



## Christ and the World of Religions

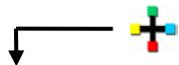
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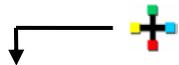
"Jesus Christ, the Life of the World", the theme of the forthcoming Vancouver Assembly, is a slogan which raises – as it is intended to do – large issues affecting the entire life of the church and of the world. Among these is the issue of relations between the religions. The World Council of Churches has always sought to keep the name of Jesus in the centre, because the only unity we can rightly hope for is unity in that name. But how are we to relate the claim, that Jesus is the life of the world, to the living experience of the millions of people of other faiths who share our world in ever closer neighbourhood? If so, is he their life as Hindus or Moslems or Buddhists, or *in spite of* their affiliation to these world religions? My purpose in this article is to explore the meaning of the theme for the understanding of inter-faith relationships.

In every strand of the New Testament, Jesus is spoken of as the one who has brought life into the world. The whole Christian reality – life and message – starts from the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. Jesus is thus "the author of life" (Acts 3:14). His flesh is that which gives life to the world (John 6:51). In Adam all die, but in Christ shall all be made alive (1 Cor. 15:22). Eternal life, the life of God himself, has been given to believers and "this life is in his Son" (1 John 5:11).

This identification of Jesus with the gift of life is almost always made against the background (stated or implied) of death. All natural life is a process of dying. It hurries towards death. "The world" is the totality of that which is dying. The life which Jesus is, and which he offers, is life which does not end in death, but starts from death. Jesus does not say, "I am the life and the resurrection", but "I am the resurrection and the life". The life he lives, and which he gives to believers, is life on the further side of death. "You died", says the apostle, "and your life is hid with Christ in God" (Col. 3:3). The life given is the life of the dead man, so that Paul can say "I have been crucified with Christ", and then go on to speak of "the life I now live... by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself up for me" (Gal. 2:20). It follows that he can

describe his ministry as "bearing about in the body the dying of Jesus so that the life of Jesus may be manifested in our body" (2 Cor. 4:10).

The New Testament thus speaks of Jesus as "life for the world", rather than as "the life of the world" Nevertheless, the latter phrase points to a fact to which the New Testament bears witness. Nowhere is the contrast between life and death drawn more sharply than in the



fourth gospel. Yet this gospel in its prologue is the one which insists most strongly that the coming of Jesus into the world was not the coming of a stranger but the coming of the one to whom the world owes its being and its life. Through him all things came to be, and "all that came to be was life in him" (John 1:3-4). This life is then identified as "the light of men", but it is immediately added that "the light shines in the darkness", and the evangelist develops the story in such a way as to show that the presence of life in Jesus is confronted with the total hostility of the powers of darkness and death which rule this world and which have their primary focus in the world of religion. The whole story is told in such a way as to portray in the sharpest contrast the facts that death reigns in the world and that life is offered to the world through the dying of Jesus, so that it is those who believe who have "life in his name" (John 20:31). The Christian church exists because those who did believe and did receive life were constrained by the power of that life to go out and share it with others. The sense of urgency which marks that action of sharing can not be separated from the awareness that death does reign in the world, that all the roads we travel – whether in our personal lives or in the public life of the world – end in death.

And yet the Christian conscience cannot fail to be troubled by the sharpness with which this line is drawn between life and death. How much good there is, even in this dying world! Does not God appreciate it as much as we do? How much nobility there is in men and women who live and die without faith in Jesus! Does God condemn them all to eternal perdition? And can it really be that all the millions of men and women and little children who have lived and died before Jesus came, or before the gospel reached them, are consigned to the bonfire? Can a God who does – or even allow – such things, be the object of our love and reverence? Questions such as these cannot be silenced.

But if we answer them by saying that the question of belief in Jesus is not so critical after all, what are the implications? I am not impressed by the argument that weakening of conviction at this point undermines the work of missions. There is something loathsome in the idea that we teach a morally abhorrent doctrine in order to maintain support for our enterprise. No, the question is one of truth: Is the death of Jesus really the crucial event in which God's grace and power met and mastered the powers of evil? Or is it only one of many illustrations (perhaps the greatest) of what God is always doing, of a grace and power which are available always and everywhere apart from that particular event? And if it is indeed the decisive event for the deliverance of the world from death, does it follow that all who have not explicitly accepted the gift of life in the name of Jesus are condemned to eternal death? This is the question which we have to try to answer.

