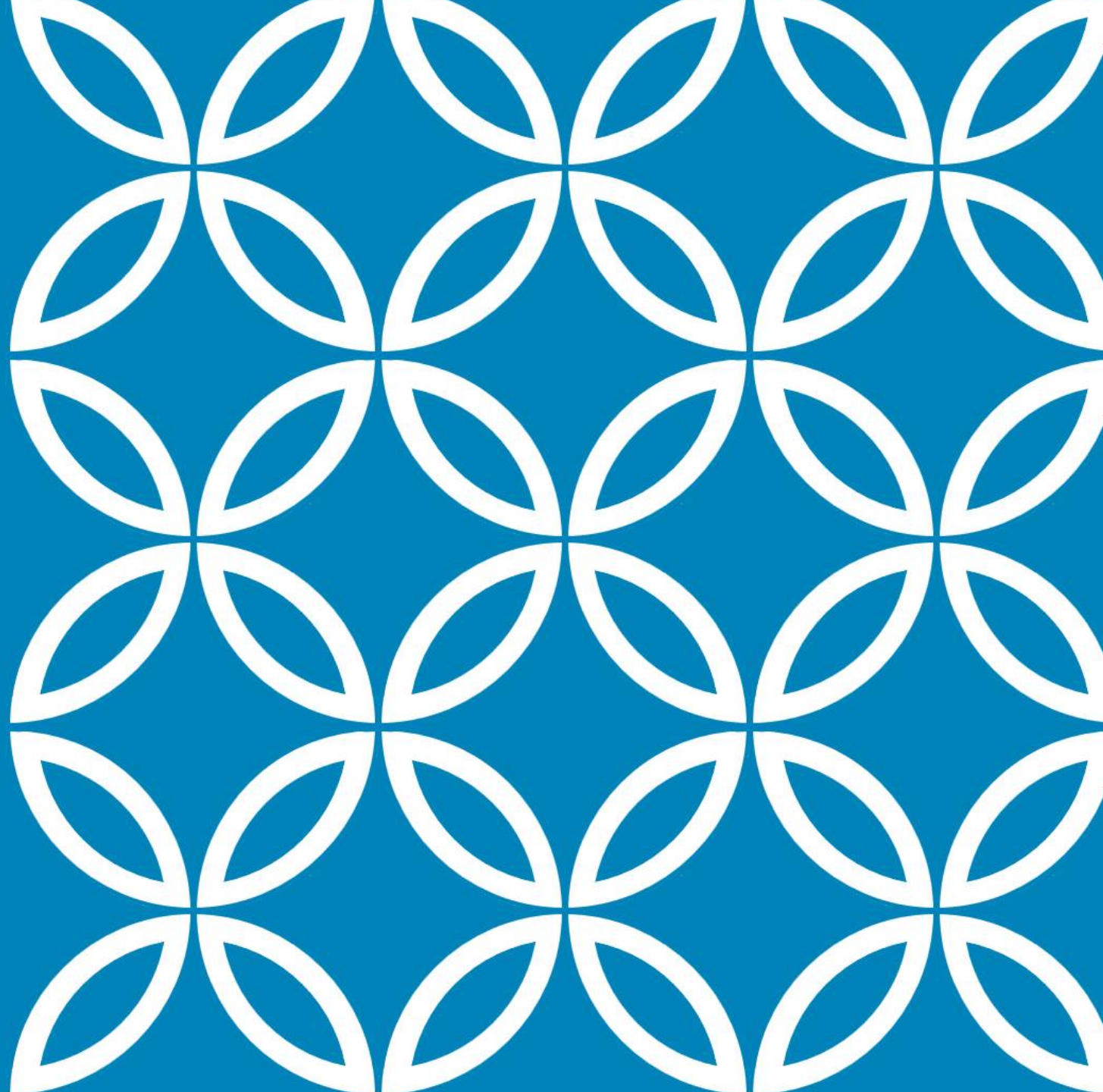
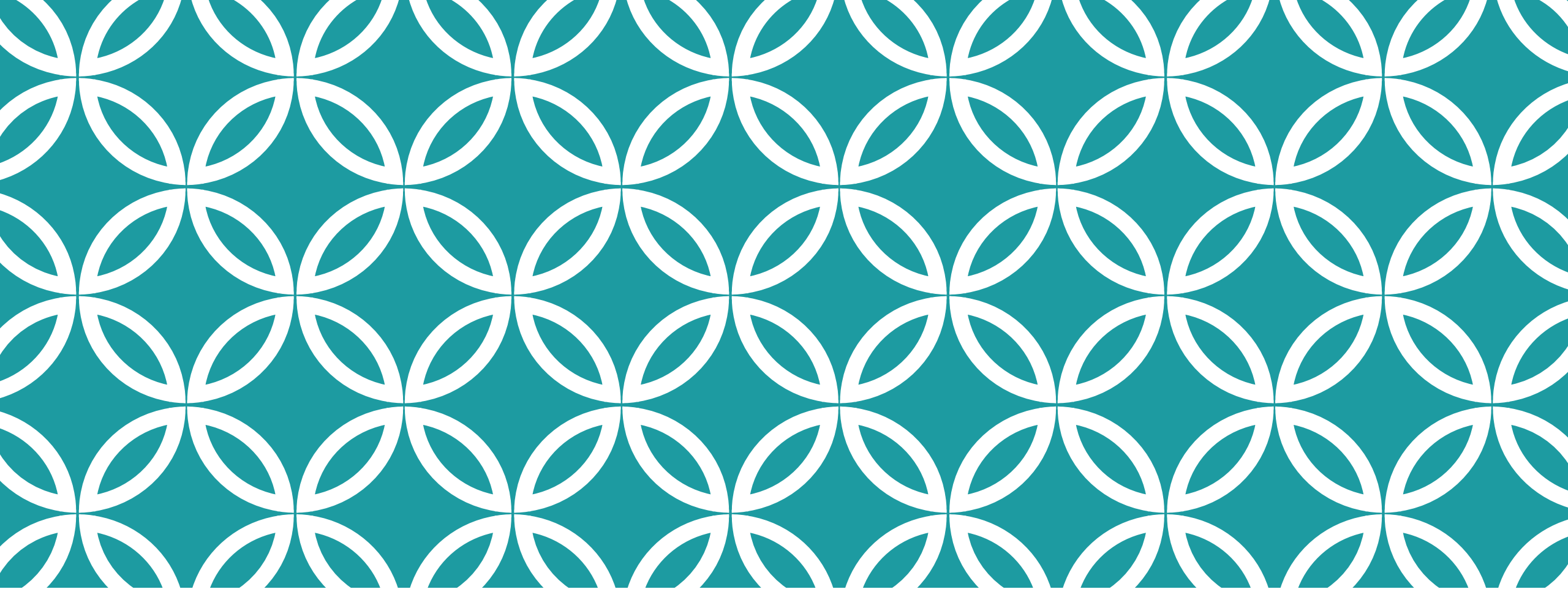


