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# A WESLEYAN RESPONSE TO RELIGIOUS PLURALISM: EVALUATION OF JOHN WESLEY'S THEOLOGY

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## Introduction

Ramakrishna Paramhansa (1836-1886), a Hindu priest, was one of the most influential religious figures in India. He once said<sup>1</sup>:

A lake has several ghats. At one the Hindus take water in pitchers and call it *jal*; at another the Musalmans take water in leather bags and call it *pani*. At a third, the Christians call it water. Can we imagine that it is not *jal*, but only *pani* or water? How ridiculous! The substance is one under different names, and everyone is seeking the same substance; only climate, temperament and name create differences.

A statement such as this represents the Hindu thinking that all the world religions are equal and valid ways to perceive the same ultimate reality. This thought, popularly called *Religious Pluralism*, has become a growing challenge to the exclusiveness of Christianity today. It says that no particular religion can claim its exclusiveness in the light of others. It is arguing against what in traditional evangelical Christian theology is the idea that Jesus Christ is the only way to salvation and that God's salvific grace is active only within the Christian faith. Therefore, the non-Christians or the unevangelized are bound to hell. As a consequence Christian theology is feeling the intense pressure of defending its uniqueness.

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<sup>1</sup>M. M. Thomas, "India: Toward an Indigenous Christian Theology," in *Asian Voices in Christian Theology*, ed. Gerald H. Anderson (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1976), p. 16, citing *The Gospel of Ramakrishna* (New York: Ramakrishna Vivekananda Center, 1942), p. 35.

In response to this situation, scholars from different Christian denominations have tried to answer this challenge of religious pluralism in various ways, yet it seems an appropriate response from the Christian church has been slow in coming. Evangelical Christians especially, says Dean Flemming, “have been relatively slow to grapple with the theological issues raised by the reality of religious pluralism.”<sup>2</sup> As a consequence, there may not be an adequate evangelical theology of religions on the scene. What the Christian church, (in particular the evangelical wing of the church), probably needs today is to formulate such a theology which could answer questions satisfactorily about the salvation and the eternal destiny of the unevangelized or those who heard about but choose not to accept Christ as their Saviour. (This does not, in any way, suggest that the satisfactory efforts have not been made yet.)

Therefore, it is appropriate to undertake this important study here and *attempt* to create a proper Wesleyan response to the delicate issue of religious pluralism.

### I. Pluralism and the Bible<sup>3</sup>

A suitable definition of religious pluralism would be that all world religions including Christianity are equal and valid ways to human salvation. Gnanakan defines pluralism as, “an attitude that will accept equal validity for all religions.”<sup>4</sup> Therefore, Christianity is not the only way to God’s kingdom as traditionally understood. It proclaims that every one including Hindu, Muslim, Buddhist has an equal access to heaven. In other words, one does not have to be necessarily believing in Jesus Christ for one’s eternal salvation. Thus the truth claim of Christianity that Jesus is the only way, the truth and the life becomes null and void.

However, this phenomenon of religious pluralism is not a new one. The Christian Church has been endeavouring to deal with it since its

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<sup>2</sup>Dean Flemming, “Foundations for Responding to Religious Pluralism,” *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 31:1 (Spring 1996): 52.

<sup>3</sup>Flemming has written a very good paper on the issue of religious pluralism mentioned in the Bible. Therefore, the entire discussion here is taken from his article: Dean Flemming, “Foundations for Responding to Religious Pluralism,” *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 31:1 (Spring 1996): 52.

<sup>4</sup>Ken Gnanakan, *The Pluralistic Predicament* (Bangalore, India: Theological Book Trust, 1992), p. 2.

beginning. Historically, Christianity has faced challenges from Greco-Roman mythology and philosophy, various religious controversies and conflicts within itself, and rise of Islam. And this, “exposure to other religions gained through these contacts helped to rekindle a diversity in theological evaluations of the availability of some knowledge of God apart from the definitive revelation of Christ.”<sup>5</sup>

But still the roots of religious pluralism go as far back as to the biblical times. In the Bible itself we find the tension between the exclusiveness of Yahweh’s religion and the pagan religions.

The Bible seems to picture the God of the Bible as very exclusive. For example, in the Old Testament, He warned His people not to follow the pagan religious practices of the Canaanites (Deut. 12:31). One of the ten commandments required people not to have any other gods besides Yahweh. Even the prophets of Israel repeatedly denounced and mocked the worship of false gods made with human hands (e.g., Isa. 40:19-20; 44:9ff.; Jer. 10:1-16; 51:17-18; cf 1 kings 18:27ff). Thus in the Old Testament we find a negative evaluation of human religions and a strong reaction against the worship of other gods.<sup>6</sup>

In the New Testament the theme of exclusiveness continues. The writers and apostles stressed the uniqueness of Jesus Christ. Peter, referring to Jesus Christ, said in Acts 4:12, “Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved” (NIV). Speaking within a context of religious pluralism in Corinth, Paul said that the gods of the pagan world were in fact non-existent beings and affirmed that there was only one God and one Lord Jesus Christ (see 1 Cor. 8:5-6). He went on to warn the believers in Corinth not to participate in feasts of idols because these idols in reality were demons and therefore their worship was demonic (1 Cor. 10:18ff). The church in Pergamum (a center of religious pluralism in Asia Minor) accommodated the pagan teachings and practices which in the book of Revelation are compared to Israel’s being led astray by Balaam into idolatry and immorality (Rev. 2:14ff).<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup>Randy L. Maddox, “Wesley and the Question of Truth or Salvation Through Other Religions (Presidential Address),” *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 27:1/2 (Spring-Fall 1992): 9.

