

ALSO BY PETER VAN INWAGEN

An Essay on Free Will

Material Beings

Metaphysics

Alvin Plantinga (co-editor)

Time and Cause: Essays Presented to Richard Taylor (editor)

GOD KNOWLEDGE & MYSTERY

*Essays
in Philosophical Theology*

PETER VAN INWAGEN



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TO ALVIN PLANTINGA

A city that is set on a hill cannot be hid.
Neither do men light a candle, and put it under a bushel,
but on a candlestick;
and it giveth light unto all that are in the house.

—MATTHEW 5:14, 15

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go to the philosophers to find anything out—other than what it is that the philosophers say. If a philosopher tells you that you must, on methodological grounds, since he is the expert, take his word for something—that there is free will, say, or that morality is only convention—you should tell him that philosophy has not earned the right to make such demands. Philosophy is, I think, valuable. It is a good thing for the study of philosophy to be pursued, both by experts and by amateurs. But from the premise that it is a good thing for a certain field of study to be pursued by experts, the conclusion does not follow that that field of study comprises experts who can tell you things you need to attend to before you can practice a religion or join a political party or become a conscientious objector. And from the premise that it is a good thing for a certain field of study to be pursued by amateurs, the conclusion does not follow that anyone is under an obligation to *become* an amateur in that field.

This is very close to some of the depreciatory statements I have made about the authority of Critical Studies. Since I regard philosophy as a Good Thing, it should be clear that I do not suppose that my arguments lend any support to the conclusion that the critical study of the New Testament is not a Good Thing. Whether it is, I have no idea. I don't know enough about it to know whether it is. I have argued only that the very little I do know about Critical Studies is sufficient to establish that users of the New Testament need not—but I have said nothing against their doing so—attend very carefully to it.²⁰

20. I am grateful to Ronald Feenstra for his generous and careful comments on this essay, which were included in the volume in which this essay was originally published. I am also grateful to Harold W. Attridge, who sent me a long and thoughtful letter about various of the points raised in the essay. I have tried to address one of his concerns in note 7. I should also like to express my indebtedness to the writings of Professor E. L. Mascall, particularly his *Theology and the Gospel of Christ: An Essay in Reorientation* (London: SPCK, 1977), which directed me to many of the authors I have cited.

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Non Est Hick

MOST of us probably remember from our childhoods a kind of puzzle called "What is wrong with this picture?" The child confronting one of these puzzles would be presented with a picture that contained details like a dog smoking a pipe or a woman writing a letter with a carrot instead of a pen. It would be announced that there were, say, ten such "mistakes" in the picture and the object was to find all ten.

There is a currently very popular picture of what are called "the World Religions" that looks to me a lot like those puzzle pictures from my childhood. The picture is done in prose, rather than in pen and ink outline. I shall have to provide you with a copy of it if I am to proceed with this essay, but it will not be easy for me to do this, for I am constitutionally unable to write the kind of prose suited to the task. Nonetheless, here goes.

There are a number of entities called "religions"; the most important among them are called the "World Religions," with or without capitals. The world religions are the religions that appear in the history books, and appear not merely as footnotes or as clues to "what the Assyrians were like" or evidences of "the beginnings of cosmological speculation." The world religions are important topics of historical inquiry in their own right. Each of them, in fact, has a history of its own; the majority of them have founders and can be said to have begun at fairly definite dates. The list of world religions must include at least the following: Buddhism, Christianity, Confucianism, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism, and Taoism. But other religions are plausible candidates for

inclusion in the list, and some might want to split some of the items in the list into two or more religions. It is the division of humanity into the adherents of the various world religions (of course, many people practice a tribal religion or belong to some syncretistic cult or have no religion at all) that is the primary datum of all responsible thinking about religion. Comparative studies of the world religions have shown that each of these religions is a species of a genus and that they have important common characteristics that belong to no other human social institutions. There are, of course, differences as well as similarities among the world religions, and some might think that there were *grave* differences, or even outright inconsistencies. It might be thought, for example, that the Middle Eastern or "Abrahamic" religions required their adherents to believe in a God who was a person and that other religions denied the existence of a divine person or subjected this thesis to "the death of a thousand qualifications" or even deprecated as a sign of spiritual immaturity any interest in a transcendent reality, whether personal or impersonal. It might be thought that Christianity taught that if your country was occupied by foreigners who despised you and your countrymen, and if a soldier of the occupying forces ordered you to carry his pack for a mile (which he was allowed by his own law to do), you should carry his pack for an extra mile; and it might be thought that Islam most definitely did not teach this. It might be thought that most forms of Buddhism taught that desire was intrinsically a bad thing, whereas Christianity taught that desire was made by God and that the Buddhist doctrine was therefore a blasphemous inveighing against the Creation. It might be thought, moreover, that these apparent inconsistencies among the world religions were not matters of the surface. It might be thought that each of them pertained to the very root and essence of the religions involved.

It cannot be denied that the apparent inconsistencies exist. What can be denied is that they have anything to do with "the root and essence" of the world religions. Each of the world religions is a response to a single divine reality. The responses are *different*, of course; no one could dispute that. The world religions are different because they arose and developed under different climatic, geographical, cultural, economic, historical, and social circumstances. The God of the Abrahamic religions, for example, is male—that is, He is described almost exclusively in terms of male imagery. This is because He represents the response to the divine of a people who in their beginnings were nomads and herdsmen, and who therefore were little concerned with the craft of growing things in the soil. Growth in the soil is particularly associ-

ated in the human imagination with the female, and religions that have their roots in a community whose economy is based on sowing and reaping tend to incorporate a strong female element. It is because the ancestors of the Jews were herdsmen and not farmers that the God of the Jews and their spiritual children is, whatever refinements may have crept into His nature over the course of the millennia, at root an exclusively male sky-god—in fact, the Lord of Battles.

The divine reality that each of the world religions responds to is in an important sense beyond the reach of human thought and language. Therefore, any attempt to conceptualize this reality, to describe it in words, to reduce it to formulas, must be woefully inadequate. And when we reflect on the fact that all our religious conceptualizations, descriptions, and formulations are reflections of local and temporary conditions of human social and economic organization, we are led irresistibly to the conclusion that the letter of the creed of any particular religion cannot possibly be an expression of the essence of the divine reality toward which that religion is directed. What we can hope to see over the next couple of hundred years—as each of the great world religions becomes more and more separated from the conditions and the geographical area in which it arose, and as the earth becomes more and more a single "global village"—is a sloughing off of many of the inessential elements of the world religions. And we may hope that among these discarded inessentials will be those particular elements that at present divide the world religions. It may be that each will retain much of its own characteristic language and sacred narrative and imagery. Indeed, one hopes that this will happen, for diversity that does not produce division is a good thing. But it is to be hoped that the great religions will "converge" to the point at which the differences between them are not incompatibilities—not even apparent incompatibilities. We may look forward to the day when a sincere seeker after the divine may (depending on the momentary circumstances of his or her life) move back and forth among the world religions as easily and consistently as the late-twentieth-century American Protestant who attends a Presbyterian church in California and a Methodist church after moving to North Carolina.