METHODS AND APPROACHES IN INTERFAITH STUDIES

Dr Angus M Slater





THE THEOLOGY OF RELIGIONS





REVISION

In the last section, we examined the rough outline of the second major position within the Theology of Religions, Exclusivism. Often seen as the default or most simple of the positions, exclusivism, through its focus on truth and difference, suggests that salvation is exclusive to a single religious tradition.

We looked at a number of different forms of exclusivism, which each have different emphases and reasons for being exclusive about salvation, such as those offered by Barth, Kraemer, and Althaus.

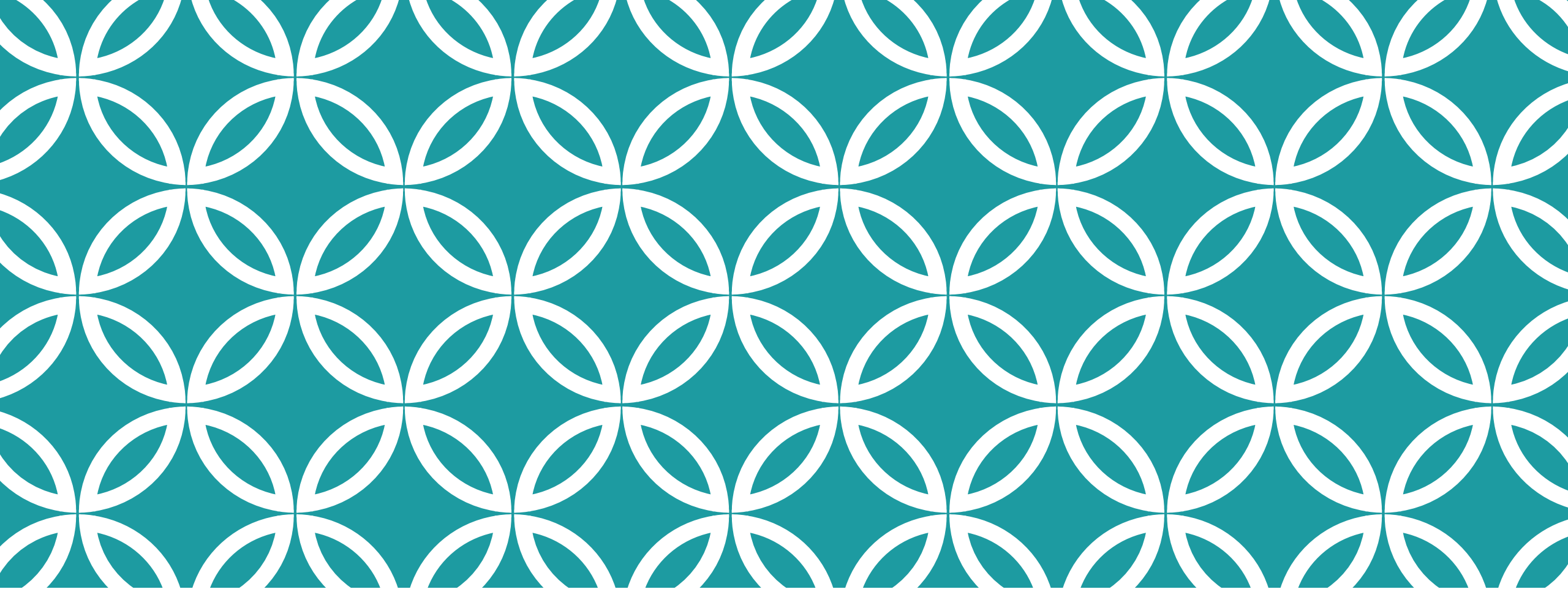


REVISION

You also had four readings to complete (Stetson, Platinga, Moser, & Robert) which attempted to explore the position of Exclusivism in more depth.

Two of the readings (Moser & Roberts) attempted to tease out some of the definitional differences that we alluded to in the previous section, while the other two (Stetson & Platinga) flesh out some of the arguments and critiques levelled at exclusivism by other positions.

Make sure that you engage with the discussion forums on Moodle and offer up a question for reflection for the group.



