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"No Other Name": A Middle Knowledge Perspective on the Exclusivity of Salvation Through Christ

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The conviction of the New Testament writers was that there is no salvation apart from Jesus. This orthodox doctrine is widely rejected today because God's condemnation of persons in other world religions seems incompatible with various attributes of God. Analysis reveals the real problem to involve certain counterfactuals of freedom, e.g., why did not God create a world in which all people would freely believe in Christ and be saved? Such questions presuppose that God possesses middle knowledge. But it can be shown that no inconsistency exists between God's having middle knowledge and certain persons' being damned; on the contrary it can be positively shown that these two notions are compatible.

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Introduction

"There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4.12). So proclaimed the early preachers of the gospel of Christ. Indeed, this conviction permeates the New Testament and helped to spur the Gentile mission. Paul invites his Gentile converts to recall their pre-Christian days: "Remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world" (Ephesians 2.12). The burden of the opening chapters of Romans is to show that this desolate situation is the general condition of mankind. Though God's eternal power and deity are evident through creation (1.20) and the demands of His moral law implanted on the hearts of all persons (2.15) and although God offers eternal life to all who seek Him in well-doing (2.7), the tragic fact of the matter is that in general people suppress the truth in unrighteousness, ignoring the Creator (1.21) and flouting the moral law (1.32). Therefore, "all men, both Jews and Greeks, are under the power of sin, as it is written: 'None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands, no one seeks for God...'" (3.9-1 1). Sin is the great leveler, rendering all needy of God's forgiveness and salvation. Given the universality of sin, all persons stand morally guilty and condemned before God, utterly incapable of redeeming themselves through righteous acts (3.19-20). But God in His grace has provided a means of salvation from this state of condemnation: Jesus Christ, by his expiatory death, redeems us from sin and justifies us before God (3.21-26). It is through him and through him alone, then, that God's forgiveness is available (5.12-21). To reject Jesus Christ is therefore to reject God's grace and forgiveness, to refuse the one means of salvation which God has provided. It is to remain under His condemnation and wrath, to forfeit eternally salvation. For someday God will judge all men, "inflicting vengeance upon those who do not know God and upon those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They shall suffer the punishment of eternal destruction and exclusion from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might" (II Thessalonians 1.8-9).

It was not just Paul who held to this exclusivistic, Christocentric view of salvation. No less than Paul, the apostle John saw no salvation outside of Christ. In his gospel, Jesus declares, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but by me" (John 14.6). John explains that men love the darkness of sin rather than light, but that God has sent His Son into the world to save the world and to give eternal life to everyone who believes in the Son. "He who believes is not condemned; he who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God" (John 3.18). People are already spiritually dead; but those who believe in Christ pass from death to life (John 5.24). In his epistles, John asserts that no one who denies the Son has the Father and identifies such a person as the antichrist (I John 2.22-23; 4.3; II John 9). In short, "He who has the Son has life; he who has not the Son of God has not life" (I John 5.12). In John's Apocalypse, it is the Lamb alone in heaven and on earth and under the earth who is worthy to open the scroll and its seven seals, for it was he that by his blood ransomed men for God from every tribe and tongue and people and nation on the earth (Revelation 5.1-14). In the consummation, everyone whose name is not found written in the Lamb's book of life is cast into the everlasting fire reserved for the devil and his cohorts (Revelation 20.15).

One could make the same point from the catholic epistles and the pastorals. It is the conviction of the writers of the New Testament that "there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all" (I Timothy 2.5-6).

Indeed, it is plausible that such was the attitude of Jesus himself. New Testament scholarship has reached something of a consensus that the historical Jesus came on the scene with an unparalleled sense of divine authority, the authority to stand and speak in the place of God Himself and to call men to repentance and faith.[1] Moreover, the object of that faith was he himself, the absolute revelation of God: "All things have been delivered to me by my Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him" (Matthew 11.27) .[2] On the day of judgment, people's destiny will be determined by how they responded to him: "And I tell you, everyone who acknowledges me before men, the Son of Man also will acknowledge before the angels of God; but he who denies me before men will be denied before the angels of God" (Luke 12.8-9).[3] Frequent warnings concerning hell are found on Jesus' lips, and it may well be that he believed that most of mankind would be damned, while a minority of mankind would be saved: "Enter by the narrow gate, for the gate is wide and the way is easy, that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard, that leads to life, and those who find it are few" (Matthew 7:13-14) .[4]

A hard teaching, no doubt; but the logic of the New Testament is simple and compelling: The universality of sin and the uniqueness Christ's expiatory sacrifice entail that there is no salvation apart from Christ. Although this exclusivity was scandalous in the polytheistic world of the first century, with the triumph of Christianity throughout the Empire the scandal receded. Indeed, one of the classic marks of the church was its catholicity, and for men like Augustine and Aquinas the universality of the church was one of the signs that the Scriptures are divine revelation, since so great a structure could not have been generated by and founded upon a falsehood.[5] Of course, recalcitrant Jews remained in Christian Europe, and later the infidel armies of Islam had to be combated, but these exceptions were hardly sufficient to overturn the catholicity of the church or to promote religious pluralism.

