love for Rama and preached his mystical experience of him while in Bengal. *Chaitanya* (1485–1533) sang his *kirtans* (communal songs) from village to village. His longing for a vision of love for Krishna eventually influenced the founding of the Society for Krishna Consciousness and the contemporary Hari Krishna movement of dancing and singing.

*Mirabai*, a sixteenth century Hindu mystic from Rajasthan, had an intense love for Krishna. She cried out,

“I am thirsting for your love, my Beloved,  
I shall make this body a lamp  
And my tender heart will be its wick.”<sup>14</sup>

*Tukuram* (1608–1649), an outcaste grain seller, who lived in a village near Pune, western India, was an intense Bhakti poet, who pleaded:

“As on the bank the poor fish lies  
Gasp and writhes in pain,  
Or as a man with anxious eyes

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<sup>14</sup> A. J. Appasamy, *Temple Bells* (Calcutta, YMCA Publishing, n.d.), p. 100.

Seeks a hidden gold in vain,  
 So is my heart distressed and cried  
 'Have mercy,' Tuku says."<sup>15</sup>

When *Swami Vivekananda* (1863–1902) asked his guru, “Have you seen God?” he was told, “My seeing him is more real than my seeing you.” By this he meant that God was a clear mental image in his mind, but not a personal creator God. For the swami, God was a mystical experience beyond all rational understanding of him. Vivekananda became a person of great influence. He put Hinduism on the global scene as the original and final religion, at the Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893. He then gave sixteen lectures in London in 1896, principally on karma yoga as action realised in immortality. As with the Aryan rishis, he “heard the truth.” His mysticism was founded in the *advaita* non-dualistic philosophy of the Oneness of Brahman-Atman, the union of the divine reality and the spiritual self. This mystical essence of Asian secularism contrasts with the western secularism of John Lennon who in *Imagine* sang:

“Imagine there’s no heaven  
 It’s easy if you try  
 No hell below us  
 Above us, only sky.

Imagine all the people  
 Living for today  
 Imagine there’s no countries,  
 It isn’t hard to do  
 Nothing to kill or die for  
 And no religion too.  
 Imagine all the people  
 Living life in peace ...”

*Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan* (1888–1975) was one of the most influential philosophers of the twentieth century. He was a professor of philosophy at Madras University and at Oxford, served as the second president of India (1962–1967), and was knighted by the UK government.

He was passionately tolerant of all religious views except those that claimed exclusive truth. This indicated his rejection of the three monotheistic religions—Judaism, Christianity and Islam, while he sought to synthesize all other religions within the Upanishadic monistic framework. In this

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<sup>15</sup> Cited by Bruce Nicholls in *Is Jesus the Only Way to God?* (Auckland, Affirm Publications, 1998), p. 7.

context he was able to endorse both western and Asian secularism, thereby building a bridge between Indian and western religious and political cultures. A contemporary example of this union is seen in 2022 when Rishi Sunak was elected Prime Minister of the United Kingdom. Sunak headed an increasingly secular nation but was proud to publicly call himself a Hindu. For him the god Ganesh symbolises wisdom, understanding and a discriminating intellect.

The expanding influence of science and technology, aided by widespread liberal education, has also led to the secularisation of religious superstitions such as astrology. This is to be commended.

The preamble to the 42<sup>nd</sup> amendment to the constitution of India (1976) stated that India was a secular nation, and separated the state from religion. Thus state-owned educational institutions were prohibited from teaching religion. However, the Indian constitution does permit the state to interfere in certain areas of India's religious life, such as the abolition of caste-ism. It also gives partial support for religious schools, upholds religious temples, and controls personal laws relating to marriage, divorce and inheritance.

## Grace Beyond Hindu Secularism

The Hindu search for meaning beyond the endless cycle of rebirths can be seen in *Pillai Lokacharya* (1264–1367) a worshipper in the southern school of Vaishnavism who glimpsed the truth of the grace of forgiveness. He took his stand on the *Charama Sloka* (Bhagavad Gita 18.66), teaching that salvation was by grace alone. He used the illustration of the infant depending entirely on the mother's milk, while religion, relying on one's own effort, was like buying milk from the marketplace.<sup>16</sup>

Lokacharya was a devotee of Krishna but rejected *bhakti marga*, arguing that grace cancelled karma law. In fact, earning God's favour through *bhakti marga* was the enemy of grace. For him, Krishna was an indulgent god who could forgive at will, which meant there was no need to repent of sin.

In Hinduism God's grace is seen in the avatars coming down to earth again and again to liberate their followers from the bondage of karmic law. Hindus long to experience the undeserved grace of God. K. M. Sen testifies, "My form of religion may change, but as a Hindu I believe that the craving for the Supreme cannot change."<sup>17</sup> For Hindus, grace does not abolish the

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<sup>16</sup> Bruce Nicholls in "Hinduism," in *The World Religions*, edited by Sir Norman Anderson (London, InterVarsity Press, 4<sup>th</sup> ed., 1975).

<sup>17</sup> Sen, p. 111.

law but works within it to hasten the release from the endless cycle of re-births, whereas for the Christian, grace is the gift of God's mercy, and is not earned by righteous living.

In Hinduism *prapatti* means total surrender to God. Each of the three *margas* in their own context seeks it as the road to self-realisation. The *charama sloka* says,

Abandon all other duties  
Go to me as the sole refuge  
From all these evils  
I thee shall rescue:  
Be not grieved.  
(18.66)

The Hindu understanding of grace is commendable but falls short of Paul's understanding that salvation is by grace alone, received by faith, and the undeserved gift of God (Galatians 2:8). It works apart from the law, not in it.

Krishna spoke to Arjuna who was struggling with his craving for righteousness alongside his duty to kill his family's enemy without impure motivation.

God reveals himself to seekers in different ways. Dreams with the appeal "Follow Me" have led many seekers to trust in Christ alone. A biblical account of God's grace is seen in the appearance of Melchizedek in Genesis 14, and of Cornelius in Acts 10. In each case they trusted God as they knew him and lived by grace. *Paul Sudhaka*, a Brahmin from Kerala and a student of Dr Radhakrishnan in Madras, was so awed by the genealogy of Jesus in Matthew 1:1-17 that he became his disciple and was an effective evangelist to upper class Hindus.

While the *Bhagavad Gita* gives full recognition to each of the three *margas* as the way to *moksha*, its concept of grace overshadows them all. Grace reaches a high point in chapter 18.62 which states:

Surrender exclusively unto Him with your whole being, O Bharat. By His grace, you will attain perfect peace and the eternal abode.

## **The Christian Response to Secular Hinduism**

Hindu philosophy and religion without an acknowledgement of the biblical creator-God, are powerless to answer the crises of violence, evil and injustice which have characterised humanity throughout its history.

The Christian response begins with God's self-revelation as the knowable and eternal Word. He is the creator of the universe as a space-time

reality and is holy, just and loving. He reveals himself and his purposes for humankind in personal and historic ways. He is “the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob,” while the Hindu *trimurti* of Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva have no historical roots. The mythical Shiva as the protector of the good is the destroyer of evil. His most sacred temple is at Kedarnath in the Himalayan snows, at the source of one of the tributaries of the Ganges. Every year thousands of pilgrims travel up the rugged path to this temple where they pray that Lord Shiva will give them a vision of his presence. The central image in the temple is a phallic symbol representing Shiva’s creative power. With my son who was a student at Woodstock School in Landaur, Mussorie, I made this journey to Kedarnath where we watched the pilgrims enter the temple and then begin their journey home, disappointed that Lord Shiva had remained silent.

By contrast, the Christian image of God is the person of Jesus Christ, born of the Virgin Mary in Bethlehem, Israel, who died on a wooden cross outside of Jerusalem and three days later rose from the dead. He was an historic person who ascended to heaven and is seated at the right-hand side of God, his Father. He is the living God whom Christians worship in a person-to-person relationship, whereas for Hindus, religion is striving to end the karmic cycle of death and rebirth by overcoming evil in the past life with good deeds in this one but with little hope of liberation. Believing Christians know the truth of the living God by faith, without which it is impossible to please God. “For everyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him” (Hebrews 11:6). Jesus offers liberation from a sinful life to those who repent of their past and present behaviour, seek his forgiveness, and trust him alone for eternal life.

The uniqueness of biblical revelation is that God is a covenant-making and covenant-keeping God to those who live in partnership with him. When Israel, God’s chosen community, failed to keep the covenant relationship established by God he promised them a *new* covenant. According to Jeremiah he said: “I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God and they will be my people.” He added, “I will forgive their wickedness and remember their sins no more” (Jeremiah 31:33–34).

Jesus inaugurated this new covenant when in his last meal with this disciples before his crucifixion he took bread, broke it, and said, “Take, eat, this is my body.” He then took a cup of wine, gave thanks, and offered it to them, saying, “This is my blood of the new covenant which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins” (Matthew 26:26–28). Jesus had already promised his disciples that he would send them the Holy Spirit who would guide them into all truth, and empower them to overcome evil.

In *saccidananda*, Hindus glimpse the triune nature of God as *sat* (truth), *chit* (consciousness) and *ananda* (pure happiness.) But this abstract knowledge falls short of describing God's nature as creator, redeemer and sanctifier. Christians experience God as their heavenly Father, Jesus as their Saviour, and the Holy Spirit as their Advocate who empowers them to live victoriously.

*Saccidananda* is a religious belief without personal involvement. For the Hindu there is no personal dialogue with God. However, for the Christian the relationship between the living God and his disciples is illustrated in the experience of Moses, who while minding the flock of his father-in-law in the desert near Mount Horeb, saw a bush that was not consumed. When he went near to examine it, God called to him, "Moses, take off your sandals for this place where you are standing is holy ground." Then God revealed to him his personal name, "I Am Who I am" (Exodus 3:14). This meeting with God is not a mythical but an historical event. It led to God's revealing his moral will to Moses in the form of Ten Commandments which were relevant for all time and for all people and revealed God's righteousness.

For the Christian, God is holy-love, holding together his wrath against all godlessness and against the wickedness of human beings (Romans 1:18, 21-23) with his kindness, tolerance and patience (Romans 2:4). Thus the essence of God's being is holiness and love. We love because he first loved us. (1 John 4:19)

Contemporary Hindus see no need for an atoning sacrifice, although sacrifice was important to the rishis of the Vedas. Sacrifice was ignored by the advaita of the Upanishads and then recovered by the three margas of the Bhagavad Gita.

On the other hand, surrender to God is not enough. Jesus stated that repenting and believing the good news was the essence of the gospel (Mark 1:15), and emphasised that salvation reflected a new level of relationship between a person and God.

Paul explained the Christian distinctive when he said, "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith, and this is not of yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no-one can boast" (Ephesians 2:8-9). This is the Christian hope.

## **Chapter Nine: Secularism in Buddhist Cultures**

Secular Buddhism is often called agnostic, pragmatic or atheistic. It seeks to interpret traditional Buddhism in both a rational and a humanistic way, denying both the philosophical assumptions and religious practices of traditional Hinduism. It interprets the traditional teachings of Buddha in the context of contemporary cultures and lifestyles.

In western society, secularism is now a dominant way of life, and religion has been relegated from the centre to the periphery. Secularism does not necessarily deny the existence of God but considers it irrelevant to the issues of the modern world. Its dominance in the west has now spread to Asia.

In this chapter we will analyse this trend, reject what is untrue and discern how to build relationships with our Buddhist neighbours who are secular. And we will respond to the challenge using the teachings and practices of biblical revelation. Secularism goes beyond both of these in its quest to find the meaning of life. The original Theravada Buddhism is sceptical of both the philosophy of Mahayana Buddhism and of the religious assumptions borrowed from Vedic and Upanishadic Hinduism—assumptions on the cause and effect of karma on human life. Karma depends on the actions of the previous life, just as the next rebirth depends on the actions of this one.

As we seen, the emergence of secularism began in the west with the Greek philosophers, notably Socrates and Aristotle, and re-emerged in the Age of Enlightenment with Thomas Hobbes, Rene Descartes, Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Immanuel Kant. It has now become the dominant worldview of western culture. Other factors in the growth of modern secularism include the assumptions of evolutionary science and economic prosperity, as well as the failure of religion to overcome human suffering.

### **Secular Buddhists**

Secular issues that now influence contemporary Buddhism worldwide have become a growing force in modern lifestyles. Although there is no national or international network of secular Buddhists, the movement is spearheaded by a number of Buddhist teachers, some of whom have had global influence.

*Stephen Batchelor* is the best-known western sceptic of traditional Buddhism. Born in Scotland, he belonged to the secular youth culture of the 1960s and went to India where he was deeply influenced by S. N. Goenka, an Indian teacher. Batchelor taught *Vipassanā* (insight) meditation. He lived briefly in Dharamsala, India, with the Tibetan refugees, accepting their religious philosophy, and becoming a Buddhist monk. After eight years without finding any peace, he transferred to a monastery in south Korea where he trained in Zen meditation. He understood *dharma* not as a philosophy but as a total way of living. He returned to lay status in order to marry Martine Fages, a Buddhist nun whom he had met in south Korea. Together they returned to England and joined a small Buddhist community in Devon, although they now live in France. Batchelor became dissatisfied with traditional Buddhism and went on to publish *Buddhism Without Belief* (1997) which quickly became a bestseller. It was followed by *Confessions of a Buddhist Atheist*. In his book *After Buddhism*, which promoted a sceptical philosophy, he says he was influenced by the Greek philosopher Pyrrho (360–270 BC) who is considered the founder of ancient scepticism. Pyrrho rejected dogma, suspended judgment on all things, and lived according to his daily experience. Batchelor then focussed on interpreting the Pali canon of Theravada Buddhism in the light of modern Buddhist lifestyles.

*Jack Kornfield*, an American and former Theravadian monk, developed the Insight Meditation Society “without the complications of rituals, robes, chanting and the whole religious tradition.”<sup>18</sup>

*S. N. Goenke* (1924–2013) was born in Burma to an Indian business family and became an Indian Buddhist. He taught *Vipassana Insight Meditation* as the art of living. He believed that Buddha’s path to *dhamma* (liberation) was universal and scientific, and did not require belief in any religious system, being open to all people of all faiths and none. It meant freedom from impure thinking in order to create a pure mind. Vipassana Insight Meditation starts with recognising natural breathing, enabling the mind to become concentrated and increasingly aware of the interconnection between mind and body, as well as to become filled with compassionate and loving thoughts.

Goenke was the supreme example of a devout Buddhist who became secular in his interpretation of the Pali scriptures. He helped to establish meditation centres throughout the world, each providing ten-day courses

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<sup>18</sup> Gil Fronsdal, “Insight Meditation in the United States: Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness”, in C. S. Prebish, K. K. Tanaka (eds.), *The Faces of Buddhism in America* (University of California Press, 1998).

on the condition that learners refrain from practising other religions or other meditative practices for the duration. His vision was an opportunity for Christians to establish relationships of understanding and respect between Christians and secular Buddhists. It was also an opportunity for Christians to share the message of Jesus and his kingdom as the answer to a suffering world and to show that no self-effort based on meditation can liberate a person from *tanha's* sinful desires and craving. Buddhists who are searching beyond the emptiness of nirvana for eternal life will find it only in a holy, just and loving God.

Today, Vipassana courses are taught in 241 permanent meditation centres in 94 countries. In the year 2000 Goenke laid the foundation for the Global Vipassana pagoda near Mumbai which was opened in 2009. Its central meditating hall has a capacity for 8000. In 2012 Goenke was conferred the Padma Bhushan in honour of his contribution to India's social work program. Jay Michaelson wrote a book called *SN Goenke: The Man Who Taught the World to Meditate*, published in 2013.

## The Enlightenment of the Buddha

Buddhism in Asia is a humanistic and pragmatic religious culture founded by Siddhartha Gautama (c. 563–480 BC) The dates of his birth and death are disputed in different Buddhist texts.

Gautama achieved Enlightenment at about 35 years of age. Six years earlier, as the son of a wealthy Hindu raja, he had had the profound experience of seeing for the first time human suffering and death. This led him to become a wandering Hindu ascetic in the Ganges valley. Over the next six years he exceeded all his colleagues in his self-denial, almost to the point of death. But asceticism failed to provide him with meaning to life. And so he began to eat again, much to the dismay of his colleagues. He turned to solitude and eventually went to Gaya where he meditated under a Bodhi tree on the banks of the river Neranjara. It is not clear how many days he spent doing this. Some say six days, others one night. In the middle of the night, under a clear moon, he had a moment when he grasped the meaning of life “as it is.” He experienced liberation from his suffering, glimpsed its meaning and causes, and devised an eightfold path to eliminate it. His lifestyle changed to peace and joy, as his friends soon noticed. He went on to call himself the Buddha, the Enlightened One, although his favourite name for himself was *Tathagatha*—“the one who has reached his goal.”

In his Enlightenment Buddha experienced nirvana, which literally means to “blow out,” or be extinguished like a candle flame. It appears he did not mean the total annihilation of life but the extinction of all suffer-

ing, including desire, lust, hate, thirst and ignorance. He described his experience as the state of inner bliss, peace and freedom. The reality of experiencing nirvana impelled him to spend the next 45 years, until his death at aged 80, preaching and teaching his new message in village after village across north India, converting Hindus and Jains to be his followers. He called his converts who experienced nirvana *arahats*—people who had broken the cycle of rebirth. He did not need the help of a transcendent God or any of the Hindu gods and goddesses in his quest for nirvana. It was a topic he never chose to debate. In reality he was a practising atheist.

At the same time, however, Buddha was deeply religious in his understanding of the need for spirituality. He explained this in his four Noble Truths. In this sense his faith differed from western secularism which excludes religion altogether. Today many westerners who are conscious of an inner spiritual vacuum are turning to Buddhism for solace. Western missionaries often do not understand the distinction between western and Asian spirituality, and our Asian theological colleges need fresh insight into ways to bridge this gap. Jesus' claim to be the way, the truth and the life points to the fulfilment of this inner spiritual vacuum.

### **Four Noble Truths**

Buddhism and Christianity differ sharply on where truth is to be found. They reject each other's diagnosis on the problem of human suffering, its causes and cure. For the Buddhist, the nature and cause of suffering is detailed in the first two Noble Truths. *Dukkha* was universal human suffering caused by *tanha*—desire, thirst, and craving for the pleasures of life. Together all human suffering pointed to ignorance, for which the cure was to follow Buddha's Eightfold Path (the fourth Noble Truth.) In summary, Buddha's cure was to "cease from all evil, cultivate the good, and cleanse the mind," in short, to live the ethical life which it prescribed. By contrast, the Christian reply is to recognise the truths of the first two Noble Truths, and to offer a different way to overcome them by calling people to repent of their sin and to put their trust wholly in Jesus Christ.

### **The Assumptions of Theravada Buddhism**

Theravada Buddhism is the original Buddhism followed by the Theravadians, those who adhere to the Teaching of the Elders. It was outlined in the first and second council of the monks who accepted the Pali canon as being faithful to the teachings of Gautama Buddha, the Four Noble Truths, and nirvana, the path to liberation. Its assumptions include:

### 1. *Karma and Samsara*

*Karma* is the natural law of cause and effect common to all life, while *samsara* is the belief in unending death and rebirth. Buddha did not invent these two principles. He accepted them from his Hindu heritage, beginning with the Vedas. He assumed every action must have a cause, but for him karma was not fatalism but the conscious intent to control one's actions, whatever their cause. Buddha believed one had freedom to control karma—a freedom not bound by any religious belief. He believed that the quality of the present life was dependent on the good and bad actions of the previous one and that those of the present life would shape the next.

