

FURTHER IMPLICATIONS OF GODISM

The Promise of Godism

In chapter 1 we explored the claim that by aligning *the religions*, peace and goodwill between them might be achieved. But we posed the question whether this ‘promise’ is in fact an empty one and whether politicians, in particular, who pursue this agenda as part of their societal ‘cohesiveness policies’ will create a religious chimera (a Greek mythological monster with a lion’s head, a goat’s body and a serpents tail – otherwise defined as a grotesque product of the imagination) that ultimately satisfies no one but still manages to draw people away from Almighty God. Throughout this book we have looked at the nature of God as revealed from the pages of the Holy Bible. It is in fact the Bible that most challenges the Godist position. Certainly some religions lend themselves very readily to the syncretistic thrust of Godism. Others may do so where it is seen as convenient.

This book has contained a number of challenges to the Godist position. We have looked at the nature of a good God Who is simultaneously holy, righteous, truthful, wise, and in love has opened the Way by which anyone can be saved from the penalty of sin, through Jesus Christ. It is this righteous God Who is revealed throughout the pages

of the Holy Bible. In chapters 3–4 we addressed some problems people have with parts of Scripture they find difficult to understand. The self-revelation of this one true God is clear and consistent in the Bible. The hard evidence for the resurrection of Jesus Christ is immensely powerful; His claims to divinity could only mean that He is truly God as well as truly man. His claim is that the Father has committed judgement to the Son, so He will judge all men who have ever lived on earth. All will bow the knee to Him. It has been rightly observed that anyone who has made such a claim is either God or mad or bad. The testimony of the saints is that He is alive, He is divine, and all His promises are true. All this means that orthodox, biblical Christianity cannot possibly be part of some multi-faith enterprise in which there are different ways of salvation. That would be completely incoherent at every level of understanding and experience.

To Godism, all this is an extremely troublesome problem that will not go away. The universality of Jesus' claims; their particularity; the historicity of the resurrection and its witnesses, who were willing to die rather than renounce the One who they had seen risen from the dead — every aspect of the Christian claims challenges the syncretist, at every turn. It may well be that a new religion will emerge from the ambitions of Godism, if not from the philosophy itself. We can readily imagine situations where warfare, economic dislocation, ecological disaster and uncontrollable disease might give birth to a widely-held (if erroneous) view that religion is part of the problem and that a harmonised religion must be part of the solution. But only by denying or even outlawing the Holy Bible and its message of the Cross of Christ, could such a religion be imagined. Time will tell if this scenario will emerge in our lifetimes, but the Bible

seems to point towards a day when a new global religion will emerge. This is seen by many Christians as part of the interpretation of the Old Testament books of Ezekiel and Daniel, and above all, of course, the book of Revelation. This will be the time of the *Lawless One*, otherwise called the *Antichrist*. There are many competent studies of this important subject, so we will comment no further except to observe how the *Lawless One* will deceive. Again we allow the words of the Bible to speak. Readers may want to read the short second letter of Paul to the Thessalonian church, or just focus on chapter 2 where we read this: **The coming of the lawless one is apparent in the workings of Satan, who uses all power, signs, lying wonders, and in every kind of wicked deception for those who are perishing, because they refused to love the truth and so be saved. For this reason God sends them a powerful delusion leading them to believe what is false, so that all who have not believed the truth but took pleasure in unrighteousness will be condemned.** (2 Thessalonians 2:9–12 NRSV).

Notice that there will be counterfeit miracles, or ‘lying wonders’ (NRSV). With the advance of technology we can anticipate how such ‘miracles’ might be staged. The new religion(s) will pander to evil, and perhaps not surprisingly this will be attractive to many. God will therefore give people over to a ‘powerful delusion’. If people want to believe in this new religion and its politico-religious leader, then God will allow this. It will be perhaps the ultimate, and final, consequence of that first rebellion in the Garden of Eden, where mankind first determined that he wanted to be like God. **“Did God really say to you?”** chided the devil (Genesis 3:1). Did God really say to you that there is only one Saviour and only one path to God? Did God really

say that, or are you being narrow-minded in believing that approach? Are you being intolerant? Readers might query whether a truthful God would ‘send’ a powerful delusion. Does God delude? The point is that God eventually allows us to have our full rein when we harden our hearts against Him. We should be amazed that God mercifully restrains our evil so much: that is His mercy and patience at work. But a day of wrath will come. We may believe whatever we want, but not without either (a) completely ignoring the Bible, the position adopted by all too many both within and outside the church; or (b) twisting what the Bible actually says — and this, it is submitted, is the position of that oxymoron ‘Christian Godism’. The Lord Jesus, needless to say, will not submit to such misrepresentation. Having been nailed to a cross once, He is not going to be put there again. He reigns in glory now, and one day He will put all His enemies under His feet. **God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins, having cancelled the written code, with its regulations, that was against us and that stood opposed to us; he took it away, nailing it to the cross. And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross** (Colossians 2:13–15).

Jesus has fulfilled the law, that *written code*, and nailed it to the cross. The *powers and authorities* that He has disarmed are spiritual powers that are further described by the apostle Paul in Ephesians 6:12, and indeed readers may want to reflect upon Ephesians 6:10–18 in this regard. Jesus has not submitted to the spiritual *powers* in the past. Nor will He do so in the future. Rather He has defeated them.

