

## TURNING TO THE EAST

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### *Introduction*

Approaching the subject of the human condition from non-Christian viewpoints in Europe means diverging somewhat from what has previously gone before us in this discussion. While we have discussed original sin from the perspective of Christian history and from various viewpoints, we have had no need to engage the world as yet, at least until we have some consensus on what we believe. The world of religion and ideology, we have found, has little if any concept of human depravity that has resulted from an act of rebellion against a personal and moral God in history or that this depravity pervades the whole human race. We will look into this assertion more carefully in what follows.

One daunting realisation has been the complexity and proliferation of religion, pseudo-religions, ideologies, and sects that comprise the pluralistic scene of Europe. This suggests to me that rather than being exhaustive we must, due to limited space and time, approach the subject by researching representative sources. This means that the writer must selectively approach the topic, which means that we are subject to criticism for what has been left out. Others, at another time, may engage the areas I have left out.

In this particular study we can only hope to scratch the surface to see what may, in fact, represent the broader reality to sufficiently satisfy the purposes of this study. I propose that our particular purpose will be to look selectively at dominant non-Christian ideologies that are most evident on the European scene, focusing on those aspects most closely related to our subject—sin and the concept of original sin. We can be confident that even a short and somewhat superficial study will bear significant information regarding our context of ministry and mission in Europe.

### *Resurgence of Religion*

In the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, secularism was touted as the fulfilment of the Enlightenment dream. Mankind had come of age: there was no longer a need for religion because enlightened humans, through the use of critical reason, could solve human problems. We had secular theology, the church come of age. Religion, including theology, imbibed at the well of secularism. Secularism blasted religion, and religion took a beating, but it did not die. Today, religion has come back—almost with a vengeance. We are not living in a secular world—a world devoid of religion—but in a world proliferating with religions (mostly out of sight and confined to the private world, but substantially present and pervasive).

Douglas John Hall affirms the resurgence of religion with an example from a Canadian university:

Under the now-more-conscious threat of nonbeing, humankind asks openly for the meaning of being. Religion is again interesting. The faculty of Religious

Studies at McGill University, my large, secular university, is the fastest growing faculty of all. This phenomenon is duplicated all over the world.<sup>1</sup>

This new interest in religion is as diverse and complex as anytime in history. It resembles pre-Christian Europe and, in some ways, represents the resurgence of pre-Christian religions on the European continent. We now have paganism 'with an attitude'! In keeping with this, J Gordon Melton states:

During the twentieth century, the West experienced a phenomenon it has not encountered since the reign of Constantine: the growth of and significant visible presence of a variety of non-Christian and non-orthodox Christian bodies competing for the religious allegiance of the public. This growth of so many alternatives religiously is forcing a new situation in the West in which the still dominant Christian religion must share its centuries old hegemony in a new pluralistic religious environment.<sup>2</sup>

Obviously it affects how we prepare ministry for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. A new context means a new approach. How does this new pluralism affect the understanding of persons in this new context regarding the human condition? Does 'repentance' and 'cleansing from sin' have any meaning whatsoever in this context?

These phrases have some meaning, I believe due to the residual effect of Christian thought in Western culture for over a thousand years, but may be interpreted in a far different way than we think because of the religio-cultural and cognitive framework of this new, radically different (yet very ancient) context.

Michael von Brück (on the faculty of Regensburg University, and a Lutheran pastor) reflects on how this affects theology:

Many today are in agreement that an important—perhaps *the* important—theme of Christian theology is the encounter of world religions. We can only understand Christian faith and proclaim it intelligently in the context of such an encounter, when we have become aware that Christianity is not alone. And that the truths of religions cannot be met by superficial polemics.<sup>3</sup>

While we may debate his use of the words 'truths of other religions', I do not think we can argue with the fact that we cannot engage the religious scene in a superficial manner, unworthy of mature engagement and misrepresenting our faith by our lack of understanding of other faiths.

In the past the confrontation of different cultures and views of truth—such as the heliocentric and geocentric worldviews—has led to current paradigm shifts. Today, too, we are at a turning point in our history, and it is probable that the

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<sup>1</sup> Douglas John Hall, 'Ecclesia Crucis: The Theologic of Christian Awkwardness', in *The Church Between Gospel and Culture*, eds George R Hunsberger and Craig Van Gelder (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996), 212.