<sup>6</sup>Flemming, “Foundations,” p. 55.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., p. 60.

Thus we assume that both testaments (Old and New) are against the worship of other gods and that the God of the Bible warned His people not to follow the pagan ways. As Flemming says, “The New Testament nowhere contradicts the Old Testament understanding of human religions as idolatrous, distorted by sin, under satanic influence and unable to save.”<sup>8</sup>

However, we also find that the same God who demanded separation of His people from the pagans has not limited His self-revelation to the community of Israel only, rather He has extended it outside this sphere. For example, in the Old Testament, He called Abraham out of a pagan Semitic culture. He revealed Himself to outsiders such as Abimelech, king of Gerar, and Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, in the form of a dream (Gen. 20:3; Dan. 4). Balaam, the pagan Mesopotamian diviner, was used by God to speak His word of blessing to Israel (see Num. 22:18-20 & 23:3ff). Job from the land of Uz, was spoken to by God directly and was called by Him as His servant and “a blameless and upright man who fears God and shuns evil” (Job 1:8).<sup>9</sup>

Also, in the New Testament, Jesus commended the “great faith” of the Roman centurion (Matt. 8:5-13) and of the Canaanite woman (Matt. 15:21-28). Both of these were gentiles and “outside the stream of God’s special revelation to the Jews.”<sup>10</sup> But later on at the end of the passage in Matt. 8:5-13 we see that Jesus was implying the inclusion of both Jew and Gentile in the messianic banquet in the kingdom of heaven (8:11). Also, in Acts 17:16ff, Paul had called the Athenians as very religious people and recognised that there was something genuine in the religious life of these pagans.<sup>11</sup>

Thus, we see that the Bible seemingly reveals the tension between exclusiveness and inclusiveness. On one hand, both testaments (Old and New) appear to be showing the exclusiveness of Yahweh, yet on the other they seem to be painting Him as an inclusive God. They indicate God’s inclusiveness in calling and bringing in the gentiles and using them for His purpose and glory. They also show us God’s grace is not limited to the Jewish community only, rather is at work outside among the gentiles leading them and their cultures toward God. There were people in the

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<sup>8</sup>Ibid.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., pp. 56-57.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., p. 62.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., pp. 62-65.

Bible who, although “outsiders,” yet had an authentic relationship with the true God. Based on this discussion, it seems that the Bible gives us both pictures about God: He is an exclusive God in a sense that He does not want other gods to be worshipped; and He is an inclusive God as far as His calling of various people is concerned. One more observation might be assumed here is that the Bible views other religions, “positively as sources of insight and as preparations for faith in the true God.”<sup>12</sup>

## II. John Wesley and Religious Pluralism

When we come down to the Wesleyan era, we notice that John Wesley was not totally ignorant of the issue of Christianity’s relation to other religions either. However, it would be interesting to note that whatever ultimate attitudes he had toward other religions he developed them over a period of several years.

Maddox suggests that Wesley had gone through three main periods as far as his theological thinking was concerned: the “early Wesley” (1733-38), “the middle Wesley” (1738-65) and the “late Wesley” (1765-91).

Earlier in his life Wesley characterised “all religion of those who have no revelation of Christ as demonic.”<sup>13</sup> The reason for this conclusion was his disappointing missionary work among the native Indians in Georgia (1736). Before he left for Georgia he had high hopes about the native Americans. He thought that these people possessed “a moral and religious clarity free from the distorting sophistications and ambitions of advanced culture.”<sup>14</sup> This understanding was based on the fact that he considered these people to be innocent “as little children, humble, willing to learn and eager to do the will of God.”<sup>15</sup> As a consequence, he assumed that they

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<sup>12</sup>Ibid., pp. 58-59.

<sup>13</sup>Maddox, “Wesley and the Question of Truth,” pp. 14-15

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., p. 11.

<sup>15</sup>Wesley in his letter to a friend (October 10, 1735) writes his motives for going to Georgia. Obviously this letter was written before his departure to Georgia: “My chief motive . . . is the hope of saving my soul. I hope to learn the true sense of the Gospel of Christ by preaching it to the Heathen. They have no comments to construe away the text; no vain philosophy to corrupt it; no luxurious, sensual, covetous, ambitious expounders to soften its unpleasing truths, to reconcile earthly-mindedness and faith, the Spirit of Christ and the spirit of the world. They have no party, no interest to serve, and are therefore fit to receive the Gospel in its

would “immediately discern if his doctrines were authentic or not.” However, later on in his actual encounter with them he was disillusioned and disappointed. He realised that he had unrealistic expectations of these people which resulted in his classifying their religion as demonic.<sup>16</sup> This disillusionment following 1738 caused him to give his most negative evaluations of initial universal revelation<sup>17</sup> of God. He did not deny it, but he saw it as nearly empty. However, by 1757 he believed that some knowledge of God was available to all only that it was not effective in producing virtuous (i.e., holy) lives. Later on between 1765-91 there was a shift in his thought about other religions. At this time he suggested that God might have taught some heathens all the essentials of true religion (i.e., holiness) by an “inward voice.” In this period, he claimed that the initial universal revelation enabled people to infer that there was a powerful and merciful Creator.<sup>18</sup>

There could be two limitations which hinder a more detailed exploration about John Wesley’s (more particularly the “late Wesley”) views on his attitudes toward other religions. *Firstly*, because of the little reliable information that was available in the 17th and 18th century England on other religions Wesley was unfortunate to be able to deal with only Judaism, Islam and Paganism of his day. *Secondly*, in Wesley’s days religious pluralism might not have been a major concern to the church. As a consequence Wesley did not write more on this topic. Therefore, it further restricts our discussion on this issue on an extensive level.