We learn of Christ’s supremacy over powers and principalities, as well as over His church in the same letter of Paul to the Colossian church: **He is the image of the**

invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy. For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross. Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior. But now he has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation — if you continue in your faith, established and firm, not moved from the hope held out in the gospel. This is the gospel that you heard and that has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven, and of which I, Paul, have become a servant (Colossians 1:15–23).

This is the gospel that has been proclaimed. As Christ is supreme it is incoherent to suggest His supremacy could be 'shared' with other religions. Those of *the religions* and/or Godists and/or Western politicians may consider such a sharing of power to be a 'natural' religious development in the interests of fairness or justice. Their belief, however (*if* they truly believe this!) begins to look like a powerful delusion — a self-delusion! Readers should note in v.23 above, there is an implicit warning specifically to Christians. It is the great 'if' word. We will be presented holy in the sight of God *if* we remain firm in the gospel. There must be

a danger that churchgoers who begin to adopt other faiths, or consider other faiths to be co-equal with Christianity, or simply consider *the religions* as alternative paths, will ultimately lose their salvation. This must be an especial danger where their dalliance with Godism is done in stiff-necked defiance of what the Holy Spirit has said on this issue.

Did Jesus ‘deserve’ to die?

This might sound slightly puzzling, especially when taken in context with all that we have explored so far in this book. The Godist philosophy, when expressed from within the church, clearly has some major biblical obstacles to overcome. ‘Christian Godists’ recognize this and have been forced therefore to develop their own ‘theology’ in order to circumvent what the Bible so clearly states. Jesus said **“I am the way, the truth and the life, no one goes to the Father except by me”** (John 14:6 GNB). Some have quibbled as to whether when Jesus said this He meant *God* the Father. Their argument runs along the lines: ‘Jesus only said He was the only way to the Father, not that He was the only way to God!’ This is inventive, but quite disingenuous. It is perfectly clear what Jesus meant. Another objection from the Godist philosophy is this: because God allowed sin into the world, then He is either fully to blame for its effects, or is at least a co-defendant alongside mankind. Using an ostensibly ‘logical’ extension to this argument, the Godist concludes: *God is ultimately responsible for His creation and therefore, as He allowed sin to enter the world, so He must provide the remedy: so it was that Jesus (as God) ‘deserved’ to die on the cross.* We have been happy to use logic elsewhere in this book in deconstructing the Godist philosophy. But we must also note that logic has its limitations, and this may be just

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such an occasion! Indeed we could go further and observe that this Godist argument represents faulty logic. God has given mankind freewill and there can be little doubt that most humans prefer it that way! Precisely why God allowed sin to enter the world is not given a definitive answer in Scripture.¹ Rather than speculate, most orthodox Christians trust that God knows what He is doing. The key point is that God has gone to extraordinary lengths to rescue humans from the power, the grip, the guilt and the consequences of sin. The ultimate cost to God was the life of His dear Son, who became sin for our benefit. But God did not undertake this rescue mission because He was guilty. He undertook it because He is merciful. We are the guilty ones; we humans are the sinners, and we choose to be that way. God did not 'have' to provide any remedy at all. He could have left us wallowing in the mire of sin. But He has chosen to rescue us. From an orthodox Christian viewpoint it must be added that where the view that *Jesus is guilty* is expounded from within the church or outside it, it is simply blasphemous. It accuses the holy and good God of being like us – a sinner. This is a gross lie.

As the sinless one, Jesus certainly 'deserved' no punishment. But can God be so indicted in the court of public opinion? God allowed freewill and therefore, having foreseen the consequence (sin), was it at the very least a failure not to have prevented it? We must again remind ourselves just how much we would 'rail' against all the strictures that any lack of freewill would place upon us. We would not be able to talk as we wanted. We would not be able to think or act as we wanted. We would be religious-robots in thrall to a God who controlled our minds as well as our

¹ See Peter Sammons *The Birth of Christ* (ISBN 0-9551790-1-7, Glory to Glory Publications 2006) chapters 1 and 2 for more background on this subject.

bodies. God could certainly not develop a real *relationship* with us, and certainly not a love relationship, if we were merely spiritual automata. When people rail against God for ‘allowing’ man-made disasters and crimes, they never stop to think what their demand for God’s daily intervention would entail in terms of loss of human choice. And of course one day God *will* create a new heaven and a new earth in such a way that natural disasters, war, pestilence, hunger and poverty will no longer exist.² That will happen after Christ has returned as Judge.³ If people want that sort of a world to be delivered say, tomorrow, then they would have to meet Jesus as Judge tonight. Are they ready? Of course they are not! It is by God’s mercy that He continues to give us time to change — but one day that time will run out.

A second and rather more common charge levelled against God runs something like this: *It would be unfair of God to ‘damn’ people of the religions, who had not had the opportunity to hear the saving good news of Jesus.* This is closely aligned to the idea that God has a ‘duty’ to ‘save’ all people. This is a genuine concern, so we should tackle it head-on. Some have said that there is no ‘obvious’ correct path, and so people generally remain wedded to the religion (or lack of religion) into which they were born. As a sociological observation, we can agree that many people remain with the religion of their forefathers, although it should be noted that today large numbers are turning to Christ from *the religions*. From a biblical perspective it is simply wrong to say that there is no obvious path. There *is* an obvious path. That path is Jesus, Who said: **“Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the**

² See Revelation chapter 21.