I find it hard to plan a route through the jungle of argumentative literature which has grown up around this issue in the past fifty years. As one possible and promising route, I propose to reopen the debate



between Hendrik Kraemer and A. G. Hogg, which was started by the publication of Kraemer's *Christian Message in a Non-Christian World* in 1938, developed at the Tambaram conference that year, and continued in the writings of both men till their deaths. This debate has served as a point of reference in many later discussions, and has recently been re-examined in the writings of Eric Sharpe,<sup>1</sup> J. L. Cox,<sup>2</sup> O. V. Jathanna<sup>3</sup> and C. Badrinath.<sup>4</sup> Both Kraemer and Hogg were

exceptionally gifted and sensitive thinkers. Each was aware of the strength of the other's position. The discussion between them takes us (I think) to the heart of the matter. In summarizing and commenting on the debate, I am much indebted to the masterly work of O. V. Jathanna referred to above.

### **Kraemer: biblical realism**

Kraemer begins by drawing a contrast between "religious and moral ideas" and "the revelation of a connected series of divine acts". It is the latter which must be our starting-point, and we therefore turn to the Bible as "the only legitimate source from which to take our knowledge of the Christian faith".<sup>5</sup> The Bible is a radically theocentric book. It shows us God in action, taking the initiative. It is here, not in any general ideas of "religion" as a human experience, that we find our starting-point. The heart of the "connected series of divine acts" is of course the incarnation, life, death and resurrection of Jesus under Pontius Pilate. This is an absolutely unique event in history by which the whole human situation is changed. It is not merely the communication of divine truth, but the restoration of mankind to the proper relationship with God. It is a revealing which necessarily involves a veiling, because man estranged from God does not recognize God. The revelation therefore involves contradiction. It can be received only in faith. The action of God in Jesus Christ has made possible what is otherwise impossible, "that sinful man can walk with God the holy and righteous in unbroken and undefiled fellowship".<sup>6</sup>

This action of God in Jesus Christ is to be distinguished from all the phenomena of religion, including those of the religion called Christianity – which is an ambiguous affair always requiring to be brought under the judgement of the revelation as testified in the Bible.

Is there, then, revelation otherwise than in Jesus? Yes – for God reveals himself in nature, in history and in conscience. No – because it is only in the light of God's action in Christ that we can discern his revelation in nature, history and conscience. Apart from this, nature is an enigma full of both cruelty and beauty; history is a tangle of good and evil in which God's revelation of himself is by no means obvious; and conscience, like every other human faculty, is distorted by sin. So the attitude of the Christian to the phenomena of religion must be a dialectical one, a combination of "yes" and "no", "the human and broken



reflection of the divine "no" and "yes" of the holy God of reconciliation who holds the world under his absolute judgement and at the same time claims it for his grace."<sup>7</sup> The "no" which has to be pronounced against all human religion is the reflection of God's judgement on the sin which corrupts all human life, including (especially) human religion. The "yes" is the reflection of the fact that, even when the world rebelled against him, "God did not let it go, but held it fast in his new initiative of reconciliation".<sup>8</sup>

### **Hogg: non-Christian faith**

A. G. Hogg was a philosopher, and spent his long missionary career teaching philosophy in India. His teaching and personality were to have a deep influence on a whole generation of Hindu thinkers, of whom his student Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan was the most distinguished. As a teacher in a residential college, Hogg had deep and lasting friendships with Hindus. He could not doubt the reality of their experience of God. He was absolutely clear about the centrality and decisiveness of God's revelation of himself in Jesus, but he reasoned from his own experience of God in Jesus that the God who revealed himself thus could only be the God who is seeking always and everywhere to woo men and women from their estrangement and unbelief to a filial trust in their heavenly father. He was sure that at the heart of the religious experience of his Hindu friends, with all its errors and falsehoods, there was a faith which was a partial and defective, yet real, response to this divine pleading.

