

CONTENTS

Foreword	9
Introduction	11
1. THE “GODS” ARE ON THE MOVE <i>Have you caught the grand vision?</i>	13
2. THE ICON OF TOLERANCE <i>How did we get here?</i>	33
3. THE SEARCH FOR TRUTH <i>If it’s true for me, is it true for you?</i>	53
4. AN EXTRAORDINARY BIRTH <i>What does it take to be a savior?</i>	73
5. AN EXTRAORDINARY LIFE <i>Who is the real Jesus?</i>	93
6. AN EXTRAORDINARY AUTHORITY <i>If God has spoken, what has He said?</i>	115

7. AN EXTRAORDINARY DEATH	
<i>What happened on that middle cross?</i>	137
8. AN EXTRAORDINARY RESURRECTION	
<i>Could the disciples have made up the story?</i>	155
9. AN EXTRAORDINARY ASCENSION	
<i>What is Christ doing today?</i>	173
10. AN EXTRAORDINARY RETURN	
<i>Which God reigns?</i>	191
11. AN EXTRAORDINARY STUMBLING BLOCK	
<i>Is everyone else lost?</i>	211
12. AN EXTRAORDINARY RESPONSIBILITY	
<i>How can we best represent Him?</i>	231
Notes.....	247



CHAPTER 1

THE “GODS” ARE ON THE MOVE

Have You Caught the Grand Vision?

Years ago I heard a chilling invitation.
“Unite or Perish!”

That message seemed to dominate every session of the Parliament of the World’s Religions that met in Chicago in 1993. And the group most often targeted for criticism—the folks who could not be expected to buy into this united agenda—were those who belonged to the historic Christian faith. The message I heard at the parliament was that we had better get on board or be left to swim (or drown) on our own!

The gods are on a roll, and woe to those who stand in the way of their agenda! With lofty ideals and utopian plans

to unify the religions of the world for the common good, this parliament met to break down the barriers that exist in the accelerated march toward unity. Six thousand delegates came to learn from one another, explore areas of agreement, and grasp a better understanding of one another's religious heritages. They also promoted a global ethic designed to alleviate the suffering and wars of the world. Their time, they said, had come.

What place did Christ have in the more than 700 workshops that were available during the eight-day conference? At times He was variously admired, quoted, and favorably compared to other religious teachers, ancient and modern. He was seen as one more stage in the evolutionary development of religion; indeed, He was a very necessary and important stage, but He was only one enlightened man among many. It was noted that in our day He is overshadowed by others but that He should be admired for being the man for times. A *special* man for His times.

Except for one or two speakers (one said of Him, "He didn't even know the world was round"), Christ was thus revered for His contribution in the history of religion. He was even described by some as a revealer of God, a man who had achieved the highest degree of enlightenment. Others allowed that He was the Master of Masters, the one who shows us the way; the one who is to be loved and followed. But alas, He was only one among many others. Though He was *respected*, He was not *worshipped*.

Things have not changed since then. If anything, we're even more religiously "tolerant" than we used to be. What I saw and heard at that conference is a microcosm of your school, business, and community. The people who live next door and your associates at work most likely believe that it

doesn't matter what god you pray to because every deity is ultimately the same deity shrouded in a different name.

Consider: A 2007–08 Pew Research Center survey indicates that “most Americans agree with the statement that many religions—not just their own—can lead to eternal life. Among those who are affiliated with a religious tradition, seven-in-ten say many religions can lead to eternal life. This view is shared by a majority of adherents in nearly all religious traditions, including more than half of members of evangelical Protestant churches (57%).”¹ A 2011 Barna survey indicates prevalent belief in universalism and pluralism.

Here is what Barna found:

Broadly defined, universalism is the belief that all human beings will be saved after death. On balance, Americans leaned toward exclusive rather than inclusive views. For example, 43% agreed and 54% disagreed with the statement, “It doesn't matter what religious faith you follow because they all teach the same lessons.”

Similar splits in public opinion emerged for the statement, “All people will experience the same outcome after death, regardless of their religious beliefs” (40% agreed, 55% disagreed) and the sentiment, “All people are eventually saved or accepted by God, no matter what they do, because he loves all people he has created” (40% versus 50%).

59% of adults believe that “Christians and Muslims worship the same God even though they have different names and beliefs regarding God.”