<sup>2</sup> J Gordon Melton, 'Modern Alternative Religions in the West', in *A Handbook of Living Religions*, ed John R Hinnells (London: Penguin Books, 1984), 455.

<sup>3</sup> Michael von Brück, *The Unity of Reality*, trans. James V Seitz (New York: Paulist Press, 1986), Forward, v.

meeting between Europe and Asia will be an important factor...in constructing a new paradigm of truth, behavior, political organization, and religious thought.<sup>4</sup>

I am reminded of Lesslie Newbigin's term for Europe that he occasionally used—calling it 'Western Asia'. In many respects it has the potential of becoming just that!

### *The Enlightenment: the Human as Autonomous and Good*

The Enlightenment means many things and is, in reality, a complex worldview with many facets that interrelate and create a cultural paradigm that has in the West been passed from generation to generation since the pivotal thinking of René Descartes and others.

What emerges is the doctrine of the autonomy of the human person. Essentially, 'the principle of autonomy presupposed the presence in the world of a universal natural law that all humans could come to know through the power of reason.'<sup>5</sup> Each person would follow the path of reason and things would get better and better. As human confidence itself grew, the need for God began to diminish. Stanley J Grenz notes the eventual result of Enlightenment thinking on the view of the human condition:

Enlightenment anthropology neatly integrated humankind into the harmony of the cosmos, in part by emphasising the inherent potential of the human individual and by de-emphasising the traditional Christian emphasis on human depravity. Enlightenment ethicists stepped away from the belief that all human beings are born in sin and naturally inclined to evil.<sup>6</sup>

It is not difficult to see how, with this view pervading Western culture, Christianity (as well as God) could be readily and steadily dismissed as non-progressive or obscurantist.

To make a very long story short, the 20<sup>th</sup> century saw the emergence of a strong reaction against the Enlightenment. The Enlightenment, which dismissed dogma and faith, produced scepticism, loss of meaning, and ultimately nihilism (which Nietzsche picked-up on quite early). So, what we are seeing is a search for answers and meaning that the Enlightenment failed to give. The Enlightenment, according to many (including Lesslie Newbigin), is a failed project. And many Western Europeans, probably more than we would expect, have turned toward the East to find what is essentially (or at least apparently) lacking in Western culture.

### *Turn Toward the East*

To give us a little understanding of what it means to turn to the East, I will quote from Hermann Hesse's *Siddhartha*, where, at the end of his life, the Buddha concludes:

Everything that exists is good—death as well as life, sin as well as holiness, wisdom as well as folly. Everything is necessary, everything needs only my agreement, my assent, my loving understanding: then all is well with me and

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<sup>4</sup> Von Brück, 1.

<sup>5</sup> Stanley J Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism* (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996), 69.

<sup>6</sup> Grenz, 70.

nothing can harm me. I learned through my body and my soul that it was necessary for me to sin, that I needed lust, that I had to strive for property and experience nausea and the depths of despair in order to learn not to resist them, in order to learn to love this world, and no longer compare it with some kind of desired imaginary world, some imaginary kind of perfection, but to leave it as it is, to love it and be glad to belong to it.<sup>7</sup>

There is, I believe, a subtle blending of East and West in Hesse that points Eastward but still has the flavour of the West. As we move to the East, there is not a lot of discussion of sin, nor does it necessarily mean to them what it means to us who have been raised in a culture saturated by biblical concepts. Moving Eastward, we are also not likely to hear much that we could conclude to be ‘world-embracing’.

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<sup>7</sup> From *Siddhartha*, (translated by Hilda Rosner. New York: New Directions Publishing Company, 1951, p. 116) quoted in Peter Moore. *Disarming the Secular Gods: How to talk to Skeptics who will listen*. (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1989), pp. 49-50.

*East Indian Thinking: Impact on the West*

In a classic text on comparative philosophy titled *The Concept of Man: a Study in Comparative Philosophy*, edited by S Radhakrishnan and P T Raju, we find a chapter titled ‘The Concept of Man in Indian Thought’ by Raju.<sup>8</sup> The thrust of the chapter is two-fold: first, there is a marked interest in ‘self-realisation’ (the idea that you take what you have as valid and nurture it, bringing it to greater life and light); and second, the movement of the search for truth and reality from the external world to the internal realm ‘while performing one’s duties’. These ideas do not necessarily deny human sinfulness but the assumption appears to be that we have what we need, we need only recognise it and nurture it.