Thus Hogg was led to challenge Kraemer at two principal points. First, Kraemer had started from the distinction between the unique revelation in Jesus and the empirical phenomena of religion, including Christianity. Hogg argued that an analogous distinction must be made between the *faith* of the non-Christian, in which there is a real though partial response to a real revelation, and the *faiths* – the complexes of belief and practice – which have been built around this central reality to form the non-Christian religions. These latter are full of error which the Christian missionary must lay bare. But the existence of these errors does not destroy the reality of the faith, nor does it require us to deny the reality of the revelation to which this faith is a response. Non-Christian faith, therefore, is "not merely a seeking but in real measure a finding, and a finding by contact with which the Christian may be helped to make fresh discoveries in his own finding of God in Christ."<sup>9</sup> Thus "it is radically wrong for a missionary to approach men of other faiths under a conviction – no matter how sincerely humble that conviction may be – that he and his fellow-believers are witnesses to a divine revelation, while other religions are exclusively the product of a "human religious consciousness".<sup>10</sup>

Secondly, Kraemer had affirmed the uniqueness of God's revelation



in terms which appeared to suggest that revelation occurs nowhere but in Jesus. Hogg also affirms the uniqueness of the revelation in Jesus, but finds the uniqueness in the *content* of the revelation, not simply in the *fact* of its occurrence. God is always revealing himself, though some fail to respond. What is unique about Jesus is that here alone was the perfect response, and therefore the full and perfect manifestation of God's will and purpose. The uniqueness does not lie in the fact *that* a revelation took place, but in *what* was revealed. The "what" is the person and work and teaching of Jesus, which "must win conviction by its own direct appeal".<sup>11</sup>

The debate reopened

In the recent discussions, Sharpe and Cox have emphatically sided with Hogg against Kraemer. Badrinath, looking at the debate from the side of Indian religion and culture, is quite clear that Kraemer has understood the real nature of the encounter between dhanna and the gospel – while Hogg has not. Jathanna is more even-handed, and makes the following criticisms of both parties. Of Kraemer, he complains that he gives inadequate attention to the content of the revelation in Jesus; that he does not explain clearly the importance for faith of the historical (as against mythological) character of the revelation; that he does not explain how Christ's act of reconciliation is effective for those who lived and died before the gospel reached them; and that while acknowledging that God is somehow at work in the non-Christian religions, he does not relate this to his work in Christ. Of Hogg, Jathanna complains that he sees Jesus too simply as an impressive personality, that he limits the reconciling work of God to the theistic religions, that he does not sufficiently take account of the hiddenness of God's revelation and of the scandal of the cross, and that the distinction between faith and faiths will not stand the weight which Hogg puts on it.

For my own part I am convinced, with Badrinath, that it is Kraemer rather than Hogg who rightly identified the issue between the gospel and Hinduism. It is the issue between a view which takes the religious consciousness as the fundamental datum for discussion, and the view which takes history – the shared history of the human race – as fundamental. I propose, therefore, to begin by giving reasons for being unable to follow Hogg, and then to try to throw some light on the weaknesses which Jathanna has correctly identified in the position of Kraemer.

### **A critique of Hogg's position**

1) Basic to Hogg's position, is the distinction between "faith" and "faiths". This is very closely parallel to the distinction on which Wilfred Cantwell Smith bases his discussion of *The Meaning and End of Religion*.<sup>12</sup>



Smith speaks of "faith" in the sense of "man's religiousness". He takes this to be a universal feature of human nature, basically the same everywhere. He contrasts with this "the cumulative tradition" which – in many varied forms – has been developed from this "religiousness" and continues to shape it. Two points have to be made on this. First, faith, in any usual sense of the word, has an object. It is faith *that* something is the case or will be the case, or it is faith *in* someone or something which exists. Faith cannot be defined without reference to its object. For Smith this object is "the Transcendent", which is the same for everyone. However, the discussion makes it clear that this is a purely formal concept; no material content can be given to it. The words "true" or "false" cannot be ascribed to any statement about its nature. There can be no such thing as a misdirected faith. The concept of idolatry, for instance, is meaningless. "No one in the whole history of man has ever worshipped an idol. Men have worshipped God – or something – in the form of an idol."<sup>13</sup> This is to sever faith from reality.

For Hogg, also, faith is a universal fact of human life; it is the human response to the divine pleading. But the response is distorted by error, and therefore the missionary must seek to expose and dispel the error so that faith may correspond to its true object. Nevertheless the faith – even if distorted by error – was a real response to a real divine communication. This is a far more satisfactory position than that of Smith, but it is open to difficulty. Is the faith of the non-Christian defective simply because of misunderstanding? Is it simply that the lenses need changing so that the vision may be clearer? In a sentence to which Kraemer drew sharp attention, Hogg wrote: "In India, for example, what of divine truth and reality has, owing to the initiative of the self-revealing God, succeeded in shining through to man is all inevitably stained by the medium of monistic tendency through which it had to pass."<sup>14</sup> On this, Kraemer commented that this monistic tendency "is not a regrettable side-issue but the pride, the most precious possession and the most valued achievement (so they feel it) of India."<sup>15</sup> Is this a case of misunderstanding, or of misdirected faith? Would one say of a devout Moslem that his faith-response to God was distorted by the fact that it had to pass through the teaching and personality of the Prophet? And if we were dealing only with misunderstanding, would not the devout Hindus and Moslems be the most eager to welcome the gospel as clarifying what they had understood in a distorted way? The experience of missionaries and evangelists does not support this view. Faith and faiths cannot be so clearly distinguished.