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simplicity. They are as little children, humble, willing to learn, and eager to do the will of God; and consequently, they shall know of every doctrine I preach, whether it be of God.” (John Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley*, 13 vols. [Kansas City, MO: Nazarene Publishing House, n.d.], 12:38.) Hereafter cited as Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley*.

<sup>16</sup>When we compare Wesley’s letter to his friend (10 Oct. 1735) (Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley*, 12:38) with his interview with five Chicasaw Indians as mentioned in his journal on 20 July 1736 (Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley*, 1:37-8), we find the difference between Wesley’s initial impression of the Indians before he went to Georgia and the actual state of these people when he came in contact with them. Therefore the reason for his disappointments.

<sup>17</sup>Initial universal revelation of God means all knowledge of God. The major source of this knowledge Wesley identified was inference from God’s creation. Maddox, “Wesley and the Question of Truth,” p. 14.

<sup>18</sup>Maddox, “Wesley and the Question of Truth,” p. 15.

But even whatever information was available to Wesley, later in his life he had been able to show maturity in his thoughts and attitudes toward other religions. He addressed the issue of religious pluralism through a few of his sermons although not using this term in a specific way. Concerning the discussion on non-Christian religions, he heavily depended upon the work of John Fletcher and in the process endorsed his thoughts. More particularly, he used Fletcher's "*Treatise on the various Dispensations of the Grace of God*" in one of his sermons—"On Faith"<sup>19</sup>—to reveal his position on this issue.<sup>20</sup> Based on this "Treatise" Wesley was able to see other religions or faiths that he knew in his days (the Materialist, Deist, Muslims, Jews) as

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<sup>19</sup>Preached on April 9, 1788.

<sup>20</sup>John Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley*, 3rd ed. 12 vols. (Kansas City, MO: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 1979), 7:195-98. Hereafter cited as Wesley, *The Works*. Following discussion is taken from Wesley's sermon: "On Faith." Fletcher believed that there were four dispensations (the heathen, Jewish, John the Baptist, and Christian) which were distinguished from each other by the degree of light which God vouchsafed to them that were under each. He had organised these dispensations in a hierarchal order, the heathen (who received a small degree of light) being at the bottom of the ladder and the Christians (who received more light than any other) at the top of the ladder. Because of the small degree of light they received the heathen simply believed that there was a God who rewarded those people that diligently seek him. Next to the heathen dispensation were the Jews who were entrusted with the grand means of light, "the oracles of God" which helped them to have, "a clear and exalted views of the nature and attributes of God; of their duty to God and man" (p. 195). Above both the heathen and Jewish dispensation was the dispensation of John the Baptist whom a clearer light was given because Jesus himself affirmed that John the Baptist was greater than any man who was born of woman. However, above all these dispensations was the Christian dispensation. A Christian who was under this dispensation had received the Spirit of adoption whereby the Spirit of God witnessed with his spirit that he was a child of God. Further elaborating these points Wesley pointed out that there were several sorts of faiths and gave a few examples of them. He arranged them into ascending order. First, the Materialist who believed God to be material. Second, the Deist who believed in the existence of God but did not believe the Bible. Third, the heathen who received a light up to some degree. Wesley divided the heathen into two categories: the ancient heathen and the modern heathen (for example the Muslims). Fourth, the ancient Jews who lived between the giving of the law and the coming of Christ and believed in the coming of Messiah but had not had a chance to see him come. Fifth, the Roman Catholics who believed all that God had revealed as necessary to salvation. Sixth, the Protestants whose faith embraced only those truths as necessary to salvation and which were clearly revealed in the Bible.

worth respecting. He did not disregard the non-Christians and dismiss their religions as without any truth. On the contrary he had sympathetic attitudes towards them because he saw a possibility of some light in them albeit perhaps obscured. For instance commenting on the Islamic faith, he said that the Muslims might have been taught by God all the essentials of true religion by an inward voice.<sup>21</sup> Also, Maddox comments that Wesley, “held out a significant hope that many of the heathen, in all of their variety, might have found a saving relationship with God by responding to the light that they have received.”<sup>22</sup> This indicates that in Wesley’s mind the source of human salvation was God and not any religion. However, Wesley never equated Christian faith to any other faith. He believed that the Christians were more privileged because they received more light from God than the heathen, the Jews and even John the Baptist.

What made Wesley to say that the Islamic faith had all the essentials of true religion or the heathen have the obscured rays of light, therefore hope for salvation? The answer to this question lies in the heart of the doctrine of Preventive Grace.

### III. Preventive Grace

Wesley was not the first theologian to use this term *preventive grace* but, “it seems to be more determinative for Wesley than any other teacher.”<sup>23</sup> “Preventive” literally means “going before.” Therefore, preventive grace means, “‘the grace that comes before’ and refers to God’s activity prior to any human movement toward God.”<sup>24</sup> Wesley believed that this grace—to which he sometimes referred a “natural conscience”—was possessed by every human being to a greater or lesser extent.<sup>25</sup> As a consequence every human being has the basic knowledge of God and also the ability to respond to His invitation. As Wesley says, “Something of this is found in every human heart, passing sentence concerning good and evil, not only in all Christian, but in all Mahometans [*sic*], all Pagans, yea, the vilest of

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<sup>21</sup>Ibid., 7:197.