But with the so-called "Expansion of Europe" during the three centuries of exploration and discovery from 1450 to 1750, the situation changed radically.[6] It was now seen that far from being the universal religion, Christianity was confined to a small comer of the globe. This realization had a two-fold impact upon people's religious thinking: (i) it tended toward the relativization of religious beliefs. Since each religious system was historically and geographically limited, it seemed incredible that any of them should be regarded as universally true. It seemed that the only religion which could make a universal claim upon mankind would be a sort of general religion of nature. (ii) It tended to make Christianity's claim to exclusivity appear unjustly narrow and cruel. If salvation was only through faith in Christ, then the majority of the human race was condemned to eternal damnation, since they had not so much as even heard of Christ. Again, only a natural religion available to all men seemed consistent with a fair and loving God.

In our own day the influx into Western nations of immigrants from former colonies, coupled with the advances in telecommunications which have served to shrink the world toward a "global village," have heightened both of these impressions. As a result, the church has to a great extent lost its sense of missionary calling or been forced to reinterpret it in terms of social engagement, while those who continue to adhere to the traditional, orthodox view are denounced for religious intolerance. This shift is perhaps best illustrated by the attitude of the Second Vatican Council toward world mission. In its Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, the Council declared that those who have not yet received the gospel are related in various ways to the people of God.[7] Jews, in particular, remain dear to God, but the plan of salvation also includes all who acknowledge the Creator, such as Muslims. People who through no fault of their own do not know the gospel, but who strive to do God's will by conscience can also be saved. The Council therefore declared that Catholics now pray *for* the Jews, not for the *conversion* of the Jews and also declares that the Church looks with esteem upon Muslims.[8] Missionary work seems to

be directed only toward those who "serve the creature rather than the Creator" or are utterly hopeless.[9] Carefully couched in ambiguous language and often apparently internally inconsistent,[10] the documents of Vatican II could easily be taken as a radical reinterpretation of the nature of the Church and of Christian missions, according to which great numbers of non-Christians are specifically related to the Church and therefore not appropriate subjects of evangelism.

The difficulty of the orthodox position has compelled some persons to embrace universalism and as a consequence to deny the incarnation of Christ. Thus, John Hick explains,

> For understood literally the Son of God, God the Son, God-incarnate language implies that God can be adequately known and responded to only through Jesus; and the whole religious life of mankind, beyond the stream of Judaic-Christian faith is thus by implication excluded as lying outside the sphere of salvation. This implication did little positive harm so long as Christendom was a largely autonomous civilization with only relatively marginal interaction with the rest of mankind. But with the clash between the Christian and Muslim worlds, and then on an ever-broadening front with European colonization through the earth, the literal understanding of the mythological language of Christian discipleship has had a divisive effect upon the relations between that minority of human beings who live within the borders of the Christian tradition and that majority who live outside it and within other streams of religious life.
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> Transposed into theological terms, the problem which has come to the surface in the encounter of Christianity with the other world religions is this: If Jesus was literally God incarnate, and if it is by his death alone that men can be saved, and by their response to him alone that they can appropriate that salvation, then the only doorway to eternal life is Christian faith. It would follow from this that the large majority of the human race so far have not been saved. But is it credible that the loving God and Father of all men has decreed that only those born within one particular thread of human history shall be saved?[11]

But what exactly is the problem with God's condemning persons who adhere to non-Christian religions? I do not see that the very notion of hell is incompatible with a just and loving God. According to the New Testament, God does not want anyone to perish, but desires that all persons repent and be saved and come to know the truth (11 Peter 3.9; 1 Timothy 2.4). He therefore seeks to draw all men to Himself. Those who make a well-informed and free decision to reject Christ are self-condemned, since they repudiate God's unique sacrifice for sin. By spurning God's prevenient grace and the solicitation of His Spirit, they shut out God's mercy and seal their own destiny. They, therefore, and not God, are responsible for their condemnation, and God deeply mourns their loss.

Nor does it seem to me that the problem can be simply reduced to the inconsistency of a loving and just God's condemning persons who are either un- , ill-, or misinformed concerning Christ and who therefore lack the opportunity to receive Him. For one could maintain that God graciously applies to such persons the benefits of Christ's atoning death without their conscious knowledge thereof on the basis of their response to the light of general revelation and the truth that they do have, even as He did in the case of Old Testament figures like Job who were outside the covenant of Israel.[12] The testimony of Scripture is that the mass of humanity do not even respond to the light that they do have, and God's condemnation of them is neither unloving nor unjust, since He judges them according to standards of general revelation vastly lower than those which are applied to persons who have been recipients of His special revelation.