PLURALISM

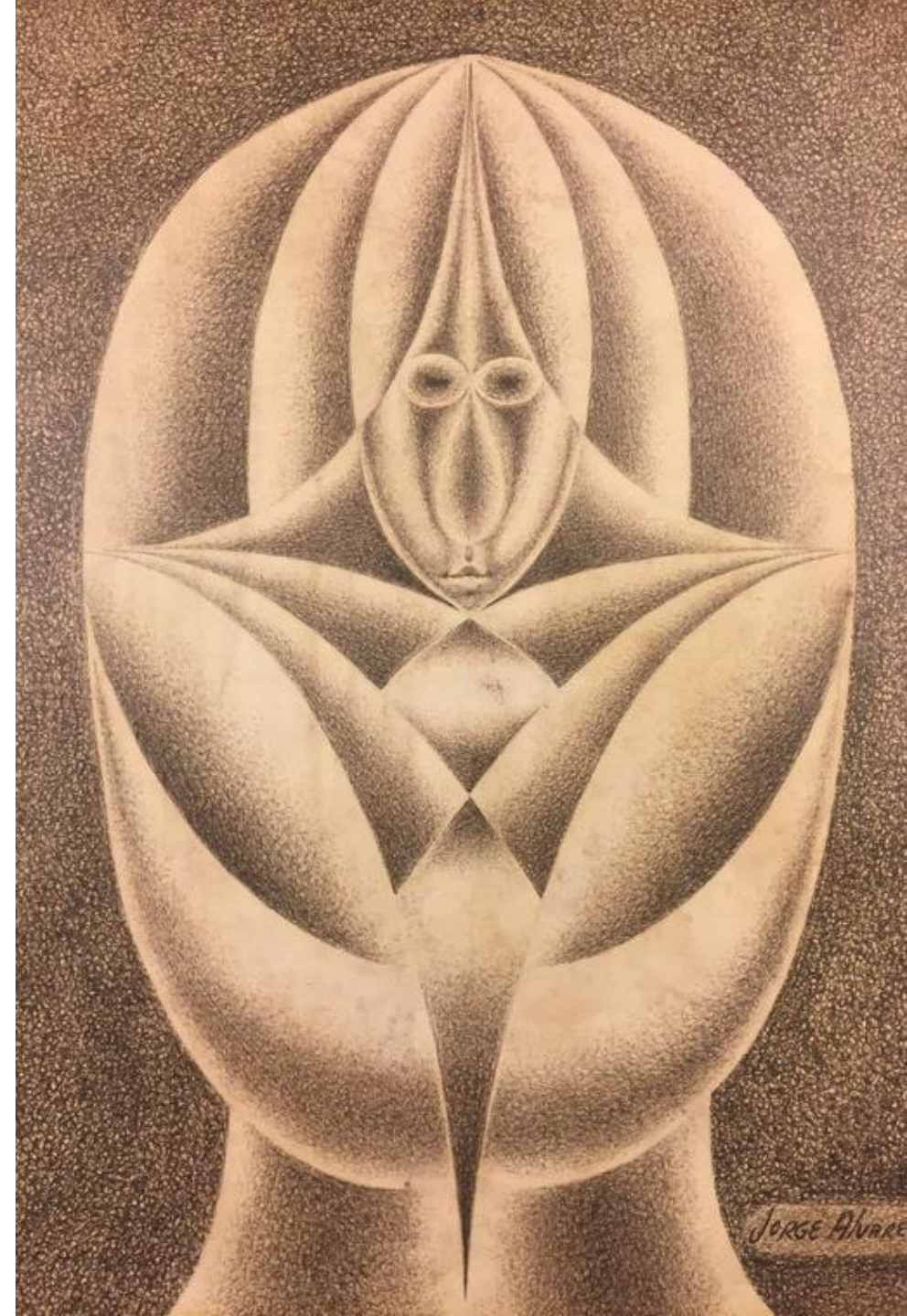


PLURALISM

While Inclusivism suggests that Christian salvation is available to those outside the Christian tradition, and Exclusivism suggests that it is not, Pluralism is the third option to the question.

Pluralism, as a constructive endorsement of salvation outside the Christian tradition, take many forms and draws on a number of methods by which this salvation is delivered.

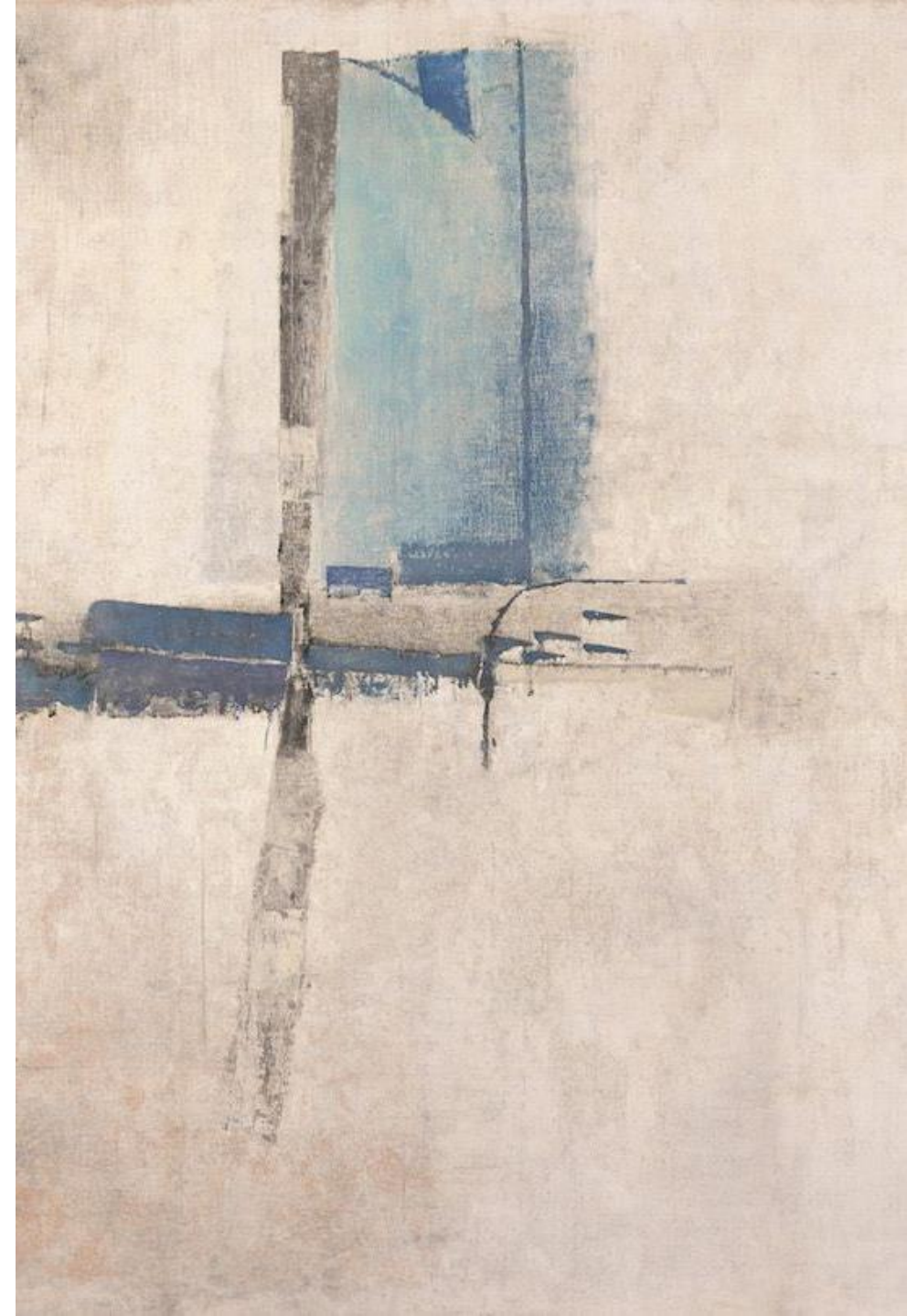
Crucially, it differs from Inclusivism by endorsing the idea of shared or separate forms of salvation across religious lines.