For all the schools [of Indian thought], man is a wayfarer; the way, however, lies not from one point in space to another, but from the world of outward reality to the inward realm. The direction of the process of the world is from the outward to the inward. Life is the inwardness which matter attains; and mind is the inwardness which life attains in the process of the world we observe. The being of man belongs to this process, and the success of life is proportional to the inwardness he deliberately pursues and attains.<sup>9</sup>

The movement of the object of human focus from outward reality to the inward realm means, in this context, more than just nurturing one’s spiritual life—it means that there is divinity in humanity. The most famous Hindu saying from the *Chandogya Upanishad*, is ‘Tat Tvam asi’—which literally means ‘That you are’. This phrase points to a fundamental idea of Eastern thinking, that humans are, in essence, gods.<sup>10</sup> In the *Upanishads* under the title of Chapter 1, ‘Katha’, we read:

The secret of immortality is to be found in purification of the heart, in meditation, in realization of the identity of the Self within and Brahman without. For immortality is union with God.<sup>11</sup>

The question would be how to interpret ‘purification of heart’. One might suppose it would mean that we remove ourselves from attachment to the material world.

The *Bhagavad Gita*, an epic that is extremely popular among the people of India, deals with human nature in two ways. In one place it says that humans (at least Arjuna) are free from sin, while in another place it talks about humans having a demonic nature. How do we interpret these two ideas in the context of the *Gita* and Hinduism? It would be fair to say that humans are held responsible for whether they are good or evil—and therefore pre-determine their next reincarnation (the law of karma). There is a sense in which destiny enters into this formula but, by and large, each person is responsible for their behaviour and this affects their subsequent life. There is no concept of sin or condition of sin that reigns in our beings that can be dealt with by grace from God—or

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<sup>8</sup> P T Raju, ‘The Concept of Man in Indian Thought’, in S. Radhakrishnan and P. T. Raju, eds, *The Concept of Man: a Study in Comparative Philosophy* (Lincoln, Nebraska: Johnsen Publishing Company, 1966, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition), 220-319.

<sup>9</sup> Raju, 310.

<sup>10</sup> Moore, 42.

<sup>11</sup> Swami Prabhavandanda and Frederick Manchester, *The Upanishads: Breath of the Eternal*, The Vedanta Society of Southern California (New York: A Mentor Book, 1957), 13.

any supernatural being. *Bhagavad Gita*, Chapter 18 ('Renunciation and Salvation'), verses 45-47, says:

Rejoicing in his special work a man attains perfectedness, hear how he may achieve success rejoicing in his special work. For a man attains perfection with his own action worshipping the One who fills this universe, source of activity of being.<sup>12</sup>

We can generally conclude that Indian thinking does not engage in thinking about sin (in the sense of offending a personal God who is holy and moral) or the condition of sin in individuals, but is more concerned in attaining perfection through self-realisation or through complete identification with Brahman, leaving the sensible world of illusion.

### *The Human Condition in Chinese Thinking*

The Chinese scholar, Wing-Tsit Chan, has written a great volume on Chinese philosophy,<sup>13</sup> and also a fine chapter in Radhakrishnan and Raju titled, 'The Concept of Man in Chinese Thought'.<sup>14</sup> I will attempt to summarise the essential points of this chapter. The Chinese, whether Confucian or Taoist, scholar or illiterate, radical or conservative, is a humanist.<sup>15</sup> Salvation is the full-realisation of the human nature.<sup>16</sup> This is based on the over-arching belief in the goodness of human nature. Human beings are by nature good.<sup>17</sup> This doctrine of the original goodness of human nature comes from the Confucian school, even though it was not taught (according to Chan) in the ancient Confucian classics or by Confucius.<sup>18</sup> It was Mencius who taught the original goodness of mankind.<sup>19</sup> There were those who, of course, diverged from this position, some seeing human nature as evil and some as good and evil.

Although the view of Mencius prevailed in neo-Confucianism, it is interesting how he and Hsün Tzu dealt with the issue.

Mencius (371-289 BC), responding to the question of how persons whose nature is good can do evil, basically says that if humans follow their essential character, they would be able to do good. If a person does evil it is not the fault of original endowment.<sup>20</sup> Hsün Tzu (298-238 B. C.) took the opposite view: human nature is evil and if there is any goodness it would be the result of the 'transforming influence of

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<sup>12</sup> Geoffrey Parrinder, *The Bhagavad Gita* (New York: E. P. Dutton and Co., Inc., 1975), 98-99.