Rather the real problem, it seems to me, involves certain counterfactuals of freedom concerning those who do not receive special revelation and so are lost. If we take Scripture seriously, we must admit that the vast majority of persons in the world are condemned and will be forever lost, even if in some relatively rare cases a person might be saved through his response to the light that he has apart from special revelation.[13] But then certain questions inevitably arise: Why did God not supply special revelation to persons who, while rejecting the general revelation they do have, would have responded to the gospel of Christ if they had been sufficiently well-informed concerning it? More fundamentally, Why did God create this world when He knew that so many persons would not receive Christ and would therefore be lost? Even more radically, why did God not create a world in which everyone freely receives Christ and so is saved?

Now all of these questions appear, at least, to presuppose that certain counterfactuals of freedom concerning people's response to God's gracious initiatives are true, and the last two seem to presuppose that God's omniscience embraces a species of knowledge known as middle knowledge *(scientia media).* For if there are no true counterfactuals of freedom, it is not true that certain persons would receive Christ if they were to hear the gospel, nor can God be held responsible for the number of the lost if He lacks middle knowledge, for without such knowledge He could only guess in the moment logically prior to His decree to create the world how many and, indeed, whether any persons would freely receive Christ (or whether He would even send Christ!) and be saved. Let us assume, then, that some such counterfactuals are true and that God has middle knowledge.[14]

For those who are unfamiliar with this species of knowledge and as considerable confusion exists concerning it, a few words about the concept of middle knowledge and its implications for providence and predestination might be helpful.

Scientia Media

Largely the product of the creative genius of the Spanish Jesuit of the Counter-Reformation Luis Molina (1535-1600), the doctrine of middle knowledge proposes to furnish an analysis of divine knowledge in terms of three logical moments.[15] Although whatever God knows, He has known from eternity, so that there is no temporal succession in God's knowledge, nonetheless there does exist a sort of logical succession in God's knowledge in that His knowledge of certain propositions is conditionally or explanatorily prior to His knowledge of certain other propositions. That is to say, God's knowledge of a particular set of propositions depends asymmetrically on His knowledge of a certain other set of propositions and is in this sense posterior to it. In the first, unconditioned moment God knows all *possibilia*, not only all individual essences, but also all possible worlds. Molina calls such knowledge "natural knowledge" because the content of such knowledge is essential to God and in no way depends on the free decisions of His will. By means of His natural knowledge, then, God has knowledge of every contingent state of affairs which could possibly obtain and of what the exemplification of the individual essence of any free creature could freely choose to do in any such state of affairs that should be actual.

In the second moment, God possesses knowledge of all true counterfactual propositions, including counterfactuals of creaturely freedom. That is to say, He knows what contingent states of affairs would obtain if certain antecedent states of affairs were to obtain; whereas by His natural knowledge God knew what any free creature *could* do in any set of circumstances, now in this second moment God knows what any free creature *would* do in any set of circumstances. This is not because the circumstances causally determine the creature's choice, but simply because this is how the creature would freely choose. God thus knows that were He to actualize certain states of affairs, then certain other contingent states of affairs would obtain. Molina calls this counterfactual knowledge "middle knowledge" because it stands in between the first and third moment in divine knowledge. Middle knowledge is like natural knowledge in that such knowledge does not depend on any decision of the divine will; God does not determine which counterfactuals of creaturely freedom are true or false. Thus, if it is true that

> If some agent *S* were placed in circumstances *C*,
> then he would freely perform action *a*,

then even God in His omnipotence cannot bring it about that *S* would refrain from *a* if he were placed in *C*. On the other hand, middle knowledge is unlike natural knowledge in that the content of His middle knowledge is not essential to God. True counterfactuals of freedom are contingently true; *S* could freely decide to refrain from *a* in *C*, so that different counterfactuals could be true and be known by God than those that are. Hence, although it is essential to God that He have middle knowledge, it is not essential to Him to have middle knowledge of those particular propositions which He does in fact know.

Intervening between the second and third moments of divine knowledge stands God's free decree to actualize a world known by Him to be realizable on the basis of His middle knowledge. By His natural knowledge, God knows what is the entire range of logically possible worlds; by His middle knowledge He knows, in effect, what is the proper subset of those worlds which it is feasible for Him to actualize. By a free decision, God decrees to actualize one of those worlds known to Him through His middle knowledge. According to Molina, this decision is the result of a complete and unlimited deliberation by means of which God considers and weighs every possible circumstance and its ramifications and decides to settle on the particular world He desires. Hence, logically prior, if not chronologically prior, to God's creation of the world is the divine deliberation concerning which world to actualize.

Given God's free decision to actualize a world, in the third and final moment God possesses knowledge of all remaining propositions that are in fact true in the actual world. Such knowledge is denominated "free knowledge" by Molina because it is logically posterior to the decision of the divine will to actualize a world. The content of such knowledge is clearly not essential to God, since He could have decreed to actualize a different world. Had He done so, the content of His free knowledge would be different.