And:

Nevertheless, despite their own personal faith convictions, many born again Christians embrace certain aspects of

universalist thought. One-quarter of born again Christians said that all people are eventually saved or accepted by God (25%) and that it doesn't matter what religious faith you follow because they all teach the same lessons (26%). An even larger percentage of born again Christians (40%) indicated that they believe Christians and Muslims worship the same God."²

Perhaps you belong to that segment, and if so I invite you to compare Christ with other religious options. Join me on a journey that will investigate His claims, assess the historical records, and examine whether He should just be admired or actually worshiped. I'm not writing about a hidden Christ who is accessible only to those who already believe; as best I can, I present a Christ whose credentials are open for thoughtful investigation. If you think that all the deities are the same, or that all religions agree on the essential points, this book is for you.

And if you already are a Christian, I want to sound a wakeup call, an opportunity to join a growing number of believers who have chosen to sink their roots deeper, to understand their faith better, and to turn their beliefs into convictions. We should be glad for the opportunity to represent Christ in our pluralistic age. This is not a time to hide the light in our hearts but to let it shine in the hazy dusk of religious pluralism. Never before has it been so important to have Christ in our heads and not just in our hearts!

Have we—I speak to those of us who are committed Christians—have we become so desensitized by the tolerance of our age that we can see Christ dethroned in the minds of multitudes and turn away as if we didn't notice? Many of us remember how dismayed Christians became when the movie *The Last Temptation of Christ* was released. Yet we don't realize

that a similar desecration happens whenever Christ is classified as just one among many options.

Yes, of course we believe that eventually "at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those who are in heaven, and on earth, and under the earth, and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (Philippians 2:10–11), but we must rekindle our passion for Him to be honored in our day among our neighbors and friends. Our love for Him can be measured by our concern about His reputation among the people of the world.

Now if Christ is indeed only one among many, if He is but one of the gods, then it is time for all the religions of the world to unite. Let all religious leaders stand on equal ground; let them pool their insights so that they can fight our battles with a unified army. Enough of division! Enough of fruitless arguments! Enough of bigotry!

Which forces the question: Does Christ belong on the same shelf with Buddha, Krishna, Bahá'í lláh, and Zoroaster? Like Christ, such leaders (and others) have taught some rather lofty ethical ideas. Even if we say He stands taller than the rest, have we given Him His due? Or is He to be placed on an entirely different shelf altogether? That, of course, is the subject of this book.

Mind you, at the parliament no one suggested that Christians should stop being Christians or that Hindus should stop being Hindus; nor should Buddhists stop being Buddhists. The religions of the world have a rich diversity that should be prized.

Each should be admired as one beautiful petal; together they form a magnificent flower called religion, a flower that no one religion could create by itself.

This flower is growing more quickly before our eyes than

we realize. The soil has been prepared, the seeds have been planted, and the plant is beginning to bloom. Only mindless fanatics would spoil its beauty and energy. This flower, we are told, will bless the world.

THE FOUNDATION FOR UNITY

This is not a book about comparative religions, since such subjects have already been adequately treated by others. This book is about Christ; it is an attempt to understand Him better, worship Him more, and represent Him with more confidence. But first we have to cover some important matters to set the context for the discussion.

I attended the parliament because I wanted to learn more about the religions of the world, to have a better grasp of the complexity we face in America today. Second, I wanted to meet as many people as possible, to compare their beliefs with those of Christ (a few of these stories are in this book). Third, I wanted to look through the window of prophecy to see the formation of a worldwide religious system that, in all probability, will be the basis of Antichrist's brief rule on planet Earth.

The premises that were either directly stated or implied in every session have already taken root in our culture. Listen to our talk shows, read the newspapers, or attend the local school board meeting and you will find these views widely accepted and seldom challenged.

1. The doctrines of the different faiths should not be held as truths but as shells that contain kernels that are found in all religions. Since the claim for truth is a stumbling block to unity, it is best to speak of religious traditions rather than religious truths.