Secondly, in any case, Hogg was surely wrong in saying that his distinction between faith and faiths was analogous to Kraemer's distinction between the gospel and Christianity.<sup>16</sup> Sharpe is similarly misled when he refers to Kraemer's distinction between the gospel and Christianity as "his separation between the ideal and the actual in religion".<sup>17</sup> This is a complete misunderstanding of Kraemer. Kraemer



was not contrasting faith in its purest form (let us say, for example, that of St Paul) with that of the average church-goer. If that were the point, then there is certainly an analogous distinction between, say, the faith of Ramanuja and the faith of an average Vaishnava. But Kraemer's point is quite different. He is talking about the object to which the faith of Paul was directed, namely the action of God in the person and work of Jesus. The distinction which Kraemer is making puts St Paul and the average church-goer on one side, and this divine action on the other. There are indeed some places in Hogg's writing where it seems as if he is making the distinction not between the faith of St Paul and the faith of the average church-goer, but between the latter and the faith of Jesus. The faith of Jesus is thus the starting-point of Christianity, and the difference between Christianity and the religions is that the faith of Jesus was the perfect response to God's

revelation, while that of even the greatest saints of India was imperfect and distorted. If that were a true account of the gospel (and I am not saying that this was Hogg's position), then Hogg's distinction would indeed be analogous to Kraemer's. But, without entering into the large discussion which this could prompt, I must affirm my belief that Jesus is not just the first Christian believer, but is the object of Christian believing, being in himself – in his full humanity – the presence of God in the midst of human history. Hogg certainly believed this.

2) Hogg's contention that behind the errors and distortions of non-Christian faiths there is a faith which is a real response to divine self-revelation, has to meet the difficulty pointed out by Kraemer and others that the gospel narratives do not seem to support it. If the faith which is the central core of the many faiths is really a response to the self-manifestation of the Father of Jesus, how is it that it was the men of faith who took the lead in the decision to destroy him? All the gospels make clear the fact that the driving force of the movement which led to the cross was located in the religious leadership of the nation. It was not in spite of their faith, but because of their faith, that the religious leaders of Israel saw Jesus as an enemy of God. No account of the relation between religion and the revelation of God in Jesus can stand unless it can illuminate this fact.

3) Granted, as I think a Christian believer must grant, that Hogg is right in his belief that God is always seeking to win his erring children to himself, why should it be assumed that religion is the human response to this endeavour? What ground is there for thinking that religion is the sphere of God's special working? In the prologue to the fourth gospel, it is said both that Jesus is the light that lightens every man, and also that the light shines in the darkness. And it is made clear that religion is, above all, the area of darkness. While "the common people heard him gladly", the religious leaders were those who most implacably rejected him. And, on the other hand, the gospels give many examples of ordinary human goodness, faithfulness and sensitivity



to truth as being the place where Jesus finds the response which he seeks. The good Samaritan is contrasted with the holy men who have no time to be human. The Roman soldier's readiness to trust is contrasted with the stubborn unbelief of God's own people. Those who say "Lord! Lord!" are contrasted with those who get on with doing God's will. There is, in fact, little ground in the gospels for seeing religion as the primary sphere of God's gracious dealing with men, or of men's response.

4) Finally, I think that Jathanna is justified in criticizing Hogg's Christology. He complains that Hogg portrays Jesus as an immensely impressive personality who compels assent by the sheer attractiveness of his character. He writes: "The New Testament is not so concerned to present Jesus as an impression-making "personality", but basically as the one who died for the sins of the world and was raised by God to be the one Lord and Saviour of mankind, and as the one who comes to judge the living and the dead."<sup>18</sup> Jathanna is surely right, but the point must be made even more sharply. While Jesus certainly made a tremendous impression on his contemporaries, the outcome showed that much of it was based on misunderstanding. In the end, his contemporaries were practically unanimous (whether in sorrow or in anger) in rejecting him. Even the chosen disciples become unbelievers when the full nature of the revelation was made plain in the cross. The birth of Christianity cannot be understood as the result of the impression made by Jesus on his contemporaries. It can only be understood in the way the New Testament indicates: that is, by accepting the fact that Christianity was born because certain people were chosen and called to be the witnesses of a revelation which was otherwise no revelation at all, but rather a scandal or a nonsense. It is surely significant, in view of Hogg's portrayal of Jesus, that the Old Testament text most frequently quoted in the New Testament is the terrible word spoken to Isaiah: "Go and say to this people, "Hear and hear but do not understand; see and see but do not perceive"" (Isa. 6:9). This paradox of a revelation which is also a veiling, an affirmation which is