This is as much of the picture as I can bear to paint. There is a lot more that I might have included. I might, for example, have said something more about the sense in which each of the great world religions is supposed to be a response to the divine. (I might have included the idea that the aim of each of the world religions is to lead humanity to salvation, and that the real essence of salvation is a move from self-

centeredness to "reality-centeredness.") I might have said something about the "credentials" that each of the world religions can produce to support its claim to be a response to the divine reality. (I might have included the idea that the hallmark of a religion that is truly a response to a divine reality is its capacity for "saint production," its capacity to produce people who have left self-centeredness behind and become reality-centered.) But one must make an end somewhere.

Now what am I to do with this picture? I might treat it as the child is supposed to treat the puzzle picture, and point out the dog smoking the pipe and the woman writing with the carrot. I will not do this. For one thing, there is (in my view) so much wrong with the picture that I hardly know where to begin. For another, the whole topic of "religious pluralism"—which is the standard name for what might be called the doctrinal basis of the picture—is surrounded with a nimbus of rhetoric (the defense of religious pluralism has always been entirely rhetorical), and this rhetoric is designed to make any criticism of religious pluralism look like mean-spirited hair-splitting. To attempt actually to analyze the rhetoric of the religious pluralists is to be drawn into a game the main rule of which is that the other side gets to make the rules. Rather than be drawn into this game, I will strike out on my own. I will present a sort of model or theory of "religion" that is intended to provide a perspective from which the traditional, orthodox Christian can view such topics as "the world religions," "the scandal of particularity," and "religious pluralism." I do not expect this theory to recommend itself to anyone who is not a traditional, orthodox Christian.

There is, to begin with, a God. That is, there is an infinite, perfect, self-existent person, a unique and necessarily unique bearer of these attributes. It may be, as many great Christians have said, that the language of personality can be applied to this being only analogically. It may be that when we say things that imply that this being is conscious and has thoughts and is aware of other things than Himself and makes choices and has plans and acts to bring these plans to fruition, we are using language that is literally correct when we apply it to ourselves, and can be applied to God only in some way that is to be understood in terms of the concept of analogy—as we are using language that is literally correct when we say that Watson is following the suspect, and only "analogically correct" when we say that he is following Holmes's reasoning. And it may not be. It may be, as William P. Alston has suggested, that there is available a plausible functional account of personal language that has the consequence that the meanings of terms like 'conscious' and 'thought' and 'plan' are so abstract that it is possible for

them to apply univocally to God and to human beings.¹ But even if the language of personality can be applied to God only analogically, it is the only language we Christians have been given and the only language we have. It is not open to us to talk of God only in the impersonal terms appropriate to a discussion of Brahman or the Dialectic of History or the Absolute Idea or Being-as-Such or the *Élan vital* or the Force. (If it is the implication of "apophatic" or "negative" theology that it is improper to use personal language in speaking of God—I do not say that it is—then apophatic theology must be looked at as an assault by Athens on Jerusalem.) This is the meaning of Genesis 1:26–27. It is because we are made in the image of God and after His likeness that we can properly apply to Him terms that apply to human beings.

This God, although He is the only thing that is self-existent, is not the only thing that exists. But all other things that exist exist only because He has made them. If He had not, by an act of free will, brought other things into existence, there would be nothing besides Himself. When we say that He "made" other things than Himself, we do not mean that He formed them from some preexistent stuff that existed independently of His will. There could be no such stuff, for He is the Creator of all things, visible and invisible. Moreover, He did not produce the world of created things and then allow it to go its own way. Even He could not do that, for it is intrinsically impossible for anything to exist apart from Him—the *fons et origo* of being—even for the briefest moment. He sustains all other things in existence, and if He were to withdraw His sustaining power from any being—a soap bubble or a cosmos or an archangel—it would, of absolute, metaphysical necessity, immediately cease to exist. And He does not confine His interactions with the created beings to sustaining them in existence. He is, as we learn from St. John, love; He loves His creatures and, because of this love, governs the world they inhabit providentially.

Among His creatures are human beings, who were, as we have said, made in His image. They were made for a purpose. They have, as the Shorter Catechism of the Church of Scotland says, a "chief end": to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever. This end or purpose implies both free will and the ability to know God. Human beings have not been made merely to mouth words of praise or to be passively awash in a pleasant sensation of the presence of God. They have been made

1. William P. Alston, "Can We Speak Literally of God?" in *Divine Nature and Human Language: Essays in Philosophical Theology* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989).

to be intimately aware of God and capable of freely acting on this awareness; having seen God, they may either glorify and enjoy what they have seen—the glorification and the enjoyment are separable only by the intellect in an act of severe abstraction—or they may reject what they have seen and attempt to order their own lives and to create their own objects of enjoyment. The choice is theirs and it is a free choice: to choose either way is genuinely open to each human being.²

God wishes to be the object of human glorification and enjoyment not out of vanity but out of love: He is glorious and enjoyable to a degree infinitely greater than that of any other object. He has given us free will in this matter because it is only when a person, having contemplated the properties of something, freely assents to the proposition that that thing is worthy of glory, and then proceeds freely to offer glory to it, that a thing is truly glorified. And it is only when a person, having enjoyed a thing, freely chooses to continue in the enjoyment of that thing that true enjoyment occurs.

Unfortunately, the first human beings, having tasted and enjoyed God, did not persist in their original felicity. (Perhaps they chose to ignore some stricture on the course of their development that, in their pride, they thought they could bypass. We cannot say, for the form in which temptation could be present in the mind of an as yet unfallen creature is necessarily a mystery to us. The suggestion that it would be psychologically impossible for an Edenic human being to feel, or, at any rate, to succumb to, temptation to do wrong is, however, an assertion and not an argument. The idea that we are in a position to say what is psychologically possible for beings in circumstances that are literally unimaginable to us is nothing more than an illustration of the apriorism that is an endemic intellectual disease of philosophers and theologians.) They turned away from God—perhaps they did not describe what they were doing in that way, just as an alcoholic husband may not describe what he is doing as “turning away from his wife and children”—and ruined themselves. In fact, they ruined not only themselves but their posterity, for the separation from God that they achieved was somehow hereditary. This turning away from God and its consequences are known as the Fall.³

I find the following analogy helpful in thinking about the condition

2. It may sound as if I am preaching Pelagianism here, but it will become evident in a moment that this can hardly be my meaning. In my view, in the present age of the world, this freedom comes to us only by Grace.

3. For a discussion of the Fall that takes up some points that cannot be gone into here, see Essay 4 in this volume.

of fallen humanity. Imagine a great modern city—New York, say—that has been lifted several yards into the air by the hand of some vast giant and then simply let fall. The city is now a ruin. The mass of the buildings stand at crazy angles. Others have been totally destroyed or lie on their sides. Some few still stand more or less straight. The suitability of the buildings for human habitation varies. Most of the rooms in most of the buildings are now, in some measure, open to the wind and the rain, but a small proportion of them are still snug and dry. Water mains and gas mains and electrical cables have mostly been severed by the catastrophe, but here and there a building still has water or gas or electricity. How these remnants of function are distributed among the various buildings of the city is simply a matter of chance: the fact that a particular building is snug and dry and more or less upright and still has running water is a consequence of the way a vast network of forces redistributed themselves when the city was dropped. Certainly it does not reflect any particular credit on the design of the building: no building could be designed to withstand such a catastrophe, and that this one emerged relatively intact (but in normal circumstances it would be condemned) is due to the fact that a complex array of forces happened to come close to “canceling out” at this location.