Molina saw clearly the profound implications a doctrine of middle knowledge could have for the notions of providence and predestination. God's providence is His ordering of things to their ends, either directly or mediately through secondary agents. Molina distinguishes between God's absolute and conditional intentions for creatures. It is, for example, God's absolute intention that no creature should sin and that all should reach beatitude. But it is not within the scope of God's power to control what free creatures would do if placed in any set of circumstances. In certain circumstances, then, creatures would freely sin, despite the fact that God does not will this. Should God then choose to actualize precisely those circumstances, He has no choice but to allow the creature to sin. God's absolute intentions can thus be frustrated by free creatures. But God's conditional intentions, which are based on His middle knowledge and thus take account of what free creatures would do, cannot be so frustrated. It is God's conditional intention to permit many actions on the part of free creatures which He does not absolutely will; but in His infinite wisdom God so orders

which states of affairs obtain that His purposes are achieved despite and even through the sinful, free choices of creatures. God thus providentially arranges for everything that does happen by either willing or permitting it, and He causes everything to happen insofar as He concurs with the decisions of free creatures in producing their effects, yet He does so in such a way as to preserve freedom and contingency.

Middle knowledge also serves to reconcile predestination and human freedom. On Molina's view predestination is merely that aspect of providence pertaining to eternal salvation; it is the order and means by which God ensures that some free creature attains eternal life. Prior to the divine decree, God knows via His middle knowledge how any possible free creature would respond in any possible circumstances, which include the offer of certain gifts of prevenient grace which God might provide. In choosing a certain possible world, God commits Himself, out of His goodness, to offering various gifts of grace to every person which are sufficient for his salvation. Such grace is not intrinsically efficacious in that it of itself produces its effect; rather it is extrinsically efficacious in accomplishing its end in those who freely cooperate with it. God knows that many will freely reject His sufficient grace and be lost; but He knows that many others will assent to it, thereby rendering it efficacious in effecting their salvation. Given God's immutable decree to actualize a certain world, those whom God knew would respond to His grace are predestined to do so in the sense that it is absolutely certain that they will respond to and persevere in God's grace. There is no risk of their being lost; indeed, *in sensu composito* it is impossible for them to fall away. But *in sensu diviso* they are entirely free to reject God's grace; but were they to do so, God would have had different middle knowledge and they would not have been predestined.[16] Similarly those who are not predestined have no one to blame but themselves. It is up to God whether we find ourselves in a world in which we are predestined, but it is up to us whether we are predestined in the world in which we find ourselves.

The Soteriological Problem of Evil

Years ago when I first read Alvin Plantinga's basically Molinist formulation of the Free Will Defense against the problem of evil, it occurred to me that his reasoning might also help to resolve the problem of the exclusivity of salvation through Christ, and my own subsequent study of the notion of middle knowledge has convinced me that this is in fact so.[17] For the person who objects to the exclusivity of salvation through Christ is, in effect, posing what one might call *the soteriological* problem of evil, that is to say, he maintains that the proposition

> 1. God is omniscient, omnipotent, and omnibenevolent

is inconsistent with

> 2. Some persons do not receive Christ and are damned.

Since (1) is essential to theism, we must therefore deny (2).

The orthodox Christian will point out, however, that (1) and (2) are not explicitly contradictory, since one is not the negation of the other, nor are they logically contradictory, since a contradiction cannot be derived from them using first order logic. The objector, then, must mean that (1) and (2) are inconsistent in the broadly logical sense, that is, that there is no possible world in which both are true. Now in order to show this, the objector must supply some further premise(s) which meets the following conditions: (it) its conjunction with (1) and (2) formally entails a contradiction, (ii) it is either necessarily true, essential to theism, or a logical consequence of propositions that are, and (iii) its meeting conditions (i) and (ii) could not he rationally denied by a right-thinking person.[18]

I am not aware of anyone who has tried to supply the missing premise which meets these conditions, but let us try to find some such proposition. Perhaps it might be claimed that the following two propositions will suffice:

> 3. God is able to actualize a possible world in which all persons freely receive Christ.

> 4. God prefers a world in which no persons fail to receive Christ and are damned to a world in which some do.

It might be claimed that anyone who accepts (1) must also accept (3) and (4), since (3) is true in virtue of God's omniscience (which includes middle knowledge) and His omnipotence, and (4) is true in virtue of His omnibenevolence.

But is (3) necessarily true or incumbent upon the theist who is a Molinist? This is far from clear. For although it is logically possible that God actualize any possible world (assuming that God exists in every possible world), it does not follow therefrom that it is feasible for God to actualize any possible world.[19] For God's ability to actualize worlds containing free creatures will be limited by which counterfactuals of creaturely freedom are true in the moment logically prior to the divine decree. In a world containing free creatures, God can strongly actualize only certain segments or states of affairs in that world, and the remainder He must weakly actualize, using His middle knowledge of what free creatures would do under any circumstances. Hence, there will be an infinite number of possible worlds known to God by His natural knowledge which are not realizable by Him because the counterfactuals of creaturely freedom which must be true in order for Him to weakly actualize such worlds are in fact false.[20] His middle

knowledge serves to delimit, so to speak, the range of logically possible worlds to those which are feasible for Him to actualize. This might be thought to impugn divine omnipotence, but in fact such a restriction poses no non-logical limit to God's power.[21]