³ See Revelation chapter 20.

road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it” (Matthew 7:13-14). Elsewhere Jesus affirmed **“I am the way”** (John 14:6). So there *is* an obvious way, and there is an exclusive way. But just how ‘obvious’ is that Way, if people have never even heard the name of Jesus? Surely people cannot be held accountable if they not even heard that wonderful name?⁴

We begin to answer this objection by recalling the ideas of a well known liberal Christian, Lesslie Newbigin (1909 – 1998). He commented in his book *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*⁵ that it had become customary to classify views on the relation of Christianity to the world religions as either pluralist, exclusivist or inclusivist. His position was *exclusivist* in the sense that it affirmed the unique truth of the revelation in Jesus Christ, but was not exclusivist in the sense of denying the possibility of the salvation of the non-Christian. It was *inclusivist* in the sense that it refused to limit the saving grace of God to the members of the Christian church, but it rejected the inclusivism which regarded the non-Christian religions as vehicles of salvation. It was *pluralist* in the sense of acknowledging the gracious work of God in the lives of all human beings, but rejected pluralism that denied the uniqueness and decisiveness of what God has done in Jesus Christ. Many church-attending Christians, evangelicals as well as liberals, concur. His analysis may have been deficient or incomplete, but it did affirm the reality of salvation only through Jesus, which is,

⁴ The name of Jesus (Yeshua/Joshua) is significant, meaning broadly ‘God is my help’ or ‘God is rescue’. See Peter Sammons, *The Birth of Christ* (Glory to Glory Publications – ISBN 0-9551790-1-7) chapter 6 for more on this subject.

⁵ Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, pages 182-83 (ISBN: 9780281057023).

it must be said, a cornerstone of true biblical Christianity. On that basis the Newbigin analysis continues to have a following. However it is our view that it is just too close to the Godist position.

We have taken some pains in this book to uncover and understand the self-revelation of Almighty God, so far as we can do so in our mortal and necessarily limited way. We have learned, it is hoped, that God *is* good and holy. In chapter 12 we challenged whether our question can ever be reduced to a simple, formulaic ‘does Jesus condemn religionists and those of no religion’? We began to see that the real question is about law and grace, and how people choose to live in this world. And we saw that men will still have no excuse before the judgement seat of God: they will need to have at that point the righteousness that comes from God, to be ‘in Christ’ —to rely on their own ‘righteousness’ would be insufficient for their sins to be covered.

The God revealed in the Bible (and speaking for himself, the God known to the author of this book) is a God of utmost love, utmost holiness, and utmost righteousness. He alone is God. He may judge as He sees fit. Countless millions – probably billions – of people down through the ages as well as today, who have real and intimate experience of this God have found that they can trust Him and love Him completely. The God who loved me enough to give His Son for me has surely revealed beyond doubt His mercy. We can trust God absolutely to do the right thing as regards ‘judgement’: He will be perfectly just and fair for He is perfectly holy and perfectly just and He *will* do the right thing. It may be quite impossible for humans to know what the right thing is in regard to this question of judgement, but we get many clues to God’s character throughout the Scriptures. It is not for us to tell Him what He should do.

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Many people hold the view that ‘good’ people will be saved by God. And so they will (John 5:29). The word ‘good’, however, is grossly over used. The world’s understanding of what is good and bad is utterly different to God’s overruling on this matter. It is deeply sobering to note that the *very best* things that we do look like filthy rags to God (Isaiah 64:6). We simply have no idea how serious sin is, nor the vast gulf that truly separates us from God — a gulf that is caused solely by sin. When this truth was given to the prophet Isaiah, the image that we are to keep in mind is one of rags covered in faeces – in other words, what people wiped their bottoms with! And that is the very best that we can do! To start to speak of ‘good’ in almost any context only shows how little humans comprehend of what good is. Men bluntly delude themselves that their conduct is ultimately acceptable and justifiable before God, but God’s standards are immeasurably higher (see Proverbs 16:2). He alone can weigh true motives, and that fact should be both a comfort and a warning to us. Who is good? We remind ourselves that Jesus answered the question of the rich young ruler (Matthew 19:17). There is only one who is good, and that is God Himself, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Whatever we think of as good from our worldly perspective — well, we’re back to those filthy rags! So if anyone *is* good, then God will certainly ‘save’ them. The trouble is, absolutely no one but Jesus is good! Not in the biblical sense, at any rate.⁶

This takes us back then to the only known remedy for

⁶ This idea of what is truly ‘good’ helps to put in perspective that otherwise puzzling comment by the apostle Paul in Romans 5:7. He comments that ‘very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die’. It is true that Christians will sometimes be called upon to lay down their lives for the one Man Who was truly good — the Lord Jesus Himself.