I have said that this story provides a model for the fallen human race. We are all ruins, in a sense very closely analogous to the sense in which the Parthenon is a ruin. That is, we cannot be said without qualification to be the products either of chance or of design. Each of us is at birth the product of two factors: the original plan of a wise and providential Creator and the changes that chance—different in the case of every individual—has introduced into the original perfection that came from the Creator’s hand. The effects of these changes are not grossly physical, of course, as they are in the buildings that are the other term of the analogy. They are moral and intellectual and aesthetic and spiritual. A particular human being may labor under a genetic predisposition to a vicious temper, or to an almost total lack of sensitivity to the needs of others, or even to a positive enjoyment of the sufferings of others. Another human being may be blessed with a genetic disposition to a sweet temper and great human sympathy and a horror of any human suffering. A particular human being may be born with almost no capacity for sustained rational thought, or with a tendency recklessly to disregard evidence, or with an inherent disposition to deprecate any use of the mind that is not directed toward what is immediately useful. Another human being may be genetically endowed with dispositions to intellectual virtue. Similar points may be made about

our various genetic endowments as regards aesthetic matters. There is little more that needs to be said about our genetic endowments in these areas, except perhaps to stress the point that I have been talking about our *genetic* endowments, and that the bad dispositions we have been born with can no doubt be to some degree mitigated, and the good dispositions corrupted or rendered impotent, by social and other environmental factors.

What is more relevant to our present concerns is our "spiritual endowments"—that is, the degree to which the spiritual endowment that was a part of the Creator's plan for each individual has managed to survive the Fall. We have said that human beings were made to be intimately aware of God. It would not be profitable for me—whose spiritual life is devoid of the least tincture of mystical or religious experience—to speculate at any length on the nature of this awareness. I expect that this awareness was somehow connected with the subject's ordinary sensory awareness of physical objects (which endure and move and have their being in God). I expect that the way in which I am aware of the "invisible" thoughts and emotions of others through their faces and voices provides some sort of analogy.⁴ I expect that the way the natural world looked to unfallen humanity and the way it looks to me are as similar and as different as the way a page of Chinese calligraphy looks to a literate Chinese and to me. But whatever the nature of our primordial awareness of God, we have largely lost it. Perhaps, however, none of us has lost it entirely, or only a very few of us have. And it may be that this awareness is present in various people in varying degrees. (The city is now a ruin. The mass of the buildings stand at crazy angles. Others have been totally destroyed or lie on their sides. Some few still stand more or less straight.) It is because some vestige of the capacity to be aware of God is present in all or most people that there is such a thing as religion. (We should note that an awareness of God does not necessarily seem to be an awareness of God to the person who has it: an awareness of a distant mountain range may seem to the person who has it to be an awareness of a bank of clouds.)⁵

4. Cf. Romans 1:20; Wisdom of Solomon 13:1-9.

5. This useful analogy has a defect: it suggests that "misperceptions" of God are invariably as innocent as ordinary perceptual mistakes. But this is not so. I will make my point by means of an extreme example, without meaning to imply that this point is confined to cases of the extreme sort that I shall consider. There have been and still are those who believe in dark gods, gods whose favor can be gained only by ritual sodomy or by the immolation of babies or by tearing the heart out of a living victim. I see no reason to suppose that the remnant of our original awareness of God is any less a causal

It is because a capacity to be aware of God is present in people in varying degrees that people are more religious or less religious—or at any rate this is one reason among others for the varying degrees of engagement with religion exhibited by various people. It is because there are people in whom the capacity to be aware of God is relatively intact (the buildings that stand almost straight and provide shelter from the elements and perhaps even a tickle of water from the taps) that there are great religious leaders and doctors and saints—or, again, this is one reason among others. And these people are not confined to any particular geographical area or to any historical period. This statement is, of course, consistent with the statement that it is only in certain social and cultural milieux that they will flourish spiritually or have any effect upon history.

In a way, what I have said in the preceding paragraph looks a great deal like the picture of the world religions that I have made it clear that I reject. Although I have talked about a personal Creator and a Fall, it might be argued that these are no more than details, and that the picture I have painted differs from the picture I have undertaken to attack in only a few background details. What difference does it make (someone might ask) what the exact nature of the relation between the great spiritual leaders and the divine reality is—as long as it is admitted that they are spread throughout the human race? In fact (the questioner might continue), don't your "details" undermine themselves? If you know about this "Fall," you know about it from certain great spiritual teachers: Augustine and Paul and the authors of the early books of Genesis. But their authority, if they have it, to pronounce on the relation of the human and the divine can be due only to their being in closer touch with the divine reality than most of us. And they are not in closer touch with the divine reality than, say, Lao Tzu or Gautama. (At least, you have not given us any reason to suppose so; and if it were so, how should *you*, who by your own admission are spiritually nothing out of the ordinary, know this?) If you are right, spiritual gifts are distributed more or less randomly in space and time, as randomly as intellectual and aesthetic gifts. Why, then, should a

factor in the life of the religions of ancient Mesopotamia or pre-Columbian Central America (or current Satanism) than in the life of what the nineteenth century called "the higher religions." I do not believe, however, that God would allow any of His creatures *innocently* to perceive Him as a dark god. The belief that there were divine powers that demanded the immolation of babies can no more have been an "honest mistake" than the belief of the Nazis that a cabal of Jewish plutocrats arranged the defeat of Germany in 1918 can have been an innocent misreading of history.

certain stream of stories told in the ancient Levant be normative for all of humanity? If things were as you say, if there has been a primordial catastrophe that has left us all, in varying degrees, spiritual ruins, then the details of our relation with the divine would have to be "blurry," too blurry to be read with confidence by such as you. Therefore, you can have no ground for your statement of the details, and when the details—which are of no great intrinsic importance in any case—have been erased, your picture is indistinguishable from the standard picture of the "world religions."

There is a great deal of merit in these pointed questions. Indeed, if I had no more to put into my "model" than this, they would be unanswerable. I do, however, have more to put into my model than this. The consequence of what I shall add is this: the standard picture of the world religions is not so much false as it is out of date. For God has not left us to deal as best we can with our state of spiritual ruin. If He had, then the picture of the world religions that I deprecate as false to the facts would have been true to the facts. But . . .

In many and various ways God spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets; but in these last days He has spoken to us by a Son, whom He appointed the heir of all things, through whom also He created the world. Let me expand on this theme, in rather a different vein from the author of Hebrews—or perhaps not so different.

The world religions, insofar as they have any reality at all (this qualification is an adumbration of a point I shall take up presently), are human creations. That is, they are the work of human beings, and their existence and properties are not a part of God's plan for the world. Other examples of human creations that are similar to religions in that they are in some sense composed of human beings would be: the Roman Empire, Scotland, the Children's Crusade, Aunt Lillian's sewing circle, the Comintern, the Vienna Circle, the Gestapo, the American Academy of Religion, Tokyo, fauvism, the Palestine Liberation Organization, the *New York Times*, and the National Aeronautics and Space Administration.