So the question is whether it is necessarily true or incumbent upon the Molinist to hold that within the range of possible worlds which are feasible to God there is at least one world in which everyone freely receives Christ and is saved. Now within Molinism there is a school known as Congruism which would appear to agree that such a position is mandatory for the theist .[22] According to Suarez, for any individual God might create there are gifts of prevenient grace which would be efficacious in winning the free consent of that individual to God's offer of salvation.[23] Such grace, which Suarez calls "congruent grace" (*gratia congrua*), consists in the divine gifts and aids which would be efficacious in eliciting the response desired by God, but without coercion. No grace is intrinsically efficacious, but congruent grace is always in fact efficacious because God knows via His middle knowledge that the creature would freely and affirmatively respond to it, were He to offer it. Accordingly, the Congruist might claim

> 5. God knows for any individual *S* under what circumstances *S* would freely receive Christ.

But why is it incumbent upon us to accept (5)? Given that persons are free, might there not be persons who would not receive Christ in any actual world in which they existed? Suarez himself seemed to vacillate at this point. When asked whether there is a congruent grace for every person God could create or whether some persons are so incorrigible that regardless of the grace accorded them by God, they would not repent, Suarez wants to say that God can win the free response of any creature He could create. But when pressed that it is logically possible that some person should resist every grace, Suarez concedes that this is true, but adds that God could still save such a person by over- powering his will.[24] But such coercive salvation is beside the point; so long as there might be individuals for whom no grace would be congruent, (5) cannot be regarded as necessary or essential to theism. On the contrary, the theist might hold that

> 6. For some individual *S*, there are no circumstances under which *S* would freely receive Christ.

In such a case, the theist could consistently maintain that there are no worlds feasible for God in which *S* exists and is saved.

The Congruist could, however, accept (6) and still insist that there are congruent graces for many other individuals and that God could actualize a world containing only such individuals, so that every one would receive Christ and be saved. But the Congruist must show more than that for certain (or even every) individual there are circumstances under which that person would freely receive Christ. He must show that the circumstances under which various individuals would freely receive Christ are compossible, so that all persons in some possible world would freely receive Christ and be saved. It is not even enough to show that the various circumstances are compossible; if he is to avoid the counterfactual fallacy of strengthening the antecedent, he must show that in the combined circumstances the consequent still follows. It might be that in circumstances C_1, individual S_1 would do action a and that in circumstances C_2 individual S_2 would do *b* and that C_1 and C_2 are compossible, but it does not follow that in C_1 - C_2, S_1 would do *a* or that in C_1 - C_2, S_2 would do *b*. Hence, even if it were the case that for any individual He might create, God could actualize a world in which that person is freely saved, it does not follow that there are worlds which are feasible for God in which all individuals are saved. Contrary to (3) the theist might hold that

> 7. There is no world feasible for God in which all persons would freely receive Christ.

Unless we have good reason to think that (7) is impossible or essentially incompatible with Christian theism, the objector has failed to show (1) and (2) to be inconsistent.

That leads to (4), which, it is said, is incumbent upon anyone who accepts God's omnibenevolence. Now I think that it is obvious that, all things being equal, an omnibenevolent God prefers a world in which all persons are saved to a world containing those same persons some of whom are lost. But (4) is stronger than this. It claims that God prefers any world in which all persons are saved to any world in which some persons are damned. But again, this is far from obvious. Suppose that the only worlds feasible for God in which all persons receive Christ and are saved are worlds containing only a handful of persons. Is it not at least possible that such a world is less preferable to God than a world in which great multitudes come to experience His salvation and a few are damned because they freely reject Christ? Not only does this seem to me possibly true, but I think that it probably is true. Why should the joy and blessedness of those who would receive God's grace and love be prevented on account of those who would freely spurn it? An omnibenevolent God might want as many creatures as possible to share salvation; but given certain true counterfactuals of creaturely freedom, God, in order to have a multitude in heaven, might have to accept a number in hell. Hence, contrary to (4) the theist might well hold that

> 8. God prefers certain worlds in which some persons fail to receive Christ and are damned to certain worlds in which all receive Christ and are saved.

So unless we have good reason to think that (8) is impossible or essentially incompatible with Christian theism, the objector has again failed to show (1) and (2) to be inconsistent.

Since we have no good grounds for believing (3) and (4) to be necessary or essential to theism, or for that matter even contingently true, the opponent of the traditional Christian view has not succeeded in demonstrating that there is no possible world in which God is omniscient, omnipotent, and omnibenevolent and yet in which some persons do not receive Christ and are damned.

But, on the pattern of the Free Will Defense, we can yet go further. For I believe that we can demonstrate not only that (1) and (2) have not been shown to be inconsistent, but also that they are, indeed, consistent. In order to show (1) and (2) to be consistent, the orthodox defender has to come up with a proposition which is consistent with (1) and which together with (1) entails (2). This proposition need not be plausible or even true; it need be only a possibly true proposition, even if it is contingently false.