PLURALISM

Because of the differences in emphasis and location of salvation between differing positions within Pluralism, it can be quite difficult to generalise and provide a workable definition.

Generally, Pluralism can be understood as the position that no one religious tradition has an exclusive claim on salvation (or truth) and that multiple forms of tradition lead to the realisation of salvation in their own ways.



PLURALISM

Pluralism generally recognises the validity of different major world religions (and non-religious worldviews) as all having some connection to a shared reality – whether this reality is expressed as a form of salvation, a universal truth, or a shared spirit.

This recognition of a shared reality means that Pluralists generally believe that people of different faiths can and should learn from one another and that each faith is enriched by dialogue – together we can more fully understand the reality shared by us.

Each tradition therefore offers within itself some form of possibility of salvation (however this is defined and by whatever mechanism this is seen to occur) with no tradition having an exclusivity on it.



PLURALISM

Some versions of pluralism believe that all religions are only able to offer partial revelation of the divine, some that they all share the same revelation of the divine, some that none of the religions have any claim to the divine.

This can pose issues for pluralism – how do we pick and evaluate between the different religions and their very different conceptions of the world?

We often see this expressed as a form of relativism, that ALL religions offer a path to truth. Yet are all EQUALLY close to the divine – Islam? Christianity? Scientology?



PLURALISM

Pluralism, as the statement that 'All religions lead to the same ultimate truth in some way' is itself, just like exclusivism and inclusivism, a truth claim that proposes a certain theory about the way that things are as the correct one.

Different versions of pluralism have different versions of what that "Ultimate Truth" is, how graspable by human intellect, and a whole host of other disagreements, but each attempts to describe a certain reality.

Often Pluralism can be presented as some neutral proposal of nothingness, or a "let's all agree to be nice" option – however, it is just as ideological as the other two possible positions.

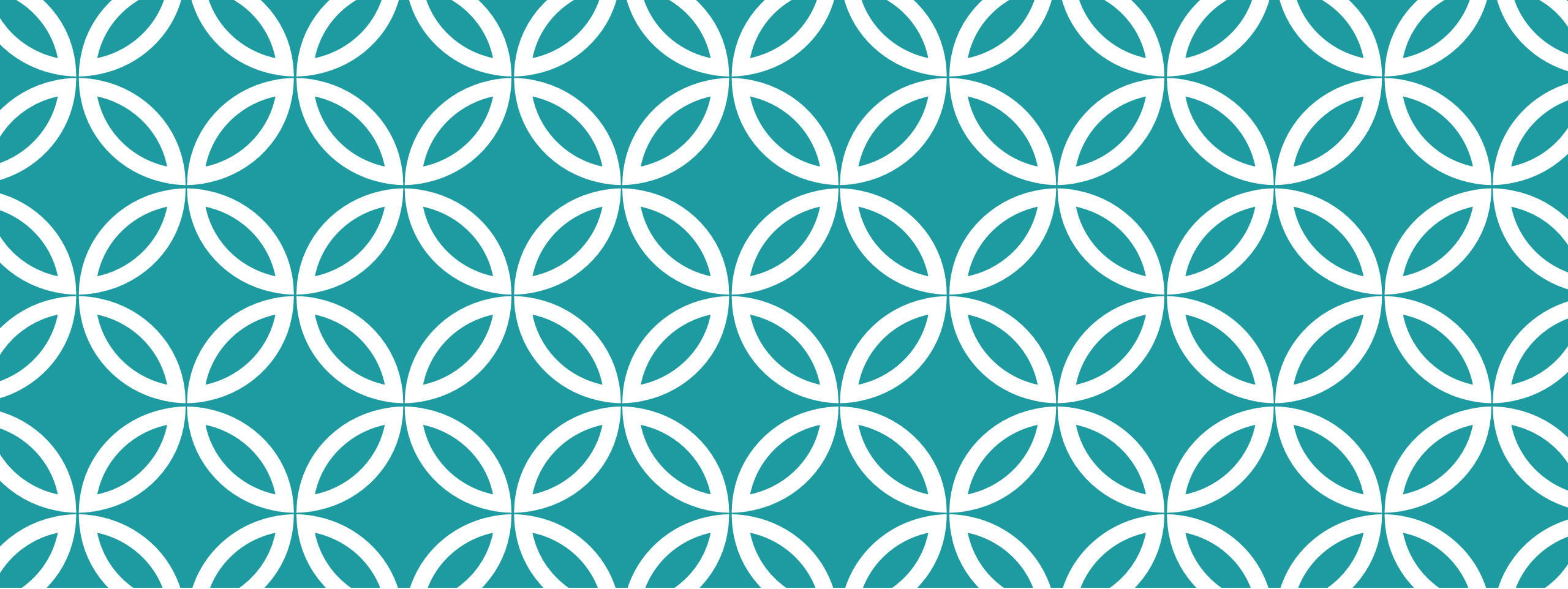


PLURALISM

While Exclusivism is generally seen as the historically default position within the Christian theology of religions, with Inclusivism emerging later at around the turn of the 19th century and becoming the institutional position of the Catholic Church, Pluralism is generally seen to be the more modern theological position.