<sup>13</sup> Wing-Tsit Chan, *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy*, translated and compiled by Wing-Tsit Chan (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1963).

<sup>14</sup> Wing-Tsit Chan, 'The Concept of Man in Chinese Thought', in Radhakrishnan and Raju, 172-219.

<sup>15</sup> Chan, 172.

<sup>16</sup> Chan, 174.

<sup>17</sup> Chan, 176.

<sup>18</sup> Chan, 177.

<sup>19</sup> Chan, 181.

<sup>20</sup> Chan, 183.

education or law and the guidance of propriety and rightness'.<sup>21</sup> But the goodness of human nature prevailed in Chinese thinking, taking issue with Christian doctrine as it was introduced to China:

It was because of this firm conviction that the Christian doctrine of original sin has been unacceptable to the Chinese intellectuals. More important than all of these, the belief in the goodness of human nature has led to the conviction that the development of one's moral nature is the way to perfection ...<sup>22</sup>

In fact, people are required to develop their good or they lose it—so the weight of moral development is totally on the person.<sup>23</sup>

We may also conclude from this rather short overview that Chinese thinking does not view sin, or the condition of sin, as necessarily a part of the human condition—but in fact has on occasions has repudiated the idea.

### *Islamic Concept of the Human Condition*

If you walk from the University of Manchester to Didsbury (which I have done), you pass through some distinct immigrant communities. It is not hard to see that Islam has arrived in force in Britain. In the United States, the presence of Islam is becoming more prominent every day. There is a mosque in Raytown, Missouri, a suburb of Kansas City, the heart of the nation. The headquarters for Islamic mission activity in North America, I have been told, is located near Indianapolis, Indiana.

Ibrahim Madkour, in 'The Concept of Man in Islamic Thought',<sup>24</sup> views the role of Islam as coming to 'awaken the souls from their slumber and to purge and purify them of their sins'.<sup>25</sup> The *Koran* says 'Oh, thou souls which art at rest, return to thy Lord, pleased and pleasing to Him' (Surah 89, verse 27). 'Yet I hold not my soul clean, for the soul is prone to evil' (Surah 12, verse 53). How is this to be understood? Certainly not as a cleansing that comes from God. The brunt of responsibility is on humans:

Indeed, divine services and prescribed duties require bodily exertion as in ritual prayer and fasting, but their fundamental aim is the purgation and purification of the soul which is man's essence.<sup>26</sup>

Moslems believe humans have free will that enables them to choose how to act. The idea of free will seems to indicate that they believe that there is nothing inherent in humanity to inhibit free choice or necessarily cause one to choose evil. They believe that Islam strengthens the human will so that one is able to choose the correct path but also that one is morally responsible for one's choices. This is especially the position of the Mo'tazila school, one of the two great schools of Islamic theology. The Ash'arite

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<sup>21</sup> Chan, 185.

<sup>22</sup> Chan, 177.

<sup>23</sup> Chan, 183.

<sup>24</sup> Ibrahim Madkour, 'The Concept of Man in Islamic Thought', in Radhakrishnan and Raju, 452-475.

<sup>25</sup> Madkour, 461.

<sup>26</sup> Madkour, 461.

school ascribes everything to God, nevertheless admit that humans have free will but that the action that follows is accomplished through God's will.<sup>27</sup>

Reiterating the duty of persons to secure their own purity, Madkour says:

Through spiritual endeavour man can cleanse his soul and ascend to higher states of being; in short, he can become a 'perfect man'...Prophet Muhammad is considered by Muslims the most perfect human being, and every Muslim can emulate him, draw nearer to his person, and approximate to his perfection.<sup>28</sup>

Islamic thinkers, generally, do see the human condition as one impeded by the nature of sin but one that is free to choose to follow the will of God. There is no mention of persons attaining the nature of God as a way of dealing with sin against the will of God, or attaining purity. Again, it is through a person's personal endeavour that one is able to attain purity.