Now we have seen that it is possible that God wants to maximize the number of the saved: He wants heaven to be as full as possible. Moreover, as a loving God, He wants to minimize the number of the lost: He wants hell to be as empty as possible. His goal, then, is to achieve an optimal balance between these, to create no more lost than is necessary to achieve a certain number of the saved.

But it is possible that the balance between saved and lost in the actual world is such an optimal balance. It is possible that in order to create the actual number of persons who will be saved, God had to create the actual number of persons who will be lost. It is possible that the terrible price of filling heaven is also filling hell and that in any other possible world which was feasible for God the balance between saved and lost was worse. It is possible that had God actualized a world in which there are less persons in hell, there would also have been less persons in heaven. It is possible that in order to achieve this much blessedness, God was forced to accept this much loss. Even if we grant that God could have achieved a better ratio between saved and lost, it is possible that in order to achieve such a ratio God would have had to so drastically reduce the number of the saved as to leave heaven deficient in population (say, by creating a world of only four people, three of whom go to heaven and one to hell). It is possible that in order to achieve a multitude of saints, God had to accept an even greater multitude of sinners.

It might be objected that necessarily a loving God would not create persons who He knew would be damned as a concomitant of His creating persons who He knew would be saved. Given His middle knowledge of such a prospect, He should have refrained from creation altogether. But this objection does not strike me as true, much less necessarily so. It is possible that God loves all persons and desires their salvation and furnishes sufficient grace for the salvation of all; indeed, some of the lost may receive even greater gifts of prevenient grace than some of the saved. It is of their own free will that people reject the grace of God and are damned. Their damnation is the result of their own choice and is contrary to God's perfect will, which is that all persons be saved, and their previsioned obduracy should not be allowed to preclude God's creating persons who would freely respond to His grace and be saved.

But it might be further objected that necessarily a loving God would not create persons who would be damned as a concomitant of His creating persons who would be saved if He knew that the former would under other circumstances have freely responded to His grace and been saved. Therefore, He should not have created at all. Now one might respond by denying the necessary truth of such a proposition; one could argue that so long as people receive sufficient grace for salvation in whatever circumstances they are, then they are responsible for their response in such circumstances and cannot complain that had they been in different circumstances, then their reaction would have been different. But even if we concede that the objector's principle is necessarily true, how do we know that its antecedent is fulfilled? We have seen that it is possible that some persons would not freely receive Christ under any circumstances. Suppose, then, that God has so ordered the world that all persons who are actually lost are such persons. In such a case, anyone who actually is lost would have been lost in any world in which God had created him. It is possible, then, that although God, in order to bring this many persons to salvation, had to pay the price of seeing this many persons lost, nevertheless He has providentially ordered the world such that those who are lost are persons who would not have been saved in any world feasible for God in which they exist. On the analogy of transworld depravity,[25] we may accordingly speak of the property of *transworld damnation*, which is possessed by any person who freely does not respond to God's grace and so is lost in every world feasible for God in which that person exists (this notion can, of course, be more accurately restated in terms of individual essences and instantiations thereof).

Therefore, we are now prepared to furnish a proposition which is consistent with (1) and entails (2):

> 9. God has actualized a world containing an optimal balance between saved and unsaved, and those who are unsaved suffer from transworld damnation.

So long as (9) is even possible, one is consistent in believing both (1) and (2).

On the basis of this analysis, we now seem to be equipped to provide *possible* answers to the three difficult questions

which prompted our inquiry. (i) Why did God not create a world in which everyone freely receives Christ and so is saved? There is no such world which is feasible for God. He would have actualized such a world were this feasible, but in light of certain true counterfactuals of creaturely freedom every world realizable by God is a world in which some persons are lost. Given His will to create a world of free creatures, God must accept that some will be lost. (ii) Why did God create this world when He knew that so many persons would not receive Christ and would therefore be lost? God desired to incorporate as many persons as He could into the love and joy of divine fellowship while minimizing the number of persons whose final state is hell. He therefore chose a world having an optimal balance between the number of the saved and the number of the damned. Given the truth of certain counterfactuals of creaturely freedom, it was not feasible for God to actualize a world having as many saved as but with no more damned than the actual world. The happiness of the saved should not be precluded by the admittedly tragic circumstance that their salvation has as its concomitant the damnation of many others, for the fate of the damned is the result of their own free choice. (iii) Why did God not supply special revelation to persons who, while rejecting the general revelation they do have, would have responded to the gospel of Christ if they had been sufficiently well-informed concerning it? There are no such persons. In each world in which they exist God loves and wills the salvation of persons who in the actual world have only general revelation, and He graciously and preveniently solicits their response by His Holy Spirit, but in every world feasible for God they freely reject His grace and are lost. If there were anyone who would have responded to the gospel if he had heard it, then God in His love would have brought the gospel to such a person. Apart from miraculous intervention, "a single revelation to the whole earth has never in the past been possible, given the facts of geography and technology";[26] but God in His providence has so arranged the world that as the gospel spread outward from its historical roots in first century Palestine, all who would respond to this gospel, were they to hear it, did and do hear it. Those who have only general revelation and do not respond to it would also not have responded to the gospel had they heard it. Hence, no one is lost because of lack of information due to historical or geographical accident. All who want or would want to be saved will be saved.