sin — the blood of our Lord Jesus. We all fall short — big sinners and ‘little’ sinners alike — but God does not turn His back on us. We can think of the example of King David — murder and adultery followed by forgiveness and restoration — to demonstrate this reality. Would the Father have sacrificed Jesus if there was *any* other way? Human love and God’s love again are poles apart. As with the word ‘good’, so we over-use and misuse the word ‘love’. All too many people think of God as being a sort of elderly *uncle in the sky* who looks down over our sin and winks as He says ‘tut, tut; but that’s all right. I will see you saved in the end, in spite of yourself.’ That is not the God revealed in Scripture. More important still, that is not a ‘god’ who would have any claim to be considered moral. Sin *is* serious and *must* be dealt with, and it will certainly be dealt with at the final judgement! The seriousness of sin is indicated in the remedy God chose for it — the life of His dear Son. But God’s love is awesome — and a million miles from ours! We read about God’s true love for His children in 1 John 4:7–21. But we should not go away with the idea that God’s love is some cheap love, or can be demonstrated in *any number of guises* (the Godist position?) His love, known by those He has redeemed, is indivisible:

Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God

lives in us and his love is made complete in us.

We know that we live in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit. And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son to be the Savior of the world. If anyone acknowledges that Jesus is the Son of God, God lives in him and he in God. And so we know and rely on the love God has for us. God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in him. In this way, love is made complete among us so that we will have confidence on the day of judgment, because in this world we are like him. There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love.

We love because he first loved us. If anyone says, “I love God,” yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen. And he has given us this command: Whoever loves God must also love his brother. (1 John 4:7–21)

How do we truly know and have assurance that God loves us? **“This is love — not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins.”** (1 John 4:10, NRSV). Wonderful! Marvellous! Our hearts should overflow with joy and love and gratitude! How unloving it would be to send religious ‘gurus’, ‘teachers’ or ‘prophets’ who could not achieve what Jesus achieved, who could add nothing to what Jesus has already done for us on the cross of execution, and whose sole contribution seems to be to confuse and to take people away from their Saviour. This is simply incompatible with love.

In point of fact nowhere in the Bible does it say that God loves the sinner but hates the sin. His love is shown to those who repent and follow His Son. If readers can find

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God's love expressed in a different way anywhere in the Holy Bible, then they may feel that this point is *not proven*. God's love is dangerously misunderstood — sometimes by the 'church' and very often by the world at large. The verses so often used as the 'love' demonstration, John 3:16 – is too often misrepresented. The point has well been made that the gospel is NOT John 3:16, which people have in the past 50 years (in particular) used as a sort of shorthand to underline God's purposes. Rather, a good shorthand of God's purposes would be John 3:15! The wonderful words on love in 1 John 4 are addressed to believers rather than the world at large – we who are to love one another (John 15:12) are the followers of Jesus. The Lord commended this sort of love as He told His followers to love one another, so that the world would know Whose disciples they are.⁷ We do well to note the point: the context of love when mentioned in the Bible is almost always within the Christian family (and in the Old Testament in the context of the chosen people God had rescued, the Hebrews). God's love is displayed to the whole world in John 3:16, but what that love means is specific and singular: the giving of His Son in order that those who go on believing in Him will not perish (be ruined for ever) but have eternal life; that they would be saved from hell (that their sins would otherwise lead to at the day of judgement). This kind of agape love is not about feelings but about God's unique and merciful provision for our greatest need. It is not unconditional, it is conditional. The world broadly rejects that love. The Bible also makes clear that the pull of sin ensnares many.

To accept any faith other than Christianity or alongside Christianity is to say that the cross was really unnecessary.

⁷ For clarity, we are not solely to love our brethren. We are also to love our neighbours as ourselves – Mark 12:31.

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It is to say that, in fact, we can ‘earn’ some or all of our salvation. To accept a faith other than true Christianity or alongside true Christianity is to imply a measure of self justification — something that is frankly intolerable to God as it shows yet again the ugly human face of pride raising itself towards God. The very best things we do even as Christians are morally paltry — we are back to those filthy rags! A true Christian recognises his position as a sinner, saved by grace through faith (from the penalty of sin) *and being saved* (from the power of sin), and one who ‘naturally’ is a creature of wrath who deserves nothing, absolutely nothing, except God’s judgement. A creature who can only plead the blood of Jesus in his defence. All other religions involve earning some, or all, of their ‘salvation’, however they define that concept. Christianity asserts that the price of our salvation has already been paid — by someone else!

If God has changed his mind and allowed people to earn some or all of their salvation, then the cross has been devalued, if not made irrelevant. Thinking again upon the fully developed Godist argument that because God gave us freewill He is said to be ‘responsible for everything including sin, suffering and evil’ we must observe that, where this ‘theology’ is propounded from within the Church, it is manifestly a heresy. Where it is propounded in the world at large, it perhaps reflects that overriding desire to make God a co-defendant alongside man, thus relieving us of our sole responsibility for sin. We are back to that idea that God will ‘wink’ at all our wrong-doing, except perhaps for those ‘very serious sins’ such as murder and rape, where God may actually trouble Himself to judge. People who hold this idea of serious versus minor sins forget the impossibly high standards that the Lord Jesus has already set out. For example, that a man who even looks upon a woman lustfully

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has committed adultery with her in his heart — the moral equivalent of committing that sin in the flesh (Matthew 5:28). And similarly that anyone who is so much as angry with his brother guilty of murder! (Matthew 5:22).⁸ All sin is serious. It must remain profoundly sad that any person, whether of Godist or any other religious persuasion, should truly believe in this idea of a good/evil God who is fully, or even partly, culpable for the sins of the world. It is sad because it is so terribly wrong, and leads those who hold the idea into a whole morass of moral relativism. If God is to blame then He cannot be sinless. If He is not sinless our sins are not atoned for. If He is sinful then the Bible is a pack of lies from beginning to end. In trying to indict God, Godists only raise more questions than they answer.