### *Buddhist Concept of the Human Condition*

Before we discuss the New Age movement it is important to mention Buddhism briefly because, according to Mary Pat Fischer, 'At the beginning of the twenty-first century, Buddhism has captured the interest of many educated people in the West. In France, for instance, it is the most popular "new religion"'.<sup>29</sup>

This reflects the influence of Buddhism along with other Eastern religions on the West, and points, I believe, to a deep dissatisfaction with Western culture within the West. Western culture has no answer for purpose or meaning, because the Enlightenment dismissed purpose and meaning from public discussion since they could not be proven by scientific method. Buddhism fits into the new emphasis on 'spirituality'—which seeks a way to magnify and affirm the self rather than to draw close to a divine Being, or to seek to be cleansed or purified to be like this divine Being. A statement by Douglas John Hall helps us keep our perspective. He writes:

Everyone has learned the word 'spirituality'. Yet it is not so easy to overcome the rationalist impact of two centuries of science—knowledge without love!<sup>30</sup>

### *Turning East: Neo-Paganism in the West*

There is something missing in the West, and Westerners have become sceptical that the epistemological program of the West can provide an answer to the deep questions of life. It seems natural to turn to the ancient wisdom of the East.

In so doing they have encountered teachers who borrow freely from the East's rich heritage, but mingle it with insights from the so-called human potential movement and the psychedelic subculture of the sixties to produce a new kind of

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<sup>27</sup> Madkour, 473.

<sup>28</sup> Madkour, 475.

<sup>29</sup> Mary Pat Fisher, *Religions in the Twenty-first Century* (London: Routledge, 1999), 451.

<sup>30</sup> Douglas John Hall, 'Ecclesia Crucis', 211.



consciousness that appears to offer an exciting and radically different approach to reality.<sup>31</sup>

What is happening in the West is the re-introduction of ancient paganism that asserts that this paganism in a new, modern form has answers that Western culture cannot supply. Rationalism and the scientific method have pushed the most important truths of life out of public consciousness. Spiritual questions and answers are matters of personal opinion, and are not appropriate for public discussion. Because the Christian church has in part accepted much of what the Enlightenment has imposed upon Western culture (including our educational institutions), it is being dismissed with the same passion as Western culture. Western culture, because of its dualism—the separation of the human from nature, the spirit from the body, and facts from purpose and meaning—has led to the resurgence of new paganism.

In an incredible return to more primitive elements of paganism, neo-paganism has embraced magic but with a contemporary twist. Instead of being seen as an attempt to manipulate gods or spirits for good or evil, it is seen more as ‘shaping forces’.

A distinctive feature of neo-paganism...is its interest in magic. Starhawk, a prominent neo-pagan witch and practitioner, defines magic as ‘the art of sensing and shaping the subtle, unseen forces that flow throughout the world, of awakening deeper levels of consciousness beyond the rational’.<sup>32</sup>

What *is*, then, is not evil or corrupt or tainted with sin. We need only somehow to gain control of the unseen forces and manipulate them in order to find self-realisation or oneness in the stream of life.

#### *The Human Condition in the New Age Movement*

While we have looked at traditional world religions (however briefly), we must look at this growing contemporary phenomenon—ancient in its origin but seemingly reborn at a time when religion (according to past ‘futurists’) was supposed to die from cultural suffocation. It is estimated that this syncretistic religion has a higher percentage of adherents in Europe than in North and South America.<sup>33</sup>

At the very heart of neo-paganism is the attempt to recreate ‘some sense of sacred meaning and connectedness with the cosmos...’.<sup>34</sup> But New Age goes beyond the attempt to bring back the perspectives of indigenous religious cultures. It desires to create a new worldview that will usher in a new age. Through various possible means of altering human consciousness they hope to enable people to move to enlightenment

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<sup>31</sup> Peter Moore, *Disarming the Secular Gods: How to talk to Sceptics who will listen*. (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1989), 41.

<sup>32</sup> Miriam Starhawk, *The Spiritual Dance: A Rebirth of a Great Goddess*, rev ed (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989), 27, quoted in Mary Pat Fisher, *Religions in the Twenty-first Century*, 35.

<sup>33</sup> William Honsberger and Dean C. Halverson, ‘The New Age Movement’, in Dean C. Halverson, ed, *The Compact Guide to World Religions* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Bethany House Publishers, 1996), 160.