The above are only *possible* answers to the questions posed. We have been about a defense, not a theodicy, concerning the soteriological problem of evil. What I have shown is that the orthodox Christian is not inconsistent in affirming that an omniscient, omnipotent, and omnibenevolent God exists and that some people do not receive Christ and are damned. It might, of course, be countered that while the possibility of (9) shows the orthodox position to be consistent, still (9) is highly improbable, given the world in which we live, so that (2) still remains improbable, if not inconsistent, with regard to (1). But here the strength of the position I have been defending emerges beyond that of Plantinga's Free Will Defense. For while it seems fantastic to attribute all natural evil to the actions of demonic beings (*e.g.*, earthquakes' being caused by the demons pushing about tectonic plates), (9) does not seem similarly implausible. On the contrary I find the above account of the matter to be quite plausible not only as a defense, but also as a soteriological theodicy. Indeed, I think that it helps to put the proper perspective on Christian missions: it is our duty to proclaim the gospel to the whole world, trusting that God has so providentially ordered things that through us the good news will be brought to persons who God knew would respond if they heard it.

Conclusion

In conclusion, then, I think that a middle knowledge perspective on the problem of the exclusivity of the Christian religion can be quite fruitful. Since all persons are in sin, all are in need of salvation. Since Christ is God's unique expiatory sacrifice for sin, salvation is only through Christ. Since Jesus and his work are historical in character, many persons as a result of historical and geographical accident will not be sufficiently well-informed concerning him and thus unable to respond to him in faith. Such persons who are not sufficiently well-informed about Christ's person and work will be judged on the basis of their response to general revelation and the light that they do have. Perhaps some will be saved through such a response; but on the basis of Scripture we must say that such "anonymous Christians" are relatively rare. Those who are judged and condemned on the basis of their failure to respond to the light of general revelation cannot legitimately complain of unfairness for their not also receiving the light of special revelation, since such persons would not have responded to special revelation had they received it. For God in His providence has so arranged the world that anyone who would receive Christ has the opportunity to do so. Since God loves all persons and desires the salvation of all, He supplies sufficient grace for salvation to every individual, and nobody who would receive Christ if he were to hear the gospel will be denied that opportunity. As Molina puts it, our salvation is in our own hands.

Finally, I hope that no reader has been offended by what might appear to be a rather dry and dispassionate discussion of the salvation and damnation of people apart from Christ. But with such an emotionally explosive issue on the table, it seems to me that it is prudent to treat it with reserve. No orthodox Christian *likes* the doctrine of hell or delights in anyone's condemnation. I truly wish that universalism were true, but it is not. My compassion toward those in other world religions is therefore expressed, not in pretending that they are not lost and dying without Christ, but by my supporting and making every effort myself to communicate to them the life-giving message of salvation through Christ.[27]

NOTES

[1] On Jesus' self-understanding, see James D. G. Dunn, *Jesus and the Spirit* (London: SCM Press, 1975), pp. 11 -92; Royce Gordon Gruenler, *New Approaches to Jesus and the Gospels* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1982), especially pt. 1.

[2] For arguments for the authenticity of this saying, see Dunn, *Jesus,* pp. 26-33, 371.

[3] On the authenticity of this and other "Son of Man" sayings, see Seyoon Kim, *The Son of Man as the Son of God* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1985), especially pp. 88-89, and the literature cited there.

[4] The authenticity of this saying is supported by its multiple attestation (cf. Lk. 13:22-30), its Jewish milieu, and its coherence with Jesus's other teachings. The most plausible way to avoid the inference would be to deny the universal scope of the saying, restricting it to the Jews of Jesus' generation. But it hardly seems likely that Jesus believed that the majority of the Gentile world would respond to him in repentance and faith.

[5] Augustine *De vera religione* 3.5; 24.47; Augustine *De civitate Dei* 20.5; Thomas Aquinas *Summa contra gentiles* 1. 6.

[6] For a brief account, see my *The Historical Argument for the Resurrection of Jesus during the Deist Controversy,* Texts and Studies in Religion 23 (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1985), pp. 82-92.

[7] "Dogmatic Constitution on the Church" [*Lumen Gentium* 2.16], in *The Documents of Vatican II,* ed. W. M. Abbott (New York: Guild Press, 1966), p. 34.

[8] "Declaration on Non-Christian Religions," in *Documents,* pp. 663-66.

[9] "The Church" [*LG* 2.16], p. 35.

[10] For example, the constitution on the Church also affirms that anyone who knows that Christ is the unique way of salvation and that the Church is his body and yet refuses to become a Catholic cannot be saved ("The Church" [LG 2.14], in *Documents,* pp. 32-33). The ambiguity and inconsistency of the documents probably reflects the struggle between traditionalists and modernists in the Council.