It arises as part of the typology later, primarily through the work of both Alan Race and John Hick, some of which you should already be familiar with from earlier readings. We are going to turn to examining some proponents of different forms of pluralism now.





EXAMPLES OF PLURALISM

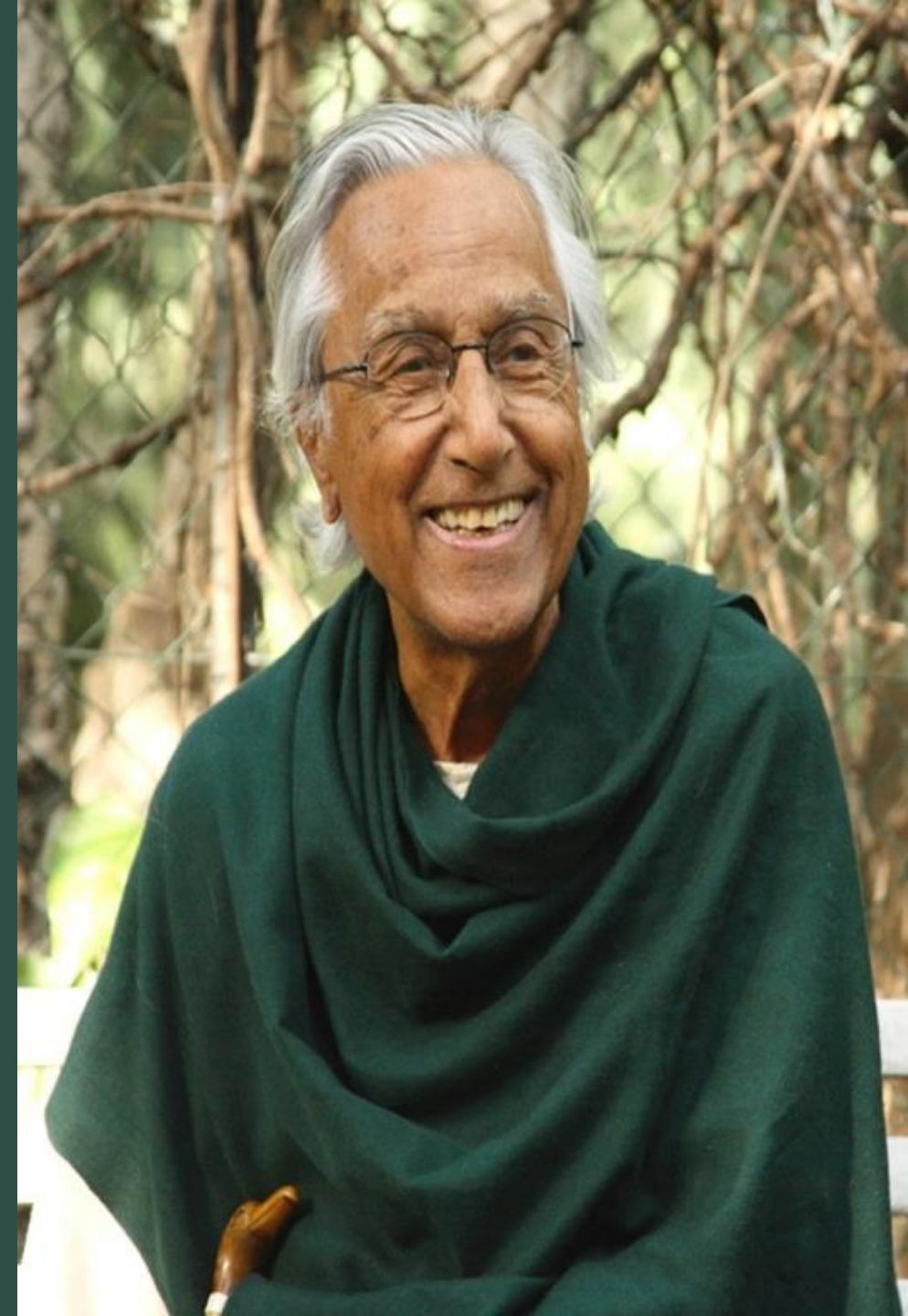


RAIMON PANIKKAR

Panikkar is a prominent proponent of a pluralistic approach to matters of religious diversity, with a distinct and slightly complicated position.

He was brought up in Spain and educated in a Jesuit school. He was ordained a Catholic priest in 1946, in the 1950s he went to live in India where he engaged in dialogue with Hindus.

It was this encounter that he credits with leading to his adoption of religious pluralism. His particular position relies on a distinction between an ultimate truth and those aspects of truth that we produce within our religious traditions. Rather, he views his pluralism as being embedded in the belief of the divine's ability to transcend any form of limitation which attempt to impose



RAIMON PANIKKAR

For Panikkar, true reality is beyond human thought.

Therefore, there can be no universal theory of religion that adequately contains the potentiality of the divine.

Expressions of God's Being, such as the Trinity, are a Christian symbol for the unnameable Absolute. Christians should be open to learning from other traditions. For example, Christian theology can learn from the Hindu Upanishads about the omnipresence of God.