We return to our question: *It would be unfair of God to 'damn' people of the religions, who had not had the opportunity to hear the saving good news of Jesus.* It is not of course for Christians or any human being to 'judge' in these matters, but God does graciously allow Christians to explore them, even so. What follows here is the author's understanding, but has the virtue of being consistent with what Scripture has revealed at all points. The 'problem' posited by Godists has two facets: (1) *what happens to the souls of those who died before the time of Christ?* – or, more accurately, before the era of grace – and (2) *what happens to those who die, never having heard?* The author keeps an open mind on (1) although he believes that there

⁸ Many readers will be familiar with and understand these two teachings of Jesus. For anyone to whom they are new, we would add this clarification: when Jesus spoke of 'looking lustfully' or 'being angry' He surely meant in both cases an absolute determination on the part of the sinner to pursue the sin in his or her mind: it is unlikely that Jesus was referring for example to a momentary physical attraction. But we should also warn that all too often small beginnings can lead to ugly conclusions, so we must be wary — of ourselves!

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are biblically sound arguments on the subject. The answer to (1) is probably broadly the same as the answer to (2) in this author's opinion.

A young missionary once had a disarmingly simple answer to this question, which he shared with the author and which we do well to keep in mind: as God is omniscient He may simply judge people on how they *would* have responded *had* they heard the gospel and had a genuine opportunity to become a disciple of the Lord Jesus. God knows, we do not. As an answer the author finds this completely satisfactory. But without in any way undermining it, more can be said. Firstly, God is a God of utmost justice. He will simply not do what is wrong. Of course our ideas of right and wrong are (once again) far, far from His verdict on this subject. It seems therefore to be entirely congruent with the reality of a holy, righteous, morally perfect and loving God that all little children, before the age of maturity and who die in their innocence will be saved by God. The Bible does not explicitly say this, and if it did, weak minded people would no doubt develop all sorts of philosophies around it. But the author suspects that this is so, and it should be a comfort to those who have sadly lost a child in infancy.⁹

The Bible gives no explicit answer to the question of the eternal destiny of those of *the religions* down through history. That there are some 'nice' people of all religions – as well as among atheists and so-called agnostics is a fact we readily recognise. But we do not know how deep their niceness goes. And it certainly cannot go far enough to earn their salvation — *for all alike have sinned...* (Romans 3:23). The author can only observe that, as a Christian, he is more than happy to trust the Lord Jesus to do the right thing as

⁹ See also Mark 10:13–16 and Matthew 18:1–11 to get a sense of God's heart in this matter.

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He deals with those of *the religions* and, indeed, those of no religion. We do however have strong clues about God's attitude, clues that are congruent with the reality of a good God (and now we use the word good in its truest sense, a sense far, far removed from the world's idea of 'good') Who has demonstrated His goodness by His provision of the beauty of the created order, as well as in the person of Jesus Christ, His Son. There is a partial answer to question (1) relating to those people who died before the gospel was preached: it seems clear that between the crucifixion and the resurrection, the lord Jesus preached to the souls of the dead (1 Peter 3:19). Just as in this world, so in the 'prison' where Jesus preached, we may be sure that not all accepted His offer of salvation. Their acceptance or rejection would surely have been in broad agreement with the manner in which those souls had already lived their lives.

Let us turn to consider question (2), relating to those who never hear the good news or who are beguiled by *the religions* in such a way that they cannot or will not hear about Jesus. There are two obvious (and biblically consistent) possibilities, and in fact both may be true. It is simply not for humans to know, and nor is it for politicians or churchmen to preach multifaith religion in the assumption that they do know! But it *is* for us to trust a completely holy, righteous, omnipotent and loving God. God may, in His omnipotence and omniscience, judge people on how they *would* have responded *had* they heard the gospel; because only He knows. We repeat, it is possible that the answer to question (1) applies also to question (2). It is *not* for us to know. But those who put their faith in *the religions* are already on their way to living their lives in the stiff-necked pride (and pride precedes a fall as Proverbs 16:18 reminds us!) of attempting to earn their 'salvation'. The good news

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is that many, even under the yoke of *the religions*, are still deeply aware of their own abject sinfulness. Some break free by turning to Christ. Most become confirmed in their religion, which always in practice seems to have an outworking of hatred towards Jesus. We repeat what has been said elsewhere in this book: this world is not anti God – this world is anti Christ; an observation that hits the nail squarely on the head. What can be said beyond doubt is that the God revealed in the Bible is absolutely just, and we can therefore rely on Him not to treat anyone unfairly.