The existence and properties of the institutions in this list are due to chance and to the interplay of a wide variety of "climatic, geographical, cultural, economic, historical, and social circumstances" that it is the business of the social sciences to identify and map. When I say that they are "not a part of God's plan for the world," I am assuming that there *are* things in the world that are not a part of God's plan for the world.⁶ As to the individual items in the list, I am assuming that—

6. For a defense of the thesis that there are many things in the world that are not a part of God's plan for the world, see Essay 2 in this volume.

given that there is *anything* that is not a part of God's plan for the world—it is fairly evident that none of these things is. Perhaps some will disagree with me about particular cases. And even if no one disagrees, it may be that we are all wrong. God's ways are mysterious, and I do not claim to be privy to them. I am proceeding only by such dim lights as I have. Nothing in the sequel really depends on whether the *New York Times* or the Vienna Circle is a part of God's plan for the world: the items listed are meant only to be suggestive examples. But I should make it clear that in saying that these institutions are not parts of God's plan for the world, I do not mean to deny that God may make use of them in carrying out His plan—as I may make pedagogical use of various physical objects that happen, independently of my plans and my will, to be among the fixtures of a lecture room in which I am giving a lecture on perception. Indeed, I would suppose that God makes *constant* use of human institutions, human individuals, animals, inanimate objects, and transient psychological phenomena in His moment-to-moment shepherding of His creatures toward the fulfillment of His plan.

Like the *New York Times* and the Vienna Circle, the world religions have arisen amid the turmoil of the fallen world by chance and have developed and grown and acquired their peculiar characteristics partly by chance and partly by the interplay of the factors that a completed social science would understand. In the case of the world religions, however, a third factor is present, one that can hardly be supposed to have been involved in the development of the *Times* and the Vienna Circle: their growth and properties are affected by the innate awareness of God (both within their "ordinary" members and within their founders and great teachers) that is still present, in varying degrees, throughout fallen humanity. It is also possible—and we might make the same point about any things that exist in this present darkness—that the world religions have been partly shaped by God so that they may be instruments of His purpose. (If this is so, it does not follow that there is some *common* purpose that they serve. For all I know, God may have shaped Islam partly to be a reproach to a complacent Christendom, and it may be that no other religion has this purpose.)

"But if God has created the world, and if the world religions are parts of the world, how can they not be His creations?" It is important to realize that the following argument is invalid: God is the creator of all things visible and invisible; *hence*, God is the creator of Taoism (or of the *New York Times* or of the Vienna Circle). St. Augustine pointed out that the premise that God is the creator of all things does not entail

the conclusion that God is the creator of evil, owing to the fact that evil is not a "thing" in the requisite sense: evil is not a substance. And just as evil is, ontologically speaking, not a substance, so religions are not substances; when a particular religion comes into being, this does not imply the coming to be of a substance, but merely certain substances—certain human beings—coming to stand in a new set of relations. And it may well be that God has not ordained that any human beings should stand in the particular set of relations that is the only being that a religion has. It is, of course, *possible* for God to create a religion; for Him to do this would be for Him to bring it about that certain human beings came to stand in a certain set of relations. I maintain, however, that He has not in fact done so: no religion is a divine creation. (But this conviction of mine is not essential to my point. If I am wrong about this, if God has created Taoism or Islam, I am wrong about a peripheral matter—as I should be wrong about a peripheral matter if the *New York Times* or the Vienna Circle were a divine creation.)

There are, I suggest, two and only two things that are in any sense composed of human beings and are both God's creations and a part of His plan for the world.⁷ These are His people Israel and the Catholic Church.

By Israel I mean a *people*. I mean those descendants of Jacob who are the heirs of the promises made to Abraham. It was to this people, and not to a religion called Judaism, that the Law was given ("I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse; therefore, choose life that you and your descendants may live, loving the Lord your God, obeying his voice, and cleaving to him, . . . that you may live in the land which the Lord swore to your fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give them").⁸ It was not "Judaism" whom David ruled and who heard the prophets, but a people.

By the Catholic Church I mean a certain *thing*. (The word is Chesterton's, and I have no better. God's people Israel are a unique people, but they are not the only people. The Church is the only thing of its kind, and we have, therefore, no useful general term under which it may be classified.) It was this thing that was created by the Holy Spirit

7. From the premise that a certain thing has been created by God, the conclusion does not follow that it is a part of His plan for the world. It is possible—for all I know, it is true—that God has created the Red Cross, as a divine mitigation of the human invention of war. But if war is not a part of the divine plan for the world, then, even if the Red Cross has been created by God, it is not a part of His plan for the world.

8. Deut. 30:19–20.

on the day of Pentecost, of which Jesus Christ is the head and cornerstone, which has charge of the good news about Jesus Christ and the sacraments of Baptism and the Eucharist, which is specifically mentioned in the Creeds. There are, we believe, both a visible and an invisible Church. I might say a great deal about the invisible Church and its relation to the visible Church, but I will say nothing. As to the visible Catholic Church, the right to pronounce on its boundaries is a bone of contention among Christians. Roman Catholics, Anglicans, Orthodox Christians, and Protestants will have different ideas about the boundaries of the visible Church. It is not my intention to say anything controversial about this matter, so I will say nothing. (Nor will I say anything of consequence about the divisive question of the relation between Israel and the Church.)

It will be noted that my characterization of Israel and the Catholic Church has been in terms of God's action in history. If God has not acted in history, these things do not exist. If God has not spoken of old by the prophets, then Israel does not exist. If He has not spoken in these last days by a Son, then the Catholic Church does not exist. (I do not mean to deny what is self-evidently true: that there are perfectly good senses of the words in which even an atheist can admit that there are such things as "Israel" and "the Catholic Church.")

The question naturally arises, Suppose that these two things, these two supernatural foundations, Israel and the Church, do exist; what is their relation to the two "world religions" Judaism and Christianity?

I do not know how to answer this question because I do not know what the words 'Judaism' and 'Christianity' mean. More exactly, although there are many contexts in which I understand these words (as, for example, if it is said that someone is a convert to Judaism, or has written a book that is critical of Christianity), there are many contexts in which I do *not* understand them, and this question is an example of one. Let me concentrate on the word 'Christianity'. Most of what I say will be applicable, the appropriate changes being made, to my difficulties with the word 'Judaism'. Many statements that contain the word 'Christianity' can be easily rewritten as statements about Christians and their beliefs and their religious practices and their behavior in secular matters.⁹ In most cases, I have no difficulty understanding

9. My difficulties with 'Christianity' do not extend to the noun 'Christian'. Like most English words, it has more than one meaning, but it has a "central" meaning that is something like this: a Christian is a person who has accepted Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, who has assented to certain creedal statements, and who has received the sacrament of Baptism. (There could, of course, be some dispute about what the creedal state-

statements of this kind. My difficulties are with statements that are not of this sort, with statements that imply, or appear to imply, that 'Christianity' is the name of a thing.