*Samsara* is the process of endless life and death, and continues until one's good deeds totally outweigh the bad ones. Then karma and *samsara* will be eliminated. Hindus called this liberation *moksha* or *mukti*, while Buddhists called it *nirvana*. This principle of cause and effect is evident in all life, from insects to human beings. Some who believe in this ideology have claimed to report incidents remembered from their past life. The Christian, accepts the principle of karma in this life as cause and effect, but rejects the idea of reincarnation as rebirth.

### 2. *Dependent Origination*

Buddha made dependent origination, also called dependent arising, a causal link between karma and *samsara*. It is a philosophic concept about the nature of existence, and has several interpretations. It states that nothing happens by itself, but that every action is dependent on a previous action and that each action influences the next one. According to Buddha, nothing is independent except *nirvana* which is beyond all change. This could be compared to the Christian view of heaven and hell which are the final states of human life.

All actions are not only dependent on others, but require a number of conditions. Buddha named twelve conditions, namely ignorance, formation of mind, consciousness, the five skandhas, the five sense organs, contact with objects, feelings and sensations, craving and desire, grasping, rebirth, old age and death. Each is impermanent and arises depending on the others. Each of the four Noble Truths is conditioned by these causal principles. The links are sometimes called *constructs*, which in themselves don't actually exist. Buddha illustrated this by referring to the parts of a chariot (axel, wheel, body, etc.) Each does not constitute the chariot. He concluded that the chariot does not exist in itself apart from its parts. Likewise, the self did not exist apart from the five skandhas of human behaviour.

Buddha used this argument to support his principle of *anatta*, the non-self idea of a person. The wheel of life, resulting in rebirth, is broken when the causal elements disappear and the awakening of nirvana is achieved. The secular Buddhist sees these links as real and unchanging. They are without beginning and end—constantly becoming. Followers of the monotheistic religions, Judaism, Christianity and Islam, reject this idea of the nonexistence of the self. For them, hate and greed are real and not conditioned by these constructs. Buddha’s logic leads to the belief that nirvana is also a construct without existence. It is “emptiness” —not a state of endless bliss as many believe it to be.

### 3. *Three Tripitaka Principles*

- Refuge in Buddha’s *enlightenment* experience
- Refuge in *dharma*, his teaching on right thinking
- Refuge in *sangha*, the monastic community of his followers

Buddha assumed these three “jewels” of his philosophy were necessary to reach nirvana. The first was the foundation of the Buddhist faith and experience and the second was the way to achieve it. The third, refuge in the sangha, became optional as ordinary people became followers who had no intention of entering a monastery. Buddha required every monk entering a monastery to keep 227 rules of conduct, and the sangha met twice a month to ensure these rules were being kept. To the present day, Buddhist monks practise a discipline of distinctive dress, and with their begging bowls depend on others for their support.

From the beginning, only men were admitted to the sangha, but later, under pressure from the growing community of female disciples, Buddha instituted an order for nuns with extra rules to meet their needs. But they were always seen to be inferior to the men. Nuns continued in the Theravada tradition until the tenth century AD but they were always small in number. The laity were always considered inferior to the monks, since nirvana was not directly available to them.

No doubt many monks were dissatisfied with the monastic life and its strict rules and constant meditation. They looked for a better way, which they found in Mahayana Buddhism. Also the secular mind rejected Buddha’s dharma as a denial of enjoying the pleasures of daily life, namely wealth, sex and social status.

To achieve liberation from consciousness, Buddha admitted that this third principle (taking refuge in the sangha) might not be necessary.

Right thinking was outlined in the fourth Noble Truth whose ethical goals depended on self-will. Christians accept these eight truths, but deny that humans in themselves have the power to live according to them. They need the transcendent power of the Holy Spirit to live moral lives. Buddhists believe that when the five skandhas of human behaviour are eliminated, the peace of nirvana will follow. The skandhas are the sense organs of the body—eye, ear, nose, tongue and touch—as well as the four mental states of feelings and sensations, perceptions, willpower and consciousness. Buddha argued that the skandhas were the cause of suffering and through self-will one's consciousness of them could be eliminated. They appeared to be permanent, although Buddha explained their impermanence in his theory of *anicca*.

#### 4. Ethics of the Eightfold Path

The Eightfold Path is a middle way, avoiding the extremes of asceticism and sensuality. It depends on intention and acts of self-will, and consists of natural moral laws for all who seek to follow Buddha. He was agnostic as to their source. They are practical and attainable, and require no transcendent help. They are traditionally grouped as *wisdom*, *morality* and *concentration*.

*Wisdom* includes right understanding and right intention; *morality* includes right speech, right action and right livelihood; *concentration* includes right effort, right mindfulness and right focus. These qualities are efforts of the self or ego. The last two—right mindfulness and right focus—are the key to the Eightfold Path. Mindfulness can be achieved on two levels.

#### 5. Meditation

a. *Calm Meditation (Samatha)*. This aims to concentrate the mind “until it becomes free of all distractions and experiences a unified state of inner stillness.”<sup>19</sup>

The key to this common form of calm meditation is breath control. This is achieved by inhaling deeply, holding one's breath for, say, five seconds, and exhaling. This technique needs to be repeated several times, whenever sensual thoughts or times of fear or uncertainty arise.

This is good advice. There are several exhortations to meditate in the Bible, such as in Psalm 119:15, 27, 48, 78, 97, 99, 148. Calm meditation leads

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<sup>19</sup> David Burnett, *The Spirit of Buddhism* (Crowborough, Monarch Publications, 1996), p. 106.

to peace of body and mind. For example: “O how I love your law. I meditate on it all day long” (Psalm 119:97).”

I practice calm meditation every day when feeling stressed, and at night to ensure immediate sleep. I understand many army leaders teach their soldiers to practice calm meditation before going into battle.

The Christian distinctive on meditation is that it leads to a life of prayer, whereas in Buddhism it is *only* meditation, for there is no God to whom to pray. The goal of Christian meditation is to experience God’s presence and to hear his word as recorded in scripture.

b. *Vipassana* (Insight Meditation). This goes beyond calm meditation with its emphasis on particular objects and goals to an awareness of every bodily feeling and mental thought. Once the mindfulness of the body is recognised, insight meditation will focus on emotions and moods, which also depend on flashes of understanding. Calm meditation prepares one for insight meditation. It understands “life as it is” beyond physical and mental objects.

Buddhists emphasize the role of *yoga* as way of concentrating on an object (as in calm meditation) or on a mental concept (as in insight meditation.) Yoga helps people to lose awareness of their bodies and concentrate on a cosmic level beyond human experience. The secular world turns to yoga to relieve itself of mental stress and anxiety. The Christian’s response is to look beyond the value of right mindfulness and right concentration to a right relationship with a loving and forgiving God.

In his Enlightenment, Buddha saw things as they were. He saw that suffering was the result of constant rebirth. This differed from the Hindu concept of avatars in which gods came temporarily and repeatedly to earth. As we have seen, Buddhists believe every birth and rebirth must have a cause that motivates it. This is inherent in all nature from plant life to humans. Ultimately human suffering for the Buddhist is a moral issue for people seeking release from *dukkha* and *tanha*. Both Buddhists and secularists believe that this release is by the self-will of the sufferer, whereas for the monotheist it is by the grace of almighty God.

## 6. *Anicca and Anatta*

The assumptions about suffering and the release from it led Buddha to formulate his distinctive concepts of *anicca* and *anatta*, which are distinct from the earlier Hindu thought.

*Anicca* is the impermanence of all things. Nothing in life remains the same. Moti Lal Pandit notes, “The Buddha asserts that everything is be-

coming: it has no beginning and no end.”<sup>20</sup> The individual exists only as a succession of moments of consciousness. Life is a succession of thought. There is no permanent soul or I-consciousness. Everything is in a state of becoming something else.

*Anatta* is the state of nonexistence of the self.

Buddha believed that when the five *skandhas* or aggregates that caused mental stress were eliminated, suffering would end. He used the illustration of a person on a raft seeking to cross a wide river. The raft was the *skandhas*, so that when the seeker reached the other side, the *skandhas* drifted away and nirvana was achieved. When the *skandhas* die, consciousness, which is the cause of suffering, no longer exists but disappears into emptiness.

Buddha is reported as saying, “When the *skandhas* arise, decay and die, O Bikkhu, every moment you are born, you decay, and die.”

## The Spread of Theravada Buddhism

The direction and authority for the Pali canons (authoritative scriptures) were not available until the first century BC.

After the death of Buddha the first council was held, where the three-fold refuges of the Tipitaka were confirmed. The second council was held about 100 years later, when according to later Pali tradition, 700 monks gathered and additional rules were established. The third council was held about 250 BC, during the reign of King Ashoka who had converted to Buddhism and vigorously promoted the faith across Asia, beginning with Sri Lanka.

Buddhist teaching and the founding of monasteries spread throughout south-east Asia, beginning with Ceylon (Sri Lanka) and spreading to Burma, Thailand, Cambodia, Vietnam and Laos, while the Mahayana tradition spread Buddhism to north-east Asia and harmonised with existing religions in China, Japan, Korea and Taiwan. Today the dominant Chinese population in Singapore is Buddhist.

In Tibet, tantric Buddhist philosophy, together with magic and demonic powers, merged with the indigenous Bon religion. It is significant that the Chinese communist rulers relocated many atheistic Han Chinese to Tibet, where many became tantric Buddhists. Surprisingly many westerners are attracted to Tibetan Buddhism, no doubt following the compassionate and moral teachings of the Dalai Lama who now lives in Dharamsala, India. Mantra prayers are central to their religious practices.

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<sup>20</sup> Moti Lal Pandit, *The Fundamentals of Buddhism* (New Delhi, ISPC, 1979), p. 29.

The best-known mantra is *Om mani padmi hum*. *Mani* and *padmi* are the jewels of the lotus, while the sounds *Om* and *hum* carry supernatural power. Merit is gained through the constant repetition of the mantras, written and displayed in revolving prayer wheels and on flags flapping in the wind.

## The Christian Response

In this section we will discuss the responses of only two Sri Lankan scholars, namely Dr Lynn de Silva and the Rev Tissa Weerasingha.

Dr Lynn de Silva, the well-known ecumenical scholar and pastor in Sri Lanka, has sought to interpret Christian doctrines in terms of the conceptual framework of Theravada Buddhism in his search for a meeting point of Buddhism and Christianity. He finds this in *anatta*, the elimination of the self. He states, "The spiritual meaning of *anatta* is the experience of self-negation, the denying of the self which is an essential aspect of the spiritual life of Buddhists as well as Christians."<sup>21</sup>

De Silva identifies *anatta* with the biblical *pneuma* (spirit) as "a dynamic quality of being which lifts man above finite existence."<sup>22</sup> He adds, "*Anatta* serves to stress the non-egocentric aspect and *pneuma* the relational aspect of personhood."<sup>23</sup> He argues that "if man is absolutely *anatta* (emptiness) then God is absolutely necessary."<sup>24</sup>

Two comments are in order. The biblical concept of *pneuma* goes beyond the sociological understanding of the nature of human relationships to describe the nature of God himself. The Spirit transforms our emptiness into eternal life with God. Secondly, if *anatta* is total emptiness, then God has nothing to save. So he is not necessary. Further, nirvana is non-existent. So his argument may lead to nihilism. The biblical response is that all people, including Buddhists, are created in the image of God with attributes that enable them to relate personally both to the reality of God and to human life. Sin against God is more than ignorance of the truth. Positively, de Silva, who is to be commended for his commitment to building meaningful relationships with his Buddhist neighbours, begins with the human predicament in terms of *dukkha* and *tanha*. Christians endorse these in their dialogue with Buddhists and other secularists.

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<sup>21</sup> Lynn de Silva, "The Problem of the self in Buddhism and Christianity," in *What Asian Christians are thinking*, ed. Douglas J. Elwood (Quezon city, Philippines, New Day Publishers, 1976), p. 112.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 113.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 114.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 117.

In order to build bridges of understanding between Buddhists and Christians it is important for Christians to begin with an exegesis of who Jesus is and why he came to earth and died as a ransom for sinners. The resurrection of Jesus is the hope of a transformed life in which both humanity and divinity dwell. Christians are encouraged to share with their Buddhist friends the stories of Jesus in the gospels and to urge them to become followers of Jesus. To interpret Jesus and his message in Buddhist concepts inevitably leads to *eisegesis*, reading into the text what the seeker wishes to find.

Tissa Weerasingha, principal of the Colombo Bible Institute and pastor of the Calvary Church, Colombo, offers a traditional evangelical response to the issues raised by Lynn de Silva. As an apologist he begins with the biblical truths. As an evangelist he seeks to lead Buddhists to a personal faith in Jesus Christ and to become members of his church. His theology determines his methodology.

Weerasingha responds to de Silva's statement that "in Christ's act of emptying himself there was no trace of *tanha* which binds man to conditioned existence and puts him under the power of *anicca*, *dukkha* and *anatta*. Christ was sinless, hence conditioned existence had no power over him."<sup>25</sup> So he goes beyond de Silva's concept of Christ's identity with emptiness and sees Christ's death as the atonement for the sins of all humanity. His death was unconditional. As an evangelist, Weerasingha sees repentance and the forgiveness of sins as the basis of salvation. In the context of shame-orientated culture, he affirms a two-dimensional response: "First the omnipotence of God in Christ as Lord of all. His sovereignty and supremacy is over all created beings, spirits, demons and cosmic powers ... The second dimension is that the supremacy of Christ demands moral accountability to a holy God who judges sin and sinful human beings. This awareness of guilt and the need for moral regeneration in shame-orientated cultures is a later awareness."<sup>26</sup>

Weerasingha sees conversion as a process based on accepting Christ's divine authority and experiencing moral regeneration. In his attempt to relate Christianity to Buddhism he sees accepting the principle of karma as an introduction to Christian salvation. He states, "Karmic Christology may be the answer the Buddhist void is waiting for."<sup>27</sup> He concludes, "Bud-

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<sup>25</sup> De Silva, "Theological Construction in a Buddhist Context," in *Asian Voices in Christian Theology*, ed. Gerald H. Anderson (Maryknoll, NY, Orbis Books, 1976), p. 50.

<sup>26</sup> Tissa Weerasingha, "Concepts of Salvation in Buddhism," in *Evangelical Review of Theology*, 15 January, 1991), p. 74.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 75.

dhism may shed some *descriptive* light on the dimensions of the human dilemma, but it cannot shed any *prescriptive* light on the solution to man's problem."<sup>28</sup>

To some extent the criticism of de Silva applies also to Weerasingha, who does not give a coherent prescriptive theology needed in evangelising Buddhists. Mahayana Buddhism raises additional theological issues, which calls for exploring additional paths in guiding Buddhists to accept Jesus and his kingdom and become members of Christ's church.

## The Rise of Mahayana Buddhism

After the death of King Ashoka in 232 BC his Mauryan empire rapidly declined. From the first century AD a wide range of *sutras* (religious teachings, usually taking the form of aphorisms or short statements of belief) were developed in north-east Asia, introducing variants to traditional Buddhism. The teachings were confirmed in *stupas* (temples) all over the region. The strict *arahat* ideal of the monasteries lost its challenge, while in India the rising attraction of the bhakti Hindu tradition, as seen in Bhagavad Gita, influenced Buddhism in the Hindu world. In response to this threat, the Hindu pundits adopted Buddha as the eighth avatar of Vishnu. The wisdom of the sutras pointed to a new inclusivism which attracted many. The best-known sutras were the diamond, the heart and the lotus sutras which pointed to a new level of spirituality which harmonised with the religious traditions of north-east Asia.

Since Buddha would not speculate on the nature of nirvana, the Mahayana Buddhists looked for new ways to satisfy the spiritual vacuum in their lives, for death was a reality they could not ignore. Further, while being absorbed into the religious cultures of Daoism, Confucianism, Shintoism and shamanism, they wanted someone to teach them how to live the good life. To satisfy their spiritual search they began to worship Buddha as a cosmic being, even as a god. They acknowledged the historic Gautama Buddha and his Enlightenment as the all-inclusive essence of Buddhism. From this developed the concept that all human beings could participate in the Buddhist essence and inherit the Buddhist Enlightenment.

To emphasize the compassionate nature of the historic Buddha, the Mahayana believers developed the concept of the *bodhisattvas* for those who vowed to delay their entry into the state of enlightenment in order

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<sup>28</sup> Tissa Weerasingha, "A Critique of Theology from Buddhist Cultures", from *The Bible and Theology in Asian Contexts*, ed. Bong Rin Ro and Ruth Eschenaur (Taichung, Taiwan, The Asia Theological Association, 1984), p. 297.

that those in bondage to dukkha and tanha might be liberated and achieve Buddhahood. The assumption was that the karmic energy created by living a good life and rejecting all evil could build up merit in order to help another to experience enlightenment and enter nirvana. This demanded to make their vow to become a bodhisattva in the presence of other bodhisattvas. This vow included a willingness to give up all possessions including family. It was an extreme act of self-sacrifice and compassion for others, only seen elsewhere in Christianity.

The most notable difference in Mahayana Buddhism from the Theravada tradition was “a change of emphasis from an escape from life to living life itself.”<sup>29</sup> In this way, becoming a bodhisattva was to accept a vicarious acts of suffering for the liberation of others. This made enlightenment a possibility for all Buddhists. The secularists may admire this denial and self-sacrifice but they cannot show that it offers the path to inner peace and joy.

The Mahayana sutras were offered as scripture, but they did not carry the authority of the earlier Pali canon. As a result many sects developed among them. The Buddhist monk was expected “not to love so much as not to hate. He had to live a life of solitude and detachment.”<sup>30</sup>

The early Buddhist monks who entered China to spread their faith initially faced severe opposition from the Daoists and the Confucianists. The Buddhists maintained their presence by building many stupas and monasteries. At the same time they sought to harmonise their faith with the religions of China.

## **The Mahayana Schools**

Of the many Mahayana sects or schools that developed I will mention only three:

### *1. The Ch’an school*

This was thought to have been established by a monk known as Bodhidharma about 470 AD. It is not clear if he came from India or central Asia. The tradition is that he spent nine years gazing at a wall in a Chinese monastery, in meditation and silence. His “wall gazing” action was an attempt to concentrate on developing his mind.

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<sup>29</sup> Burnett, p. 132.

<sup>30</sup> Pandit, p. 45.

Ch'an developed in China in the context of Daoism, as a formless eternal force beyond all sense awareness. It was an expression of cosmic energy immanent in all things. Daoism is known as the Way and the incoming Ch'an identified with it. Ch'an developed the Indian *dyana*, the practice of meditation through yoga. Ch'an had little interest in the scriptures, but concentrated on the immediate enlightenment of the mind in order to obtain Buddhahood. It came to be accepted as an indigenous Chinese religion.

## 2. *The Zen School*

The Song dynasty (960–1275) ruled China for 300 years until Genghis Khan conquered China. Song was an era of Chinese growth, with several cities having more than one million inhabitants. There was unprecedented commerce, and printing was widely used. It was “one of the most humane periods in Chinese history.”<sup>31</sup> From the time of the emperor Taizu (927–976) it was also a time of great artistic achievement, especially in architecture, pottery, music and poetry. Garden design, and the famous tea ceremony were designed to create a meditative mindset. These things also influenced the cultural art forms of Japan.