Everything we have shared up to this point does not really touch upon theology at the deepest level. From a normative Christian perspective it can be said that *the religions* do not offer salvation, in the sense of enabling their adherents to meet the exacting laws set out in the Pentateuch/Torah of the Holy Bible. *The religions* cannot offer salvation, and God has not offered a *package deal on salvation*, in the same way that you might switch your airline ticket if your carrier cannot take you on a particular day. To assume that all religions can ‘do the trick’ is simply a vain fantasy, far removed from what any of them actually say. Some Godists (as well as people of no faith, and indeed some of *the religions*) may complain that the God of the Holy Bible is a narrow god, whereas their understanding of ‘deity’ is much broader and more inclusive than that traditionally linked to Christianity. This is not as profound as may at first appear. Their ‘understanding’ of deity is precisely that — it is *their* understanding and *their* ‘god’. It is a ‘god’ of their own imagining, but not the God revealed in Scripture. This ‘god’ is a sort of googled-god, cut and pasted from bits and pieces of *the religions* and of Christianity; bits and pieces that are only half-understood and that are considered by the Godist to back-up their views. As we have already begun

to see, this cut-and-paste approach to religion poses rather more questions than it answers!

Theology

Readers will no doubt want to refer across the New Testament in which so much that is prophesied in the Old actually happens. All the New Testament aligns in this – that the Lord Jesus is, as He said, the way the truth and the life (John 14:6). He said this plainly although some today try to ‘spiritualise’ His simple statement so as to make it mean different things. As always we should look within the context of any Bible verse to ensure we are not simply taking it out of its context. We should always bear in mind ‘a verse taken out of context is a pretext!’ When Jesus said He was the way, He was comforting His disciples at the last supper. He knew He was about to die and His disciples were perplexed, unable at that point to grasp the reality of what was about to happen. Jesus told them, as He tells us, not to let our hearts be troubled, but to trust in God. Jesus will go ahead of us to that heavenly house where there are many rooms, and He will prepare a place for his disciples. Perplexed about where Jesus was going, His disciples asked Him where He was going and what was the way there – to which Jesus gave that timeless response that *He* is the way. At the profoundest level Jesus and all that He taught is the way. We think back over His three years of ministry, at His parables, His teachings, His miraculous interventions for good, and we begin to see what that way is. John 3:14 tells us that the son of man must be lifted up (literally onto a cross) so that (see v. 15) everyone who believes in Him may have eternal life. Believing Him inevitably means becoming His disciple and treading His pathway. Remember that the devil

believes in Jesus but this does not make him a Christian!

Jesus is the way, the truth and the life. At the end of the day you accept it or reject it — but you cannot modify it. We consult once again Paul’s amazing and wonderful letter to the Roman church for some deeper theology on this: Look in Romans 2:12–16, but especially vv. 14–15.

All who sin apart from the law will also perish apart from the law, and all who sin under the law will be judged by the law. For it is not the hearers the law who are righteous in God’s sight, but the doers of the law who will be justified. When Gentiles, who do not possess the law, do instinctively what the law requires, these, though not having the law, are a law to themselves. They show that what the law requires is written on their hearts, to which their own conscience also bears witness; and their conflicting thoughts will accuse or perhaps excuse them on the day when, according to my gospel, God, through Jesus Christ, will judge the secret thoughts of all. (Romans 2:12-16, NRSV)

God’s law is written onto people’s hearts. They know when they sin, and all too often their consciences are calloused on such a way that they no longer care, no matter what is revealed to them about God. But when they do by nature the things required by the law, they have become a law for themselves and they prove at the deepest level that God exists, because His law is ‘hard-wired’ into their consciences. Humans must live in the perfect law as revealed by Jesus,¹⁰ but they fall short and are found wanting. If they choose to live under grace, enjoying mercy and divine forgiveness for sin, then they must faithfully believe and follow Jesus, quite simply, as His disciples — not following

¹⁰ And, it might be added, perfectly fulfilled by Jesus.

or owing partial allegiance to other religions. No-one who sins (Jew or Gentile) has any excuse (Romans 1:19–20). This is truly deep theology! In Romans 4:15, Paul reminds us that **where there is no law, there is no transgression** [sin]. Very true. If there was no law, men would have an excuse, but we reiterate there is *no* excuse, whether people are of *the religions* or not. All alike have sinned, and all alike must ultimately be judged. And unless they have accepted the gift of God in Christ they will have no defence.

A Googled God?

We have probably explored sufficiently for the present purpose what Holy Scripture reveals about law and grace. We have seen that all mankind will be judged by Christ, all have sinned, falling short of God's standards, and we all need Christ, who alone can save us. We have observed that God is, by definition, just and merciful, and that we can therefore confidently leave aside questions about the salvation of infants and how God will meet the 'problem' (to us) of those who have never even hear of the name of Jesus. God is holy and He *will* do the right thing. Old and New Testaments lead to the same conclusions. What we cannot do is to point to *the religions* as God's 'also rans', alongside His gift of grace in Jesus Christ. They oppose and contradict each other, both in their general thrust and their detailed claims. If God made them to lead us in different directions then, it is submitted, He could not be good. Such a 'god' would be two-faced; or would not know 'his' or 'its' own mind; or would be evil. The Godist notion that a deity would reveal Himself in many different, inconsistent, self-contradictory ways is obviously completely untenable. But it is precisely this sort of a 'god' that the Godists invite us to trust! If people want to believe in such a 'god' then

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ultimately that must be their choice in this world of freewill that God has so graciously given to us, but they should be under no illusion that this is not the God of the Holy Bible. It is another 'god', a different 'god'. The God revealed in Scripture however is completely holy, completely righteous and when He saves us we can experience His love for ourselves. God is light. In Him there is no darkness at all. (See 1 John 1:5).