Is 'Christianity' really the name of a thing?—that is, is this word really a name, or is it simply a word that allows a speaker to take certain statements about "Christians and their beliefs and their religious practices and their behavior in secular matters" and compress them into statements about a feigned thing called 'Christianity'? Is the word like, say, 'the *New York Times*' or 'the Vienna Circle', which are names of real social entities? Or is it like the words 'morality' and 'violence', which (in many contexts, anyway) are no more than linguistic devices for compressing statements about moral or violent people and their behavior into statements about a feigned object ("The decline of morality in our time has reached serious proportions"; 'Violence never solves anything')?

I believe the latter. I think that a strong argument for this thesis is provided by the fact that one cannot "be a member of" or "belong to" Christianity. (Nor is there any more specific "membership word" like 'employee' or 'citizen' that can be used to describe the relation between an individual and Christianity.) One cannot say, "I am a member of Christianity," or "I belong to Christianity." A Christian is no more a member of Christianity than a violent person is a member of violence or a skeptic is a member of skepticism. (One can, of course, be a *convert* to Christianity, but conversion to Christianity does not imply membership in Christianity as conversion to Roman Catholicism implies membership in the Roman Catholic Church. To be a convert to Christianity is simply to become a Christian.) It should be evident from the way I have worded this discussion of 'Christianity' that its point

ments would have to contain, and about when Baptism has been validly administered.) I am aware that, human beings being the contentious lot they are, there are those who would say that this definition was fundamentally inadequate—because, for example, real Christians must be *good* Christians, or real Christians must display gifts of the Holy Spirit. My purpose in this note is not to resolve vexed questions about who is and who isn't a Christian, but simply to dissociate the question "What does 'Christianity' mean?" from the question "What does 'Christian' mean?"

The adjective 'Christian', unlike the noun, is very vague. Its vagueness, however, has nothing specifically to do with religion, but is rather typical of adjectives of its type. Compare, say, 'Italian' or 'Asian'. An Italian, in the central meaning of the word, is a citizen of Italy; an Asian, in the central meaning of the word, is an inhabitant of Asia. But a definition of the adjectives 'Italian' and 'Asian' will have to make use of such extremely vague terms as 'pertaining to' and 'typical of'. This fact has the consequence that the meaning of the adjective 'Christian'—like the meanings of 'Italian' and 'Asian'—is highly sensitive to context.

has nothing to do with nominalism or the reality of social entities or any other abstract question of logic or metaphysics. I am perfectly willing to say that there is such a thing as, for example, the class of all Christians, and I have said that the Catholic Church and Israel—and the *New York Times* and the Vienna Circle—are real things. There is no logical or conceptual barrier to there being a real social entity that is, as one might say, coextensive with Christianity, a thing that people belong to if and only if they are Christians, as people belong to the Roman Catholic Church if and only if they are Roman Catholics. (Indeed, there is no logical or conceptual barrier to there being *more* than one social entity that is coextensive with Christianity.) But—unfortunately—no such thing exists in the world as it is.

I hope it is also evident that in saying that 'Christianity' is not a name for a thing, I am not denying the existence or reality of Christianity—just as I do not deny the existence or reality of violence when I say that 'violence' is not a name for a thing. Here is an analogy: In saying, with St. Augustine, that evil is not a thing—that it is among neither the *visibilia* nor the *invisibilia* mentioned in the Nicene Creed—one does not express agreement with Mary Baker Eddy.

What has been said of 'Christianity', and by implication of 'Judaism', applies equally to 'Islam' and 'Buddhism' and the other words that occur in any list of the world religions. None of these words is a real name; if it were a real name, it would name a social entity of some sort, and people could belong to it. But (although there are Muslims) no one is "a member of Islam," and (although there are Buddhists) no one is "a member of Buddhism."

Let us return to our question: What is the relation of the Catholic Church to "the world religion Christianity"? I would say that insofar as this unclear question has an answer, it is contained in the following statement: All members of the Catholic Church are Christians, and some Christians are not members of the (visible) Catholic Church. In this answer, I have used the relatively clear word 'Christian' and have deliberately avoided the vague word (vague in this context, at any rate) 'Christianity'. If my suggestion that the word 'Christianity' is a "compression-word"—that it is a device for compressing statements about Christians into shorter statements about a feigned object—is correct, it should be possible to replace any meaningful statement in which the word 'Christianity' occurs with a statement in which this word does not occur. Therefore, if I am right, insofar as the question has an answer, it must have an answer in which the word 'Christianity' does not occur. There may be those who would wish to challenge my

thesis. Perhaps not everyone will agree that my answer to this question is the correct answer; perhaps not everyone will agree that I have understood the question; perhaps not everyone will agree that all statements involving the word 'Christianity' can (insofar as they have any meaning at all) be replaced by statements containing no related word but 'Christian'.

I should have to see how a challenge to my thesis would be developed before I knew what to say in response to it. But I shall view any such challenge with suspicion. I think it is an important fact about compression-words that they are often used as devices of obfuscation. A notorious case is that of the statement 'Error has no rights', which in former days was used by some Roman Catholic apologists to defend the use of political coercion in religious matters. If we try to say what this statement says without using the compression-word 'error', we find that we must say either 'People who have erroneous beliefs have no rights' or 'If a thesis is erroneous, then those who sincerely believe it to be true have no right to defend it in public—or even publicly to express belief in it'. While 'Error has no rights' has an impressive and convincing ring to it, the same can hardly be said of these two statements.

The use of compression-words and the hypostatized abstractions they purport to denote may sometimes be harmless—I have no objection, for example, to the statement 'Violence never solves anything', although I believe I could think of more useful ways to express the thought behind these words. (It will be observed that in the sequel I allow myself to hypostatize "the Enlightenment.") But I am convinced that the practice often disguises a political or theological agenda, the advancement of an ideology.

Let me make a highly speculative suggestion (I put this forward as worthy of further reflection, rather than as a thesis whose truth I am convinced of): the list of world religions—indeed, the concept of a "religion"—is a piece of misdirection intended to advance what I shall call the "Enlightenment agenda."

The historical phenomenon that named itself "the Enlightenment" (it still exists, although it has abandoned the name) is, and always has been, an attack on the Catholic Church. Its social goal is the destruction of the Church. Its main intellectual goal is twofold: first to show that there is no God, or at least no providential God who acts in history (and hence that all that the Church teaches is false), and, secondly, that the Church not only is wrong about history and metaphysics and eschatology, but is a socially retrograde force. An important part of

this intellectual goal is to exhibit those things that the Church sees as unique as very much of a piece with lots of other things.