<sup>22</sup>Maddox, “Wesley and the Question of Truth,” p. 12.

<sup>23</sup>H. Ray Dunning, *Grace, Faith, and Holiness: A Wesleyan Systematic Theology*, (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press, 1988), p. 338.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid.

<sup>25</sup>Wesley, *The Works*, 6:512.



savages.”<sup>26</sup> Thus, prevenient grace can be seen as all-inclusive in a sense that it does not discriminate or exclude human beings simply because they belong to different cultures or religious background. If God has created every human being then He must have given them the ray of light by which they would come to know their Creator. Wesley himself wrote that, “even the heathens did not remain in total darkness. . . . Rays of light have in all ages and nations gleamed through the shade.”<sup>27</sup> Therefore, the doctrine of prevenient grace excludes the possibility that some people, for instance the heathen in remote places, would die without any knowledge of their Creator or supernatural being. Similarly, if prevenient grace is possessed by every human being, then it must also be present in every religion—either be it Hinduism, Buddhism, or Islam—which provides basis for the spiritual life of these human beings.

However, Wesleyans also believe that this grace is not there by accident but has been provided because of God’s revelation in Christ. It is grounded in the atoning death of Jesus Christ on the cross providing a universal benefit “to all men and women, extending backward in time, to the Hebrew patriarchs, as well as forward, to present-day Hindus or Buddhists with no knowledge of Jesus.”<sup>28</sup> Therefore, the basis for all human salvation becomes Christ’s sacrifice on the cross. As a consequence, Christ can be seen at work in all people, cultures and religions of the world. But this does not in any way mean that Christ is hidden within non-Christian religions accomplishing the salvation of their devotees without any commitment or trust in him. The salvific benefits of His atonement are not automatically applied to the followers of non-Christian religions.

Hence, prevenient grace is limited and it cannot be a saving grace in the sense that it is able to save a person.<sup>29</sup> Wesley pointed out that

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<sup>26</sup>Ibid., 7:345.

<sup>27</sup>Floyd T. Cunningham, “Interreligious Dialogue: A Wesleyan Holiness Perspective,” in *Grounds for Understanding Ecumenical Resources for Responses to Religious Pluralism*, ed. Mark S. Heim (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), p. 194, quoting Wesley, “Walking by Sight and Walking by Faith,” in *The Works of John Wesley*, ed. Albert C. Outler, bicentennial ed., vol 4 (Nashville: Abingdon, 1987), pp. 51-52.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid., p. 192.

<sup>29</sup>In other words, prevenient grace cannot be automatically considered as identical with saving grace. In making this distinction clear, Wesley used Mr. Tucker’s thoughts and claimed his words as his own in the “Principles of

prevenient grace did not offer salvation to any one nor did it mean that every one would be saved automatically because of its presence and benefits. For him, “the light of prevenient grace was far short of divine revelation and assurance of salvation.”<sup>30</sup> He simply saw it as the grace which went before salvation and only created both awareness and capacity in an individual to accept salvation. Therefore, even though the nature of prevenient grace is all-inclusive, yet its role does not go beyond leading a human being to Christ.<sup>31</sup> It does not interfere in any way in an individual’s decision whether to accept or reject God’s saving grace. Hence, God’s saving grace still becomes resistible in a sense that it gives people a choice whereby they can either choose to respond to it or they can reject it.<sup>32</sup>

But at the same time, however, Wesley did not view this grace as essentially different from or discontinuous with saving grace. The reason for this is that in Wesleyan understanding there are not many kinds of God’s grace. Prevenient grace can be a saving grace when a person responds to or exercises it. In other words it is the same grace applied depending upon the kind of human response.<sup>33</sup>

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Methodist”: “For the preventing grace of God, which is common to all, is sufficient to bring us to Christ, though it is not sufficient to carry us further till we are justified.” (Wesley, *The Works*, 8:373.) Along the line of Wesley, Dunning also points out that even though prevenient grace, also called as the general revelation of God to humankind, “provides for the possibility of salvation not limited to the accidents of birth (place and time), it is still incomplete in both its subjective and objective aspects. It does not provide a true picture of God’s relation to fallen man, and it does not lead in any significant way to salvation. Thus general revelation points beyond itself and drives toward special revelation.” (Dunning, *Grace, Faith, and Holiness*, p. 170.)

<sup>30</sup>Cunningham, “Interreligious Dialogue,” p. 195.

<sup>31</sup>The role of prevenient grace is to grant man the gracious ability to respond to the call of the gospel; to give power to human being for moral decisions as well as to say no to sin “even before any conscious entrance into the way of salvation.” (Cunningham, “Interreligious Dialogue,” pp. 192-93.) See also William M. Greathouse and H. Ray Dunning, *An Introduction to Wesleyan Theology*, (Kansas City, MO: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 1989), p. 72.

<sup>32</sup>Allan Coppedge, *John Wesley in Theological Debate* (Wilmore, Kentucky: Wesley Heritage press, 1987), pp. 136-37.

<sup>33</sup>See H. Ray Dunning, *Grace, Faith, and Holiness: A Wesleyan Systematic Theology*, (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press, 1988), p. 339. Prevenient grace is not different or discontinuous with saving grace. As Wesley says: “Salvation begins with what is

Certainly, the doctrine of prevenient grace puts Wesleyans in the category of inclusivism. However, even though Wesleyan theology leans more toward the “inclusivist position”, yet it should not lead us in any way to conclude that the Wesleyans support some of the theories on “inclusivism” put forth by some leading theologians today (for example, Karl Rahner’s “inclusivism” and his theory of “Anonymous Christians”). Rahner believed that God’s grace could not be confined to Christianity only; rather it was present in all non-Christian religions and was in operation *anonymously* to qualify them as vehicles of salvation.<sup>34</sup> In other words, the non-Christian religions are sufficient for the salvation of their adherents without any conscious efforts and proper commitment to Christ.