During the Song dynasty both meditative Zen and family-based Confucianism flourished. Zen could combine pious worship, freedom and monastic discipline, along with flashes of awakening called *bodhi* (Chinese) and later *satori* (Japanese.) It became the dominant method of mastering the mind through intensive concentration. Zen's goal was to awaken the Buddhist nature within everybody. To sustain this high level of concentration, a Zen Master was needed to maintain the flashes of enlightenment which followed. Later the practice of paradoxical sayings known as *koan* was designed to break rational and logical thinking. The most popular koan was:

If someone claps his hands, one hears the sound at once.  
Listen now to the sound of a single hand.

## 3. *Zen from China to Korea*

Buddhism was introduced to Korea from China. By 525 it had penetrated the whole country, showing Korea's willingness to accept both culture and religion from China. The new Buddhism merged with the indigenous snake and dragon religion. By the 7<sup>th</sup> century, Buddhism dominated Korea, and the kingdom of Sila united the whole country.

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<sup>31</sup> URL: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Zen>.

Many Chinese found that living according to Theravada Buddhism was too rigid and restrictive, while living according to the Eightfold Path was beyond them. They wanted a power beyond themselves to satisfy their longing for a better life. They found it in the Pure Land School in China.

### **The Pure Land School in China**

It is thought that the earliest concepts of the Pure Land school began in India in the second century AD. It was described by a monk named Dharmakara whose passion was to reach nirvana, which he called the Pure Land paradise of supreme bliss. The Pure Land school of the Mahayana Buddhist tradition spread from India to China where it became an influential force in modern times. It offers believers a worship form markedly different from Theravada Buddhism.

The founder of this new school in China was a bodhisattva *Amitabha*. His followers eventually thought of him as less of a human person and more of a mystical, transcendent being without a historical origin. He offered Buddhists a new way to be reborn into this pure land by simply repeating his name continually, regardless of the context. He promised enlightenment to those who did this and that their minds would be purified from all sin, enabling them to enter into a state of nirvana bliss.

### **Nestorian Missionaries Enter China**

For centuries China had been closed to the outside world. This enabled them to protect their traditional political and religious practices. But in 1853 western powers forced China to open itself to outside trade, to new technologies and to new religious ideas.

When the early Nestorian missionaries entered China in 625 AD they saw parallels between New Land beliefs and the Christian faith. They persuaded many followers of *Amitabha* to put their faith in Jesus Christ instead. They emphasized that Jesus was an historical person whose life was recorded in the four gospels, whereas there was no certainty about the historical life of *Amitabha*. Then by proclaiming Jesus' suffering, death and resurrection, they gave new meaning to the concept of merit. The Nestorian church, known as the Church of the East, had a zeal for foreign missions. It spread from western and central Asia along the Silk Road to China. A Syrian monk named Alopen arrived in the Chinese capital, Chang'an, in 635 during the reign of the emperor Taizong of the Tang dynasty (618–907) who extended his tolerance to the new mission. It not clear how widely

Christianity spread in China. One suggestion is that there were thousands of adherents<sup>32</sup> while Wikipedia suggests there were few.<sup>33</sup>

In 781 AD the Christian community erected a tablet known as the *Xi'an Stele* on the grounds of a Christian monastery. Most of our knowledge of the Nestorian Christians is recorded on it. Two hundred years after the founding of the church in China, the then emperor Wuzong tried to cast out all religions from China. The Christian church died or went underground, like the early Christian communities in Rome. Another reason for the church's rapid decline was that it favoured the ruling class which then withdrew their support. The church had become too dependent on Chinese culture and upon the aristocracy, with limited roots among the common people. This is a lesson for the modern missionary movement which needs to recognise the biblical view that all human beings are created in the image of God and that God's eternal power and divine nature can be clearly understood by all religious people. Christians need to show that Jesus Christ was an historical person, revealed by God, and not a mystical and eternal Buddha.

## Tibetan Buddhism

Tibetan Buddhism is a development of both Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism in the context of the original magical and exotic *Bon* religion of Tibet, which called on gods and demons in their magical rituals and they practised animal sacrifices to appease the spirit world. Tibetan Buddhism was influenced by the tantric philosophies of the Indian god Shiva and his consort Shakti, the goddess of female power. Tantric philosophies included the mystical sexual union of male and female, a practice that other Buddhist movements rejected. The Vajarayana interpretation of Buddhism was unique to Tibet. It sought to pass beyond the appearances of things into the emptiness of the Absolute. To achieve this "emptiness" several techniques are used, including:

*Mantras*. These magical sayings radiate power to the ends of the universe. They are continually repeated by being written on paper and placed in a prayer wheel which devotees constantly turn, or by being printed on flags to flap in the wind. The best-known mantra is *Om mani padme hum*, the sounds having supernatural power when repeated aloud.

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<sup>32</sup> Burnett, p. 171.

<sup>33</sup> URL: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Church\\_of\\_the\\_East\\_in\\_China](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Church_of_the_East_in_China).

*Mandalas*. These round, many-sided diagrams reflect cosmic spiritual relationships and are designed to inspire meditation. This form of art is widely recognised in the Buddhist world.

*Magical and demonic powers* are worshipped, feared and loved.

*Lamanism* is a regional form of northern Buddhism which combined Mahayana and Vajrayana Buddhism in the Gelugpa School founded in the 14<sup>th</sup> century. It was also known as “yellow-hatted Lamanism.” It adopted the Hindu belief in reincarnation so that lamas began to claim knowledge of their previous lives. Gendun Gyatso (1475–1542) was the first to be given the title of *Dalai Lama*.

The present fourteenth Dalai Lama was born Tenzin Gyatso in 1935 and enthroned in 1940 as the head of the Dge-Lugs-pa (“yellow hats”) order of Tibetan Buddhism. Recognised as the incarnation of the thirteenth Dalai Lama, he was forced to flee Tibet with 100,000 of his followers when the Chinese finally conquered the whole of Tibet in 1959, and was given refugee status in Dharamshala, India. Many young westerners have gone to Dharamshala to study modern Buddhism with the Dalai Lama. In 1959 he was awarded the Nobel Prize for peace, in recognition of his nonviolent campaign to end the Chinese occupation of Tibet.

The Dalai Lama has won respect and admiration for his compassion, forgiveness, tolerance and commitment to peace and happiness in the world. He treats all people as equal and is encouraging harmony between the world faiths, and with respect for one another’s religions. These Buddhist values are paralleled in the Christian faith, being universal values, available to all. In true Buddhist tradition he wants to eliminate suffering and self-centred desire. The secular west warms to his inclusive values and his passion that all should be happy.

## **Converts to Buddhism**

Over the centuries there has been a steady flow of converts to Buddhism for Zen has had a notable influence on western culture. With its denial of rational thinking and its promotion of yogic practices, it offers a totally secular approach to life which appeals to modern westerners.

### *1. King Ashoka*

It is generally accepted that King Ashoka of the Maurya Empire converted to Buddhism in 250 BC in remorse following his inspection of the ruins of Kalinga in east India, after his conquest in which many thousands were killed. His feelings and respect for life are outlined in several Rock

Edicts.<sup>34</sup> In addition to sending his son and daughter to Ceylon, he sent monks to several countries in south and south-east Asia, who were successful in spreading the faith.

## 2. B. L. Ambedkar (1891–1956)

Dr Ambedkar, a criminal lawyer and later judge, had a profound influence in the framing of the Indian constitution in 1947, which was designed to free India from British colonial rule. He was born into a Dalit family and spent his life campaigning for the rights of the oppressed, concluding that the Dalits must leave Hinduism. After considering conversion to Islam or Sikhism he was drawn to Christianity but rejected this possibility because of the infighting of the different Christian churches and sects. So he settled on Buddhism. On October 14, 1956, he and about 380,000 of his followers converted to Buddhism in a colourful ceremony in Nagpur. In another ceremony a further 300,000 joined his movement. By the 2011 Indian census there were about 8.44 million Buddhists in India.<sup>35</sup> He called his neo-Buddhist movement *Navayana Buddhism*. Ambedkar wanted a religion that emphasized reason, morality and justice. He challenged the caste system in order to give political rights to the oppressed, and reinterpreted Buddhism in terms of social equality for all people.

## 3. Christmas Humphreys (1901–1983)

The human search for meaning is well illustrated in the life of Christmas Humphreys, an Englishman who had a profound influence on contemporary English thought. He followed his father as a criminal lawyer and later judge. As a youth, Christmas was a practising Christian, as his name might suggest. In his youth he read *Buddha and the Gospel of Buddha* by Ananda Coomaraswamy, which led him to say, “If that is Buddhism, then whatever else I am, I am a Buddhist.”<sup>36</sup> While at Cambridge he read *The Secret Doctrine* by Madame Blavatsky of the Theosophical Society. But the person who influenced him most deeply was D T Suzuki, the Zen Buddhist who influenced the western world more than any other Buddhist. They became life-long friends.

<sup>34</sup> For an example of Ashoka’s *Rock Edicts* see David Burnett, *The Spirit of Buddhism* (Crowborough, East Sussex, Monarch Publications, 1996), p. 80.

<sup>35</sup> Dalit Buddhist Movement, URL: [https://wikipedia.org/wiki/Dalit\\_Buddhist\\_movement#Ambedkar's\\_conversion](https://wikipedia.org/wiki/Dalit_Buddhist_movement#Ambedkar's_conversion).

<sup>36</sup> New York, Putman, 1916.

At age 23, Humphreys founded the Buddhist Lodge. It became the Buddhist Society which he presided over until his death 60 years later. He was a prolific writer, fifteen of his books being on Hinduism and spiritual practices. His book *Buddhism* (1951) was “a manual of Buddhism adapted to the needs of modern western man”<sup>37</sup> and within a few years it had sold 100,000 copies. Another influential book was a comprehensive study of Zen Buddhism.

Christmas Humphreys, as a convinced and compassionate Buddhist, has had an enormous influence on the modern world as a campaigner for secularism. Today many people educated in the west are following Buddhist principles and practices without joining a Buddhist organisation.

Frijof Capra is another author sympathetic to Zen, with his popular book *The Tao of Physics: an Explanation of the Parallels between Modern Physics and Eastern Mysticism* (1975).

Another western writer, *Robert Pirsig*, author of *The Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, rode a motorcycle with his son from Minneapolis to San Francisco. On the way they discussed the relationships between the metaphysical views of western and Asian cultures.

As the west becomes increasingly secular, the Zen way of life is attracting more followers. It is “spirituality without God.”

## The Impact of the Jesuits

*Matteo Ricci*, an Italian priest (1552–1610), was the first Jesuit missionary to gain permission to live in China and took up residence in Macao, near Canton. He saw the influential role of the scholar in Chinese society, and adapted his life to it. Recognising friendship and writing as priorities in that society, he followed both closely. His first book on friendship was published in 1598. He taught scholars the scientific findings of his own western society. After nine years of interacting with Chinese scholars, he published in 1603 *Tianzhu Shiyi—the True Idea of God*, and a number of scholars became Christians. His approach was to teach the Chinese concept of heaven as the Christian God who ruled over all nature and could be known by natural law and reason. On the basis of dismissing samsara as constant rebirth, he was careful to use the Chinese words for God, such as *Tianzhu*, the heavenly Lord. With difficulty he was granted permission to stay in Beijing, where he lived for the rest of his life and influenced many scholars towards belief in the Christian God and the practices of the Roman Catholic church. He won favour by creating a world map with China as the centre. In Beijing he

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<sup>37</sup> London, Pelican, 1951.

published *The True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven* in which he followed the teachings of Thomas Aquinas. It went through several editions. He earned the respect of the Chinese elders through his love of the Chinese language, its culture and its people.

## **Sharing the Lord Jesus with Buddhists**

To the issue, “What is the meaning of human life?” the Buddhist answer is negative. The Buddhist begins by eliminating the concept of human beings as persons with an eternal destiny. For them, human beings are an integral part of nature and therefore the concept of “person” doesn’t arise. For Buddhists the “I” identity doesn’t exist. Human beings are in constant flux, ever becoming and never arriving at a satisfying destiny. On the other hand, the Christian concept of “person” begins with our necessary relationship to God, for all people are created in his image and likeness. This means we share God’s attributes of personhood, including rational thinking, creativity, justice, compassion and love. For the Christian, “person” involves relationship with other persons, so a person living on a desert island is diminished because he has no relationships.

In his brief three years of ministry Jesus focused on healing all who were suffering and in liberating those suffering from evil spirits. The Christian response to suffering and death is to acknowledge that only Christ can free us from such despair. But while Christians are concerned that the degree of suffering in the world is increasing, and have developed many social agencies to respond to it, Buddhist organisations for social service are few. Christians can endorse the Eightfold Path, not in order to achieve salvation, but as a guide on how to live in daily dependence on Jesus Christ. The apostle James stated “Show me your faith without deeds and I will show you my faith by what I do” (James 2:18). Belief and action are both essential to the Christian ethic. Moses in his Ten Commandments outlined the basis of ethical living (Exodus 20:1–17), a way of life that was expanded and interpreted by Jesus in his Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5–7). Paul summarised the Christian life as “faith, hope and love, the greatest of these being love” (1 Corinthians 13:13). So salvation is not by detachment from the world but by attachment to Jesus by faith.

For the secular person for whom God is irrelevant, sin is a meaningless term, for there is no God to sin against. Suffering may point to a life of shame or to a life of triumph over it. Only those who believe in a redeemer God can hope for life eternal.

Each of the three great monotheistic religions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam believes that God’s creation had a beginning and will have an

end. They all believe that death is not the end of human life, but a preparation for eternal life, expressed in the language of heaven and hell.

Mahayana Buddhism longs for a transcendent reality, but it is not clear whether this is an impersonal One or a cosmic God who will fill the void in their lives. They look to Amitabha (Amida) as an eternal Buddha whom they can worship. But Buddha had no answer to evil spirits such as Mara who are prominent in Tibetan Buddhism. Christians believe that God dethroned Satan when Jesus sacrificed his life on the cross and that on the final day of judgment Satan will be destroyed (Genesis 20:10).

The glorious hope of the Christian believer is to be born again by the Spirit of God (John 3:1–15). Our response to the Buddhist longing for reality is to share the glory of Jesus with them and to love them into God's eternal kingdom.



## Chapter Ten: Secularism in Chinese Cultures

The Chinese religions of Confucianism and Taoism (also known as Daoism) are unique in the history of world religions. This is because China developed in isolation from the rest of the world, separated by its geography and languages. We have virtually no knowledge of the philosophy and religion of Shang, the first historic dynasty of China (c. 1600–1050 BC). Any primal knowledge of the living God was lost and replaced with a world of cosmic spirits, good and evil, which needed to be placated by divination and magic. Understanding the elements of nature became an important study, especially in the following Chou dynasty (1122–325 BC) whose dates overlapped with Shang. Myths and stories of the past national life and the rituals associated with them shaped their religious practices. One characteristic of the early period was what John Berthrong called “a consciousness of concern.”<sup>38</sup>

The focus of this early concern was twofold: first, to understand Tao as the mystical cosmic High Heaven, the essence of ultimate reality, and secondly, a conscious concern for the wellbeing of the Chinese people. The former was the primary concern of the Taoist, and the second the concern of the Confucianist. In the development of Chinese philosophy and religion these two were harmonised, each integrating with the other. The entry of Buddhism into China from the second century AD brought a new level of integration of ideology and practice. It seems the Chinese had no knowledge of Hinduism or of the monotheistic religions of the Jews. Their beliefs were wholly indigenous and secular. This secular factor was later capitalised on by Chairman Mao Zedong in adopting Marxist atheism in the 1950s, and now by President Xi Jinping. From the Chou dynasty the Chinese called their nation “the Middle Kingdom.”

### Confucianism

Confucius was China’s first moral philosopher. He was born into a noble family in 551 BC and died 72 years later. In the *Analects* he reportedly protested that he merely “transmitted what was taught to me without making up anything of my own.”<sup>39</sup> His goal was to restore the golden Chou age

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<sup>38</sup> Eerdman’s Handbook, p. 246.

<sup>39</sup> Parrinder, p. 319.

with its traditions as in the Book of Songs and the Book of Documents, which emphasized that the priestly kings were the best rulers of the nation. His genius was to replace the corrupt religion of his time with a moral system of behaviour which has influenced Chinese life ever since. His teachings were collected and published by his disciples in the *Analects*.

Confucius's ethics were based on two principles—*Jen* and *Li*.

*Jen* summed up the attributes of a perfect moral community, such as respect for others and loyalty to one's rulers. *Jen* was "an almost transcendental ideal attained by the sages of antiquity. It was a mystical entity—the essential quality of sainthood."<sup>40</sup>

*Li* is the moral power by which *Jen* is achieved. The ethics of *Jen* is Confucius's Golden Rule: "Do not do to others that which you do not want them to do to you," Jesus put this principle more positively when he said, "Do to others what you would have them do to you."<sup>41</sup> *Jen* and *Li* are perfected in the lives of the sages. The person who seeks to be *Jen* embodies *Li*, the ideals of human conduct. The power of *Li* is seen in the ritual codes needed to achieve the standards of nobility required of the political leaders. Confucius taught that *Jen* and *Li* were the way to become true gentlemen, and gave moral content to Chinese culture. This became the foundation of his concept of filial piety. He showed little awareness of the reality of the spirit world.

*Filial Piety (hsiao)* was based on the values of honour and shame as seen in the five principles of family relationships. It required people to honour those who were older and superior in office and to shame those who dishonoured these values. The son must honour the father, the younger brother the older brother, the wife her husband, the subject the princely ruler, and the friend his friend. These values were reciprocal; the father must honour the son, the husband must love his wife, the older brother must respect the younger, the ruler his subjects, and the friend his friend. These principles were based on the values common to all Asian religions.

*Ancestor Worship.* Filial piety led naturally to ancestor veneration. The practice began with the Chao dynasty and was popularised by Confucius. In Chinese life it is still being honoured. Both the Confucianist and the Taoist believe that at death the soul of the deceased must be assisted in its journey to Tao-heaven by the ritual practice of providing the deceased with the necessities of life—food, money and means of transport. Paper symbols of these items were placed in the grave alongside the deceased's body. At the same time evil spirits had to be placated by sacrifices. In this way the burial ceremony was of primary importance to the family of the deceased.

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<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 321.

<sup>41</sup> Matthew 7:12.

The family tablet of the deceased's ancestral history must be regularly venerated. This practice continues for every Chinese family. Chinese Christians will also show their respect and honour to both the deceased and the living members of the family. They may choose to bow before the tablet but not to venerate it. Christians are known for being faithful in regularly cleaning the tomb of the deceased.

These practices continued even during the communist regime. One consequence of the ideals of Jen, Li, Confucianism and Taoism is that education and scholarship are given high priority in Chinese society. Sages are honoured for being the wisest political rulers. Knowledge and wisdom are seen to be interdependent.

*Mencius* (390–305 BC) was born a hundred years after the death of Confucius. He was known as Master Meng, the teacher. His goal was to make explicit what was implicit in the teachings of Confucius. He made Jen the way of heaven, the cosmic power which he identified with nature. His ideal of becoming an educated sage became a secular way of life. Jen and Li were previously unattainable for ordinary people, but became attainable by all with Mencius. In his emphasis on becoming gentlemen and sages, Confucius had said little about ordinary people, but with Mencius the care of people became the prime duty of the rulers. He made the five states of filial piety the basis for social ethics, economic life and the political rule of the princes. Mencius made Confucius's Way of Heaven a secular ideal for the princes. For Mencius human beings were born good and were the "repository of humanity and justice." After his death his disciples published his teaching as *The Works of Mencius*, following the same pattern as the Confucius's *Analects* with short sentences and many anecdotes.