The Church, for example, has taught that the human species is radically different from all other species. The Enlightenment has sought to show that the human species is not all that different from many other species. Since it is blindingly, boringly obvious that humanity *is* radically different from all other species—although it is far from obvious whether the Church is right about the nature of or the reasons for this difference—any opponent of this thesis must proceed by misdirection. Thus it is pointed out by the proponents of the Enlightenment agenda that human DNA differs from chimpanzee DNA in fewer base-pairs than the number by which the DNA of grizzly bears differs from that of Kodiak bears. Or it is confidently stated that modern science has delivered a succession of "nasty shocks to human pride" (by its discovery that the earth is not at the center of the universe, or by its discovery of the vast reaches of geological time, or by its discovery that human beings and the other primates are descended from a common ancestor). Well, the point about the base-pair count is certainly true, and the statement about the nasty shocks to human pride is probably not true, but, whether their premises are true or false, these arguments are mere smoke and mirrors, for the fact is that human beings *are* radically different from all other animals, and a scientific discovery can no more challenge this fact than the transition from Ptolemaic to Copernican astronomy could challenge the fact of the alternation of day and night.¹⁰

It is a part of the Enlightenment agenda to undermine the confidence of Christians in the thesis—from the earliest times an undisputed axiom of Christian theology—that the Catholic Church is radically different from everything else in the world.¹¹ Is it "blindingly, boringly obvious" that this thesis is right?

10. Another important example of this Enlightenment strategy is provided by the attempt of the Enlightenment to show that the creation-and-flood story in Genesis is really very much the same sort of thing as the Sumerian and Akkadian and Iranian and other creation-and-flood stories. All these stories are clearly historically related and share some structural features that are interesting to the student of comparative mythology. The strategy is to go on at great length about the historical relation and the structural similarities, while studiously ignoring the fact that in every respect that could matter to anyone who was not a scholar of comparative mythology, the Hebrew story is radically different from the Sumerian and Akkadian and Iranian stories (the average educated reader will find those three stories to be very similar)—and from all other creation-and-flood stories.

11. With the possible exception of Israel. According to Christians, the Church is the New Israel, in which the promises that God made to Abraham are fulfilled (but not superseded). What the "differences" are between the New and the Old Israel, and

Perhaps it is not so obvious that the Church is radically different from all other human institutions as it is that human beings are radically different from all other animals. But there is a closely connected fact that is just that obvious, and the connection is worth developing. Here is the fact: "Western Civilization" (that is, what used to be called Christendom) is radically different from all other civilizations and cultures. Modern Euro-American civilization has produced physical and biological science,¹² the rule of law, the independent judiciary, universal suffrage, the concept of human rights and its embodiment in working constitutions, and near-universal literacy. And it has a long list of "minor" innovations to its credit, such as drawing in perspective, scientific cartography and navigation, and anesthesia. (A good sense of the uniqueness of "Western Civilization" can be obtained by comparing the anatomical drawings of Leonardo with the best anatomical drawings from classical antiquity or the Islamic world or China or India.) It will no doubt be pointed out that "Western Civilization" also originated world wars, hydrogen bombs, and worldwide colonialism.¹³ But I am not arguing that "Western Civilization" is morally superior to other civilizations and cultures; I am arguing only that it is radically different. Indeed, the horrible items in this second list simply go to prove my point, for no "non-Western" civilization has been in a position even to contemplate adding any of these things to the burden of humanity's ills. "Western Civilization" may or may not be morally superior to various other civilizations. That question could be argued interminably. What is certain beyond the shadow of a doubt is that it

whether they should be described as "radical," are delicate theological questions that do not fall within the scope of this essay.

12. "But what about ancient Greek science?" What we today call Greek "science"—the Greeks, of course, did not call it that, owing to the fact that they had no word meaning 'science'—is only a part of what we call science today. The achievements of Greek science, magnificent though they were, were entirely phenomenological, in the sense in which physicists use the term. That is, they pertained to such matters as size and motion and taxonomy. Modern astronomy is applied physics; Greek astronomy was applied geometry. There is no achievement of Greek science that can be in any way compared to Newton's derivation of Kepler's phenomenology of planetary motion from his laws of motion and universal gravitation. Greek science did not do that *kind* of thing, and it did not, therefore, *explain* things in the way in which modern science explains things. Greek science, having given what it regarded as an adequate description of all observed phenomena that it found of interest, had really nowhere to go, and, by the beginning of the Christian era, had ceased to make any significant advances. The scientific achievements of late antiquity were refinements, small increments of knowledge, and systematizations of what had already been discovered.

13. And industrial capitalism. I suppose it is controversial whether that invention should be listed with the rule of law or with the world wars.

is vastly more dangerous than any of them, owing simply to its vastly greater knowledge of the workings of the physical world. (Anyone who suggests that our list shows that "Western Civilization" is somehow morally *inferior* to some or all other civilizations should meditate on Nietzsche's pointed remark about those animals that call themselves good because they have no claws.)

Why was the continent of Europe the scene of the development of a civilization that was radically different from all other civilizations and cultures? Why did this thing happen then and there and not in classical antiquity or in India or China? I think that a very plausible answer is that the Church has made the difference. The Church was the single greatest influence in the formation of modern European civilization, and it would be odd if it had nothing to do with the unique character of that civilization. (The Enlightenment was forced by its presuppositions into the odd position of holding that the unique appearance on the world stage of science happened at just that place on earth at which—owing to the presence of the powerful, antirational, and superstitious Catholic Church—conditions were most hostile to its birth.) Is it not plausible that science and the rule of law and the rest were products of the Church in much the same sense as that in which Gothic architecture was a product of the Church?

The analogy is instructive. I am not saying that science et al. were inevitable products of the existence of the Catholic Church. If the whole Church had been as the Eastern Church was, then, quite possibly, none of these things would ever have come to be. And yet the Eastern Church is, and has always been, fully Catholic, in both its governance and its doctrine. To my mind, the Church did not *have to* produce the fruits (either the sweet or the bitter) that I have listed as the features that make "Western Civilization" unique; nevertheless, the Church *did* produce them, and nothing else that has ever existed could have. Whether or not this conviction of mine is true, it should be understood as strictly parallel with the following (presumably uncontroversial) thesis: the Church did not *have to* produce Gothic architecture; nevertheless, the Church *did* produce Gothic architecture, and nothing else could have.¹⁴ If a tree bears unique fruit, then it is probably a unique tree, even if it might never have flowered.¹⁵

14. But this analogy is in a way misleading. Gothic architecture is unique, but it is not, so to speak, *uniquely* unique. There are other architectural styles, each of them, I suppose, "unique," that can claim to rival Gothic architecture in beauty and sublimity. But the items in the list in the text have no rivals. They are not only unique in the way that any great architectural style must be unique, but simply *without parallel*.

15. I will try to give some sense in this note of how it was in my view that the Church "produced" one of the things in our list, modern science. The Church taught

I do not mean to suggest that it was the purpose of the Church to produce these fruits, even the sweet fruits. To say that would make nonsense of the New Testament, where we are told that Christ's kingdom is not of this world. If we should "lose" science and representative government and the rule of law—as I am inclined to think we are in danger of doing—if these things should take their places among the "wrecks of time," the Cross will still be there. The purpose of the Church is that we should not lose the end for which we were made, a purpose beside which physical science and the rule of law are of literally infinitesimal significance. And yet it did produce these things. If, again, a tree bears unique fruit, then it is probably a unique tree, whether or not the fruit was a part of the central purpose of the planter of the tree.