#### IV. Who will be Save?

Based on the above discussion the question arises: then who will be saved? This is not an easy question to answer. Some point to the fact that everyone will eventually be saved while others say that there is an automatic salvation available because of the gracious and merciful nature of God. However, Wesleyan theology makes it clear that people are not automatically or eventually going to be saved simply because of God’s love for humanity and His grace given to them regardless of their religious beliefs. There is a human response required by God for a person’s salvation. And that response could be through faith<sup>35</sup> in divine action. Because of the

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usually termed (and very properly) prevenient grace; including the first wish to please God, and the first dawn of light concerning his will, and the first slight transient conviction of having sinned against him. All these imply some tendency toward life; some degree of salvation; the beginning of deliverance from a blind, unfeeling heart, quite insensible of God and the things of God.” Wesley, *The Works*, 6:509. Also, the Wesleyan understanding makes it clear that there are not different kinds of grace accomplishing different kinds of results. God’s grace is one in nature. Simply there are “varying kinds of appropriations on man’s part of the benefits of grace.” (Mildred Bangs Wynkoop, *Foundations of Wesleyan-Arminian Theology*, [Kansas City, MO: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 1967], pp. 97-98.) Therefore, prevenient and saving grace are seen simply two movements of the same gracious activity of God.

<sup>34</sup>Alan Race, *Christians and Religious Pluralism*, (London: SCM Press Ltd., 1983), p. 47.

<sup>35</sup>Wesley defines faith in his sermon “On Faith”: “It is a divine ‘evidence and conviction of things not seen;’ of things which are not seen now, whether they are visible or invisible in their own nature. Particularly, it is a divine evidence and

nature of prevenient grace, every human being has faith in some sort of “God” either more on a superficial level or on a deeper level. The “superficial level faith” is not sufficient for human salvation. Wesley called it simply an *intellectual faith* and defined it as a mere conviction of certain truths (such as everyone believing in the existence of God). The faith which actually brings an eternal salvation of a human being is the *saving faith* which is a divine conviction of God and the things of God.

When we consider the meaning of the term “salvation” in Wesleyan theology, it has deeper meaning than one may think. It seems that Wesley himself divided the process of salvation in two parts. One was *initial salvation*<sup>36</sup> and the other was *proper Christian salvation*.

In *initial salvation* two things happen. *Firstly*, a person becomes aware of his sins against God; and *secondly*, he repents for those sins. This is due to the work of prevenient grace and convincing grace respectively. In *proper Christian salvation* a person is saved by faith through God’s grace. And this salvation consists of justification and sanctification.<sup>37</sup>

If we consider this broader meaning of “salvation” then it is *possible*<sup>38</sup> that the non-Christians such as the Hindus or Buddhists maybe accepted by God for *initial salvation* provided that they “truly fear God and work righteousness.” But they have not completed the stage of *proper Christian salvation* yet. There is a support for this assumption in Wesleyan theology. Wesley himself developed a theory about the “Faith of a servant” and the

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conviction of God, and of the things of God.” (Wesley, *The Works*, 7:195.)

<sup>36</sup>In *initial salvation* Wesley had two steps: prevenient grace and convincing grace. According to him salvation begins with prevenient grace. The work of this grace at this stage is to arouse the wish to please God, to convict a person of his sins against God and to create sensitivity in heart for God. Convincing grace or repentance is the next step whereby a person receives a larger measure of self knowledge and experiences “a farther deliverance from the heart of stone” (*The Works of John Wesley*, 6:509).

<sup>37</sup>According to Wesley in justification a person is “saved from the guilt of salvation, and restored to the favour of God.” And in sanctification a person is “saved from the power and root of sin, and restored to the image of God” (Ibid.).

<sup>38</sup>The word *possible* is in italics here to emphasise the fact that it is just a possibility and not a reality.

“Faith of a son.”<sup>39</sup> According to this theory, he believed that the non-Christians (the Hindus, Buddhists, or Muslims) or the unevangelized (people who never heard of Jesus), if they had a saving faith and if they truly fear God and work righteousness could be the “servants” who had believed in God and were thus accepted by Him based on the degree of light they had received.<sup>40</sup> However, they were not yet called to be sons of