also a contradiction, is one that cannot be evaded if we are to do justice to the witness of Scripture.

In his defence of Hogg against Kraemer, Cox writes: "Hogg's point was that the historical occurrence of Christ's life, death and resurrection cannot be understood properly as God's unique act of revelation. We determine this fact from the kind of personality we meet in Jesus, from whom we learn that any attempt to restrict God's efforts of self-disclosure are untrue to the nature of God and of his dealing with men"<sup>19</sup>. The unexamined assumption here is that God's efforts at self-disclosure must be directed to each person individually. But the Bible seems to teach consistently that God's gift of salvation (which is certainly intended for all) works by the principle of election, one being chosen to be the means of God's saving grace to others. We shall look at the rationale of this in discussing Kraemer. It is the weakness of

Hogg and of his contemporary champions that they do not seem to have pondered the significance of the biblical doctrine of election.

### **Kraemer cross-examined**

From Hogg we turn to Kraemer and to the criticisms which Jathanna directs against his position. I hope that, by giving full attention to these criticisms, we may be able to build on Kraemer's foundations something which can begin at least to meet these just criticisms.

1) Jathanna says that Kraemer does not give enough attention to the question "How did the disciples become believers?" Here Kraemer is weak where Hogg is strong. In his concern to emphasize the "happened-ness" of the revelation, the *fact* that God has revealed himself, he does not give enough attention to the content of the revelation. This is a criticism often made by liberal theologians against Barth. Hogg, as we have seen, thought that a real grasp of the content of the revelation – namely, of the utter winsomeness of Jesus in all his words and works – would have prevented Kraemer from thinking that such a loving God would hide himself from his children everywhere except in this one act of revelation.

I think that Jathanna's criticism is justified, but the answer to it is not, as we have seen, to be found in the direction indicated by Hogg. Christianity was not born because men and women were captivated by the winsomeness of the personality of Jesus. It was born out of the total unbelief and despair of the disciples, because certain of them had been chosen to be witnesses of his resurrection and therefore bearers to the world of the (otherwise absurd and scandalous) message that the saving power of God has been effectively set forth in the death of a man by crucifixion. As far as I can see, however, Kraemer did not turn his attention in either of his two major works in this field to the missionary significance of the doctrine of election. I shall have to come back to this again.

2) Jathanna complains that Kraemer did not provide an adequate statement of the grounds for his very sharp distinction between the historical and the mythological. Kraemer's position depends upon the absolute distinction between something which has happened as part of public history and something which is essentially an idea in the mind clothed in the form of a story. It is not difficult – at least for a western mind – to grasp this distinction and to feel its importance. The world is full of stories which are treasured and handed on because they express some truth about human experience – truth which remains valid even if the story is only a story. The story of Jesus is treasured in this way by many devout Hindus, along with the many other stories which illustrate in other ways the truth about human life – To insist that the events recorded in the gospels really happened, to place them in the same continuum as the events reported in the daily newspapers, not only

adds nothing to their significance for me now but actually devalues them by assimilating them to the transient and insubstantial happenings of this world of the senses.

Badrinath, writing from the Indian standpoint, sees this as the crucial issue. In attempting to answer the question "What is Christianity?", he writes:

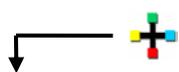
At the very heart of Christianity, as religion, is man as person, expressing himself through history, and God's revelation coming to him in history. The fall of the primeval man, because he chose to defy the word of God, was an experience in history. Similarly, when he learns to submit to the will of God, man's redemption is an experience in history. So that man, tainted by sin but given the promise of redemption, is grounded in history.... Christianity was a new interpretation of history. *History* remains the most central idea of Christianity, as it did of Hebraic religion-history being the movement of time which had a beginning and would have an end, through which God expresses his fulness, as does man.<sup>20</sup>