*Hsun-Tze*, the third founder of Confucianism, admired Confucius's learning, but placed more emphasis on practical education to prepare people for daily life. Contrary to Mencius, he taught that all people were born evil and needed a ritual code to overcome evil. He also believed that the sages were the best people to rule the state. With his practical philosophy he was the most committed of the earlier leaders to a secular view of life. Ultimate authority was Nature itself. He denied the existence of the world of spirits, and moral values were derived from reason alone. His views became the high point of rational secularism.

## **Taoism**

Taoism, pronounced Daoism by many, is the Way, a concept used by many Chinese philosophers. It is also a word Jesus used of himself (John 14:6). It

developed in the early stages of Chinese culture both as philosophy of what is ultimately real and as a religion in search of immortality. Its focus was to liberate the common people from their bondage to folk religion. The Way was sacred in order to perfect the life of society by mediating on the rule of the natural world as the way to inner peace.

### *Taoism as a Philosophy*

Philosophic Taoism was developed by Lao Tze in the book *Tao Te Ching* and later by Chuang Teo (399–295 BC) in a book titled with his own name. Little is known about Lao Tze. In fact, there is no certainty he even existed. Philosophic Taoism was an attempt to understand the nature of Tao as the eternal cosmic power that pervades all of existence. Its goal was to “steal the secrets of heaven and earth,” and by earth was meant the whole of the natural world. Taoism can be experienced but not defined. Ultimate reality was understood as the impersonal and eternal One, a concept common to most Asian philosophies. It ignored or denied the concept of a transcendent God who was active in human life and in the natural world. It was totally secular. The basic idea of *Tao Te Ching* was that human beings were to harmonise with nature by non-action (*wu-wei*). It stressed that the followers of Tao should avoid any violent act against other humans or negate the forces of nature. It was a willingness to let be what is, the goal of actionlessness. Dr Parrinder, of Kings College, London, called it quietism. Human beings should do nothing to distort the balance of the forces of nature. As a philosophy it began to decline in the fourth century AD when Buddhism spread to China and began to absorb Taoism within its distinctive principles of *anicca* (the impermanence of all things) and *anatta* (the non-existence of the self.)

### *Taoism as a Religion*

As a mystical religion, Taoism had a profound influence on Chinese culture. It absorbed the animist practices of the earlier folk religion, the gods of nature, magic, fortune telling, astrology and ways to control the spirit world. It contrasted with the rationalism of Confucianism and the rigidity of Confucius's social ethic. The goal of religious Taoism was to become immortal, through yoga and meditation. This called for a willingness to accept change as in *anicca*. Lao Tze is reported to have said, “The ways of men are conditioned by Heaven, the ways of Heaven by those of Tao, and

Tao came into Being by itself.”<sup>42</sup> His book, *Tao Te Ching* (The Way and Its Power) is accepted as the primary canon of Taoism.

Tao emphasized the five precepts of resistance—to killing, to drinking alcohol, to stealing, to lying and to adultery. It also stressed the ten virtues of piety—loyalty, love, patience, self-sacrifice, protection against evil spirits, helping the poor, advancing freedom, planting trees, building roads, and teaching the unenlightened. Most of these values paralleled Buddha’s Four Noble Truths and the biblical ethics of the Jewish prophets, while Jesus and his apostles followed the ethical principles of the Sermon on the Mount. In Christianity only God in Christ can initiate these freedoms. They are the work of God’s grace and are received by faith in Christ alone and not by human activity.

Longevity was achieved by maintaining the balance between the cosmic forces of *Yin*, the female power of the cosmos, and *Yang*, its male power. Regular exercise was a factor in maintaining this balance. Once when I was in Hong Kong, early one morning I watched a group of elderly people exercising together in the marketplace, to achieve longevity.

Maintaining the flow of *qi*, the breath or energy by which everything is made, helps to keep the body clear of impurities. The vital force of *qi* is the foundation of Chinese herbal medicine, designed to cure a wide range of diseases. The practice of acupuncture on vital points of the body (said to be 2000 of them) is designed to treat the causes of pain and distress, and not just their symptoms. It increases the flow of *qi* to restore the balance of Yin and Yang.

Taoism has also contributed to the sense of wonder at the beauty and power of nature. This is seen in its influence on Chinese art, including poetry, the beauty and symmetry of water gardens, and the inner peace of the tea ceremony. This appreciation of nature also leads to landscape painting that emphasises elaborate nature scenes and minimises the place of human beings in them. For several years I have kept the same bookmark in my Bible. It depicts a small man fishing from his junk on a still stream, against the background of towering rocks and mountains, with a small group of houses amidst a plantation of trees. I am inspired by the beauty and grandeur of nature every time I use this bookmark. This principle is Taoism at its best.

The three great religions of Chinese culture, Taoism, Confucianism and later Buddhism, have borrowed from each other’s philosophy and religion to become one religion. The high point of this syncretistic culture was in

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<sup>42</sup> Cited by John Berthrong “Sages and Immortals: Chinese Religions,” in *Eerdman’s Handbook*, p. 252.

the Ming dynasty (1369–1664) when all three religions became one, with Tao as the way of life for the Chinese nation. Since 1951 Mao Zedong and now Xi Jinping have tried to wipe out these religions as well as Christianity. However, Xi Jinping finds it necessary to accept the ethics of these religions in order to unify his communist nation. So Tao is at the heart of Chinese life and will never die. Christianity incorporates many of these values in bringing the Chinese nation to Christ and his kingdom rule. Indeed, Christ gave content to the meaning of heaven, which is missing in Taoism.

## **The Re-Entry of Christianity into China**

We have noted the collapse of the Church of the East in the late seventeenth century. When the British Empire extended its power across Asia, Christianity followed in its wake, pioneered by British Protestant missionaries. In 1807 Robert Morrison of the London Missionary Society arrived in Guangdong, Canton, as the first Protestant missionary to China. He had translated the whole Bible into Cantonese by 1819. He maintained his status in China as a translator and also by working with the East India Company. However, he made few converts.

In 1849 William A P Martin and his wife, arrived in China and spent the next ten years in Ningbo. In 1863 he founded the Presbyterian Mission in Beijing. He made a distinction between Chinese cultural forms and their religious content, suggesting that ancestral veneration was not idolatrous, but he was strongly opposed by Hudson Taylor and other missionaries. Martin's thesis was "Confucius plus, not Confucius or Christ."<sup>43</sup>

In 1853 Hudson Taylor entered China under the Chinese Evangelistic Society. Two years later he founded the China Inland Mission (CIM) to take the Gospel to the whole of China. Within 30 years CIM had more than 600 missionaries and 5000 converts. OMF, the successor of CIM, now has 1400 missionaries, serving in east and south Asian countries. It upholds the evangelical understanding of the Gospel but in some contexts is sadly insensitive to natural religious cultures.

## **Religious Faith in China Today**

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has more than 90 million members and is officially atheistic. Party membership and religious belief are incompatible. If members are discovered to belong to a religious organisation,

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<sup>43</sup> *The Church in Asia*, ed. Donald Hoke (Chicago, Moody Press, 1975), p. 150.

they are expelled from the party. However, Article 36 of the Chinese constitution allows citizens to “enjoy religious belief.” This is interpreted to mean religion must be kept private while the right to take part in it openly or to practise public worship is forbidden.

The state recognize five religions: Buddhism, Taoism, Catholicism, Protestantism and Islam. The practice of other religions is forbidden, including Falun Gong which combines Buddhism, Taoism and traditional folk religion.

“A crackdown on Falun Gong was launched in 1999 after the group organised a large peaceful demonstration outside the CCP headquarters to advocate for the release of detained adherents and greater freedom for them.”<sup>44</sup> It is estimated that at its height it numbered 70 million members. Now, after two decades of persecution, it is thought their numbers are less than 20 million.

The Chinese government estimates that the total numbers of the five registered religions is about 150–200 million, or ten percent of the population of 1.4 billion people. The World Religious Database estimates the Chinese folk religions’ members number 30.8 percent of the population, the Buddhists 16.6 percent, Christians 7.4 percent, and Muslims 1.8 percent.<sup>45</sup>

It is now estimated that the unregistered Christian “house churches” number twice as many as the government-registered churches. Some are estimating that Christians could number up to 100 million, including 9–10 million Catholics.

The rapid growth of Christianity began after the death of Mao Zedong in 1976 and continued during the more democratic rule of Tiang Zemin and Hu Jintao, until the anti-Christian policies of President Xi Jinping in 2014. It can be compared to the rapid growth of churches in Nepal during the relative freedom of the influential Maoist party of Nepal 1994–2016.

President Xi Jinping’s policy is to “sinicize” the religions of China, so that they conform to the atheistic policies of the government and to the Han culture of the majority Chinese people. This has led to the destruction of thousands of crosses in the churches, and church services being carefully monitored. Christian symbols are replaced by photos of the president. The unregistered churches have refused to comply with these regulations, with the result that persecution of their members and pastors has steadily increased, despite their continued growth in numbers.

China’s rise as a global political power, its economic expansion, and its atheistic ideology has created a spiritual vacuum among the Chinese peo-

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<sup>44</sup> URL: <http://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/religion-china#chapter-title-0-6>.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

ple. Millions of villagers have moved into the cities for employment in large factories producing material goods. The uncertainty of work, especially in times of sickness, along with inadequate housing, has increased the despair of people whose spiritual needs have not been met by the secular atheistic lifestyle.

As a result, an increasing number of Chinese people, both those highly educated and those with only a basic education, are turning to their traditional folk religions, to syncretistic Buddhism, and to Christianity. Increased persecution only leads to increased numbers.

The Chinese government has been particularly severe in persecuting the Muslim communities which number about 20 million adherents across China, including eleven million Turkic Uyghurs of the semi-autonomous region of Xinjiang in northwest China. It is estimated that two million have been detained in “re-education camps,” ostensibly designed to teach Mandarin and Chinese law. In practice they are places of torture, sexual abuse and forced pledges of loyalty to the CCP government. Many Muslims are being disbursed throughout China, and Han Chinese are being brought in to replace them. But Islam as a practising religion never dies, and it is unlikely that the Chinese government will be able to overpower and eliminate the Uyghur people.

Despite the government’s atheistic and Marxist ideology, religious revival is happening throughout China. People are searching for a religious basis for their daily lifestyles. It is clear that persecution is not eliminating the ongoing religious celebration of marriage and funeral rituals.

The hope of Christianity in China, as in the rest of Asia, depends on Christians’ faithful adherence to the biblical doctrines of creation, the deity of Christ, his resurrection from the dead, and the empowering presence of the Holy Spirit. But it also depends on the faithfulness of the churches to live out their distinctives in worship and witness. Maintaining the unity of the faith with good works is the hope of the church’s future.

## Chapter Eleven: Secularism in Japanese Cultures

Religion in Japan is thoroughly eclectic. “It is a rich tapestry of diverse traditions with a history of nearly 2000 years.”<sup>46</sup> It is a religion of diverse experiences rather than a reasoned set of beliefs.

### Kami

Kami’s roots go back to the Shinto meaning of “god or gods” but this also includes the elements of nature, especially mountaintops such as Hieri, overlooking Kyoto, or Fujiama, overlooking Tokyo which are considered sacred.

Kami is a naturalistic faith on which Shintoism was based. In the fifth and sixth centuries, Shintoism was influenced by Confucianism from China and Buddhism from Korea. These religious traditions have grown together so that it is now possible to speak of “the religion of Japan.” Worshippers will go from one Shinto shrine to the nearby Buddhist temple, and it is common for Japanese to be married in a Shinto shrine and be buried according to the rites of Buddhism.

### Sources of Buddhism

#### *Korea*

Buddhism came to Japan from Korea, first through the Mahayana sutra scriptures. Then Shotoku, prince regent in Japan (593–622), converted to Buddhism with great zeal. He built temples and monasteries and published commentaries on the sutras. Buddhism was initially opposed by the Shinto priests but was accepted by the common people and progressively became the religion of Japan.

#### *China*

*Tendai*, an eclectic Buddhist sect, was introduced to Japan from China, first by Saicho (767–822). He built a temple on Mount Hieri which became the

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<sup>46</sup> Michael Pye, *Eerdman’s Handbook to the World’s Religions* (Grand Rapids, MI, Eerdmans, 1982), p. 255.

centre of Buddhism in Japan for nearly 600 years. The Lotus sutra was the heart of Tendai teaching. The Tendai teaching on the Ultimate One found affinity with the kami of Shintoism.

*Honen* (1133–1212) was responsible for introducing the *Pure Land* sect of Buddhism into Japan, in which the Buddha *Amitabha* became *Amida* in Japanese. However, his disciple *Shiran* (1173–1262) established a variant known as the “True Pure Land” sect, with an emphasis on total passivity. By continually repeating the name of *Amida*, worshippers were assured of salvation. They had entered Buddhahood in “the pure land.”

### *Zen Buddhism*

Zen Buddhism had already been incorporated into Tendai but became a separate school when *Eisai* (1141–1215) founded the *Rizi* school of Zen in 1191. It became widely accepted by the educated class and when it introduced the *kuan* riddles into Japanese culture. A generation later, a well-known philosopher, *Dogen* (1200–1253) is believed to be the founder of the more meditative *Soto* school of Zen which appealed to the ordinary person.

Zen Buddhism came to be linked with the Japanese arts, of which the tea ceremony and the gardens of flowers, water and rocks encouraged the worshipper to identify with the ultimate Kami. Buddhist temples in the form of pagodas were built alongside Shinto shrines.

Since the thirteenth century, ancestral tablets have been kept in Japanese homes to assure the worshippers of the continuing presence of deceased family members and to supply them with pictures of their daily material needs. They have become “the living dead.”

In recent years all these schools and sects have multiplied in order to meet the spiritual yearnings of the Japanese people.

### **Modern religious movements**

The restoration of the Meiji emperor from 1868 until his death in 1912 marked the transition of Japan from an agricultural to a highly organised industrial nation with its national government, army and constitution. The emperor Meiji was motivated by a passion to free Japan from western political and economic domination, all in his own name. The Meiji reformers restored Shintoism to national prominence, replacing Buddhism, so that today Shinto shrines outnumber Buddhist temples.

In keeping with Japan’s eclectic religious heritage, modern Japan has absorbed many liberal western ideals, western science and technology. It has included Christian marriage customs and Easter mythologies. Another

consequence of this development has been the urbanisation of society so that greater Tokyo, with 37 million people, is the world's largest city. The liberation of women from being confined to their homes has led to smaller families and population decline.

These changes point to Japan's becoming a secular nation. The routine of shrine and temple worship continues but in their daily working life the Japanese have become one of the most secular and syncretistic communities in the world, having no concern for a creator-God.

### *Christianity*

Christianity had been introduced to Japan by Portuguese traders, followed by Jesuit missionaries from 1549, the most influential of these being Francis Xavier. In 1550 he had an audience with the emperor in the capital, Kyoto. He identified with Japanese religious practices as far as his Catholic religious faith would allow, winning many converts and establishing Catholic churches.

In 1587, however, the emperor, Toyotomi Hideyoshi, banned all missionaries because of their intolerant behaviour towards Shintoism and Buddhism, and executed many Christians in Nagasaki as a warning. Only small communities of "hidden" Christians survived.

### *Faith in Japan today*

From 1882 the Meiji Restoration gave religious freedom to Buddhists, Shintoists and Christians. The Japanese now enjoy the festivals of each religion without personally having to identify with any of them. Today women are increasingly pressured to work outside the home, and students are overstressed. The proportion of women who have not married has increased, and the suicide rate of Japanese women is among the highest in the world.<sup>47</sup>

The number of Christians in Japan is still small—about one to two million, or 1.5 percent of the population. Churches need to show compassion to their secular neighbours, understand their cultures, and demonstrate that Christ is the way to fill the spiritual void in their lives. Christian-based families, living a Christlike life, are the most effective way of influencing Japanese families today.

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<sup>47</sup> "The Changing role of Women's Earnings in Marriage Formation in Japan", in *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 646, p. 112.



## **SECTION THREE: A CHRISTIAN RESPONSE TO GLOBAL SECULARISM**



## Chapter Twelve: Transforming our Cultures

Secularism struggles to answer the stresses of life in our changing world, with its increasing violence at every level of society, in the streets of our cities, or between nations. Secularism without compassion has no power to solve the problem of poverty in the world. There has never been so much education as there is today, or so much agricultural productivity. Yet poverty is increasing worldwide. People are dying of starvation and often cannot afford hospital care. What is more stressful than to see an Afghan woman holding her starving baby in her arms. She has no milk for it and no money to buy food. She is weeping as her child dies, knowing that next month she too will die of starvation.

Stressed people, young and old, are committing suicide, yet a minority of people in the world are prosperous, happy and content with their lives and seem to have no need of God.

### Our Cultures are Changing

Culture is a design for living at personal, family, social, economic and political levels. I have described it as a “a fruitful mango tree.” The family is the unit of religious culture across Asia. This is equally true for Hindus, Buddhists, Chinese and Japanese and their derivatives. Marriages are arranged by families, and families mourn for several days over the death of a loved one.

Marriage is a social contract between a male and female person, although in our secular age marriage may be between two people of the same sex. By contrast, Christian marriage is a *covenant* made between one man and one woman in the presence of God who commit themselves to each other for life, with the exception allowed by Jesus in the case of marital unfaithfulness (Matthew 9:9).

To the Pharisee lawyer who wanted to debate with Jesus on the justification for divorce, Jesus’ response was to quote Genesis 2:25, “For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife and the two will become one flesh.” He then added, “So they are no longer two but one. Therefore what God has joined together let no one separate” (Matthew 19:3–9).

At the same time, Jesus honoured those called to celibacy. Both he and Paul chose to remain unmarried. I admire the thousands of Christian women who have chosen to serve Christ overseas in a different culture,

knowing they will never have the opportunity to marry. Christians who in youth have developed a homosexual tendency for whatever cause are encouraged to seek help to change their unnatural desire or remain unmarried.

Paul taught that love in a Christian marriage is symbolic of Christ's constant love for his church. Several times he called the church his body, as in Ephesians 3:22–23. Further, stable marriages strengthen stable nations. Rome, the all-powerful nation in Paul's lifetime, later collapsed and was replaced by other nations. One reason was that its citizens' marriages declined into adultery and divorce. The great religious cultures of Asia are aware of this danger, especially Islam.

### **The Common Human Factor**

The Christian message is unique. It suggests that people of every culture and race are equal and unique in the sight of almighty God, and created in his image (Genesis 1:26–27). Humans and animals were created on the same day and have much in common. They depend on the world of nature for their food and reproduce in similar ways. They are both sensitive to changes in weather patterns, and protect their young against all adversity. They each have emotions of love and hate, with the male dominating the female. The wonderful factor of all nature is that each propagates after its own kind. I marvel at the beauty and distinctiveness of the flowers of the field. They are distinct in shape and gradations of colour and all have the ability to pollinate. Only God could create such wonders.