At the very end of the Bible (Revelation 22:18), God has given a powerful warning against addition to and subtraction from scripture. This makes it clear that any Godist claim made on behalf of the writings of other religions is wholly incompatible with the Holy Bible. The one true God, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ (Himself true God and true man), the Holy Trinity of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, is perfectly consistent. His self-revelation is clear, complete and sufficient for salvation. Man is not to add to or take away from what He has revealed. His glory will never be shared by any other 'god'. The God revealed in the Bible and in the person of Jesus Christ is true to His own Word. He has given us a narrow road that leads to life and He has warned us about a broad road that leads to destruction. We remind ourselves once again what Jesus said: **Enter through the narrow gate: for the gate is wide and the road is easy that leads to destruction, and there are many who take it. For the gate is narrow and the road is hard that leads to life, and there are few who find it.** (Matthew 7:13–14 NRSV).

The multi-faith agenda seems to proffer a broad path and is now promoted by the state as well as institutions such as the United Nations. Much more could be said about this desire to create a 'god' in a comfortable, worldly, image, but

readers are encouraged to search the Holy Bible on their own to establish in their minds the truth in this matter. As they do so, they should ask the Holy Spirit of God to guide them. He will delight to do so (see John 16:13). In that exploration, along with any other issues they want to search out, the reader may wish to ask: Is God consistent? What is His attitude to sin? How has He remedied the eternal problem of sin? Some helpful pointers can be offered here:

For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe. (1 Corinthians 1:21) We are reminded that those used to speculation and philosophy find the particularity and historicity of the gospel a difficulty they will need to overcome. God has revealed Himself in the person of Jesus, not in mere worldly theories and abstract constructs.

How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are! The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him. (1 John 3:1) This, addressed to Christian believers, helps us to see something of what it means to be an adopted child of God when we have repented and are believing. Unbelievers cannot see this. As we explored in chapter 9, it is God's good purpose to extend His family and His invitation is given to all people, everywhere who will respond in repentance and faith. To ignore such an invitation is not only tragic, it is also foolish. To present all religions as co-equal, or even as God's *also-rans* is to suggest, falsely, that there are different ways in which we might be forgiven and saved. When this view of the co-equality of religions is expounded from within the church, we are reminded of the words of Jesus in His letters to the churches (in the book of Revelation). His indictment

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of those who were teaching falsehood is devastating, and it is inconceivable that His words to churches teaching a false message would be any different today!

Of those within the churches today who hold the Godist position, we can say that that their beliefs are heretical. It must be observed that their heterodox views will be held with different levels of conviction depending on the individual concerned. This is not to suggest that Christians get everything right all the time. In secondary matters of biblical interpretation in many areas, there are differences in exegesis which need not lead to break in fellowship. But this is no secondary, minor matter we are concerned with. Godism is aimed at the very heart of the gospel. If Godism were true, there would be no gospel at all; no possibility of the forgiveness of sins; there would have been no need for the cross, the saving death of Jesus; all that suffering for us would have been utterly pointless; Christianity would be offering no hope whatsoever to anyone; the claims of Jesus to divinity would have been manifestly untrue. The matter is as serious as that.

It is the view of many in this world that all religions lead to God in their distinctive ways. Once Godists have considered, as this book has sought to encourage, the full implications of their superficially comfortable belief, they ought to be shocked, and ought to realign their views to be consistent with the great gospel that Christ has given. Some Godists simply will not do so, and will continue to lead astray others who allow themselves to be beguiled into accepting a relativism which is utterly destructive.

We are reminded of an incident in Acts, where a man called Simon sought to buy his way into the leadership of the church. The apostle Peter was blunt with him: **“You have no part or share in this ministry, because your**

heart is not right before God” (Acts 8:21). It would be so tragic if church-based Godists become so hardened in their attitude that in reality they lose any share in God’s work. The danger is real, and the call of the gospel should be neither overlooked nor diluted by people who claim to be Christians. Jesus’ warning below is salutary for all who aim to teach, lead or prophesy to His people, and it has great relevance for His flock too, who need to be vigilant against false teaching and faithful in their own witness to the true gospel:

“Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves. By their fruit you will recognize them. Do people pick grapes from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? Likewise every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus, by their fruit you will recognize them.

“Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. Many will say to me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?’ Then I will tell them plainly, ‘I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!’” (Matthew 7:15–23)

The author considers to be perhaps the most chilling words in the entire Bible the final verse in that quotation. There are people who claim to know Jesus but who are in fact unknown to Him — unknown in the sense that they have no part with Him notwithstanding their public religiosity. Earlier in this book it was suggested we would eventually

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look at clues as to where a person truly stands before Christ, and with particular reference to those who are in church contexts but ‘preach’ a gospel other than Christ. There is nothing really difficult about this: if people claim to be Christians but bear bad fruit, then in all probability they are not true disciples of Christ. This is not to say that Christians will be sinless — sadly we will continue to sin from time to time even after ‘receiving’ Christ into our lives (John 1:12), but these sins are not the *bad fruit* that Jesus seems to have had in mind. What the Lord was referring to was persistent and determined behaviour that runs counter to His clear teaching and to the revelation of Holy Scripture. Where someone claims to follow Christ but opposes Him, despite warnings and despite God’s ever gracious opportunity to repent, then it is not unreasonable to conclude that they are false in their faith profession. It would be wrong to be definitive about the eternal standing of all Godists when found in a church context. Only God really knows. Yet in the light of the clear teaching of Scripture and what we know of the nature of God, which nature we began to explore earlier in this book, it would be wrong not to remind them of the purity of the gospel, and to remind them with pleading that God is jealous of His reputation; He will not share His glory with other ‘gods’ or with other ‘gospels’.