It follows that Badrinath sees Kraemer as the one who correctly perceived the issues between Christianity and *dharma*. He writes:

Kraemer was by no means the first missionary to see the trap of syncretism; but he was certainly the first to make it the central point of a coherent and serious argument as to what was really involved in the Christian encounter with the so-called Hinduism.... What possible relation could there be between the Christian revelation, considered as unique and absolute, and another world view where nothing was considered either unique or absolute?<sup>21</sup>

And at a later point in his discussion he writes: "I know of no other western missionary in India who expressed in his writings as clearly as Kraemer did an understanding of *that* in the *dharmaic* India against which Christianity was helpless."<sup>22</sup> Writing as a sceptical student of religion from within the *dharmaic* culture, Badrinath correctly perceives the incompatibility of a claim that the absolute has been revealed in a historic event with the world of "religious experience" which cannot possibly accept any absolute claim.

Badrinath does not accept the Christian claim, but he correctly sees that it is incompatible with Hindu *dharma* because it interprets human life as being essentially participation in history. From this point of view he sees the work of Indian Christian theologians such as Raymond Panikkar as simply the disappearance of Christianity into the labyrinth of *dharma* within which the idea of absolute truth is meaningless. Here we are in a timeless world, in which each individual is related directly to the ultimate reality and there can be no happening in the fleeting world of events which confronts man with truth, and therefore with the necessity for decision. Badrinath therefore quotes with emphatic



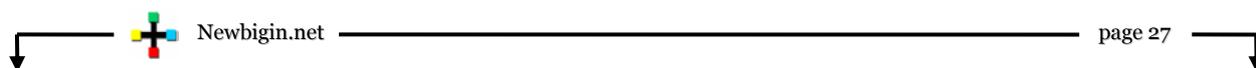
approval the statement of Kraemer that "the amiable suavity which often sweetens this pseudo-tolerance so agreeably ought not to blind our eyes to the fact that it is dearly bought at the price of a radical relativism."<sup>23</sup>

But I think that Jathanna is justified in asking for something more than Kraemer has given at this point. Let it be granted that the radical incommensurability of the two world-views, which Kraemer and Badrinath assert, is real. And let it be granted that the decision between them rests on a faith-commitment and not on any logically compelling demonstration. We must yet, I think, ask for further clarification, and this is where we have to invoke the biblical idea of election. If it is true that God fulfils his purpose of salvation not by making himself immediately accessible to every human soul considered as a separate entity but by means of events at particular times and places, this is only compatible with what we learn of God in Jesus if it is also true that these particular events are, in some sense, for the sake of all. This is what – as I understand it – the

biblical teaching about election makes clear. As I have argued elsewhere,<sup>24</sup> the doctrine of election is to be understood in connection with the biblical doctrine of man as a whole: that human beings are not to be understood as autonomous monads but always as mutually related; that salvation must therefore be in and through this relatedness; that therefore the saving deeds and words must always be mediated through one to another; that this is conclusively demonstrated in Paul's argument (Rom. 9-11) that even the Jews can in the end only be saved through the Gentiles; and that those who have been chosen and called to be the witnesses of God's saving actions are so chosen and called in order to bring others into their saving power. From the standpoint of this biblical understanding of human nature, Hogg's insistence that a loving Father must necessarily have made his saving revelation available to everyone, apart from particular events in history, is seen to rest upon a initial mistake.

3) The third complaint which Jathanna makes against Kraemer is much the most difficult to deal with. It is that Kraemer fails to answer the following question: If it is true that in Christ God has done the saving deed which "opened up a way where there was no way" for the whole human race, how can this deed be effective for those who lived and died before Christ was born or before the gospel was brought to them? As far as I can see, Kraemer did not attempt to answer that question, and it cries out for an answer.

One must begin from Scripture. Unquestionably, the New Testament at many points uses language which suggests that the work of Christ avails for those who lived and died before his incarnation. I begin with the argument of Romans 5, where a parallel is drawn between Christ and Adam. The relevant passage opens with a reference to Adam: "As sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all men sinned -". The sentence



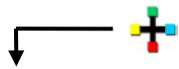
breaks off at that point, and the thought is resumed at verse 17:

If, because of one man's trespass, death reigned through that one man, much more will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man Jesus Christ. Then as one man's trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one man's act of righteousness leads to acquittal and life for all men. For as by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so by one man's obedience many will be made righteous (Rom. 5:17-19).