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<sup>39</sup>In explanation of this theory, in Wesley’s understanding there were degrees or levels of saving faith that could be gathered generally into two categories—the faith of a servant and the faith of a son. The servants were those who received a small degree of light, (for instance the non-Christians), and had been vouchsafed the small measure of faith. Their faith according to Wesley was the “faith of a servant.” Wesley put all the non-Christians in this category. The sons were those whose faith was, “. . . a divine conviction, whereby every child of God is enabled to testify, ‘The life that I now live, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me.’ And whosoever hath this, the Spirit of God witnesseth with his spirit, that he is a child of God” (Wesley, *The Works*, 7:199). Such a faith according to Wesley was a “faith of a son.” He saw born again Christians in this category. The main difference between these two faiths, according to Wesley, was that the “servant” lacked full assurance regarding the witness of the Spirit of God to his spirit. As Wesley says, “‘He that believeth,’ as a child of God, ‘hath the witness in himself.’ This the servant hath not” (Wesley, *The Works*, 7:199-200). Wesley had a reason to believe in this theory. His conviction was based on his own experience prior to his *Aldersgate experience*. In later years of his life, reflecting on his pre-Aldersgate experience, he could not conceive that he, or others in similar states, living faithfully and sincerely as servants of God, would be lost—even if such lacked the assurance of being “found” (Cunningham, “Interreligious Dialogue,” p.197). He believed that prior to his *Aldersgate experience* he had the faith of a servant which involved, “. . . the heathen honesty, the form of godliness, the sincerity of a real desire to serve God (to use the description of an “almost Christian”) but slightly more than that, I had, even then, a divine conviction which enables one to “fear God and work righteousness” (the faith of a servant)” (Robert G. Tuttle, Jr., *John Wesley: His Life and Theology* [Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1978], p. 198).

<sup>40</sup>This indicates that Wesley accepted the fact that every one, regardless of his religious allegiance who exercised the “faith of a servant” but might not have received the pardon from sin yet, was accepted by God and was received into the kingdom because he feared God and worked righteousness and the wrath of God did not abide on him (John Sanders, *No Other Name: An Investigation into the Destiny of the Unevangelized*, [Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1992], pp. 250-51); see also Wesley, *The Works*, 7:195-99. Therefore, the Hindus, Buddhists or Muslims could be servants of God with a “faith of a servant.”

God (Christians) because they did not have the assurance<sup>41</sup> that was available to Christians through the Spirit.<sup>42</sup>

So Wesleyan theology seems not to be dismissing the possibility of the salvation of non-Christians or unevangelized but stresses the need of *assurance* of it. However, not having assurance does not make these people completely lost. As Cunningham points out that in later years of Wesley's life, reflecting on his pre-Aldersgate experience, Wesley could not conceive that he, or others in similar states, living faithfully and sincerely as servants of God, would be lost—even if such lacked the assurance of being “found.”<sup>43</sup> However, Wesley insisted that the “servants” should strive for becoming the “sons.” He suggested that the only way they could have this chance to receive the adoption of sons is by continued crying to God. If they do so, “They will receive the faith of the children of God, by his revealing his only begotten Son in their hearts.”<sup>44</sup>

Taking into account this discussion we may infer that all the non-Christians and unevangelized are accepted by God for their salvation upon one condition that they must truly fear God and work righteousness, but since they lack the full assurance of the Spirit they haven't received the full salvation yet. Thus the challenge still remains for these people to strive for a proper Christian salvation.

## V. The Destiny

One of the most debated issues is the eternal destiny of those outside the Christian faith. Where would the non-Christians end up after their death? Religious pluralism argues against the traditional Christian belief that the non-Christians are bound to hell. At this stage there can be two types of non-Christians. One is those who never heard of Jesus Christ (unevangelized); for instance, tribes who live in far remote places and are untouched by the modern life. The other type is those who heard of Jesus Christ but chose not to accept Him.

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<sup>41</sup>Cunningham defines assurance as “a seal or guarantee within oneself of present salvation. It is a spiritual assurance from God based on a present relationship with God” (Cunningham, “Interreligious Dialogue,” p. 196).

<sup>42</sup>Maddox, “Wesley and the Question of Truth,” p. 15.

<sup>43</sup>Cunningham, “Interreligious Dialogue,” p. 197.

<sup>44</sup>Wesley, *The Works*, 7:199.

## Of the Unevangelized

The Bible does not clearly shed any light on the destiny of the unevangelized who did not have chance to hear the gospel. Since the Bible portrays God as the God of universal love it is hard to believe that the unevangelized people who did not have the knowledge of Christ through no fault of their own would be automatically sent to hell. Wesley himself could not comprehend this thought.<sup>45</sup> He was quite comfortable with the idea that eventually it is God who would decide the destiny of these people. He believed that, “God never, in any age or nation, ‘left himself’ quite ‘without a witness’ in the hearts of men; but while he ‘gave them rain and fruitful seasons,’ imparted some imperfect knowledge of the Giver. ‘He is the true Light that’ still, in some degree, ‘enlightens every man that cometh into the world.’”<sup>46</sup> Though Wesley considered these lights dim compared to the brightness of the revelation of the Son of God in Jesus, he nonetheless maintained that they enabled God to reach the unevangelized.<sup>47</sup> In other words, God in His mercy and by His prevenient grace will reach out to the unreached and unfortunate and save them. But this is just a pessimistic hope and does not necessarily include the non-Christians who heard about Jesus but chose to remain non-Christians by not believing in Him. We do not exactly know what is there on the other side of this world. But we can, along with Wesley, be open to the possibility and hope for salvation of the unevangelized. Wesleyan scholar Maddox suggests that Wesley thought that, “. . . some of those who have never heard of Christ may experience a degree of God’s present saving power and enter into God’s eternal saving Presence.”<sup>48</sup> This leads us to infer that God will judge people according to the light they have received. Especially, about the ancient heathen Wesley said that, “Inasmuch as to them little is given, of them little will be required . . . No more therefore will be expected of them, than the living up to the light they had.”<sup>49</sup>

## Of the Non-Christians

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<sup>45</sup>Maddox, “Wesley and the Question of Truth,” p. 17.

<sup>46</sup>Wesley, *The Works*, 7:258.

<sup>47</sup>Sanders, *No Other Name*, p. 250.

<sup>48</sup>Maddox, “Wesley and the Question of Truth,” p. 18.