2. No religion should be thought of as superior to another. Indeed, this belief in superiority is the major roadblock to religious unity. At the parliament, seminars were held to overcome "this crucial obstacle."
3. We can retain our own particular religion but must move beyond it to deeper levels of experience. As we move away from religion to this true spirituality, we are united.
4. Proselytizing (Christians call it evangelism) is bigotry, pure and simple. The idea of winning converts is based on the antiquated notion that one religion has more to offer than another. Our task is to help others discover the hidden inner meaning of their religions, rather than convert them to our own.

To quote the words of Swami Chindanansa of the Divine Life Society, "There are many effective, equally valid religions. They are to be equally revered, equally recognized, and equally loved and cherished—not merely tolerated. The Hindu Scriptures say, 'In whatever way men approach Me, even so do I go to them.'"³ But if the different religions are the same in essence, why do they appear so disparate to us? *It's all a matter of perspective*; how easy it is for all of us to give a different description of the same thing. God (or the gods) is one; it is our fallible interpretations that bring disunity.

At the parliament, the delegates were often led to shout "I AM!" as an affirmation of their own godhood. People who still believed in prayer were told that they should pray to their own "god of choice." We were told that the better we understand ourselves and our global village, the more readily we will be mature enough to realize that no religion has a right to exclusivity. Some gods may work best for you; whereas the rich traditions of the goddesses are more appealing to your friends.

THE VISION OF UNITY

The famous historian Arnold Toynbee predicted that the governments of the world would unite either by force or federation, but that the unity could not succeed without a universal religion. Christianity, he said, should be purged of its “sinful state of mind,” namely, its exclusivism. The political/economic framework of world government needs to be supported by the unified spiritual dimension of humankind.⁴

This appears to be happening before our eyes. As America has become more diversified racially, so it is becoming more diversified religiously. We are told that the only hope for peaceful coexistence in our country and the larger world is for the religions of the world to set aside their differences and rally around the common banner of love, acceptance, and service to our fellow man. After all, the various religions are but different expressions of the same ultimate, the same god (or gods).

Listen to some of the benefits unity will bring:

- ___ An end to war
- ___ An end to hunger through a redistribution of the world’s resources and population control
- ___ Conservation of the earth’s environment
- ___ Genuine equality among all races and religions and between men and women
- ___ A global ethic that will unite the human family
- ___ The dawn of an entirely new age of human achievement and potential

Later in this book I shall discuss what will happen to those who do not sign on to this agenda. Testimonies—scores of them—were given about the personal benefits of those who have taken the time to harmonize the rational mindset of the religious West with the mystical experience

of the religious East. Religious unity will change the world because it begins by changing individuals.

One woman claimed healing through mystical meditation; another said her New Age religion saved her marriage. One man said that only when he delved into Hinduism did he “find the other half of his soul.” Words often used were *fulfillment*, *peace*, or *energy*. Yes, there were plenty of testimonials to say, “It works!”

ILLUSTRATIONS OF UNITY

In John Godfrey Saxe’s well-known poem “The Blind Men and the Elephant,” the six blind men of Indostan all wanted to learn what an elephant was like. Each approached the beast from a different direction; each explored part of the elephant—its side, its tusk, its trunk, its leg, its ear, and its tail. Relating their experiences, the six compared the elephant to a wall, a spear, a snake, a tree, a fan, and a rope.

*And so these men of Indostan
Disputed loud and long,
Each in his own opinion
Exceeded stiff and strong
Though each was partly in the right
And all were in the wrong!*

*So, oft in theologic wars
The disputants, I ween,
Rail on in utter ignorance
Of what each other mean,
And prate about an elephant
Not one of them has seen!⁵*

If only we would realize that the various religions of the world are simply different aspects of the same divinity! In fact, the argument goes, we should be thankful for these diverse ways of seeing because they give us a fuller picture of whatever gods or goddesses there be. Far from thinking that one religion is superior, we should expand our horizons to see the bigger picture. The Religious Ultimate is greater than any one portrait of him or her.

If the blind men and the elephant illustrate why we have different religious traditions, the wheel helps us understand what happens when we move away from our dogmas and unite the core of our beliefs. Visualize a wheel with a rim, spokes, and hub. At (1) the outer rim we find our different religious doctrines, which form the most superficial level of understanding; but, (2) once we grasp that our beliefs are symbols, we begin to move toward the center. At the rim, dialogue is impossible because it is even difficult for us to understand how other people believe as they do; but as we move toward the center, we find a deeper meaning. Then, (3) finally at the hub we discover our true unity; here is “the brilliant blue of empty sky” as I heard one person put it. Now we can better appreciate other religions, because we see them through the lens of inner unity and faith.