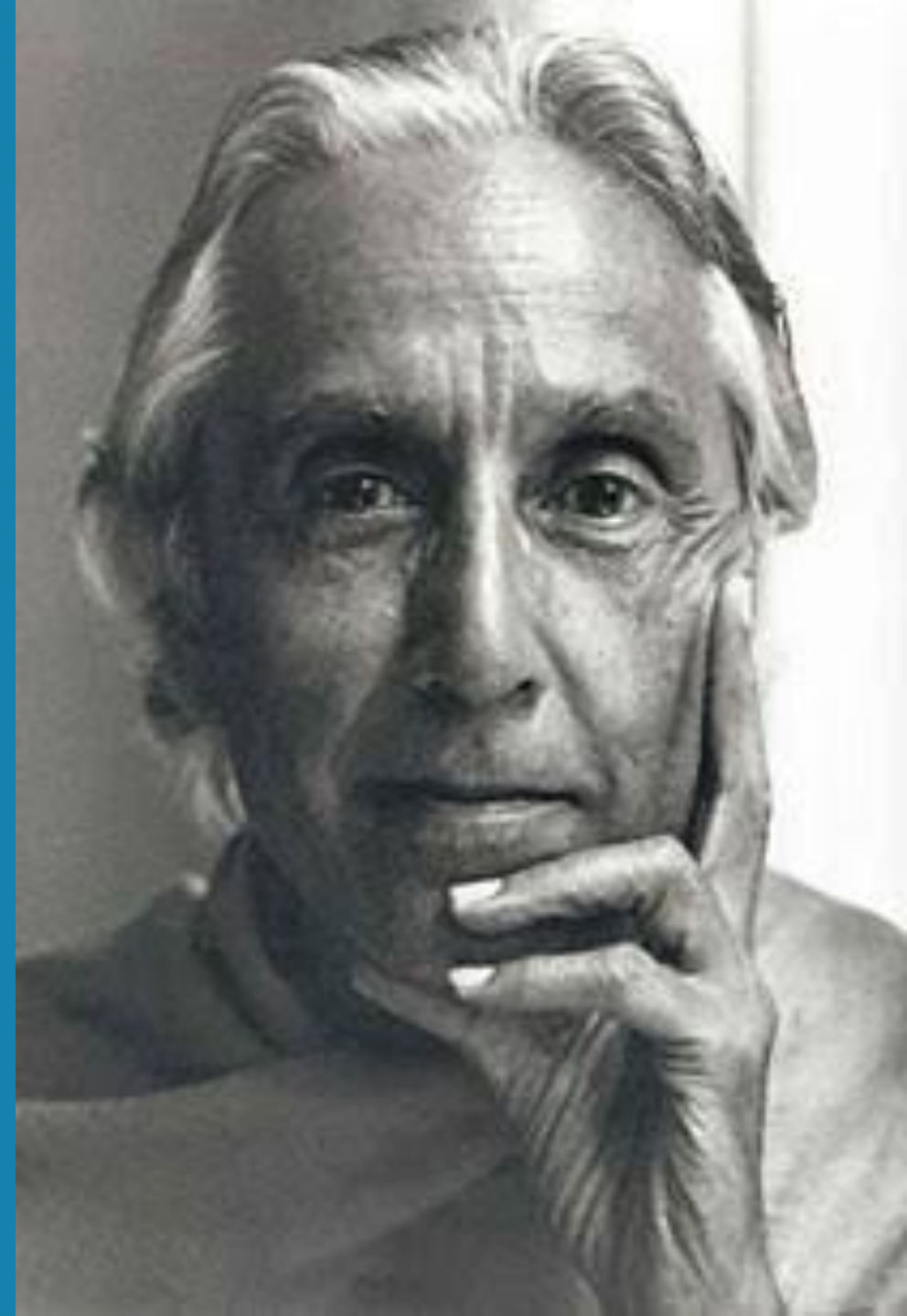
This is an attitudinal pluralism: the acceptance of diversity because of a belief in the transcending power of the divine



RAIMON PANIKKAR

“Pluralism is not a theoretical system or an attitude that respects religious diversity, but an attitude that respects the freedom of reality to transcend our systematizing efforts to contain and define it. It actively resists the tendency to absolutize any claims to validity.”

Yadlapti M, “Raimon Panikkar, John Hick, and a Pluralist Theology of Religions”, *Journal of Inter-Religious Studies*, No. 5, 2011.



PAUL KNITTER

Paul Knitter is another Catholic theologian who moved from a position of religious exclusivism to pluralism.

Paul Knitter's best known book is *No Other Name: A Critical Survey of Christian Attitudes Toward the World Religions* in which he develops his pluralistic position more fully.

Interestingly, Knitter wrote his doctoral dissertation on Paul Althaus who we looked at as an example of soft exclusivism in the last section; it is here, as a critique of Althaus, that we find an early expression of his pluralism emerging.



PAUL KNITTER

In a book he edited, *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness* (1987), Knitter argues that pluralism was a viable expression of Christian theology. A number of eminent contemporary theologians contributed to the book such as Langdon Gilkey, Tom Driver, Wilfred Cantwell Smith, Rosemary Radford Ruether, and Raimundo Pannikar.