Some Godists in church contexts, and indeed some outside the church context, may react to the foregoing in this way: what really matters is not the finer points of what you believe, it is how you live your life that counts. This argument is closely associated with that *golden rule* that is said to run through all religions, of ‘doing to others as you would want them to do to you’, and of demonstrating compassion. Some Godists would say, perhaps with a shrug, that strict belief in Jesus may or may not be important, but

God will ultimately recognize them for their works. They argue in fact that: **You have faith, I have works** (James 2:18). This seems to have been the attitude that Jesus warned against in Matthew chapter 7. There will always be false religiosity. Tragically there will be people who in a stiff-necked way continue to try to ‘offset’ their sins against their so-called ‘good works’. But Jesus will not be fooled: see again Matthew 7:21-23. This is all so tragic. We hear the echo of that classic Godist position, whether expressed from within or outside of the church: ‘My God is completely merciful. My God is completely loving. All people (or nearly all!) will be saved by my God. Your God is unmerciful!’ Throughout this book we have attempted to understand something of God as He has revealed Himself. The world’s attitude that there are multiple paths to God is neatly summarized in our mind map in Appendix 1. This attitude is dismissive of God. God is revealed by the Bible as being holy, righteous, merciful, loving and compassionate, and all these qualities are best expressed in the ministry and achievements of Jesus, the Son of God, about Whom we read:

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For by Him all things were created that are in heaven and that are on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or powers. All things were created through Him and for Him. And He is before all things, and in Him all things consist. And He is the head of the body, the church, who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in all things He may have the preeminence.

For it pleased the Father that in Him all the fullness should dwell, and by Him to reconcile all things to Himself, by Him, whether things on earth or things in

heaven, having made peace through the blood of His cross. (Colossians 1:15–20, NKJV).

It is in Jesus that we find the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours, but also for the sins of the world at large (1 John 2:2). We might also ask, as we consider the extraordinary claims that the Bible makes of Jesus: Who else has added a NEW commandment? (John 13:34). Who else has authority to forgive sins? (Matthew 9:6 and Mark 2:7).¹¹ Who else is heir of all things? (Hebrews 1:2). Who else is the Word made flesh? (John 1:14). Who else is in very nature God? (Philippians 2:6–11).

With Godists operating in churches there may have to be a *parting of the ways*, especially where such heterodox views are expressed by those who exercise positions of leadership (Titus 3:10).¹² With sorrow and prayer we must warn ‘Christian Godists’ that there must arrive a point at which their beliefs cease to be Christian. In pursuing these beliefs in stiff-necked defiance of what the Bible teaches, both in its overall thrust (the need to remain pure from *the religions*), and in the specific teaching of the Lord Jesus that He only is the way, He only is the truth and He only is the life, such people run the very real risk of losing their relationship with Him. Trusting in their religiosity, and possibly in their *extreme* religiosity to the extent that they put trust in religions alongside Christ, and trusting in what they see as the evidence of their works, we can only repeat that such people run all too great a risk that one day

¹¹ Jesus graciously delegates His authority to forgive sins to His disciples. See John 10:21–23. This is a great responsibility for Christians.

¹² False teachers style themselves as Christian pastors, teachers, and evangelists (cf. Jude 4) who *secretly bring in destructive heresies*. Their self-designed religious teachings lead to division and faction (cf. 1 Cor 11:19, Gal 5:20) and ultimately spiritual weakness in churches that make a virtue out of tolerating unscriptural teachings and ideas in the name of love and unity.

they will find themselves excluded. There are, said Jesus, some who will be amazed at their exclusion. Jesus used the symbol of a wedding to illustrate His relationship to His church. We think again of the five foolish virgins who were unable to wait faithfully for their bridegroom to return. Jesus uses the same symbol in Matthew 22:1–12, the parable of the wedding banquet of the King. The chosen people had rejected their Messiah (22:5), and sadly did not deserve to attend the feast (22:8). So the King calls for others to be invited to His wedding feast, and in this we see the covenant of salvation being extended to all nations, not just to the Jewish nation. But some people manage to slip into the feast uninvited: **But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing wedding clothes. ‘Friend,’ he asked, ‘how did you get in here without wedding clothes?’ The man was speechless. Then the king told the attendants, ‘Tie him hand and foot, and throw him outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth’** (Matthew 22:11–13). The uninvited guest, who presumably thought he should attend the wedding feast on his merit, was speechless. There must be a similar danger for Godists within the church, that they have so determinedly set their faith in religions and the ‘good works’ of *the religions*, that they cannot understand that the bridegroom has ceased to recognize them.