OBSTACLES TO UNITY

But what should we do with our doctrinal beliefs, those stubborn convictions that are roadblocks to unity? In one session of the parliament one leader said, “Hold on to your chairs tightly, as if you might go through the ceiling if you were to let go. Now think of one of your most cherished beliefs—now let go of both your chair and your cherished

belief! Nothing happened, right? Now you've got the feel of it!" Then we were told that we could have our belief back, thank you very much. We just have to get used to "letting go"!

If we still struggle with "letting go" of our cherished beliefs there was a seminar titled, "A Vocabulary for the 21st Century," which aimed to show that all so-called doctrines were merely metaphors for a deeper meaning. In practical terms, this means that one can give up his doctrines without surrendering the terminology that communicates them. The Bible, it was said, does not mean what most think it does; all that is required is to give up our doctrines and then we will see that its metaphors will yield a deeper, hidden meaning. If only we could progress beyond the childish stages of our faith and grow to maturity, to *inclusive* maturity.

Christianity, we're told, had failed—at least the form common in the Western world. We have squandered the earth's resources because of the foolish notion that we should have dominion over the earth. Christianity talks of love and breeds hate; it speaks of one creator yet divides the creation with its narrow doctrines. The message was clear: It's time to move on. Christianity is like a boat that has taken us across the river; now it's time to abandon it for the exciting new future. We are leaving the Piscean Age (Christianity) for the age of Aquarius. Goodbye to the past and welcome to the future!

Well, I think you've got the picture. When someone says that Christianity has failed, most people interpret that to mean that Christ has failed. It's our Savior they are talking about! And it is our privilege to help the world see that they might just be mistaken in their assessment.

Two immediate questions come to mind: How is the Bible viewed when a spirit of ecumenism (inclusiveness) takes

over? And where does Christ fit within a syncretistic (religiously unified) culture?

What about the Bible?

Obviously if the Bible is to harmonize with any number of religious viewpoints, it has to be reinterpreted, made to “fit” if you please. Whenever I’ve been on a talk show or have debated the merits of Christ, I’ve heard, “That’s just interpretation!” The impression is given that the Bible can be easily stripped of its literal meaning and made compatible with any number of viewpoints.

A while ago a book titled *Bible Illuminated* was released. It is a collection of Bible stories (from both Old and New Testaments) that interprets these accounts from a universal standpoint. The editor/author of the book is Swami Bhaktipada who says his goal is “to give Christians and those of other faiths an understanding of the Bible that is not sectarian, to encourage an appreciation of the Bible as a particular expression of the eternal truth that is taught in all the world’s great religious traditions.”⁶

The Bible Illuminated, which comes with 101 mystical paintings, is part of a series of books designed to show that all the religions of the world have essential unity. Already the Swami has published *The Illustrated Ramayana*, an English edition of the Hindu Vedic scriptures. To quote him once more, “A true devotee, whether or not he is a Christian, Muslim, Jew, Hindu or of another faith, is inspired by the hearing of the Lord’s glories from any authorized source—from David’s Psalms or Lord Krishna’s Gita, from the Ramayana or the Quran.”⁷

Reality is always obscure, but because we abhor ambiguity, we tend to hold tenaciously to our own point of view. But as

we mature and are able to synthesize the various perspectives, we unify our viewpoints. Eventually, the greater the unity, the greater the clarity of vision.

So much for the Bible.

What about Christ?

Standing in the way of the Grand Plan for religious unity is the person of Christ. Historically, Christianity has held Him to be unique, the only special Son of God, the Lord, Savior. But many Christians—or at least many of those who use the label—are beginning to think that we can no longer maintain exclusivity in the midst of the growing awareness of other faiths. And the push to unity is too powerful, too inviting to resist.

Here are three possible ways to relate Christ to the challenges of other religions.

First, there is *pluralism*—the direct assertion that we must accept all religions as equals. Christ is only a man, a prophet, one of a variety of options, and not necessarily a better option at that. Pluralism insists that even the word *tolerance* smacks of bigotry, the insinuation that we have to “tolerate” those who are different from us. We should not simply tolerate different religions; we should grant them the same respect we give our own. In this scenario Christ is variously interpreted, but always He is stripped of His deity (unless His assertions are interpreted to mean that all of us are divine).