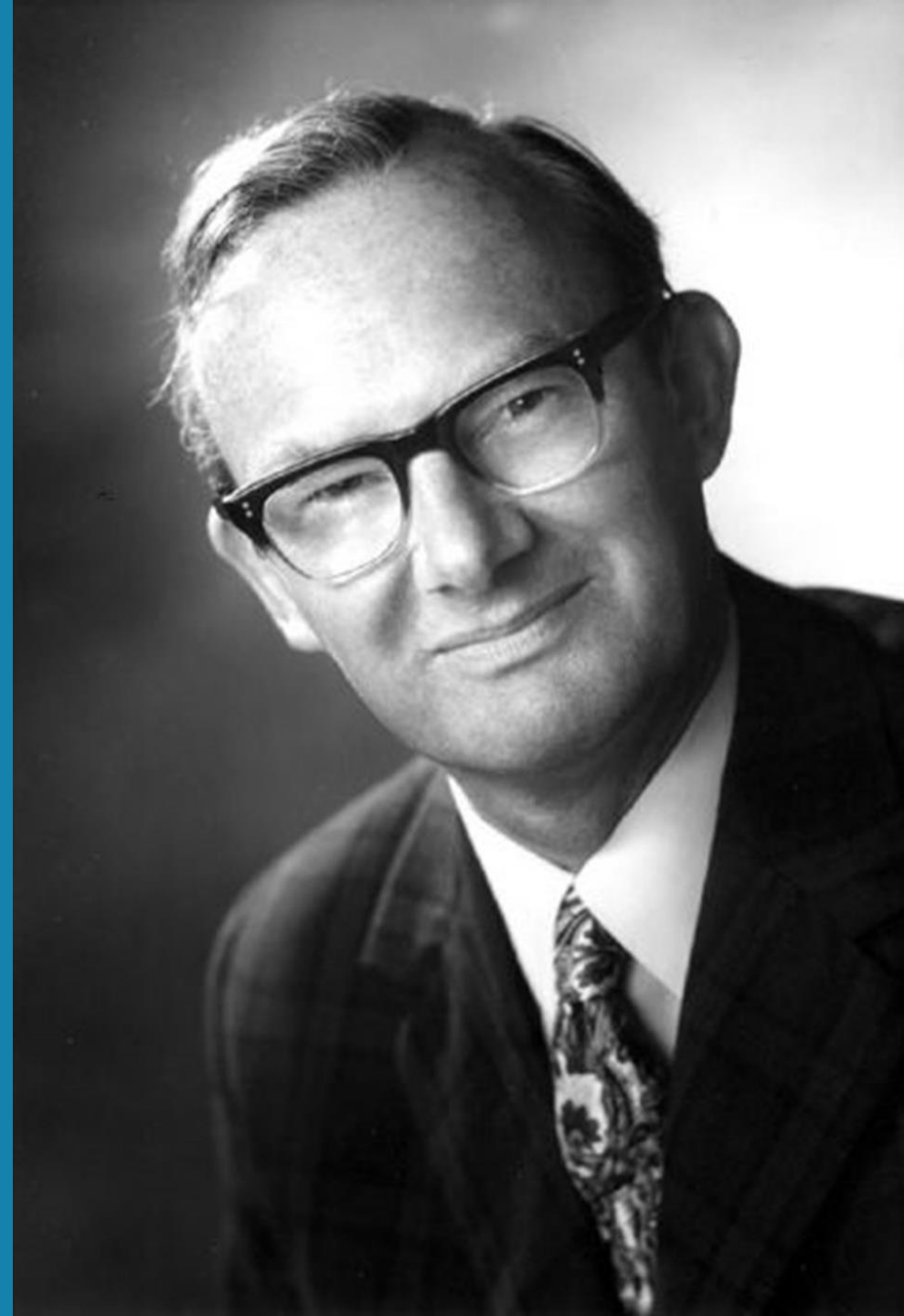
In this book the contributors argued that salvation is effective in its particular way across a variety of religions. Religions represent culturally disparate responses to the Real or the Absolute; each of these offers the path of salvation, which is seen to be between and among the various religious expressions of it.



JOHN HICK

John Hick was originally a conservative Christian whose theology has gradually moved to a position of pluralism. His thinking began to change when he began teaching philosophy at Birmingham University in the late 1960s, when he encountered people of other faiths such as Islam, Sikhism and Hinduism.

In 1973 he published a book entitled *God and the Universe of Faiths*, in which he called for a paradigm shift in the way in which we think about religions. In this book he argued that each of the world's religions should be regarded as different, but valid responses, to the one divine Reality. He has become perhaps the most well-known proponent of pluralism.