<sup>49</sup>Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley*, 7:197.

What is the destiny of the people who deliberately reject Jesus Christ? Again we cannot pass any judgement on their destiny. It seems that Wesley himself was not quite sure as to how to tackle this issue. On one hand John 3:16 reminds us that those who do not believe in Jesus Christ are going to perish. On the other, Wesley said that he did not have any authority from the Scripture to judge the non-Christians nor did any one have right to sentence “the heathen and Muhammadan world to damnation.”<sup>50</sup> He was of the opinion that, “it is far better to leave them to Him that made them, and who is ‘the Father of the spirits of all flesh’; who is the God of the Heathens as well as the Christians, and who hateth nothing that he hath made.”<sup>51</sup> Here again he arouses some pessimistic hope for the non-Christians in saying that since God is a God of good creation He will never despise His creation no matter who they are. Wesley confirmed these attitudes of his by giving three examples. Talking about the heathen he positively believed that, “. . . God will judge the heathens with some discrimination after all; not directly in terms of their appropriation or rejection of Christ, but in terms of how they respond to the gracious revelation (light) that they do receive.”<sup>52</sup> Concerning the modern-day Jews (meaning those who existed after Jesus’ coming and who chose not to believe in Jesus) he said that even though they did not believe in Him, we as Christians still could not pass any judgement upon them. Rather we must leave them to their Master (God). “Any such may be servants, though not yet sons of God and on them the wrath of God does not rest.”<sup>53</sup> Writing about the the Muslims, he said that the Muslims, “. . . are rather to be pitied than blamed for the narrowness of their faith. And their not believing the whole truth, is not owing to want of sincerity, but merely to want of light.”<sup>54</sup>

## VI. Reflection

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<sup>50</sup>Ibid., 7: 353; see also Clark H. Pinnock, *A Wideness in God’s Mercy: The Finality of Jesus Christ in a World of Religions*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1992), p. 158.

<sup>51</sup>Sanders, *No Other Name*, p. 250, quoting Wesley, “On Living without God,” in *The Works of John Wesley*, 3rd ed., 14 vols. (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1986), 7:353.

<sup>52</sup>Maddox, “Wesley and the Question of Truth,” p. 18.

<sup>53</sup>Pinnock, *A Wideness*, p.158.

<sup>54</sup>Wesley, *The Works*, p. 197.



In the light of above discussion, several questions come to mind. Was Wesley indirectly suggesting that all world religions were equal and valid ways for taking their devotees to heaven? Is Wesleyan theology “inclusivist” in its position?

The Bible seems not in any way to allow salvation coming to people through other religions or apart from the grace of God of Israel. And Wesley also appears not thinking of other religions as capable of providing salvation to human beings apart from or independent of Jesus Christ. That is why he emphasised the doctrine of prevenient grace. He believed that because of God’s prevenient grace rooted in Jesus’ atoning work, “God has always and everywhere found a way into the hearts and lives of men and women.”<sup>55</sup> Nevertheless, this general revelation of God is not enough for eternal salvation. People still need to come into a saving relationship with Jesus Christ. Therefore, for Wesley this saving relationship depended on divine conviction and eventually adoption into God’s family when the Spirit of God witnesses with the person’s spirit that he is a child of God.

Based on this understanding, Wesley emphasised the need of a saving faith. Under saving faith he placed the non-Christians (only those who fear God and work righteousness) and Christians. But he saw these non-Christians as servants of God with a servant’s faith and Christians as sons of God with a son’s faith. However, Wesley did not look down upon the servants but was confident that they were accepted by God and had a hope that if they continued to cry before God they would eventually be adopted into God’s family. He said:

There is no reason why you should be satisfied with the faith of a Materialist, a Heathen, or a Deist; nor, indeed, with that of a servant. I do not know that God requires it at your hands. Indeed, if you have received this, you ought not to cast it away; you ought not in anywise to undervalue it; but to be truly thankful for it. Yet, in the mean time, beware how you rest here: Press on till you receive the Spirit of adoption: Rest not, till that Spirit clearly witnesses with your spirit, that you are a child of God.<sup>56</sup>

In the light of this, Wesley did not undermine the faiths of others. Because of his understanding of prevenient grace he was able to acknowledge the truth and beauty outside the Christian faith. He said:

Whatsoever good is in man, or is done by man, God is the author and doer of it. . . . Some great truths, as the being and

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<sup>55</sup>Cunningham, “Interreligious Dialogue,” p.195.

<sup>56</sup>Wesley, *The Works*, 7:200.

attributes of God, and the difference between moral good and evil, are known, in some measure, to the heathen world. The traces of them are to be found in all nations: So that, in some sense, it may be said to every child of man, 'He hath showed thee, O man, what is good; even to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God.'<sup>57</sup>

Thus, according to him the non-Christian religions have the light of God but to a smaller degree; therefore they are not in a state of offering any kind of assurance to their devotees. Therefore, Wesley never communicated that these religions were capable of saving their devotees. Even though he was in harmony with this view that Christians should have an attitude which respected the faith claims of other religions, yet, in light of the revelation of God in Christ, he could not allow Christ to become one saviour figure among many.<sup>58</sup>

Furthermore, it seems that Wesley was not willing to discuss in detail about the destiny of the non-Christians or unevangelized. He never communicated that the unevangelized were bound to hell neither did he say that they would automatically be saved simply because they did not hear about Jesus Christ. He showed some pessimistic hope for the eternal salvation of non-Christians. Nevertheless, he chose to leave their destiny into the hands of a God who created them.