By drawing a parallel between Adam and Christ, Paul here certainly suggests that the new relation to God inaugurated by Jesus is as universal in its scope as the old relation of sin and death inaugurated by Adam. It would certainly be wrong to suggest that this new relation is established apart from any decision to accept it. If that were maintained, one would have to construe verse 12 in the same way, that is to say as meaning that the sin of Adam makes all men guilty apart from their own acts of disobedience. That belief has a long history but modern exegesis of the text does not support it. Nevertheless, these verses do imply a view of Christ's work of reconciliation which gives it a universal scope analogous to that of sin and death. The same analogy is suggested in 1 Corinthians 15:22: "As in Adam all die, so in Christ shall all be made alive." And the long argument of Romans 9-11, with its triumphant assurance that "all Israel will be saved" (11:26) and its conclusion that "God has consigned all men to disobedience that he may have mercy on all" (11:32) would seem to be unintelligible unless Paul has in view the whole of Israel and the whole of the human race, past and present. Moreover, the reference to God's "forbearance" in Romans 3:25f. seems to imply that, in some way, the expiation accomplished on Calvary was effective for those who lived and died before Christ.<sup>25</sup>

It is congruous with this that the New Testament in many places assumes that the patriarchs and prophets of Israel will share in the joy of the kingdom (e.g. Matt. 8:11; Luke 13:28f.; John 8:56; Heb. 11:39ff.). The teaching of the letter to the Hebrews is particularly

explicit that God's saving purpose cannot be accomplished apart from the faithful of former days who longed for but did not see the coming of the kingdom. And in this letter, the line of the pre-Christian faithful goes back beyond Abraham to Noah and Abel, and therefore involves in principle the whole human race. In one of Jesus' sayings, the suggestion is made that the pagan sinners of Nineveh and the pagan queen of Sheba will be present on the great day to condemn the unbelieving people of Israel (Matt. 12:41ff.). And there are other passages which affirm that those who are now in the world of the dead will in the end acknowledge Jesus as Lord (e.g. Phil. 2:10; Rev. 5:13). Finally, there are the passages which speak of Jesus himself going to the world of the dead to summon them (see John 5:25 and Eph. 4:9f.,

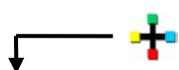


and compare Rom. 10:7 where Paul has replaced the original "Who will go over the sea?" by "Who will descend into the abyss?". I do not refer to 1 Pet. 4:6, since it seems possible that "the dead" in this verse are the Christians who have died, not the dead in general)

None of this teaching can be construed to mean what is usually called "universalism", for it lies always in close relation with teaching about judgement and the dread possibility of final perdition. But it does make it clear that, in the biblical view, all of history is in some sense a unity, with the incarnation of the eternal Word of God as the centre which gives it meaning. It is only within the framework which this view provides, that we can understand the decisiveness of the Christ-event for all times and all people. Apart from that one centre, life has no meaning, and that is true equally for those who lived before and for those who live after. And if one rejects this framework, and asks that life must find its final meaning in the religious experience of each individual apart from his relatedness through others to the whole of history and to the whole of nature, one is flying from reality. It is in this direction, rather than by invoking, as Jathanna does,<sup>26</sup> the idea of reincarnation for a "second chance", that the question posed to Kraemer by Jathanna has to be answered.

4) Jathanna's final complaint against Kraemer is that while he says that God has never left himself without witness among those who are without the gospel, and that "the religious and moral life of man is man's achievement but also God's wrestling with him",<sup>27</sup> he does not explain how this witness and this wrestling are related to God's work in Christ: Early Christian writers made use of the doctrine of the Logos to affirm their belief that the righteous pagans of antiquity would share in the kingdom along with the saints of Israel. The saying of the fourth gospel that Jesus is the light that lightens every man has been invoked to support this affirmation. The difficulty which this raises is twofold. First, sober exegesis of the text in its context, and in the light of general Johannine usage, strongly suggests that what is referred to is not the inner illumination of conscience and reason, but the light of truth which shines on all men, bringing all under judgement. Jesus, in other words, is the reality with whom all must reckon, for he is the one light as he is the source of all life. Secondly, the use of this idea has usually led to a moralistic way of interpreting the work of Christ, so that he is seen as the Saviour of the good and wise of former days, not as the Saviour of sinners. I think, therefore, against Jathanna, that Kraemer is not to be blamed for not using the doctrine of the Logos to answer the question "How is God at work in the non-Christian religions?".