[11] John Hick, "Jesus and the World Religions," in *The Myth of God Incarnate,* ed. John Hick (London: SCM, 1977), pp. 179-80.

[12] For a defense of such a position, see Stuart C. Hackett, *The Reconstruction of the Christian Revelation Claim* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1985), pp. 242 46.

[13] As we have seen, it is the testimony of Scripture that most persons who *hear* the gospel do not respond with saving faith and, moreover, that most of those without the light of the gospel do not even respond to the light of general revelation fact which sociological observations would seem to confirm. Hence, I would agree with Hick that attempts to resolve the difficulty by appeal to "anonymous Christians" or "implicit faith" or "the invisible church" are ultimately unavailing, but not because they are clinging to the husk of the old theology, but precisely because they are incompatible with it.

[14] Of course, this is a controversial assumption, But for a defense of the doctrine of middle knowledge see Alvin Plantinga, "Reply to Robert Adams, " in *Alvin Plantinga,* ed. James Tomberlin and Peter Van Inwagen, Profiles 5 (Dordrecht, Holland: D. Reidel, 1985), pp. 372-82; Jonathan L. Kvanvig, *The Possibility of an All-Knowing God* (New York: St. Martin's, 1986), pp. 121-48; Alfred J. Freddoso, "Introduction," in Luis Molina, *On Divine Foreknowledge,* trans. with notes by Alfred J. Freddoso (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1988); and my own *Divine Foreknowledge and Human Freedom* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1990).

[15] For Molina's doctrine, see Ludovici Molina *De liberi arbitrii cum gratia donis, divina praescientia, providentia, praedestinationae et reprobatione Concordia* 4. This section has been translated by Freddoso under the title in note 14. For Suarez's doctrine, see R. P. Francisci *Suarez, Opera omnia, ed.* Carolo Berton, vol. 11*: Opuscula theologica sex materiam de auxiliis gratiae absolventia quaestionesque de scientia, libertate et justitia Dei elucidantia: Opusculum II: De scientia Dei futurorum contingentium* 2. 7.

[16] In a proposition taken in the composite sense, the modal operator governs the proposition as a whole, *e.g.*, "Necessarily, if God sees Socrates sitting, he is sitting." When the proposition is taken in the divided sense, the modal operator governs only a component of the proposition, *e.g.* "If God sees Socrates sitting, he is necessarily sitting. " The distinction is analogous to the more familiar difference between necessity *de dicto* and *de re.* In the case at hand, the proposition "If God via His middle knowledge and decree has foreknown and chosen to actualize a world in which Peter will be saved, then necessarily Peter will be saved" is true *in sensu composito,* but false *in sensu divivo.*

[17] For his reasoning see Alvin Plantings, *God and Other Minds* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1967), pp. 115-55; Alvin Plantinga, *The Nature of Necessity,* Clarendon Library of Logic and Philosophy (Oxford: Clarendon Press,

1974), pp. 164-95; Alvin Plantinga, "Self-Profile," in *Plantinga,* pp. 36-55.

[18] For an explanation of why each of these conditions must be met, see Plantinga, *God and Other Minds,* pp. 116-17, and Plantinga, "Self-Profile," pp. 39-40.

[19] See Thomas P. Flint, "The Problem of Divine Freedom," *American Philosophical Quarterly 20* (1983): 257. According to Flint, although all worlds are possible for God to actualize, a world is feasible for God to actualize if and only if it is a member of that proper subset of all possible worlds determined by the counterfactuals of creaturely freedom which God knows to be true.

[20] See Plantinga, "Self-Profile," pp. 50-52.

[21] See Thomas P. Flint and Alfred J. Freddoso, "Maximal Power," in *The Existence and Nature of God,* ed. Alfred J. Freddoso (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), pp. 93-98.

[22] On Congruism, see *Dictionnaire de théologie catholique,* ed. A. Vacant, E. Mangenot, E. Amann, (Paris: Letouzey et ane, 1923), s.v. "Congruisme," by H. Quilliet, vol. 3. 1, cols. 1120-1138; *Hastings' Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics,* s.v. "Molinism," by Aelfred Whitacre; Th. de Régnon, *Banes et Molin* (Paris: H. Oudin, 1883), pp. 122-60.

[23] Suarez, *Opera,* vol. 11*: Opuscula 1: De concursu et efficaci auxilio Dei ad actus libri arbitrii necessario* 3.6, 14, 16, 17, 20; Suarez, Opera, vol. 10: *Appendix prior*: *Tractatus de vera intelligentia auxi ii efficacis, ejusque concordia cum libertate voluntarii consensus* 1, 12, 13, 14.

[24] Suarez, *De concursu et aux ilio Dei* 3.14, 16; Suarez, *De scientia Dei* 2.6.9.

[25] See Plantinga, *Nature of Necessity ,* pp. 184-99.

[26] Hick, "Jesus and World Religions," p. 180.

[27] I am very grateful to Thomas Flint and Robert Gundry for helpful comments on the first draft of this paper.

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