On the gate to the Cavendish laboratory of the University of Cambridge, where Ernest Rutherford discovered the nature of the atom, are written the words, "Great are the works of the Lord; they are pondered by all who delight in them (Psalm 111:2)."

Animals have a limited understanding of time, but they can remember the past. An elephant or a monkey can remember the face of the person who abused it, even five years earlier. Pet animals can demonstrate affection to their human owners. It appears animals and birds have their own language with which to communicate with each other. But there the comparison stops. Biblical Scripture is clear that human beings have a unique relationship with one another and with their Creator God. They have an amazing ability to progress in life, as seen when an illiterate villager is compared with an atomic scientist. Whereas the chimpanzees, the most developed of the monkey clan, remain at the same level of development, past and present, human beings have changed enormously over the centuries. The most amazing gift of God to humanity is the development of

language. For example, India has 4600 people groups who speak 1650 distinct languages or dialects whose grammar and syntax are unique to their group.

Equally amazing is humans' unique gift of creativity. The builders of the Egyptian pyramids 4000 years ago knew how to construct them with incredible scientific accuracy, as did the astronomers who designed Stonehenge in England from 5000 years ago. In our time a man has walked on the moon, and the gap between animals and human beings continues to widen.

But we are also distinguished from animals in our ability to control the world of nature. God said, "Let us make humans in our own image and let them rule over all creation (Genesis 1:26.) So God created humans in his own image. Male and female he created them. God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in numbers; fill the earth and subdue it (Genesis 1:27–28). Humankind began with a single pair, male and female, which Scripture named as Adam and Eve. Luke ends his long lineage from Joseph with the words, "The son of Adam, the son of God" (Luke 3:38). Then Paul affirms Adam as the first man and Jesus as the second and last man (Romans 5:12, 1 Corinthians 15:22,35), 1 Timothy 2:13–14). Paul states that Adam's sin is imputed to the whole human race. Christ's work of redemption is directly linked to redeeming Adam and his descendants from their original sin.

Many modern scientists believe the human race began with a single person in Africa millions of years ago. However, we believe that the biblical account of creation and the fall into sin of our first parents is neither unscientific nor irrational. We can assume Adam and Eve lived after the end of the last Ice Age which ended about 11,000 years ago.

The distinctive truth about Adam and Eve is that they could communicate directly with God, their Creator. This means God could speak to them in their own language and they could respond in praise. But they also had the freedom to disobey God's instructions to them. Their fall into sin is outlined in Genesis 3, and chapters 4–11 mention the consequences of their disobedience of the laws of God. It is a theological statement of human history and gives confidence to the Christian that Scripture is "God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness" (2 Timothy 3:16).

## **From Honour and Shame to Sin and Guilt**

Volumes have been written on honour and shame and on sin and guilt, but few have been written on the relationship between them. Many evangeli-

cal pastors and missionaries from the west have little understanding of these cultural issues. They assume their western understanding of Scripture is the biblically correct one, but this is not necessarily so.

While I was teaching a course in a seminary in Yangon (Rangoon), Myanmar, I observed that Christian missionaries had almost totally failed to convert Myanmar citizens with a Burmese-Buddhist heritage. At present there are only a few thousand converts with this background, out of 50 million Buddhists.

Dr Peter Thein Nyunt, lecturer at the MEGST seminary in Yangon, believes this failure is due to the missionaries' failure to replace the western contextual pattern of belief with a Myanmar "contextual conversion pattern."<sup>48</sup>

Asian religions except for the monotheistic ones of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, have little or no need of a creator God. Western missionaries emphasize the biblical concept of sin and guilt, while most Asians live their lives practising the concept of honour and shame, the ruling principle of their ethical behaviour. To offer a Burmese Buddhist eternal life horrifies him. His goal is to end all life, as nirvana teaches. Buddhists have no need of God, and for many, he doesn't exist. To steal a valued possession is not wrong if it will benefit the family and the state. If by cheating in an exam a person can on graduation get a better-paid job, and therefore finance family needs, it is not wrong. To those who have no knowledge of God, sin and guilt are meaningless concepts. Therefore in witnessing to Asians we need to understand their motives before appealing to their conscience and showing them a better way of social responsibility.

Buddhists metaphysics begins with the rational understanding of the Hindu *karma*, *samsara* and *moksha*, to which they add the concepts of *anicca* (the impermanence of all things) and *anatta* (the nonexistence of the self.) These philosophies are based on the laws of nature, so that to overcome suffering and endless rebirths, appeal is made to reason and to self-effort. This becomes a negative path to peace and justice, with no assurance of achieving it.

At the same time, honour and shame is the basis of filial piety. Pleasures and success in life depend on honouring the older person and the one with higher status in life. Shame is the failure to maintain this principle. To change one's religion is to dishonour the whole family and one's community and even the state. Such an act is shameful, and the convert becomes a traitor to the nation.

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<sup>48</sup> Peter Thein Nyunt, *Mission Amidst Pagodas* (Carlisle, UK, Langham Monographs, 2014), p. 123.

In Asian nature-based religions, honour and shame determine their ethical practice. The breaking of man-made cultural laws, leads to a subjective sense of shame. In the theistic religions—Judaism, Christianity and Islam—all ethical laws are divine laws, and to purposely break them is sin, leading to a guilty conscience. At the same time the concepts of honour and shame are also biblical concepts, based on divine law, so that honour and shame and sin and guilt are the outworking of God's righteousness.

Jesus was honoured by God in his life and shamed by others in his death. Hebrews states "... who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down on the right hand of the throne of God" (Hebrews 12:2). In his resurrection from the dead Jesus restored the honour of God the Father. Thus in the cross and resurrection we see the integration of honour and shame with sin and guilt.

Secular people have their own understanding of sin and guilt. For example, in Hinduism caste is an unbreakable law. People are born into one caste and are expected to marry within it. In death Hindus are cremated according to the caste laws. Failure to keep the caste laws shames the whole community and they deserve to be punished. In the case of the theistic religions, social and ethical laws are divine laws and in these religions sin is against God with sinners being guilty of breaking his laws. The first four of the ten Commandments given to Moses demand obedience to God alone and the keeping of the Sabbath as a holy day of rest while the next six commandments denounce the failure to keep God's ethical laws. They include honouring parents and not committing murder, adultery or theft or coveting the possessions of one's neighbour. These two sets of laws are part of one divine law.

Two ways in which people break God's laws are nakedness and idolatry.

### *Nakedness*

God put the original man and woman, known to us as Adam and Eve, in the Garden of Eden, to work and care for it. They were naked and unashamed. But when tempted by the serpent, the devil, they disobeyed the laws given to them by the Creator God, ate the fruit from the forbidden tree, and their eyes were opened. They recognised their nakedness and were ashamed. They tried to cover themselves by sewing together leaves to make aprons. There are seventy references in the Bible to the covering of one's nakedness. In some Muslim countries women are required to cover their whole bodies with their traditional dress. To fail to do so often results in their death. Secular people in the west customarily share their nakedness as far as society allows.

## *Idolatry*

In Hindu cultural practices, idols are symbols of named gods and are designed to inspire faith in these gods. But it is common practice for idols themselves to become their gods. Since idols are man-made, they easily become symbols of the human ability to manipulate the will of a god for human gain. Idols are usually represented in male or female forms, and for worshipers to identify with their sexual behaviour often leads to moral degeneration and to sacred prostitution. In animist cultures the elements of nature are worshipped as gods, as in the Maori religion, where Tane is worshipped as the god of the forests.

Idols are also understood as mental concepts. Karma, samsara and moksha are absolutized as eternal laws independent of the creator God. By contrast, the biblical understanding of idolatry is that it is demonic and must be totally rejected. The Decalogue revealed to Moses on the mountain begins, "You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself idols in the form of anything in heaven or on earth ... You shall not bow down to them or worship them" (Exodus 19:5). In Moses' absence, the people turned to worship the golden calf and God struck them with a deadly plague (Exodus 32:35). God's judgment on Israel was severe when they worshipped Baal of the Ugarit religion, or later the astral gods of the Assyrians and Babylonians.

Paul warns that God's wrath falls on those who exchange the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal men, birds, animals and reptiles (Romans 1:23). In Paul's day the Ephesians worshipped the goddess Diana of Rome (Artemis in Greek) whose image had fallen from heaven. After Paul's preaching to them, the sale of silver shrines to Diana declined. This led to an uproar that engaged the whole city in a frenzy, only calmed by the appeal of the city clerk. Thus in idolatry the creature is equated with God the creator.

In the present ecological crisis, human efforts to control the forces of nature have become for many a substitute religion. Nature itself has become the god they can manipulate and control by scientific means. But only the living God can control our changing climate and guide humans to adapt to it. "The earth is the Lord's and everything in it ... therefore lift up your heads that the King of glory may come in" (Psalm 24:1,9).

## Chapter Thirteen: Hope for Life Beyond Death

All who are born will die sooner or later. Philosophers generally avoid discussing this issue, hoping that the human soul will be annihilated or absorbed into the One—the World Soul. Those who adhere to a known religion generally follow the dogmatic views of that religion, which may be universalism (all will be saved), annihilation (none will be saved), or heaven for the righteous and hell for the unrighteous—in which case hell is either a place for reformation of the soul, or a place of eternal punishment.

### Eternal Life

To those who belong to one of the three monotheistic religions, Judaism, Christianity or Islam, the deeper issue is to understand the essence of the Creator God. Is he loving and just, or vindictive and unforgiving?

The purpose of this chapter is that we might better understand how God will judge all people on the final Day of Judgment, and especially the people of Asia who have never heard the gospel to the point of understanding it. We recognise that God's way of decision-making has not been fully revealed to us, but we know that he will judge all people righteously. Abraham asked him, concerning the plight of Sodom, whether he would “spare the city for even ten righteous persons in it.”

What we believe and how we live are inseparable and interdependent. To the lawyer who asked “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus replied, “Love the Lord your God with your whole being, and love your neighbour as yourself.” In answer to the lawyer's defensive question, “Who is my neighbour?” Jesus told the parable of the Good Samaritan, ending with the words, “Go and do likewise” (Luke 10:25–37).

Paul responded to the issue of life beyond death this way: “To those who by persistence in doing good seek glory, honour and immortality, he will give eternal life. But to those who are self-seeking and who reject the truth and follow evil, there will be wrath and anger” (Romans 2:7–8). Does this mean that those who have never heard the gospel will be judged by God according to their works? James says yes.

We can assume that our first parents, Adam and Eve, were created immortal. But when they sinned, they died spiritually, to be immortal no longer. Does this mean that all mortals will be raised to life on the Day of

Resurrection and then either enter God's heaven or hell or be extinguished forever? Is immortality conditional? This raises the question of the relationship between creation time and God's eternal time. The answer is not clear in Scripture. We understand that time was created at the beginning of the universe and will end when creation ends. So God's eternal time is not to be equated with God's creation time.

An increasing number of evangelical scholars are turning to passages in the Bible that suggest immortality is conditional since only God is immortal (1 Timothy 6:16, 1 Corinthians 15:51–54). All human beings are mortal, which means that all will die. These scholars argue that immortality of the soul is a platonic Greek idea which influenced the early theologians, including Origen and Augustine. Further, to consign people to hell to suffer for eternity would be to deny the character of God, who is eternal and loving.

Scripture teaches that eternal life is a gift of God's grace, given to those who have trusted in Jesus for salvation. When the unbeliever dies and is raised at the day of Resurrection he or she will be judged by the risen Christ. This comes as a warning to those who reject Christ's rule over their lives. In the parable of the sheep and the goats, those who do not live righteously and compassionately will go away to eternal punishment. The king will say to them "Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels" (Matthew 25:41, 46). So Satan and his false prophets will be thrown into the lake of fire and be destroyed. (Rev 20:10)

The final judgment raises several issues. Does the word "eternal" mean the duration of time or is it the quality of time? Is God's eternal time to be equated with creation time that has a beginning with the creation of space and matter and will end with it? If God compassionately desires that none shall perish (1 Tim 1:4) is this compatible with eternal punishment? Is hell the natural consequence of a consciously sinful life? Many secular people live selfless and disciplined lives and have compassion for those who suffer. How will God judge them if they have no knowledge of Christ?

To these questions we have no simple answer. Our understanding of God is limited to the degree he has revealed himself as recorded in Scripture. Our only response is to trust God to do right.

## **Salvation Hope in Contemporary Asia**

Most Christians are more concerned about church growth than about the eternal status of those who have never heard the gospel. However, we can praise God for the growth of the church across Asia in recent years, espe-

cially the last 75 years. Since World War II and the granting of political freedom to many Asian nations, the culture of each country in Asia has been changing. Economic growth, national confidence and openness to explore new lifestyles all mark this cultural change, and the gospel has come in to fill many a spiritual void in its midst. In earlier times missionaries pioneered church growth but in more recent years the growth has been through national Christians witnessing to their own people. I will mention three cultures among the many where the witnessing church has exploded beyond expectation:

*Nepal.* Until 1960 there were virtually no Christians in Nepal. In the capital, Kathmandu, there was just one known Christian, a member of the displaced Rana family after the king regained power in 1952. Today it is estimated that about eight percent of the 30 million Nepalese are Christian. Until the year 2000, Christians suffered much persecution, and many remained secret believers. Then, with a degree of political freedom, the church grew rapidly, so that today there are eight accredited theological colleges in Kathmandu, all staffed by nationals. Miracles of healing have been a factor in the conversion of many families.

*China.* When Mao Zedong, the founder of the People's Republic of China, gained control in 1949, Christians suffered severe persecution for the next 30 years. The church went underground and many believers were killed for their faith. Some thought the church no longer existed, but when the next leader, Deng Xiaoping, was inaugurated in 1979, the church multiplied many times. Since Xi Jinping came to power in 2013, there have been fresh waves of persecution, and today Christian activity is carefully monitored by government officials. According to the Chinese Government's White Paper of 2018, the number of Christians was stated as four million Catholics and ten million Protestants. The paper also acknowledged 25,000 "meeting places" (the underground church) but how many millions are meeting in these secret places is not known.

*Iran.* Some claim that the Iranian Christians are the fastest growing community in the world today, despite the fact that they are banned by law.<sup>49</sup> It is estimated there may now be a million Christians in this Islamic nation of 80 million. But even with this rapid growth, still only 1.5 percent of Iranians are Christians.

Again, rapid cultural change is an important factor in the growth of the church. Ayatollah Khomeini's revolution of 1979 revitalized Islam for

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<sup>49</sup> According to scholar Ladan Boroumand "Iran today is witnessing the highest rate of Christianization in the world." URL: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christianity\\_in\\_Iran](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christianity_in_Iran).

many years, but now Islam has radically declined due to the harsh rule of the government and the subjugation of women. The government claims that 99.4 percent of Iranians are practising Muslims but the reality is different. Only an estimated 40 percent of the population identify themselves as worshipping Muslims, while 47 percent claim they have no religion or are atheistic.<sup>50</sup> The exploding church has gone underground mainly to avoid extreme persecution and death.

What of those who have never understood the gospel?

It is hard to know how many people in today's world have never heard that Christ died to forgive their sins, since even the semi-literate villager has access to the modern electronic media of radio, television, computers and mobile phones.

Jesus taught that to enter his kingdom seekers must first confess their failure to live a pure life; then they must turn away from their past attitudes and actions, and seek God's forgiveness. Understanding the meaning of the cross may come later. To enter the kingdom one must put one's whole life into the hands of Jesus and trust him for the present and for life beyond death. The Bible calls this an act of faith, and for some people it is a long process.

Asian cultures have little understanding of sin because they have little understanding of God as holy, just and loving. Instead, their whole lives are governed by the principle of honour and shame. They honour those above them, especially fathers, and they feel ashamed when they have grieved their family or local community or even their nation. One drastic example of this is that a Muslim may kill his daughter if he discovers that she was not a virgin on her wedding night. He is ashamed that he failed to protect her.

The connections between honour and shame and sin and guilt are not easy to explain. Without the objectivity of recognising wrong acts as sinful, sin is limited to a subjective experience within the framework of shame. It is only the work of the Holy Spirit within that convinces people that sin is more than a feeling. It is disobedience to God, evidence of a failed relationship to him.

In the story of Adam and Eve, after they had sinned they felt ashamed of their nakedness and tried to cover it by hiding from God in the garden. They had eaten the fruit in their desire to gain wisdom. From their subjective experience of feeling ashamed, they became objectively afraid of God.

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<sup>50</sup> URL: <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/meet-the-worlds-fastest-growing-evangelical-movement/>.

It is only the Holy Spirit that can enable a person to become aware of their true sin and guilt.

Although all people have an awareness of the difference between right and wrong, this awareness can be perverted so that they resist the prompting of the Holy Spirit to repent and believe the good news of Jesus Christ.

## God's Covenant with his People

The God of the Bible is a covenant-making and covenant-keeping God. He gave our first parents a blessing by saying “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it” (Genesis 1:28). He then put them into the expansive Garden of Eden “to work and take care of it” (Genesis 2:15).

Then God made a personal covenant with Noah and his family. Noah was a righteous man among his people and he walked with God (Genesis 6:9). His faith in God and his word was seen in his building of the ark on dry land although he was ridiculed by the people of his city. It is estimated that he lived a few years after the death of Adam who lived to be 930.<sup>51</sup>

God said to Noah, “I will establish my covenant with you and you will enter the ark” (Genesis 6:18). This covenant included his whole family and a selection of animals and birds. After the Flood, God renewed his covenant with Noah, his family and with nature. Noah responded by building an altar to the Lord and sacrificing on it clean animals and birds as burnt offerings (Genesis 9:20). God's covenant with Noah was a person-to-person divine initiative.

Next was an everlasting covenant with Abraham and his descendants, which included the promise of the land of Canaan as a permanent possession—“And I will be your God” (Genesis 17:8).

Many generations later God made a covenant with Moses, based on his love (*hesed*) for the people of Israel. He said “Therefore, take care to follow the commands, decrees and laws I give you today” (Deuteronomy 7:11). He then sealed the covenant with Moses at Mount Horeb when he gave him Ten Commandments to walk in and obey so that the people might “live and prosper and continue [their] days in the land they would possess” (Deuteronomy 5:33).

God's covenant with the Israelites was renewed with King David (2 Chronicles 13:5 and 21:7). This covenant of intimacy was poetically expressed in Psalm 2 and Psalm 110, symbolising the national blessing that continues to the present day.

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<sup>51</sup> James Montgomery Boice, *Genesis: an expositional commentary chapters 1-11* (Grand Rapids, MI, Zondervan, 1982) p. 234.

Sadly, human beings have failed to do their part in responding to God's covenants of life. Adam and Eve yielded to Satan's temptation, believing it would enable them to be like God; the people of Babel were tempted to maintain their independence and ignore God's covenants while Moses came down from the Mount to see the people worshipping idols. The greater the privilege of God's covenants made with his chosen people, the greater was his judgment and punishment when both individuals and nations spurned him. But God is both gracious and merciful in all his promises and he does not desert his own people. Rather he seeks to bring them back to faith.

When the first covenant failed, he promised a new one: "I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God and they will be my people. They will all know me, from the least to the greatest. I will forgive their wickedness and remember their sins no more" (Jeremiah 31:31-34).

This new covenant was sealed by the blood of Jesus Christ in his death as a sacrifice for the sins of the whole world. It showed the undeserved grace that God gives to all who repent and believe in his name. He has been faithful to such people throughout all human history. Those who repent do so because God's Spirit is working in their lives, drawing them to his mercy.