<sup>34</sup> Mary Pat Fisher, *Religions in the Twenty-first Century*, 36.

or union with God. It is through the experience of such enlightenment that the new age will emerge, the true paradise.<sup>35</sup>

It is accurate to say that Hinduism is not a religion, but a family of religions, advocating multiple ways to enlightenment, salvation, or whatever the ultimate goal may be. New Age, in a similar vein, has been described as ‘an updated, Westernized version of Vedanta Hinduism with bits of Taoism, Zen, and ancient Babylonian and Egyptian religions thrown in for good measure.’<sup>36</sup>

The fundamental problem of humanity, New Age believes, has to do with perception. One writer describes it as follows:

...all humanity is suffering from a severe case of ignorance in that we have forgotten our true nature. We have forgotten that we are unconditionally connected to and emanated from God, which is the Universal Mind.<sup>37</sup>

What is needed, they believe, is a new way of thinking, a new consciousness, a paradigm shift. As we become enlightened, we can find power to ‘transform ourselves’, and thereby transform the world. While Christianity teaches that our rebellion broke our relationship to God, New Age believes that it is impossible to break the relationship between us and the divine Oneness.<sup>38</sup> It is not difficult to see that the idea of someone atoning for our sins in order to restore our broken relationship with a holy and personal God makes little sense in this system.<sup>39</sup>

The goal of meditation—or whatever method is utilised—is to experience Oneness, and such an experience, it is claimed, will change our lives. We experience the interconnectedness with all things, and our perspective is transformed to see all of life as a manifestation of the divine.<sup>40</sup> Some New Age advocates believe that the ‘goal is the perfection of our ability to love.’<sup>41</sup> New Age sees reincarnation, not as something from which to escape, but as a spiritual evolution toward perfection.<sup>42</sup>

Regarding sin and salvation, New Age follows the mystical philosophers of the East with a Western touch to make it palatable for Westerners. Sin is not a matter of transgression but more a matter of ignorance. But wrongdoing, because of the law of karma, has its own punishment. Humanity did not fall because of sin; what Christians believe about the Fall was the splitting of the unity (God) into mind and matter.

Humanity will be the means of reuniting mind and matter, and thus will save God!<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> David L. Smith, *A Handbook of Contemporary Theology* (Wheaton: A Bridgepoint Book, 1992), 274.

<sup>36</sup> Smith, 274-74.

<sup>37</sup> Honsberger and Halverson, ‘The New Age Movement’, 162-63.

<sup>38</sup> Honsberger and Halverson, ‘The New Age Movement’, 164.

<sup>39</sup> David L Smith, *A Handbook of Contemporary Theology*, 285.

<sup>40</sup> Honsberger and Halverson, 164.

<sup>41</sup> Honsberger and Halverson, 165.

<sup>42</sup> Honsberger and Halverson, 165.

<sup>43</sup> David L Smith, *A Handbook of Contemporary Theology*, 285.

Obviously, the Christian view of the human condition and the New Age view are at the opposite ends of the spectrum. The Christian view is repudiated out of hand. One writer had noticed the similarity of New Age with ancient Gnosticism. The Gnostics taught that redemption of the spirit from its attachment to the material was a matter of special spiritual knowledge and that creation is an emanation from the godhead or some original essence.<sup>44</sup> A similar view appears in New Age.

New Age has also been analysed as being Pelagian, in the belief that humanity is intrinsically good and that all that is required for a person to be holy is to work toward that end. 'This same belief permeates the whole New Age spirituality.'<sup>45</sup> There is no place in the New Age movement for sin.<sup>46</sup>

#### *A Note from Wesley*

My assessment of the whole of the non-Christian view of the human condition is that there is no correlation with the Christian view of the human condition as traditionally held by the Church in the West. This, I believe, has real implications for our ministry in Europe. Before I assess what this may mean for us, let me note a rather interesting discussion in Wesley's sermon on 'Original Sin', where he generally draws the same conclusion that I have regarding non-Christian views. He writes:

The writings of many of the ancients abound with gay descriptions of the dignity of man; whom some of them paint as having all virtue and happiness in his composition, or at least, entirely in his power, without being beholden to any other being; yea, as self-sufficient, able to live on his own stock, and little inferior to God himself.<sup>47</sup>

Regarding those who are called Christian, he writes:

...but many likewise of them that bear the name of Christ, and to whom are entrusted the oracles of God, spoken as magnificently concerning the nature of man, as if it were all innocence and perfection.<sup>48</sup>

In language characteristic of his age, he distinguishes between Christianity and 'Heathenism' on the point of human depravity:

Many of the ancient Heathens have largely described the vices of particular men. They have spoken much against their covetousness, or cruelty; their luxury, or prodigality. Some have dared to say that 'no man is born without vices of one kind or another'. But still as none of them were apprised of the fall of man, so none of them knew of his total corruption. They knew not that all men were empty of all good, and filled with all manner of evil. They were wholly ignorant of the entire depravation of the whole human nature, of every man born into the world, in every faculty of his soul, not so much by those particular vices which

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<sup>44</sup> Pat Collins, CM, *Spirituality for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: Christian Living in a Secular Age* (Dublin: The Columba Press, 1999), 111.