If a thing is to be known by its fruits, then the Church is unique. But it does not follow that it is unique in every respect, and, in particular, it does not follow that the Church is spiritually unique. I have conceded that the fruits of the Church that have made "Western Civilization" radically different from all other civilizations and cultures are irrelevant to the purpose of the Church. (Logically and conceptually irrelevant:

that the material world was not an illusion. Hence it taught, in effect, that there was something for science to investigate. (All the "teachings" that I mention in this note are the denials of beliefs that have had a significant number of adherents. The combination of teachings is unique to the Church.) The Church taught that the material world was not evil, and hence that it could be investigated without moral contamination. The Church taught that no part of the material world was a divine being (as many of the ancients had thought the stars and planets to be) and thus that it could be investigated without impiety. The Church taught that the material world was the creation of a single perfectly rational mind, and thus that it was not simply a jumble of things that had no significant relation to one another; its teaching therefore implied that the material world made sense, and that croquet balls were not going to turn into hedgehogs. The Church taught that the material world was a finite, contingent object; its teaching therefore implied that the nature of the world could not be discovered by a priori reasoning (a lesson Descartes was to forget). The Church taught that humanity was made in the image and likeness of God, and thus encouraged the belief that the human mind, being a copy of the mind of the Creator, might be equal to the task of discovering the nature of the Creation. The Church taught that not only humanity but the whole physical universe was redeemed in Christ ("For God so loved the *kosmos* . . ."), and thus that the investigation of that universe could be a Christian vocation, a way of glorifying its Creator and Redeemer. Assent to these teachings was second nature to the general run of educated Christians in the High Middle Ages, although some of them were disputed in the Schools. This assent produced a climate of thought and attitude that made the birth of modern experimental science possible. It is probably also worth mentioning that the Church's consistent condemnation of magic and astrology can hardly have hindered the development of science. (There is, of course, another relevant factor: the physical world cooperated. That is, it turned out to be the sort of thing whose nature *could* be investigated by the methods devised in Medieval and Renaissance Christendom.)

it is very plausible indeed to suppose that these fruits are in another way all too relevant to the purpose of the Church. The power and leisure and personal security that modern Euro-American science and social organization have given to great numbers of people in the West are no doubt the main causes of the long and continuing apostasy of the West.) May it not be that some or all of the world religions are the spiritual equals of the Church, even if they lack the Church's power to produce a wholly new kind of civilization? The Eastern Church apparently lacks the power of radically transforming the temporal aspects of civilization that the Western Church has displayed, and is nevertheless the spiritual equal of the Western Church.

May it not be that all the world's religions are instruments of God's salvation? May it not be that Islam and Buddhism are not merely accidental instruments of salvation, as literally anything under the sun may be, but intended instruments, spiritual equals of the Catholic Church?

I have no way to prove that this is false. If I had, I should be living not by faith but by sight. I can say only this: if that suggestion were true, then the Bible and the Creeds and all of Jewish and Christian history (as Jews and Christians tell the story) are illusions. The teachings of the Church are quite plain on the point that the Church is a unique instrument by which Christ and the Holy Spirit are working (and the Father is working through them) to bring us to the Father. And the teachings of the Church are quite plain on a second point: While the genesis and purpose of the Church belong to eternity, it has been given to us temporal creatures in time. (How else could it be given to us?) It was given to us through events that happened in Palestine in the first century of our era, and all possibility of our salvation depends on those events and on the Church's bringing us into the right relation with them. The Church is a thing that operates in history, and no hypostatized abstraction called Buddhism or Islam—or Christianity—is even in competition with the Church. These hypostatized abstractions, I speculate, are devices in the service of the Enlightenment agenda, and their purpose is to direct the attention of people away from the Church and to focus it on the abstraction "Christianity," which is the sort of thing that can be compared and contrasted with other abstractions like Buddhism and Islam. The comparisons, incidentally, are often extremely instructive. In reading or hearing them, the Christian is continually reminded of Chesterton's remark that, according to the students of comparative religion, Christianity and Buddhism are very much alike, especially Buddhism. (But nowadays Hinduism is the world religion that stands *prima inter pares*; it owes

this preeminence to its proclivity for syncretism, to its ability to absorb what the proponents of the view of the world religions I have been discussing would regard as the essential features of all other religions.) But the nature of the comparisons is not central to my point. My point is that even if the comparisons were invariably honest and just, they would still be a piece of misdirection, a device to draw our attention away from the concrete reality of the Catholic Church and direct it toward the abstraction "Christianity."

I want to turn our attention away from this abstraction and back to the Church. I can hope to do no more than to attempt to convince a few people that this is where the attention of Christians who are interested in the question of their relation as Christians to the non-Christian religions of the world should be directed. I am certainly not particularly qualified to say anything in detail about the Church and Buddhism or the Church and Islam. It is not my business to tell Christians what they ought to think about Buddhism or Islam. If that is the business of any individuals (as opposed to, say, ecumenical councils), it is the business of Christian historians and Christian students of Buddhism and Islam and Christian theologians. I have been concerned only to argue that Christians should think not in terms of, for example, "Christianity and Buddhism," but rather in terms of "the Church and Buddhism"—or, better still, "the Church and the Buddhists."

I will devote the remainder of this essay to an investigation of a difficulty that people sometimes feel in connection with the idea of the uniqueness of the Church. If I understand the phrase, this difficulty is what is sometimes referred to as "the scandal of particularity." Is there not something arrogant about the Church's claim to be unique? The odd thing is, the idea of there being such a scandal seems to make no sense at all.

Most of us have probably heard the old anti-Semitic quatrain, "How odd / Of God / To choose / The Jews." In addition to being morally rather nasty, this verse makes no sense at all. It presupposes that the Jews are "the chosen people" in the following sense: They were *about* somewhere, and God examined the various peoples of the world and, from among them, chose the Jews. But that is not how things went. The only thing that God chose in that sense was Abraham and his household—who were not yet "the Jews." God's people are a *product* of that choice. In a very straightforward sense, God did not choose, but made, or, one might even say, *forged*, Israel. The Hebrew scriptures are the story of that terrible forging ("for it is a terrible thing I will do with you").

If the Jews claim the distinction of being the one people among all the peoples of the world that God has made, do they call down a charge of scandal upon themselves? No, indeed. One can understand why it would be scandalous if the Jews claimed that God had chosen them from among all the peoples of the earth because of their excellent qualities, if they claimed to have bested all the other peoples of the earth in a contest for God's favor. (That is the claim that is ascribed to them in the nasty little verse I have quoted—together with the implication that they of all people are the most unlikely to be the winners of such a contest.) But that is not the story the Jews tell.

In a similar way, if the Catholic Church claims to be the unique instrument of salvation, there is no scandal. The United States and the Soviet Union and many other things have invented themselves, but the Church did not invent herself. The Church is God's creation, and what makes her the unique instrument of His salvation is no more the achievement of her members than the splendor and bounty of the earth are the achievements of her inhabitants. Those features of the Church that are the work of human beings (like those features of the earth that are the work of human beings) are mere details added to God's design. And those details, like all the other works of human hands, contain good, bad, and indifferent things, hopelessly intermingled.