This pluralism (or universalism) affirms without qualification that no religion has the right to sit in judgment upon another. Without mutual respect, uncritical tolerance, and an unqualified acceptance of the rich heritage of others, there are no grounds for unity. Superiority leads to the prejudice

that must be exposed, despised, and eventually plucked up by the roots.

A second more common stance is *inclusivism*—an openness to other religions that began with the eighteenth-century Enlightenment. Christ, in this view, may still be unique, but He does not have sole possession of the truth. Other religions are also an expression of the divine, though their form may be less clear than that given to us in the New Testament.

Liberals have always sought to demonstrate the spiritual value of other religions. The World Council of Churches stresses that only through religious dialogue amid the diversity of the world's religions is it possible to see the totality of God's revelation. Only ignorance and narrow-mindedness would limit God's revelation to Christianity, the dominant religion of the West.

Since Vatican II, this march toward inclusivism has been seen in the Catholic Church too. Previously, it was fervently believed that salvation could come only through the church—that is, the Catholic Church. But now that Protestants are called “separated brethren,” one text of the Council says that the Roman Church must no longer be identified as the sole church of Jesus Christ and “that those who have not yet received the Gospel are related to the Church in various ways.”⁸ Interestingly, now that the door of salvation has opened to Protestants, it has also opened for those of other religions. Pope John Paul had been known to pray with Hindus, Buddhists, and representatives of other faiths.

Third, there is *exclusivism* which maintains that God has revealed Himself only in Christ; all other religions are therefore incomplete, misleading, and false. Elijah, the mighty prophet of the Old Testament, one might call an

exclusivist. When he had a contest with the prophets of Baal and they were proven to be false, he took 400 of them and had them put to death at the river Kishon.

The New Testament continues with this tradition of exclusivity, except that followers of other religions are no longer subject to civil penalties. (Although intermittently throughout the history of the church heretics were burned at the stake, this was based on a confusion between the Old Testament age and the New Testament command to render to Caesar that which is Caesar's and to God that which is God's.)

Exclusivism, I might add, does not conflict with freedom of religion. Freedom to adopt whatever religion one wishes (or none at all) should be a right in all countries, especially those that have been influenced by the Christian faith. As we shall see later, a proper definition of exclusivism means that, whereas we recognize and respect freedom of religion, we do not compromise our beliefs. We also do not combine them with other religions or philosophies. If there is one true God, our options are limited.

These three possibilities spawn other variations. For example, there is *selectivism*, which says that we must not follow any one religion but compile our own personal list of cherished beliefs. A smorgasbord has the advantage of having many nourishing items, and we get to choose whatever suits our fancy. This is more democratic, more in keeping with the radical individualism that is so highly prized in America. In such a context, Christ can play any role you want Him to.

Increasingly our generation wants to take religion out of the realm of rational discourse and relegate it to the area of personal preferences and opinions. If there are thirty-one flavors of ice cream, why can we not have similar variety in

religions? The gods of the New Age Movement are always tolerant of sexual preferences, feminism, and hedonistic pleasures at almost any cost. Why shouldn't we each choose a religion that is compatible with our private values? In order to have a meaningful faith, it must agree with our deeply held beliefs. What works for you might not work for me.

What about You?

Interest in Christ is on the rise. An article in *U.S. News & World Report* says that “the quest for the historical Jesus is getting a new surge of scholarly energy.”⁹ Every day—in churches, in self-help groups, in discussions at home and in the office—Christ is discussed. In fact, interest in Him seems to be increasing right along with the proliferation of new species of privatized religion. Christ is being redefined to suit the syncretism of our times. Later I'll explain why many who speak well of Him actually are undermining His credibility.

I've discovered that the less some people know about Christ the more they like Him. The baby in the manger touches even the most cynical soul who has long since given up on religion. The secularist who is bent on reforming society quotes selected verses from the Sermon on the Mount with reverence. And the religious types use Him as their example of humility, sacrifice, and basic goodness. He is worthy to be spoken about in hushed tones. He is, say some, the first among equals. Yet in all this He is often damned by faint praise.