*What about those who have never heard?* How will God respond on the day of judgment to the millions who have never heard his name? We have seen throughout biblical history that God is patient and meets those who seek him. A moving example of his patience was when Abraham pled with the Lord to spare the people of Sodom if he found only fifty righteous in that city. The Lord said, "If I find fifty righteous people in the city of Sodom, I will spare the whole place for their sake" (Genesis 18:26). Abraham then asked, "Would you spare the whole city for forty-five people?" The Lord replied he would spare it for forty-five. Then Abraham asked for forty, thirty and then twenty. The Lord agreed to spare the city for the sake of twenty righteous people. Then Abraham asked God, once more if ten were to be found, would he spare it? And the Lord replied, "For the sake of ten I will not destroy it" (verse 32).

In the midst of pleading for the people of Sodom, Abraham asked, "*Will not the judge of all the earth do right?*" (verse 25).

With this encouragement we can ask the Lord to judge rightly those in Asia who have never heard his name. May he do so because of the righteous people among them.

In the birth of Jesus of Nazareth we have the amazing story of the Magi astrologers who came from a distant land to worship the new-born king.

God in his mercy appointed a star for them to follow. When they arrived at the house in Bethlehem, probably months later, they saw the child and his mother Mary and they bowed down and worshipped him, presenting him with gifts of gold, incense and myrrh (Matthew 2:1–12). These wise pagan men from the east were constrained by the Spirit to go to Bethlehem to worship the baby. Their gifts showed their understanding that Jesus would become a king.

From this Asian story we have hope that God is at work in the lives of many pagans up to the present day who will come to acknowledge Jesus as their Lord and Master.

We may turn to India and see that God continues to work among millions of pilgrims and seekers from the earliest days to the present. The Aryan invaders who pioneered the founding of the nation of India more than 3000 years ago understood the need to offer animal sacrifices for the forgiveness of sins. The massive Ashvamedha horse sacrifice took a year of preparation before the horses were sacrificed for the dual purpose of regenerating the cosmic order and for covering their sin. Today up to 10 million Hindus make a pilgrimage each decade to the *kumbh mela* at Allahabad where the northern rivers, the Ganges and the Jumna, meet. The pilgrims bathe in the waters of this sacred river for the forgiveness of their sins.

Then we have the story in the Bhagavad Gita of King Arjuna who was filled with remorse for killing his relatives in a war in north India. He turned to Krishna, his charioteer, for advice. In a long discourse on the meaning of love, Krishna advocates in the final verse (*charama sloka*) an absolute surrender to God, “Abandoning every duty, come to me alone for refuge; I will release you from all sin; sorrow not” (Bhagavad Gita XVIII:66). In these references we see that Hindus were aware of the need to confess their sins and to surrender entirely to the God of love.

These experiences give glimpses of the biblical understanding of the need for repentance from sin and faith in God. They are repeated throughout Hindu history. For the last 2000 years millions of Hindus have prayed daily the sacred Upanishadic prayer:

From delusion lead me to truth  
From darkness lead me to light  
From death lead me to immortality.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*, 1.3.28.



## Chapter Fourteen: God's Kingly Rule

Jesus Christ is God's answer to the suffering of humanity and to the secular hope of overcoming it. Where the cause is ignorance, rational thinking is not enough. Where the cause is *tanha*—desire, thirst and craving—the Eightfold Noble Path is good ethics but it is powerless to overcome these evils. Jesus saw himself as the Good Shepherd who cared for his sheep and protected them against hungry wolves (John 10:11,14).

Jesus also saw himself as the Suffering Servant of Isaiah who gave his life as a ransom for many. (Mark 10:15, Matthew 20:28, 1 Tim 2:6). He called himself the Son of Man and only briefly confessed that he was the incarnate Son of God. To those with a knowledge of the Scriptures he was like the Son of Man who was given authority, glory and power and whose kingdom would never be destroyed (Daniel 7:13–14). He was also the Messiah, the anointed and sent one, the Christ of God (John 1:41). In his moments of agony he appealed to God as Abba, an intimate title for his heavenly Father (Mark 14:36). His message to the unbelieving world was simple: “The time has come; the kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news” (Mark 1:15).

### From the Resurrection to the Cross

Secular people are not moved by the death of Christ, but they are challenged by his resurrection from the dead, because it gives them hope for life after death. Secular people avoid thinking about what will happen to them when they die, but the issue of what then happens is subconsciously before them. So it is better to begin a discussion with secular people with the resurrection, and then move on to the cross as the way to achieve this hope.

The book of Revelation summarizes the resurrected Jesus, as one worthy to open the sealed scroll of every person, people and nation. He is the one who was slain and is worthy to receive all honour and glory and who now sits on the throne of heaven. “To him be glory and power for ever and ever” (Revelation 5:9–13).

On the night of his resurrection Jesus twice said to his frightened disciples in the house where the doors were locked for fear of the Jews, “Peace be with you.” He then endued them with the Holy Spirit who would reveal his true nature to them. A week later he appeared to Thomas and empowered him with the Holy Spirit also.

It is significant that Paul in explaining the Gospel to pagans in the Athenian marketplace, began with the good news of Jesus' resurrection (Acts 17:18). Then in meeting with the scholars at the Areopagus, he explained that their unknown God was none other than God the Creator of heaven and earth, who would judge all people through Jesus whom he raised from the dead. Some believed; other scoffed at him.

No mention is made of the cross in this brief dialogue, but this does not mean that Paul did not preach it, for he would not have preached the resurrection without also discussing the meaning of the death of Christ. In his preaching, the cross was always central, but the significance of it may be better understood by first answering the question, "Is there life after death?" before announcing the cross as the way to forgiveness of shame and guilt. In the biblical record, the cross and resurrection are one saving act of God. However, in building bridges with people of other faiths or no faith, the Holy Spirit will guide us as to where to begin.

God gave Jesus a name above every other name so that on the final Day of Judgment when he returns to rule the earth, all people will bow and confess him as Lord, to the glory of God the Father (Philippians 2:9-11). In the cross and resurrection of Jesus, we have the bridge that allows secular people to go beyond their honour and shame, to confess their sin, acknowledge their guilt and to accept Jesus as their Redeemer.

## Our Christian Priority in Mission

Our task is to help the secular world, as well as those of other faiths, to acknowledge their failure to save themselves and to recognise Jesus as their only hope for salvation. In the parable of the Prodigal, the son in his poverty in the far country came to recognise that he had dishonoured his father and shamed the family. He repented and returned to his father to ask for forgiveness. The older brother, overwhelmed by resentment, failed to recognise his own sin and was filled with hate towards his brother (Luke 15:11-32).

The secular goal of living is to discover the way to peace, truth and happiness through the pleasures of this life. The Buddhist hope is that the cravings for pleasure can be eliminated by living according to the Eightfold Noble Path. But in fact, these *tanha* pleasures are motivated by selfishness. Buddha himself acknowledged this, for he seems to be aware of the realm of evil spirits. As we have seen, the demon Mara plagued him throughout his life, but did he recognise its source? In Buddhist art Mara is still the most popular symbol.

In Hinduism, peace and prosperity in life depend on strict adherence to the laws of one's caste. Here too salvation comes from living according

to the ethical principles of their religion. Mahatma Gandhi endorsed the keeping of the ethical principles of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount as sufficient for salvation. I had the privilege of handling his own Bible with Matthew 5-7 heavily underlined. He transposed the words "God is love" to "Love is God." But when fatally shot, his dying words called on his god Ram to save him.

As we have seen, the Christian reply begins with an innate awareness of right and wrong, but because of human selfishness, conscience can be manipulated to justify sinful desires, as history attests.

### **What is Wisdom?**

The goal of both secularism and human religion is to uphold *wisdom* as the way to enlightenment. However, when the author of Ecclesiastes seeks to define wisdom, he says, "God has set eternity in the hearts of all; yet they cannot fathom what God has done from the beginning to the end" (Ecclesiastes 3:11). The consequence of trusting reason alone is that "everything is meaningless, a chasing after the wind." Ecclesiastes concludes, "Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of all people" (12:13). To "fear God" here means to exercise unwavering trust, and this is repeated fourteen times in this book.

The book of Proverbs is devoted to the nature of true wisdom. It states "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom and the knowledge of the Holy One is understanding" (Proverbs 9:10). Paul follows this up by writing, "We preach Christ crucified, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ is the power of God and the wisdom of God" (1 Corinthians 1:24). He then adds, "God has chosen the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; and the weak things of the world to shame the strong" (1:27). Paul's constant prayer was that "the God of our Lord Jesus Christ may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation" (Ephesians 1:17) and that "through the church the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms" (3:10). This message has been repeated throughout church history. The Westminster Shorter Catechism, echoing Calvin, states that "man's chief end is to glorify God and enjoy him forever." Honouring Jesus is a necessary step to entering his kingdom.

In discussing Christ and his kingdom with people of no faith or other faiths it is generally a mistake to begin by discussing the deity of Christ as the Son of God or by explaining the nature of the Trinity or the atonement of Christ's death. It is better to begin with the issues of concern to unbelievers. Jesus' approach was to explain the secrets of the kingdom to his believing disciples, but to not-yet believers he spoke only in parables

(Mark 4:11). He used parables to illustrate the concerns of ordinary lives which were usually different from those of his disciples.

Secular people are concerned to overcome suffering and to live honest and happy lives. This is to be commended, but it doesn't answer the question "What happens to us when we die"? This question opens the opportunity to discuss the resurrection of Jesus as the assurance life beyond death.

## **The Kingdom of God is Near**

The King said to his first disciples, "The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news" (Mark 1:15). To Nicodemus, the Pharisee, who came to him privately one night, he said, "Unless a man is born again from above, he cannot see the kingdom of God" (John 3:3). Nicodemus believed and entered the kingdom.

The kingdom of God is also the kingdom of Christ. When Jesus came, the kingdom became visible on earth. It is a relational rule over all of life and becomes increasingly evident as believers grow to know and trust Jesus as Lord.

## **God Rules Over Nature**

God created the vast space-time universe. He created our solar system in seven days (or ages) as recorded in Genesis 1. Each day began with darkness and ended with light. There is an amazing continuity and progression in God's creative work. When God created humankind in his own image, he created them male and female. It is significant that the creation of male and female began in the creation of plant life on the third day. On Day Four, he created the birds and fish and on day Five, the animal kingdom and human life. It is a wonderful example of God's progressive creation in nature each after its kind.

God's rule in nature is a testimony to his work of grace. Several of the Psalms witness to this wonder. When the Psalmist reflects on God's creation of heaven and earth and of humans to rule over it, he explains, "O Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!" (Psalm 8:9). This same sense of the awe of the nearness of the creator-King is repeated in Psalm 19,67, 119,147 and 148.

## **God Rules Over Satan**

A dramatic example of God's rule over Satan is seen in the healing of the demon-possessed man who lived wild among tombs in the Gerasenes region. (Mark 5:1-20, Matthew 8:28-34, Luke 8:16-19). When he saw Jesus at

a distance he ran and fell on his knees before him, crying out, "What do you want of me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? Don't torture me." Jesus responded, "You evil spirit, come out of this man!" (Mark 5:7-8). He and a legion of other spirits came out of him, and with Jesus' permission entered a herd of pigs and drowned in the lake.

Again in response to the Pharisees, Jesus said, "If I drive out demons by the Spirit of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you" (Matthew 12:28). In some Asian countries such as Nepal and Pakistan, Satan continues to manifest his work as he did in biblical times. However, in our secular world Satan comes as a wolf in sheep's clothing (Matthew 7:15). His strategy is to convince believers that he doesn't exist. Indeed, he appears as an angel of light (2 Timothy 11:14). Paul was conscious of Satan's power and warned the Ephesian believers to put on the whole armour of God in order to withstand the devil's schemes (Ephesians 5:10-18).

### **God Rules Over Suffering and Death**

Jesus showed his kingly power by healing the sick and those with leprosy, giving sight to the blind, feeding the hungry and raising the dead to life. To the paralytic who was let down through the roof, Jesus said "Your sins are forgiven" and he then commanded him to get up and walk (Mark 2:1-12). Christ's rule was clearly over both natural and spiritual death. Paul confessed, "Death has been swallowed up in victory ... The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law, but God gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ (1 Corinthians 15:54-56).

Christ's victory over suffering and death also has a future dimension. He spoke about eternal life in the kingdom age to come (Mark 10:30). He gave both physical and spiritual signs of the end of the age (Mark 13:1-37, Matthew 24:1-51, Luke 21:5-38). In this age of intense suffering, the Gospel of the kingdom is to be preached to the whole world, and only then will the end come (Mark 24:14).

When Jesus rose from the dead and met his disciples in Galilee, he said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations ... and I will be with you always, to the very end of the age" (Matthew 28:18-20).

### **God Rules Over his Church**

Roman Catholics identify the kingdom only with their own church. Evangelicals believe that the completion of the kingdom will come when Jesus returns at the end of the age.

At Caesarea Philippi, Jesus entrusted the emerging church with the keys of the kingdom of heaven. He commissioned Peter and the other disciples to bind and loose from sin those who had entered the kingdom. (Matthew 16:13-20) While the church is not identical with the kingdom, they are interrelated and interdependent. It is the kingdom that creates the church, which is a witness to its presence and power. The Holy Spirit is the bridge between them. This became visible on the Day of Pentecost, when under the guidance of the Spirit, the church became a visible institution to be ruled by elders and deacons. Yet it was always accountable to Christ for the proclamation of his kingdom. When Christ is satisfied that this Gospel of the kingdom has been preached to the whole world, the end will come. The kingdom is always bigger than the church. Some envisage this as two concentric circles, the church being the inner one and the kingdom the outer one. The frontiers of the kingdom are wider than those of the church, yet they have an inseparable relationship. When Christ returns to earth, he will bring the glory of the kingdom with him.

## Chapter Fifteen: Knowing God—from Meditation to Prayer

Knowing God in the nature religions of Asia is through the practice of meditation, which varies from religion to religion. Yoga is the common technique to enhance it. Hindus practise the mystical experience of meditating on their particular god or goddess.

I recently watched the Hindu Diwali Festival of Lights in the Aotea Square in Auckland. Thousands of Indian Hindus rejoiced together with dance and drama to celebrate Lord Rama's destruction of the demon Ravana who had abducted Sita, Rama's wife. Others present celebrated Lord Krishna and his destruction of the demon Narakasura and the freedom of the people of his kingdom. Diwali is a festival of lights, the triumph of good over evil and light over darkness. To the Diwali worshippers, these gods were real, to be honoured and obeyed.

The *Bhagavad Gita*, Song of Love, is the most loved of all Hindu scriptures. It is deeply mystical and symbolic. Lord Krishna, an avatar of Vishnu disguised as Arjuna's charioteer, debated the possibility of disinterested warfare. He said, "To guard righteousness, to destroy evildoers, to establish the law, I come into birth age after age" (Bhagavad Gita 4.8). The *Bhagavad Gita* is designed to show the way to meditation based on the three margas: karma, bhakti and jnana. Hindus are satisfied to meditate on an abstraction, such as a point on the wall.

Throughout history devout Hindus have worshipped their gods and goddesses, believing them to be real beings. Mirabal, the 16<sup>th</sup> century mystic poet of Rajasthan, sang:

My Lord, you taught me love: where have you gone?  
You lit the candle of love; why have you abandoned me now?  
When will you return? Without you, love means nothing.<sup>53</sup>

Mirabal was a devout bhakti lover of Lord Krishna. She devoted her life to dancing and singing his praises. Her songs of love have deeply influenced the mystical history of Hinduism.

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<sup>53</sup> Cited Kathleen Nicholls, "The Indian Spirituality Past and Present," in Sunand Samithra, *Doing Theology in Context* (Bangalore, Theological Book Trust, 1992), p. 45.

## Knowing God Through Meditation

Having forsaken the Hindu ascetic way of self-mortification, Buddha experienced enlightenment through intense meditation over several nights. As he lost all consciousness of physical existence, he experienced Ultimate Reality “as it really is.” He saw nirvana as “deathless bliss,” the extinction of all suffering, lustful desire and craving for life. This deeply mystical experience shaped his mission of converting Hindus for the next 45 years. In Zen Buddhism the innate “Buddha-nature” is realised through intense meditation.

In Chinese religions, Confucius and Mencius had mystical experiences as they meditated on the Tao of Heaven.

The mystical experience of meditation is also important in the lives of the saints of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. To meditate is to know God, to experience union with him, and to know his divine will. The Psalmist exclaims, “O how I love your law! I meditate on it all day long” (Psalm 119:97). The whole of this long psalm is a call to meditate on the promises of God, even to keeping awake at night in order to do so. (Psalm 119:148).

In Islam, mystical meditation is dominated by the Sufi tradition where the emphasis is not only to experience union with God but also to be absorbed into God. The great Islamic scholar, Al Ghazali (1058–1111) was a strong defender of Sufiism. The well-known Persian poet, Jalal al Din Rumi (1207–1273) taught that the *tawhid* (oneness of God) was fully seen in the mystical blazing flame of love. He believed that poetry, music and dance were sacred and the surest way to reach God, while at the same time he maintained his belief in the sharia law of the Qur’an. Thus the Sufi mystical path (*tariqa*) was the way to experience God. Rumi’s best-known poem ran to six volumes, containing 27,000 lines.

## Knowing God Through Prayer

Christians are encouraged to go beyond meditation to the experience of personal prayer to God Almighty, and to pray for themselves, the church and the world.

After Nebuchadnezzar, ruler of Babylon, had defeated the Egyptians at the battle of Carchemish in 605 BC, he invaded Judah and from 587 BC the Babylonian captivity began. Daniel a captive, eventually rose to become next to the king as the ruler of the nation, much to the resentment of the Babylonian officials.

Early in his reign Nebuchadnezzar had a distressing dream which the wise men were unable to interpret for him, resulting in a death sentence

for all. Daniel, one of the wise men, returned to his house and after prayer he went to the king and interpreted his dream for him. We note that he prayed in public before seeking to save his own life, thanking God for revealing the dream to him, and praising God for his wisdom, knowledge and power (Daniel 2:20–23).

Prayer was central to Paul's ministry. He exhorted the Christians in Colosse to pray without ceasing (Colossians 1:9). His experience of Christ living within him was a profoundly mystical one, (Galatians 2:20).

Throughout western church history there have been well-known praying mystics, who also had a deep knowledge of Scripture. They included Teresa of Avila, John of the Cross, Francis of Assisi, Julian of Norwich, Meister Eckhardt, and more recently, Thomas Merton. The German Lutheran pietists were also known for their mystical love of Christ. The Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholic churches are noted for their mystical prayer life. In Asia we might include Sadhu Sundar Singh, Narayan Vaman Tilak, and Chandran Devanesen; in China, Watchman Nee. When Christians are bathed in both meditation prayer and in the power of the Holy Spirit, they become the people God uses to redeem his suffering and lost world.

## The Praying Community

The theistic religions emphasize the individual's commitment to prayer for the family and for the church as the people of God. For Jews, the keeping of the Hebrew Sabbath and their regular worship in the synagogues have enabled the community to overcome centuries of ostracism and persecution. For Muslims the worship of Allah in the mosque and the keeping of sharia law have enabled their families to maintain their distinctive identity despite internal theological conflicts.