<sup>45</sup> Collins, 111.

<sup>46</sup> Collins, 111.

<sup>47</sup> John Wesley, 'Original Sin', (sermon number 44) *The Works of John Wesley* (Third Edition), Vol VI (Kansas City, Missouri: Beacon Hill Press, 1979), 54.

<sup>48</sup> 'Original Sin', 54.

reign in particular persons, as by the general flood of Atheism and idolatry, of pride, self-will, and love of the world. This, therefore, is the first grand distinguishing point between Heathenism and Christianity.<sup>49</sup>

I cannot argue with Wesley at this point, but will say that what he says is seemingly still the case, if, in fact, Christianity still holds to the doctrine of original sin!

I would like to reinforce Wesley's discussion with a statement made by a 20<sup>th</sup> century British missionary whose insight regarding the sad condition of Western culture is becoming more recognised every day. Lesslie Newbigin has hit upon the crux of the issue when he says: 'Apart from what God has done in Jesus, there is no ground for speaking of the radical sinfulness of human nature.'<sup>50</sup>

### *General Conclusions*

I would like to summarise with some general observations regarding the human condition from a non-Christian viewpoint:

1. What becomes apparent as one studies other major religions and religious movements is that *there is little or no understanding of sin as an offence against a living, loving, holy God*, and there is little or no understanding (perhaps even less) regarding humanity possessing or being subject to a depraved sinful condition. There are many schools of thought within each tradition and some may move in this direction, but none can be said to match the Christian understanding of the condition of sin in the heart of humanity.
2. What also becomes apparent is that *much of what is found is escapism*. The attempt is to leave or move beyond present existence with the idea that being finite or somehow caught in the material realm is detrimental to true spirituality or of reaching a perfected spiritual state.
3. *Much of what is found is works-righteousness*, If there is any concept of salvation, the burden for finding it and reaching it is wholly placed upon the individual. The individual must find the path and walk on it, meeting the demands of that particular discipline in order to arrive at a point where walking ceases. The individual strives to reach a point where he/she no longer strives.
4. The idea of God entering into this world to atone for our sins and redeem us from our sinfulness has no real counterpart in the great religions. The whole scheme seems alien to their concepts of salvation, enlightenment, or self-realisation.

### *Final Words from the Gita*

I would like to leave you with the words of Krishna to the warrior Arjuna from the *Bhagavad Gita*:

Steadfastly the will  
Must toil thereto, till efforts end in ease,  
And thought has passed from thinking. Shaking off  
All longings bred by dreams of fame and gain,

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<sup>49</sup> 'Original Sin', 63.

<sup>50</sup> Lesslie Newbigin, *The Light Has Dawned* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1982), 206.

Shutting the doorways of the senses close,  
With watchful ward; so, step by step, it comes  
To gift of peace assured and heart assuaged,  
When the mind dwells self-wrapped, and the soul broods  
Cumberless. But, as often as the heart  
Breaks—wild and wavering—from control, so oft  
Let him re-curb it, let him rein it back  
To the soul's governance! For perfect bliss  
Grows only in the bosom tranquillized,  
The spirit passionless, purged from offence,  
Vowed to the Infinite. He who thus vows  
His soul to the Supreme Soul, quitting sin,  
Passes unhindered to the endless bliss  
Of unity with Brahma. He so vowed,  
so blended, sees the Life-Soul resident  
In all things living, and all living things  
In that Life-Soul contained. And whoso thus  
Discerneth Me in all, and all in Me,  
I never let him go; nor looseth he  
Hold upon me; but, dwell he where he may,  
Whate'er his life, in Me he dwells and lives  
Because he know and worships Me, Who dwell  
In all which lives, and cleaves to Me in all.  
Arjuna! If a man sees everywhere—  
Taught by his own similitude—one Life,  
One essence in the Evil and the Good,  
Hold him a Yôgi, yea! Well-perfected! 51

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<sup>51</sup> From *The Bhagavad Gita, A Treasury of Asian Literature*, ed John D Yohanan, trans Sir Edwin Arnold (New York: A Mentor Book, 1956), 353.