If we take as our guide the texts referred to in the preceding section, we shall be led to a different way of answering the question. These – especially the letter to the Hebrews, but also the references to the men of Nineveh and the queen of Sheba – suggest that it is the men and women of faith, those who looked for that which is not yet seen, who



are to share in the final victory. It is not those who are satisfied with what they have, but those who with unquenchable faith seek "the city whose builder and maker is God" (Heb. 11:10) who

will be rewarded. It is those who hunger and thirst after righteousness who will be filled. But this hungering and seeking is not (as Hogg rightly insisted) simply man's work. It is indeed the evidence of God's work: "You would not seek me if I had not already found you". It is the sign that God has not abandoned his estranged children.

W. E. Hocking has defined faith as a "reversed scepticism", a refusal to grant the last word to things as they are. Such faith does not necessarily express itself in religious terms. Even in very secular terms it can be a "signal of transcendence",<sup>28</sup> witness to a reality beyond sight and logic. That reality is the triune God – the Father who is the source and sustainer of all, the Spirit at work in hearts and consciences, and the Son, Jesus, whom we know because he has met us in the flesh. Because "all things were made through him", and because "that which has been made was life in him", and because that light is the light of men, we are unable to find the fulness of life apart from him, and there is a hunger and thirst which can only be quenched by him. When we seek satisfaction in something other, we are on the way to death. The world as a whole does just that, and therefore is on the way to death.

When we say that Jesus is the life of the world, we are not identifying him with anything within this world-on-the-way-to-death, whether it be religious or secular. We are saying that he is the source of the world's life – the source, therefore, of that hunger which can only be fully satisfied when he is received as Lord and Saviour. If we ask how he is present in the world apart from that acceptance, part at least of the answer must be that he is present in that faith – whether religious or secular – which is open and eager for a reality beyond what now is. Just as physical hunger is a sign of life, so the hunger and thirst for righteousness to which Jesus promises satisfaction is itself the sign of the active presence of him who is the source of the world's life.

#### NOTES

1. E. Sharpe, *The Theology of Hogg* (Christian Literature Society, Madras 1971), pp.75-82; *Faith meets Faith* (SCM Press, London 1977), pp.91-102; "The Legacy of A. G. Hogg", *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, 6, 1982, pp.659.
2. J. L. Cox, "The Development of A. G. Hogg's Theology in Relation to the Non-Christian Faiths", unpublished PhD Thesis (1977) in possession of Aberdeen University; "Faith and Faiths: The Significance of A. G. Hogg's Missionary Thought for a Theology of Dialogue", *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 31, 1974, pp.241-54.
3. O. V. Jathanna, *The Decisiveness of the Christ Event and the Universality of Christianity in a World of Religious Plurality*, (Peter Lang, Berne, Frankfurt, Las Vegas 1981), pp.62-200.
4. C. Badrinath, "The Labyrinth: A History of the Western Encounter with India", unpublished work quoted by kind permission of the author.
5. H. Kraemer, *The Christian Message in a Non-Christian World* (Edinburgh House Press, London 1938), p.61.
6. *ibid.*, p.75.
7. *ibid.*, p.104.
8. *ibid.*, loc. cit.
9. A. C. Hogg, "The Christian Attitude to Non-Christian Faith" in *The Authority of the Faith* (IMC Tambaram Series, Vol.1, 1939), p.103.
10. *ibid.*, p.106.
11. *ibid.*, p.125.
12. W. Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion* (Macmillan, New York 1962; SPCK, London 1978).
13. *ibid.*, p.141.
14. Hogg, *op.cit.*, p.108.
15. H. Kraemer, *Religion and the Christian Faith* (Lutterworth Press, London 1956), p.227.
16. Hogg, *op.cit.*, p.104.
17. Sharpe, *IBMR*, 6, p.66.
18. Jathanna, *op. cit.*, p.262.

19. Cox, *SJT*, 31, p.252.
20. Badrinath, *op. cit.*, pp.417ff.
21. *ibid.*, p.453f.
22. *ibid.*, p.528.
23. Kraemer, *Christian Message*, p.207, quoted in Badrinath, *op. cit.*, p.530.
24. Newbiggin, *The Open Secret* (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids 1978; SPCK, London, 1979), pp.7387.
25. I am grateful to Sir Norman Anderson for drawing my attention to the significance of this passage for the present discussion.
26. Jathanna, *op. cit.*, pp.470-81.
27. Kraemer, *Christian Message*, p.104.
28. P. Berger, *A Rumour of Angels* (Penguin Books. London 1969).

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