## VII. Wesleyan Theology Today

This further leads us to a question: how does Wesleyan theology today respond to the issue of religious pluralism? Before this question is answered, we must recognize the vastness of Wesleyan scholarship therefore our inability to present a full picture on this topic. This leads us to affirm that it would be unfair to say that the following opinion represents the whole Wesleyan theology on this issue.

The Bible suggests to us that the operation of God's prevenient grace is clearly not limited to the community of Israel only. Rather it has been spread throughout the world and is active in every culture, every religion and every human being. This activity of God and His self-revelation in the cultural and religious context outside of Israel is intended as a preparation for God's historic revelation as Yahweh.<sup>59</sup> In other words, other religions

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<sup>57</sup>Wesley, *The Works*, 7:374& 6:506 .

<sup>58</sup>Joe Gorman, "The Christian in a Religiously Plural World," *The Seminarian*, 19 May 1989, p. 2.

<sup>59</sup>Flemming, "Foundations," pp. 58-59.

are seen as preparatory to the gospel if they reflect moral truth or right action. Therefore, some suggest that there is no discontinuity between Christianity and other faiths. Every religion is seen as “humanity’s sincere response to God and desire to know him.”<sup>60</sup> Floyd Cunningham says that the “Wesleyan thought . . . agrees with Karl Rahner that, ‘It would be wrong to regard the pagan as someone who has not yet been touched by God’s grace and truth.’”<sup>61</sup> Because of this the suggestion is that Christian theology must not take a negative stance toward everything in other religions. Furthermore, it is recognised by some that whatever truth may be found in other religions is the result of the activity of prevenient grace in its revelatory function. Therefore, the Christians must gratefully accept such truth and use it as a point of contact to demonstrate the fulfilment of those glimmers of truth by the fuller revelation in Christ. “After all, Judaism is a non-Christian religion; and if Christianity is seen centrally to be a fulfilment of its truth as found in the Old Testament, to a lesser degree it could also be validly claimed that other religions also find their fulfilment in Him who is the Apex of all revelatory activity.”<sup>62</sup>

However, some scholars also understand that *not all religions* can “predispose people to accept Christianity when confronted with it.”<sup>63</sup> They can help a person to search for God or they can also become a stumbling block to finding him. Thus, they are seen as the arena of both, “sinful opposition to God and God’s gracious activity that prepares people for the final and saving revelation in the Christ event.”<sup>64</sup> Because of this reason it would be better to infer that any religion in itself is not sufficient and is not the means of offering eternal salvation.

Regarding the destiny of the unevangelized, the “Bible never addresses directly the question of the fate of the unevangelized.”<sup>65</sup> It does not give explicit guidance one way or the other. This makes it hard to give any concrete answer to the question of the destiny of the unevangelised.

<sup>60</sup>Ibid., p. 66.

<sup>61</sup>Floyd T. Cunningham, “Christ, the Word, the Light and the Message: A Wesleyan Reflection on the World Mission,” *Asia Journal of Theology* 5:1 (1991): 106, quoting Karl Rahner, “Christianity and the Non-Christian Religions”, in *Christianity and Other Religions*, eds. John Hick and Brian Hebblethwaite (Glasgow: Collins, 1980), p. 75.

<sup>62</sup>Dunning, *Grace, Faith, and Holiness*, p.166.

<sup>63</sup>Flemming, “Foundations,” p. 67.

<sup>64</sup>Ibid., p. 69.

<sup>65</sup>Ibid., p. 70.

However, the Wesleyans believe that salvation is still by faith in Christ and because of God's grace. They believe that because God's prevenient grace is active in all human hearts regardless of their religious allegiance, it draws them to God and prepares them for acceptance of the gospel when they hear it. In Wesleyan thought "grace of God" plays a major role. Based on this understanding, we might say that if ever the unevangelized are to make it to heaven, it would be only because of God's grace. Dean Flemming confirms that, "One thing the Scriptures do make clear is that if people are in heaven apart from the preaching of the gospel, it will not be on the basis of their sincerity or their own goodness or devotion to religious observance. It will be because the grace of God was active in their lives through the Holy Spirit, drawing them to Christ."<sup>66</sup>

### Conclusion

Based on our discussion, a proper Wesleyan response to religious pluralism, as I think, would be that it is not the religion which saves a human being but it is the merciful God who extends His invitation to all people because of His prevenient grace rooted in Christ's atonement. As a result, salvation is ultimately through Jesus Christ. But people still have a choice to resist God's grace in Jesus Christ. However, to resist that grace is to resist God. If God is the author of human salvation then the only way He has worked out salvation plan is through Jesus Christ and not through any religion or religious figures.

Thus this understanding leads us to assume that Wesleyan theology only sees salvation outside of Christian faith as just a possibility and not a reality. As Dean Flemming points out that up to a certain extent Wesleyan theology is, "sympathetic to an 'inclusivist' position that allows the possibility of salvation among the unevangelized and a more open attitude toward the role of other religions in God's dealings with humankind."<sup>67</sup> Therefore, the non-Christians should be considered as accepted by God for their salvation if they fear Him. We do not know the way God would save these people. But we can pessimistically hope for their salvation. If Wesley was right then people's eternal destiny depends upon how they responded to God's given light to them. However, in the mean time, rather than passing judgement on their eternal destiny hastily, we must help them to realise God's grace that is available and encourage them to respond to Calvary's invitation.

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<sup>66</sup>Ibid., p. 73.

<sup>67</sup>Flemming, "Foundations," p. 53.