While Christian conversion is personal and individual, the church is the household of God in the world (Ephesians 2:19). It is family-based and celebrates the institutions of baptism and the Lord's Supper. By definition, the church (*ekklesia* Greek and *qahal* Hebrew) is the assembled community of the family of God. It is the body of Christ in union with Christ. In all his preaching and teaching, Jesus had one message, the proclamation of the coming of the kingdom of God. This has become visible in life of the church.

While Jesus and his disciples were in Caesarea Philippi, Jesus said he would build his church on Peter's confession of Jesus as "Christ, the son of the living God" (Matthew 16:18) Though Jesus did not directly expound this identity of himself, it was basic to his teaching. One example of this was his message to his disciples: "You are the salt of the earth; you are the

light of the world” (Matthew 5:13–16). The church as the community of believers became a visible reality on the day of Pentecost with the coming of the Holy Spirit in fullness when they all broke bread together, shared their possessions, and prayed. Through their witness 3000 were added to the church that day.

The church was called to be both a serving and a witnessing community. Paul continued to preach the kingdom of God but expressed it in terms of building the church. He loved the church and he had a list of churches and individuals he prayed for each day. He compared Christian marriage and the relationships of husbands, wives and their children to the headship of Christ over the church (Ephesians 5:22, 33 and Colossians 3:18–25). Paul gave special attention to church government by appointing elders and deacons in every congregation, and by encouraging his fellow apostles to do the same. Christian denominations differ in their understanding of the functions of the church, the meaning of the Lord’s Supper, the relationship of pastors to the rule of elders and deacons, and the purpose of baptism, but they maintain unity in Christ as their Lord and Saviour.

## **Church and State**

The church’s relationship to the state has a long and torrid history. Traditionally, the church is concerned with the spiritual lives of its members, while the state is concerned with the temporal life of society.

Jesus’ dictum, “Render to Caesar the things that belong to Caesar and to God the things that belong to God” (Matthew 22:21) has been widely interpreted to illustrate the church’s relationship to the state. Until the dramatic conversion of the Roman emperor Constantine in 312, the state progressively controlled the church, but with Constantine, Christianity became the state religion. The removal of the capital of the Roman empire from Rome to Constantinople in 330 AD was evidence of this radical change in relationship. Throughout the Middle Ages from the 6<sup>th</sup> century, the church progressively controlled the state. The Roman popes controlled both and it became known as the Holy Roman Empire. Although the state had become nominally Christian, corruption and abuse of the church’s power was so strong that Martin Luther tried to reform the Catholic church. His failure to do so led to a split in the church and the beginning of the Reformed churches, first in Germany and then in France and the Netherlands under Calvin. Then Anabaptist churches arose to demand a complete separation of church from state. These differences have multiplied several times over the centuries, influenced by the distinct national cultures of first the missionaries and then their converts.

More recently in Asia, some new churches with their own subcultures and led by charismatic pastors have become independent. Apart from the family of Eastern Orthodox churches, the churches in Asia were born out of western missionary movements dominated by evangelical missions. In most cases these churches have sought independence from the state. Now independent churches are emerging apart from the mission-established churches and are establishing their own relationship to the state. In countries where the governments and radical religious movements have oppressed the church, many of these churches have gone underground to survive. As already noted, this was the experience of the church in China under the rule of Mao Zedong from 1950 to 1975. Then in times of relative freedom the churches multiplied. This happened under the brief rule of Deng Xiaoping from 1979 until the rise of the radical Xi Jinping in 2012.

In the present secularising of Islam in Iran, despite the harsh rule of the Muslim state, thousands of Muslims have become Christians, but to survive in fellowship and witness they have had to hide their identity and wait for the day when they can become visible.

Missions are now in reverse. The vigorous Asian churches are sending their own missionaries to the west, to strengthen the numbers of Christian immigrants to these nations and to win the secularised west to faith in Jesus Christ.

Christ's dictum on the relationship of the church to Caesar is being fulfilled in different ways, some in maintaining the harmony between the church and state, and others in separating them. In a few nations in Africa and among the South Pacific Island nations, the church dominates the state. Most of the Tongan immigrants to New Zealand see themselves first as Methodists who have come from ruling the state in Tonga and only secondly as Tongan citizens.

Though the relationship of the church to the state keeps changing as national cultures change, Jesus' dictum on the relationship of God and Caesar is our theological guide, to be applied to every changing context.



## **Chapter Sixteen: Building Bridges of Identity and Faith**

This section of the book is about closing the gap between secularism and Christ's mission to the world in which evangelism as conversion to Christ and his church is central. There are several steps in Christ's mission to redeem humanity and to transform creation, the church and society for the glory of God. These include:

### **I. Revitalising the Global Church**

Christ's mission was to redeem our suffering and lost humanity through his body, the church. As we have seen, Christ wants this to be a visible manifestation of his kingly rule. We thank God that throughout church history there have been times of reformation of belief and times of spiritual awakening and renewal. But there have also been times of decline and apostasy. For the past seventy years we have witnessed a decline in church membership in the western world. This is primarily due to the worldwide impact of secular ideology and practice. Many churches in the west are now down to one-third of the membership they had in the 1960s—the high point of church growth.

In Marxist society, principally in China and North Korea and to a lesser extent in Russia, secularism has progressively become atheistic and anti-Christian. The global church is now experiencing suffering, persecution and martyrdom in numbers equivalent to those of the combined past twenty centuries. Buddhism, which by nature is secular, offers spirituality without God, and as we have seen, secularism is permeating the Islamic world, notably Iran. Jihadist Islamist movements are striving to wipe out Christianity, but by the grace of God are failing to do so. Global suffering is increasing everywhere from personal and family life to community and state warfare. Immorality and addictions to alcohol and drugs are also growing. The most stressful situation is global poverty and mass starvation.

We can predict that within the next fifty years secularism will implode on itself, leading to a mass loss of human freedom and increased suffering, while there are signs that the secular world is returning to religion for survival. Secular Chinese working in Tibet are becoming Buddhists. By contrast, women and students in Iran are protesting on the streets of their cities against the strictures of traditional dress codes. In recent years, millions have turned to Christ across Asia, but they must live their faith se-

cretely in order to survive. Nevertheless, there are many who openly accept persecution and even death for Christ's sake.

The recovery of the global Church in our fallen world begins with revitalizing our church's life in Christ as Lord and Saviour. Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth and the life" (John 14:6). He alone is the only way to God. Other "paths" to God are deceptive. All other claims to truth lead to the worship of the self. Jesus alone is the hope of eternal life. He compares himself to a grain of wheat which is planted and dies in order to produce much fruit. (John 12:23–26)

So the revitalizing of our churches begins as they identify with the suffering love of Jesus. The Lord made it clear that loving God with our whole being demands that we love our neighbour as we love ourselves. It comes as a shock to some Christians to realise that if we don't love our neighbour, who may also be our persecutor, we don't really love God. The renewal of the church calls for this total understanding of love, whether our neighbour be a secular Buddhist, a syncretistic Hindu, or an exclusive Muslim.

The secular world is not drawn to the church, however, because it does not see this quality of Christ-like life in its members. The world sees the church as an exclusive social club whose members are only involved in enjoying each other and the church's benefits. Many Christians have no secular friends. Christ's challenge to the churches and their members is to be bridges of compassion in our suffering world and as faithful witnesses to the Gospel.

The signs of a revitalized church are seen in its love of the Scriptures as the Word of God, its constant prayer for others in need, its confession of every known sin and its joyous worship of the Lord in song. It is sensitive to the guidance of the Holy Spirit who empowers lives to the glory of God. The recovery of our identity with Christ and his Spirit in the world is the primary answer for the church in the world of increasing suffering and death.

## 2. Contextualising the Good News

As Peter Thein Hyunt of Myanmar has noted, "the present separating conversion pattern of mission must be replaced by a contextualized conversion pattern."<sup>54</sup>

The failure of our churches and their mission agencies in both the west and now in Asia to achieve this goal is persuading the secular world that Christianity is irrelevant to their needs.

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<sup>54</sup> Peter Thein Hyunt, p. 123.

In 1984 the ecumenical Anglican Consultative Council in London defined mission as action in five spheres of community living. These have been adopted by several missions and denominations. They are:

- To proclaim the good news of the Kingdom
- To teach, baptise and nurture new believers
- To respond to human needs of loving service
- To seek to transform the unjust structures of society
- To strive to safeguard the integrity of creation, and to sustain and renew the life of the earth<sup>55</sup>

All agree that new converts need to be baptised and nurtured in the faith. Traditionally, evangelical missions have emphasised evangelism and expected converts to be baptised. However, the issues we face need a more comprehensive understanding of our mission in the world. All churches recognise that mission includes alleviating human suffering and promoting justice in society but many see this either as integral to mission or only as the ethical response to mission.

When the lawyer wanted to debate with Jesus about which was the greatest commandment, Jesus didn't give a theological response. Instead, when asked "Who is my neighbour?" Jesus told him the parable of the good Samaritan, where compassionate action is more important than following religious practices.

Evangelical missions seek to fulfil the first three of these five marks of mission, namely, evangelism, baptism of new believers, and meeting human need. More liberal churches emphasise human need and the last two, social justice and the care of the environment. I am not aware of many local churches that see mission as needing to fulfil *all five* categories.

A contextual understanding of mission means beginning with the categories that are important to both the believer and the enquirer, who may be secular or belong to another faith. Many see evangelism as the fruit of social justice and saving the world from total ecological collapse. Others are committed to zero carbon increase as the primary ethical issue of our time and for some it has become a substitute religion. At the same time, the daily news media give priority to human suffering, whether through poverty, sexual abuse, or national oppression. They give priority to heart-rending examples of suicide, of children starving to death and of rampant disease. These tragedies are sadly real. Our biblical calling is to respond by

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<sup>55</sup> All ordained members of the Anglican diocese of Auckland, New Zealand, are required to sign their commitment to this mission statement.

actively being engaged in their healing and by showing that Jesus is the answer to their sin and guilt.

He rebuked his disciples when they failed to exorcise evil spirits. I have a missionary colleague who during her lifetime of service in Pakistan was gifted in casting out evil spirits from individuals and from their homes. In most cases she had to agonise over these deliverances, often for many hours, and would only give up when the devils left.<sup>56</sup> The modern secular world interprets demonic presences as psychosomatic illnesses, to be treated by scientific means. However, Jesus taught his disciples to distinguish between disease and demonic power (Mark 6:7–13) while Satan teaches secular people to believe that he (the devil) doesn't exist!

### 3. Belonging, Believing, Becoming

One of the congregations I serve in Auckland welcomes people to enter their church through the door which has above it the bold statement: "Belong, Believe, Become." This is good contextualisation in today's secular world. Fifty years ago it would have been written, "Believe, Belong, Become." This was the evangelistic method of Billy Graham and it led to a huge growth of the church, because the national cultures were already sympathetic to the Christian faith.

In 1954, for example, as a student pastor in London I took my congregation to the Billy Graham crusade in the Harringay Stadium. The whole of London was talking about Billy Graham's crusade. Posters were on buses and everywhere in the city. For thirty nights thousands attended, and hundreds responded to Billy's preaching. The new believers were counselled by well-prepared church members, and integrated into local churches. Some became pastors and missionaries. The emphasis was first on *believing*; then came *belonging* and finally *becoming*.

Such an approach is less effective in today's secular age. Today the order needs to be changed to "Belong, Believe and Become." To belong means that churches and their mission agencies need to develop programmes that secular people can identify with and which also meet their innate spiritual needs. This means churches may sponsor programmes that appear to be secular but in reality are bridges to awaken a spiritual hunger to know God in their lives. Examples of such programmes may include the creative arts such as poetry, storytelling, music and song, paint-

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<sup>56</sup> Vivienne Stacey, *Supreme Over Satan* (Lahore, Pakistan, Masihi Isha'at Khana, 1986). See also *Mission Ventured: Dynamic Stories Across a Challenging World* (InterVarsity Press, 2001).

ing and calligraphy, sculpture and design, drama, mime and cultural dance.<sup>57</sup> Games that encourage mental and physical skills, such as chess, bowls, and ten pin bowling for youth, may help to build relationships. Teaching ESOL (English to Speakers of Other Languages) has been widely accepted by churches as part of Christ's mission, and has led to the conversion of many.

It is important to see these activities as bridges that lessen the gap between the church and the secular world. When seekers join with Christians in these social activities, they gradually want to know more about who Jesus is and why he is so important to them. They then need to respond to Jesus' call to "follow me." Understanding the theology of the call follows later when as a believer they are part of a local church.

Many secular people have never experienced a Christian worship service and find it embarrassing to be asked to do so. They may feel more at home in a small group which explores the Bible together and discusses the issues of daily life. These home groups are bridges to the church.

#### 4. Conversion as a Process

As Jesus walked by the Sea of Galilee, he saw the fisherman, Simon Peter, and Andrew his brother. A little further on he saw James and John, the sons of Zebedee. He said to them all, "Come, follow me." They were so impressed by the quality of his life that each did just that, leaving his nets to follow him (Mark 1:14–20, Matthew 4:18–22).

Sometime later, Jesus was in a town by the Sea of Galilee and saw Matthew, the collector of taxes for Herod Antipas. Matthew was sitting at his tax booth when Jesus said to him "Follow me" and he did so. (Mark 2:13–14, Matthew 9:9–13, Luke 5:27–32).

In each case Jesus established a person-to-person relationship. He spoke with authority and divine power and they did not hesitate to follow him. The call required no theological or cultural conditions: "Just come and follow me."

We need not equate the disciples' response to the call "Follow Me" with their understanding of conversion as being born again (Nicodemus), or in the sense of being justified by faith (Paul). The gospels have no record of when the disciples passed from death to life in Christ. We can assume that

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<sup>57</sup> See the Asian cultural expression of these art forms in Kathleen Nicholls, *Asian Arts and the Christian Hope* (New Delhi, Select Books, 1983). This book won public recognition in the World Book Fair in New Delhi in 1982. It is now out of print, and I hope to publish a new book on the subject in 2023.

their conversion was a slow realisation that they must confess their sins and accept Jesus as their Saviour and Lord.

Even Peter continued to think of Jesus in accord with the Jewish tradition that the Messiah would deliver their nation from the oppressive rule of the Romans. When he went on to rebuke Jesus for prophesying that he would suffer at the hands of the Jewish elders and be killed, the Lord's reaction was severe: "Out of my sight, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me!" (Matthew 16:23). In time they grew to accept Jesus as the promised Messiah, as Peter did by divine revelation at Caesarea Philippi. Although Peter had already been with Jesus for a considerable time, he had still thought of him as a prophet and teacher (Matthew 16:23–28). This event at Caesarea Philippi with Jesus probably took place about halfway through his three years of discipleship training. It was not until the evening of Jesus' resurrection that the disciples, including Peter, more fully understood he was more than a prophet: he was indeed the Son of God.

Some of our churches engaged in evangelism require belief in God, confession of sin, and even a change in dress code such as women removing a caste mark from their forehead before coming to Jesus. Some mission agencies require acceptance of the "four spiritual laws" as a condition for membership. Other agencies stress understanding the differences between Christianity and other religions before converting to Christ.

These theological approaches are understandable in the case of mission to Muslims. But it is better to begin the conversation with the prophet Isa al-Masih, as recorded in the Qur'an, and then to show that he is more than a prophet. The prophet Isa (Jesus) is the most important bridge in leading inquirers from the Qur'an to the Jesus in the Gospels. According to the Qur'an, Isa "healed the blind and the leper and raised the dead." (S3:49, 5:110). Muhammad did none of these things.

This may lead to a discussion of Jesus' virgin mother Mary, who is also a bridge to Jesus. In fact the whole of Surah 19 is dedicated to her.

So evangelism begins by building an acceptance of Isa al-Masih and also with Mary.

Jesus' parable of the four seeds describes the four soils in which the gospel seed is sown. They represent four types of people in their response to the Gospel, namely, the negative fundamentalists, the superficial enthusiasts, the syncretists, and those prepared by the Spirit to receive the good news and bring forth a harvest (Mark 4:1–20, Matthew 13:1–23, Luke 8:4–15). Evangelists need the guidance of the Holy Spirit to know which of their enquirers are likely to be responsive to the good news.

Jesus' call to his disciples to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world is a call to bring out the truth of the gospels, and at the same time

to show the need to be delivered from the corrupting influences of shame and guilt.

## 5. Conversion as a Leap of Faith

Some seekers of the truth, whether secular or religious, convert to Christ at a single event. This may be from a dream, or at an evangelistic meeting with a friend, or through reading the Bible. Their conversion is radical and immediate. Some who have experienced instant and radical healing from disease immediately decide to follow Jesus. This is common in many Asian countries.

However, for others conversion is a slow process, possibly occurring over several years. This is common among highly educated people, CS Lewis of Cambridge University being a well-known example. After a long struggle as an atheist, he made a leap of faith.

Nilakanatha Goreh (1825–1896) is another example. A Marathi-speaking Brahmin from Benares, he was fluent in reading and speaking in Sanskrit and had earned the title of Pundit. He was given a Bible by William Smith a CMS missionary, and for the next three years he reasoned out the relative truths of Hinduism and Christianity. It took him three years of intense struggle before he took the step of trusting Christ alone for his salvation, confessing his sins and accepting Jesus Christ as his Lord and Saviour.

He was baptised in in 1848, becoming known as Nehemiah Goreh. From 1956 he taught at Bishops College, Calcutta. His book, *“Hindu Philosophical Systems: A Rational Refutation”* has never been fully answered by Hindu scholars.

The fishermen and the tax collector who immediately decided to respond to Jesus call of “Follow Me” were impressed with his life and character without fully understanding his divine nature. At what stage in the next three years they took the step of confessing their sins and accepting Jesus as their Lord, we do not know. It was only after Jesus rose from the dead and met them that they understood fully that he was the Son of God.

It is important to recognise the importance of taking this leap of faith for salvation, for it is only by the grace of God, through the direct presence of Christ and his Holy Spirit, that conversion becomes possible. Salvation can never be earned as it is in other Asian religions. Christians need patience and perseverance in witnessing to their non-Christian neighbours, family and friends, because salvation is God’s work, no matter how long it takes. The purpose of evangelism is to bring people into the Kingdom.



## Chapter Seventeen: The Cost of Discipleship

A disciple is a learner—the pupil of the teacher. The Greek philosophers, Socrates, Plato and Aristotle, each had their own disciples and established schools to train them. Following the Jewish Talmud, the Hebrew rabbinical writings, rabbis had disciples who sought to follow their philosophical and religious emphases. The Pharisees, too, were known by their disciples. Jesus invited twelve men to be his disciples, whom Paul called apostles, the sent ones. Jesus went from village to village and sent his disciples two by two to preach his message of the kingdom of God, and he gave them authority over evil spirits and power to heal the sick (Mark 6:6–16).

At Caesarea Philippi Jesus rebuked Peter for being a stumbling block. He then added “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself, take up his cross and follow me.” Jesus was well aware of his coming crucifixion. On his last journey to Jerusalem, in the Garden of Gethsemane, he agonised in prayer, “Abba Father, take this cup from me, but not what I will but what you will” (Mark 13:26).

In a telling paragraph, Jesus warned his disciples of the cost of discipleship. In planning to build a tower a man must count the cost. Otherwise he will not have enough money to complete it and will be ridiculed for his bad judgement. (Luke 14:28–30) Likewise, when Asians consider becoming followers of Jesus, they can expect persecution and they need to count the cost also.