Since Christ said that the world would hate Him, we can be quite sure that *when the world loves Him it is because they have made Him into something He is not*. The biblical Christ cannot be dismissed; He stands in our path forcing us to

make a decision, either to the right or to the left. In His presence neutrality is impossible. The babe in the manger quickly grows to become God, the King.

THE PURPOSE OF THIS BOOK

I've written this book to give reasons why Christ must always stand alone; all attempts to unite Him with the religions of the world are doomed to fail. Once we clarify His credentials and the gospel He brought us, we will realize that the Christian faith is exclusive and must logically be so. Amid charges of bigotry, our task is to be lovingly exclusive. If there is any good news in this world, the followers of Christ will have to proclaim it.

The Bible draws a definitive line through the peoples of the world, but it is not a line between races, nations, or even cultures, as such. This line separates Christ and His followers from all other religious choices. I'm committed to helping us identify that line, show where it should be drawn, and give reasons that we have no right to move it.

FBI agents, I am told, don't spend much time studying counterfeit money since there are too many varieties of bogus bills. Rather, they study the genuine articles, observing all their unique details. Armed with a good knowledge of authentic money, they can recognize counterfeits of whatever kind. Those who are conversant with the truth recognize error when they see it.

I've already mentioned that this book is a study about Christ against the backdrop of other religious preferences. If we take a careful look at the genuine article, namely the God-man, we will recognize other teachers who have a different origin and belief. I intend to show why although

other religions take bad men and try to make them better, *one is qualified to take dead men and make them alive.*

When you travel through Switzerland, you often see two mountains in the distance that appear to be joined, but as you get closer you may find that they are separated by very sheer cliffs. And down below is a fast-flowing, uncrossable river.

Take a superficial look at Christ and other gods and you might think that there are some impressive similarities. Take a closer look and you will discover that they are separated by an unbridgeable chasm. Christ has little in common with other teachers, prophets, Swamis, and gurus. It is not just that He stands taller than others; in His presence they disappear somewhere beyond the horizon.

Christians are not called to wring their hands when pagan ideas dilute the truths of the gospel. We are called to give a credible response, to raise His banner, and to expect that at least some people will salute. I hope you share my passion to know Christ with such accuracy, to be convinced of His credentials with such certainty, and to see His uniqueness with such clarity that we will be able to present Him to anyone, regardless of his or her religion of choice.

Here are some comments you have heard from your friends or in the media. Or maybe you hold one of these opinions yourself. Either way, my intention is to help us clarify why such views are based on a major misunderstanding of Christ:

_____ “You’re into Christ . . . I’m into Buddha . . . we all have to choose the religion that is best for us.”

_____ “I love Christ as much as you do, but I don’t think He is the only way to God. . . . God would never

limit the way to heaven to one person. My God is more inclusive than that . . .”

_____ “I think that much of the New Testament contains mythology. I don’t believe these things happened. It’s just a matter of interpretation.”

_____ “I think that all the religions of the world are essentially the same; why should we argue about the peripheral matters?”

_____ “I haven’t left my Christianity, I’ve just moved beyond it to something deeper. I no longer emphasize religion but am into spirituality . . .”

An artist named Gustave Doré completed a painting of Christ. A passerby paused to admire his work and remarked, “You must love Him to paint Him so well!” The artist replied, “Yes, I do love Him, but if I loved Him more, I’d paint Him better!”

Eight chapters in this book are devoted to painting a verbal portrait of Christ. As best I can, I have shown His uniqueness and pointed out why all attempts to link Him with others are misguided. Having made this study, I love Him more, and I’m praying that when you have finished reading what I’ve written, you also will love Him more so that together we can “paint Him better”!

But before I begin the portrait, the next chapter explains where we are as a culture and why presenting Christ’s message has its special challenges in our day. Then another chapter will be devoted to the question of religious truth, answering the objections of those who believe that all religions lead to the same end. I’ll show why the illustration of the wheel (referred to above) is so profoundly wrongheaded.

Then we begin our journey, placing Christ on the shelf

with other gods. Can the gods compete? Or do they topple like the ancient Philistine god Dagon when placed next to the ark of the Lord—helpless in the presence of Someone much greater than they (1 Samuel 5:3)?

Read on.