"Well, isn't it fortunate for you that you just happen to be a member of this 'unique instrument of salvation.' I suppose you realize that if you had been raised among Muslims, you would make similar claims for Islam?" Yes, it is fortunate for me, very fortunate indeed. And I concede that if I and some child born in Cairo or Mecca had been exchanged in our cradles, very likely I should be a devout Muslim. (I'm not so sure about the other child, however. I was not raised a Christian.) But what is supposed to follow from this observation? If certain people claim to be the members of a body that is the unique instrument of God's salvation, who is supposed to defend their claim? Those who are *not* members of that body? It should be noted, moreover, that this style of argument (whatever its merits) can hardly be confined to religion. Consider politics. As is the case with religious options, a multitude of political options faces the citizens of any modern nation. And which of us can say that his political allegiances are coded into his DNA? Tell the Marxist or the liberal or the Burkean conservative that if only he had been raised in Nazi Germany he would probably have belonged to the Hitler Youth, and he will answer that he is well aware of this elementary fact, and ask what your point is. No one I know of supposes that the undoubted fact that one's adherence to a system of political

thought and action is conditioned by one's upbringing is a reason for doubting that the political system one favors is—if not the uniquely “correct” one—clearly and markedly superior to its available rivals. And yet any argument to show that the Church's belief in her own uniqueness was arrogant would apply a fortiori to this almost universally held belief about politics. The members of the Church can, as I have remarked, take no pride in her unique relation to God, for that relation is His doing and not theirs. But the superiority of one's own political party to all others must be due to the superiority of the knowledge, intelligence, wisdom, courage, and goodness of one and one's colleagues to the knowledge, intelligence, wisdom, courage, and goodness collectively embodied in any other political party.

While we are on the topic of arrogance, I must say that if I am to be charged with arrogance, it had better not be by the authors of the picture of the world religions that I outlined at the beginning of this essay. Any of *them* that flings a charge of arrogance at me is going to find himself surrounded by a lot of broken domestic glass. I may believe that everything that the Muslim believes that is inconsistent with what I believe is false. But then so does everyone who accepts the law of the excluded middle or the principle of noncontradiction. What I do *not* do is to inform the Muslim that every tenet of Islam that is inconsistent with Buddhism is not really essential to Islam. (Nor do I believe in my heart of hearts that every tenet of Islam that is inconsistent with the beliefs of late-twentieth-century middle-class Anglo-American professors is not really essential to Islam.) Despite the fact that I reserve the right to believe things that are not believed by Muslims, I leave it to the Muslims to decide what is and what is not essential to Islam.

“But why should membership in the unique instrument of God's salvation depend upon accidents of birth? Isn't that rather unfair to those born at the wrong time and place to belong to it? Wouldn't God's unique instrument of salvation, if there were one, be universally available?”

This is a serious question. Before I answer it, let me remove a red herring. It is not necessary for Christians to believe that there is no salvation outside the *visible* Church. I do not know how widespread this belief has been in the past, but it is certainly not widespread today. (In my own lifetime, a notorious Roman Catholic priest—remember Father Feeney?—was excommunicated for obstinately teaching this doctrine.) Nor do very many Christians believe that those who died before the creation of the Church are denied salvation. (There would certainly be biblical difficulties with this idea, since the salvation of the

Good Thief in St. Luke is explicitly stated, despite the fact that his death occurred not only before the creation of the Church on the day of Pentecost, but before Christ was raised into the new life that is transmitted to us through the Church.)¹⁶ The medieval legend of the Harrowing of Hell may be without any actual basis in the Apostles' Creed, but it testifies to the popularity of the belief that Christ's salvation is offered to those who died before His Incarnation.

So much for the red herring. Now for the serious question. This question would be unanswerable if Christians believed that salvation came through a religion called “Christianity” rather than through the Church. But I take the only sure condition of damnation in which Christian belief is involved to be the following: Anyone who has accepted Christian belief and rejects it and rejects it still at the moment of his death—and rejects it with a clear mind, and not when maddened by pain or grief or terror—is damned. (“Which Faith, except everyone do *keep* whole and undefiled, without doubt he shall perish everlastingly”; “which except a man believe *faithfully*, he cannot be saved.”) What provision God makes for those who have never heard the Christian message, or who have heard it only in some distorted and falsifying form, I do not know. That is God's business and not ours. Our business is to see that as many as possible do hear the Christian message, and do not hear it in a distorted and falsifying form. (But I do know that one of the things that may keep a person from hearing the Good News in its right form is the presuppositions of his native culture and religion. A Christian of our culture may know the words that a missionary has spoken to, say, a Buddhist who thereafter remains a Buddhist; he will not necessarily know what the Buddhist has heard. I do not know, but I suspect, that many people in our own culture who are, formally, apostate Christians may never have heard the Christian message in its right form. I certainly hope so, and the statements that many apostate Christians make about the content of the Christian message encourage me in this hope.)

The way for a Christian to look at the saving power of the Church is, I believe, like this: The Church is like an invading army that, having established a bridgehead in occupied territory, moves on into the interior, consolidating its gains as it goes. All those who do not consciously and deliberately cast in their lot with the retreating enemy and flee with

16. The salvation of Enoch, Abraham, Moses, and Elijah seems to be clearly implied in various passages of the Old and New Testaments—and, indeed, the salvation of a great cloud of pre-Christian witnesses.

him to his final refuge will be liberated—even those who, misled by enemy propaganda, fear and mistrust the advancing army of liberation.

If an army establishes a bridgehead, it must establish it at some particular place. “And why in Palestine?” Because that’s where Israel was. “And why did God choose to locate His people there rather than in India or China?” Well, it would have to be *somewhere*. Why *not* there? The question borders on the absurd, although it has been pointed out that Palestine is approximately at the center of the great Euro-Afro-Asian supercontinent. Why did the Allied armies land in Normandy? No doubt Eisenhower and Montgomery had their reasons. But if a skeptical Norman farmer or Resistance fighter had heard rumors of the Allied landing, and had asked “Why *here*?” you wouldn’t have to know the reasons the Allied commanders had for choosing the Normandy beaches to answer him. It would suffice to point out that the same question could be raised about any reported landing site by those who happened to be in its vicinity, and that the question therefore raised no doubts about the veracity of the rumor.

“But why should our salvation be accomplished by the institution of something that can be compared to an invading army?” I have no idea, although I am glad that God has chosen a method that allows some of His servants the inestimable (and entirely unearned) honor of being His co-workers in bringing salvation to others. Perhaps there was no other way. Perhaps there were lots of other ways, but this one recommended itself to the divine wisdom for reasons that surpass human understanding. Or perhaps the reasons are ones we could understand but that it would not, at present, be profitable for us to know (“What is that to thee? Follow thou Me.”). But I am sure of one thing. Anyone who believes in God, in a being of literally infinite knowledge and power and wisdom, and who believes that human beings require salvation, and who thinks he can see that God would not have used such a method to procure our salvation, has a very high opinion of his own powers of a priori reason.

If we are Christians we must believe that salvation has not come to humanity through Confucius or Gautama or Mohammed. We must believe that the salvation of humanity began with events that were quite unrelated to the lives and teachings of these men. We must believe that it began when some women standing outside a tomb were told, “He is not here.” Perhaps there is some authority who has discovered good reasons for thinking that these central Christian beliefs are false. If so, it is not John Hick.

PART III

Trinity and Incarnation