The most perceptive account of the cost of discipleship was when Jesus, at the Passover festival, responded to some Greeks who came to Philip wanting to see him. Philip told his brother Andrew and together they told Jesus, whose unexpected response to them was, “Unless an ear of wheat falls to the ground and dies it remains only a single seed, but if it dies it produces many seeds.” (John 12:24). He continued “The man who loves his life will lose it. (v. 25).”

He then added, “When I am lifted up from the earth I will draw all people to me,” indicating the nature of his coming death on the cross (John 12:32).

In the Middle East and Asia the cost of discipleship is increasing, despite the rise in global education and economic prosperity. It is estimated that during the twentieth century more Christians have been killed out of hate than in the previous nineteen centuries. In this context Christians need to be sensitive to this cost of discipleship when pressing people to accept Christ as their Saviour. In the secular world the cost is less severe.

## Learning How to Live with Persecution

In daily life new believers have to decide how to live with their families. Should they openly confess their faith or live as secret believers? In many cases open witness results in new believers having to flee from their family home, never to return, or staying and being killed. This has been the consequence for believers in Muslim families but is now spreading to Hindu and Buddhist communities where fundamentalists see Christians as enemies of their religious and political life. Even peace-loving Christians are hated for claiming that Jesus is the only way to God.

Throughout history Christians believers have lived secretly with each other. The early Christians in the Roman empire were noted for using the catacombs as their place of meeting.

In recent times during the Mao era in China from 1947 to 1975, all public Christian activities were forbidden. Many in the west thought the church no longer existed in China, but in fact it went underground during the brief rule of Deng Xiaoping from 1978 to 1990, and his two successors Jiang Zemin and Hu Jinto. After the ruthless Xi Jinping came to power in 2012, Christians were again severely persecuted. The present semi-underground free church continues to outnumber the state-recognised Three Self church, although both continue to grow.

In Myanmar, the northeastern ethnic states of the Chins, the Kachins and the Karens are predominantly Christian. They seek to protect their rights by openly resisting the national Buddhist militia rule, with the sad consequences of endless bloodshed, loss of life and destruction of property. Clearly, violence is not the way to respond to persecution.

Paul's advice to the Christians in Corinth facing severe persecution was "Be on your guard; stand firm in the faith; be men of courage, be strong. Do everything in love" (1 Corinthians 16:23–24.) This is good advice in today's troubled world.

In Asian religious contexts the issue of baptism becomes important for the new believer. Public baptism usually spells the end of all family relationships, and increases the threat of death. Secret baptism may be of limited value in strengthening the believer's faith, but it can increase the fear of discovery. The ideal is to delay baptism until the whole family can be baptised together, but this rarely happens.

In the case of jihadist Islam, the convert is seen as both an apostate from Islam and a traitor to the nation, and must be imprisoned or even killed. The unity of the mosque and the state increases this danger. Political changes may also increase it. For example, Mohindra Modi of India is trying to make India a Hindu state by eliminating minority cultures such

as Islam and eventually Christianity. At the same time, secularism is increasing in many Muslim countries such as Iran and Indonesia where millions of disillusioned worshippers are turning to Christ, mainly as secret believers.

Another factor in persecution which is usually ignored is the influence of Satan who persuades Christians that he doesn't exist, or deceives them with the idea that all religions are expressions of the one ultimate reality. The secular mindset is proving to be Satan's most successful weapon. As a result, most traditional churches in the west have now only a third of their membership of fifty years ago.

## **Obedience to the State**

Towards the end of Jesus' ministry some Herodians and Pharisees came to Jesus with the question: "Is it right for to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?" Jesus asked for a denarius coin, normally used in paying the poll tax to Rome, and turned the question back to his critics. He asked them whose subscription or image was on it. Following their reply, he said to them, "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's and give to God what is God's" (Mark 12:13-17). They had no reply. Here Jesus is affirming that the church has a responsibility to obey the rulers of the state but at the same time to put obedience to God above that.

Perhaps the most remarkable example of responding to this tension was Daniel, a Jew exiled to Babylon during the sixth century BC, who then rose to occupy a leading government post under the Babylonian emperors Nebuchadnezzar, Belshazzar and then Darius and Cyrus. His loyalty to these pagan rulers was tested when Darius foolishly decreed that anyone who prayed to another god but the emperor for the next thirty days would be cast into a den of lions. Daniel's response was to return to his home, open the window as he always did, and pray to his God. Despite Darius's attempt to save him, Daniel was thrown to the lions, only to have God rescue him.

Throughout the history of the church many Christians have suffered a similar fate but without being rescued. Today's worldwide community of believers illustrates the truth that the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church.

An example of resisting political rule in the early church was when Peter and the other disciples refused to stop preaching in the temple courts. The high priest threatened them with severe punishment but Peter replied that they must obey God rather than men. (Acts 5:18-20). Peter and the apostles rejoiced in being worth to suffer disgrace for God's name.

All too often churches in Asia are suffering unnecessary persecution, however, because they fail to respect the political power of their rulers who see the church as an inward-looking exclusive community whose members enjoy their own company and care only for their own needs, while defending their independence from the state. Some Asian churches may succeed as worshipping communities but fail to be compassionate. They may limit their mission to direct evangelism but do little to meet suffering human or to be agents of justice in an unjust society. They may prefer to leave compassion in their communities to such specialised agencies as World Vision or Barnabas Fund. Sadly, many believers have no friends among their religious or secular neighbours.

Christ, however, set an example of holistic mission, exhorting his disciples to be in the world but not part of it (John 17:13–19).

## **Chapter Eighteen: Living Life to the Glory of God**

People live their daily lives according to what they believe and to their relationships with other people.

For many people, relationships with others are the most important factor in their lives. For example, Hindus are born into a caste system which determines whom they marry, and limits their friends and often their employment. Buddhists and Chinese are secular and in some cases they are more open in their relationships. The monotheistic religions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam are committed to a personal Creator God and to their scriptures which they believe are uniquely revealed by their God. In the case of the fundamentalist sects, their relationships are restricted to people with the same beliefs. In Asian faiths, marriage arrangements are determined by social and religious relationships. Other influences include the workplace, sports, the educational institutions and social clubs. However, where secular lifestyles are developing, religion becomes less important.

### **The Glory of God in Creation**

In the Jewish and Christian faiths, the Old Testament reveals God's glory in the nature which he created. The mountains, sunsets, lightning and thunder are where God especially reveals his glory. He revealed his glory to Moses in a burning bush which was not consumed. It was there that God said to him, "I Am Who I Am" (Exodus 3:14), while some Psalms (such as 147 and 148) burst into joy at the glory of God in creation.

Every day I keep several fresh flowers on my kitchen counter and study desk. I admire the beauty of their shape, their gradations of colour and sometimes their smell, and I regularly meditate on the amazing progression of God's creation as recorded in Genesis Chapter One, beginning with life on the third day when God created vegetables and fruit. He assured the continuity of nature by bees and the wind transferring the pollen grains from the male stamen of the flower to the female stigma where they germinate.

On the fifth day God created the fish and the birds and assured their continuity by the female laying eggs. On the sixth day he created animals and humans whose continuity depended on the act of copulation. With each day of creation God saw that it was good, reflecting his authority and glory.

This amazing progression in God's self-revelation differs sharply from the evolutionary theory in which God has no part in the progress of creation.

## **The Glory of God in the Lord Jesus Christ**

The climax of God's self-revelation was his sending of Jesus Christ to reveal his power, wisdom and love and to obtain victory over sin by his death on the cross and resurrection from the grave. Those who by his grace have become his disciples, are called by Jesus to live a life of praise and worship and to share his glory with all their friends and neighbours. Those of a monotheistic faith seek to live their lives in accord with the teachings of their respective holy scriptures which they hold in awe as the revealed Word of God.

In the Old Testament in particular, the glory of God is revealed. During Israel's wilderness journey from Egypt to the promised land there were times when Moses' face shone with that glory. On one occasion the Lord said to Moses, "I am pleased with you and I know you by name." To which Moses replied, "Now show me your glory" (Exodus 3:17-18).

The temple was uniquely the place where God visibly manifested his glory. The prophet Isaiah experienced this in the temple when he saw the Lord's glory fill it. The angels declared, "Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory" and the temple shook and was filled with smoke. (Isaiah 6:3-4)

God uniquely revealed his glory, however, when he sent his Son Jesus, whose glory was seen in the way he taught his disciples, his parabolic teaching, his casting out of evil spirits, and his healing of all who put their trust in him. The apostle John described Jesus' arrival as the Word becoming flesh. "We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth" (John 1:14). Then God's glory was seen on a high mountain when Jesus was visibly transfigured before three of his disciples. His clothes became dazzling white and a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son whom I love. Listen to him" (Mark 9:7).

God's glory was uniquely seen in the cross when the centurion appointed to watch over his death proclaimed, "Surely this man was the Son of God" (Mark 15:39). Then on the day of the resurrection, Jesus in his risen glory appeared first to Mary Magdalene, then to the two disciples returning home to Emmaus, and finally to the confused disciples who had gathered behind closed doors. A week later he appeared to Thomas, and during the next forty days he appeared to many in Galilee.

All religious people love their scriptures, which leads them to love their founders as scholarly teachers, such as Buddha, Confucius or Lao Tze.

Christians love Jesus Christ as their Lord and Saviour, while Muslims acknowledge the Prophet Isa (translated Jesus) as the one to whom God revealed the Injil (the gospels.)

The growth of secularism in Asia is creating a spiritual vacuum with both negative and positive consequences. We have seen both emerge in Iran. Negatively, about half of the population have become secular while still practising the formalities of their faith. One significant consequence is that the rate of women in Iran initiating divorce is thought to be higher than that of men. Positively, it is estimated that the number of secret believers could number up to a million.

## The Micah lifestyle

Most Christians seek the glory of Jesus Christ in their daily lives. They recognise that Jesus showed how to live, as did Moses, Abraham, David and the prophets. In this context we will look to the prophet Micah who lived in the seventh century before Christ, for guidelines on how to live our daily lives. Micah emphasised the importance of three ethical values—to act justly, to love mercy and to walk humbly with God (Micah 6:6–8). We will consider their relevance to contemporary living.

### 1. Act Justly

The word justice occurs more than a hundred times in the Old Testament, in the words *mispat* and *sedeq*. The words justice and righteousness are virtually interchangeable. Justice refers to the judgment of God who is holy and righteous and who acts in righteous ways. Abraham was justified through his God-given faith and not by his own faith. In the account of Jesus' birth when Joseph learned that Mary was pregnant, he did not, as a righteous man, want to expose her publicly. But then an angel appeared to him in a dream and explained the nature of her conception. When Herod decided to kill John the Baptist because of his accusations against him, he also feared John "knowing him to be a righteous and holy man" (Mark 6:20).

God's call to his people to act justly was not only because his holiness demanded it but because of his love for them as seen in his atoning death in which he provided the way for sins to be forgiven. In the Golden Rule, he also explained how to live justly.

God's justice is redemptive in how to live, as well as being retributive in terms of his judgment. He entered into a covenant relationship with believers so that in acting justly they would glorify God. God is just to those

who repent and seek his righteousness. To the poor and physically disabled Jesus offered healing and partnership in his kingdom. Justice and love were joined together throughout his ministry.

Micah knew that God required more than burnt offerings with their “rivers of oil.” The more we understand the brokenness of our modern world, the more we need to act justly to redeem and restore it.

The secular philosophy, beginning with the ancient Greeks in the west and with Buddha and Chinese religions in Asia, is to trust reason and self-will in order to live the good life (*eudaimonia*.) Buddha sought to overcome suffering and ignorance by appealing to his ethical teachings in the Eight-fold Path. Hindus trust in avatars, while others trust in the mystical powers of yoga and zen. For Muslims sufism is the way to the good life. Still others look to their national dictators to tell them how to live it, or they look to the principles of environmentalism.

The Christian way is to trust God’s grace and love in Jesus Christ and to seek the empowerment of the Holy Spirit in daily decision making. Ethics for the good life are grounded in Moses’ Ten Commandments and in Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount. Mahatma Gandhi, influenced by Christians in South Africa, proclaimed “God is love” but his Hindu roots led him to claim, rather, that “love is God.” For him, salvation was ethically determined, while for Christians ethics is the integration of God’s justice, love and mercy.

## 2. Love Mercy and Kindness

God is faithful to forgive sins and is merciful to all who are stressed and in despair. The word *mercy* has many applications in both the Old and New Testaments. In the OT *hesed* meant God’s loving kindness. God was faithful in affirming his covenant love with Israel which would never fail (Psalm 89:28) even when his people turned to the worship of Baal. Mercy carried the idea of grace and favour as well as compassion and kindness.

In the New Testament mercy is *charis*, God’s grace. It is God’s undeserved love which enables the believer to live a moral life. Jesus emphasized this in several of his parables, for example, the parable of the workers in the vineyard. In this story, those hired in the eleventh hour received the same reward as those who had worked the whole day (Matthew 20:1–16), illustrating that God’s grace was not dependent on human effort. Again, in the parable of the prodigal son the father forgave his erring son and welcomed him back into full sonship (Luke 15:11–32).

In his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said, “Blessed are the merciful for they shall be shown mercy” (Matthew 5:7). He called his followers to love their enemies and pray for those who persecuted them (Matthew 5:44).

Some who live a secular lifestyle ridicule Christians for their silence on social and environmental issues, a factor that has led to a steady decline in church membership in the secularized west.

### 3. *Walk Humbly With Your God*

The third condition of living life to the glory of God depends on the integration of the above two principles of acting justly and loving mercy. David Prior states that it is only by applying ourselves to the third (walking humbly with God) that we can begin to practise the first two. He then adds, “If we do not walk humbly with God, it is unlikely—if not impossible—that we shall walk humbly with other people. If we love kindness, mercy and compassion we shall act justly.”<sup>58</sup>

To walk humbly with our God is contrary to the spirit of the modern secular age where the worship of the self, and the boasting about one’s achievements, predominate. For secular people the Christian lifestyle is foolish and detracts from successful living. On the other hand, Jesus criticised the teachers of the law and the Pharisees for demanding prior obedience to the laws of tithing while they neglected justice, mercy and faithfulness (Matthew 23:23).

I am personally challenged by the wisdom of Jeremiah which is worth quoting in full:

This is what the Lord says: “Let not the wise man boast of his wisdom or the strong man boast of his strength, or the rich man boast of his riches, but let him who boasts boast about this: that he understands and knows Me, that I am the Lord, who exercises kindness, justice and righteousness on earth, for in these I delight,” declares the Lord (Jeremiah 9:23–24).

Dietrich Bonhoeffer who spoke out against Hitler’s Nazism was executed in 1945 during the last days of the war. In his book, *The Cost of Discipleship*, he insisted that one must humbly serve Christ without ulterior motives. To be proud of one’s work was no longer serving Jesus in humility. He argued that it was reasonable to hold every Christian, more than the unbeliever, to a higher standard of work.

Therefore to act justly, love mercy and walk humbly with God is to live life to the glory of God.

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<sup>58</sup> David Prior, *The Message of Joel, Micah and Habakkuk* (Leicester, UK, Inter-Varsity Press, 1998), pp. 177–178.



## Conclusion

In summary we may conclude:

1. As Christians we affirm the reign in heaven and on earth of the Lord Jesus Christ as our present and future response to global secularism. As prophet, Jesus brought the message of judgment and hope; as priest, he gave himself as a sacrifice for the sins of the world; and as king he brought peace and justice to all who trust in him as saviour and Lord. In our covenant relationship with Christ all too often we are so anxious to share our gospel with unbelievers that we do not listen to their concerns or criticisms of our doctrines or behaviour.

2. As Christians we are called to follow the example of our Lord in avoiding confrontation and debate with secular people and with those of other faiths. We are called to build relationships of respect and openness in *dialogue* with them. They, like us, are created in the image of God and have a yearning to relate to the transcendent One who has no name and who is the God of nature. They either fear death or deny the possibility of life beyond it.

3. As Christians we live by the teaching of the biblical Scriptures, the Old and New Testament, as God's final and authoritative Word in all matters of faith and conduct. We look to the Holy Spirit to rightly understand it. At the same time we also recognise and accept the biblical truths contained in the scriptures of other Asian faiths, where these are not contrary to biblical revelation. Among the many truths are the Asian understanding of the law of karma as cause and effect, the ethics of the Eightfold Path, and the Qur'anic recognition of Isa al-Masih who is fulfilled as Jesus in the Gospels.

4. As Christians we are called to localise our faith in the context of both the changing global secularism and the independent Asian faiths. This includes our belief in the resurrection, the necessity to confess our sins and sinfulness beyond our state of shame, the need to love God with all of our being and the need to love our neighbours, whether secular or religious, as ourselves. As individuals and as members of Christ's body, the Church, we are to walk humbly so that we can act justly and compassionately to all who are suffering from whatever cause. This calls for putting on the whole armour of God to overcome the forces of satanic evil.

5. As Christians we are called to share our common love of art which is expressed in many Asian forms. These include using puppets, mime, calligraphy, drama and dance as creative arts. Asian religions, as well as Chris-

tianity, are rich in poetry, proverbs, stories, music and song. The architectural designs of temples, public meeting places and churches are also ways to inspire relationships of mutual respect. What can surpass the beauty and spiritual purpose of the Taj Mahal in Agra, India, or the Sikh gurdwara, the golden temple, at Amritsar, India?

6. As Christians we are called to live with persecution as Christ did. After a final farewell to his disciples he took them to Gethsemane on the Mount of Olives and asked them to pray for him as he prepared to face the suffering of the Roman cross. In agony he prayed, "Abba Father, take this cup from me, but not as I will but as you will." When persecuted and threatened with death, it is common for Christians to pray in the same way. In this context Christ calls us to love and pray for our enemies, especially when our persecutors are members of our own family or community. We are dependent on the Holy Spirit to know how to respond to persecution, for example how and when to become baptised often becomes a difficult issue for new believers.

7. As Christians we are called to witness to the whole gospel of the Kingdom of God to all people, secular and religious. Our mission includes responding to human suffering with compassionate service, seeking to transform unjust societies and restoring God's creation.

8. As Christians we are called to constantly prepare for the day when Jesus will return to earth with power and in great glory to consummate his kingdom on earth. Scripture says that at that time every knee will bow before him. We are all called to prepare for that Day, whether or not it occurs in our lifetime. The steady increase in violence, suffering and death throughout the world today might suggest that his coming is nearer than we think. We are called to live our lives each day for his glory and to help others to do the same.

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*Finding God in a Secular World* shows how global secularism is changing in the west and now in Asia as people seek to find meaning for life for themselves or from their scriptures. It emphasises the need for Christians to respect and be open to those with no faith or traditional faiths. It urges Christians to acknowledge those truths in scripture which are pro-Christ. The book is a helpful guide to mission in modern life, to overcoming satanic evil and to the cost of discipleship. Those with a passion to make Christ known need to read it.

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**Rev Dr Bruce Nicholls**, the well-known contextual theologian and missiologist, has had a lifetime of teaching, first in India with his wife Kathleen at the Union Biblical Seminary, and then across Asia. He established TRACI, a research centre in New Delhi, and pastored a CNI church in Haryana state. He was one of the founders of ATA, founded the WEF Theological Commission, and edited its journal, *The Evangelical Review of Theology*, for 20 years. He is a graduate of the universities of Auckland and London and of Princeton Theological Seminary. He holds a DD from Ashland college and university, USA.

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