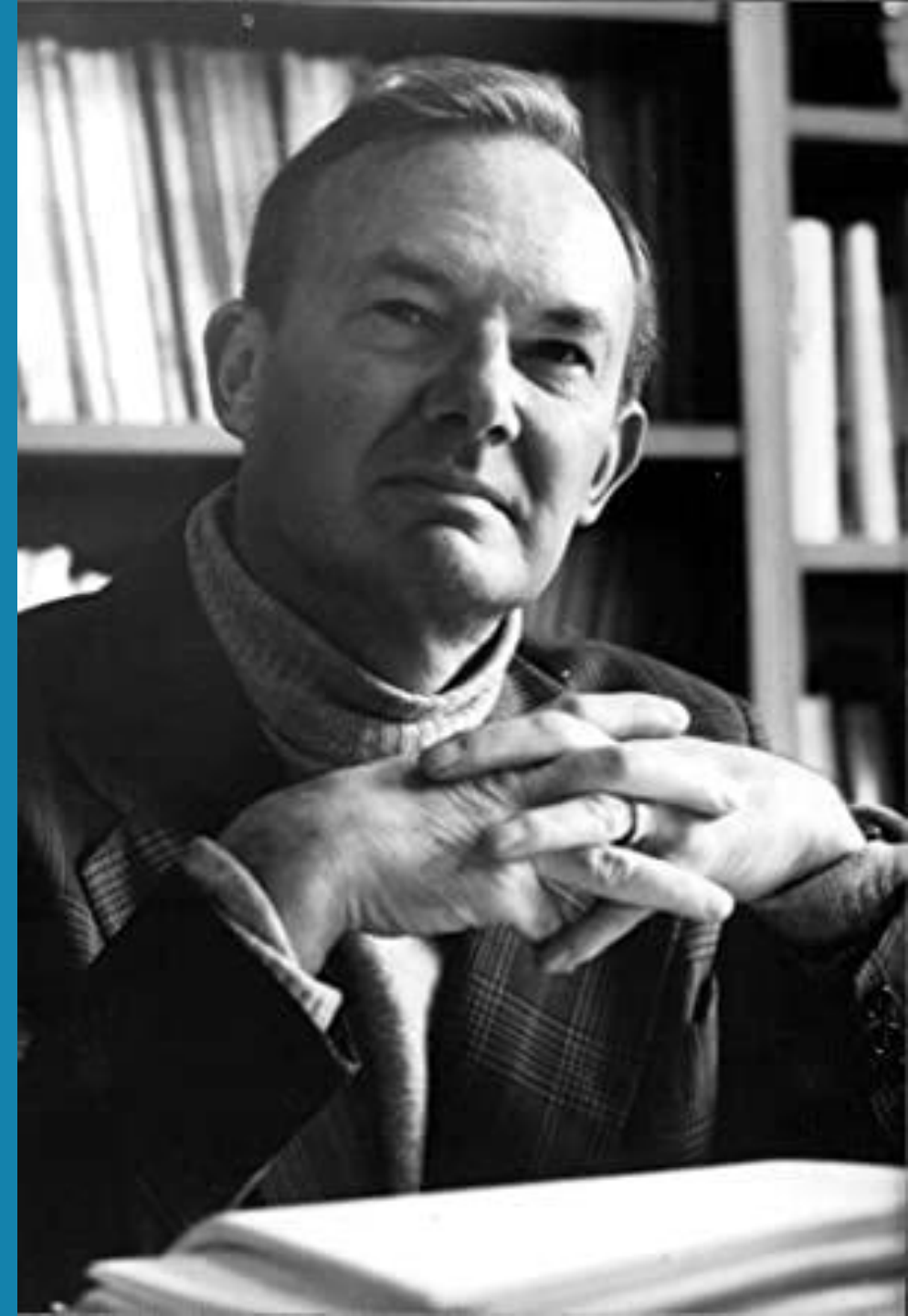


JOHN HICK

However, this acceptance of other traditions is accompanied by a rejection of the orthodox doctrines of Christianity, which has made him somewhat controversial as a Christian theologian.

For example, in his book *The Metaphor of God Incarnate: Christology in a Pluralistic Age* Hick argues that the doctrine of the incarnation does not point to a real event – that is, the event of God becoming human. Rather, the incarnation should be seen as a metaphor developed by the early church.

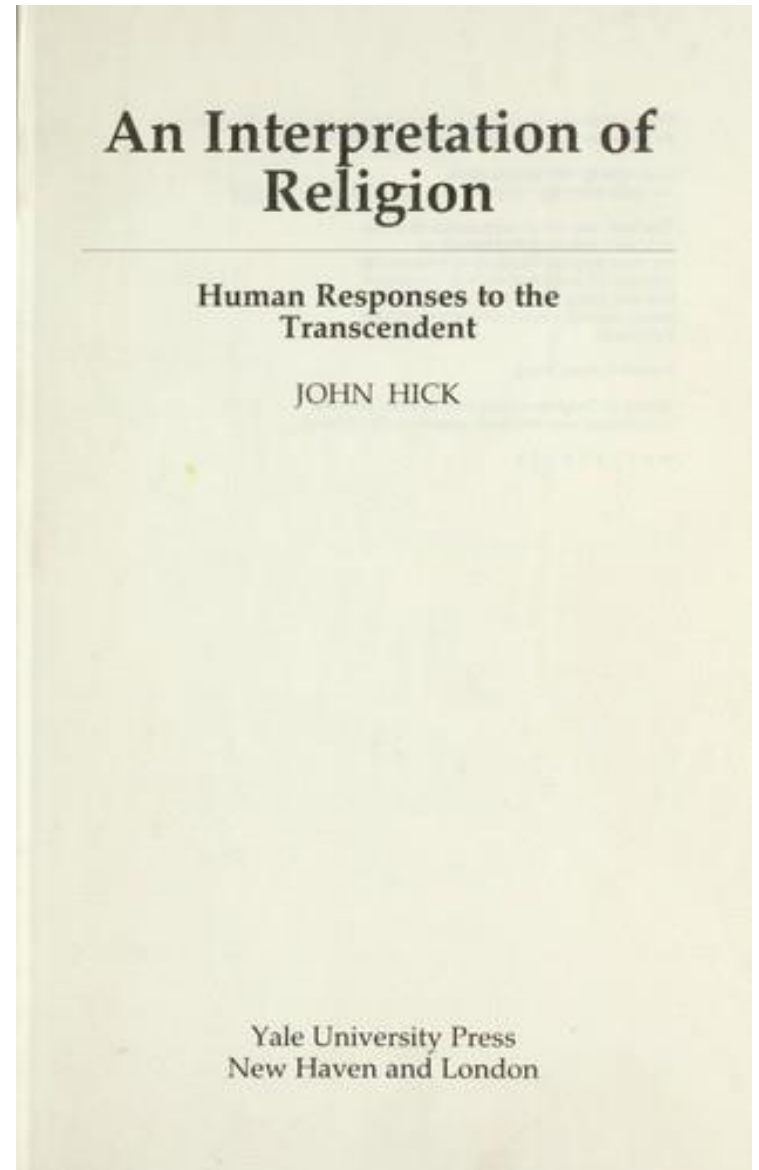
He does not support the traditional Chalcedonian position on the incarnation, because he regards the idea of a being who is both divine and human to be philosophically incoherent.



JOHN HICK

John Hick's best known work is based on the Gifford lectures of 1986 *An Interpretation of Religion*. Here Hick argues that the different faiths represent different expressions of the Real. (Sometimes the Real is referred to as “Ultimate Reality”.) Authentic religion represents a movement away from a condition of self-centredness to Reality centredness. This is what salvation is.

He advocates a pluralistic theology of religions, that does not ascribe an exclusive claim to this movement to any one tradition.

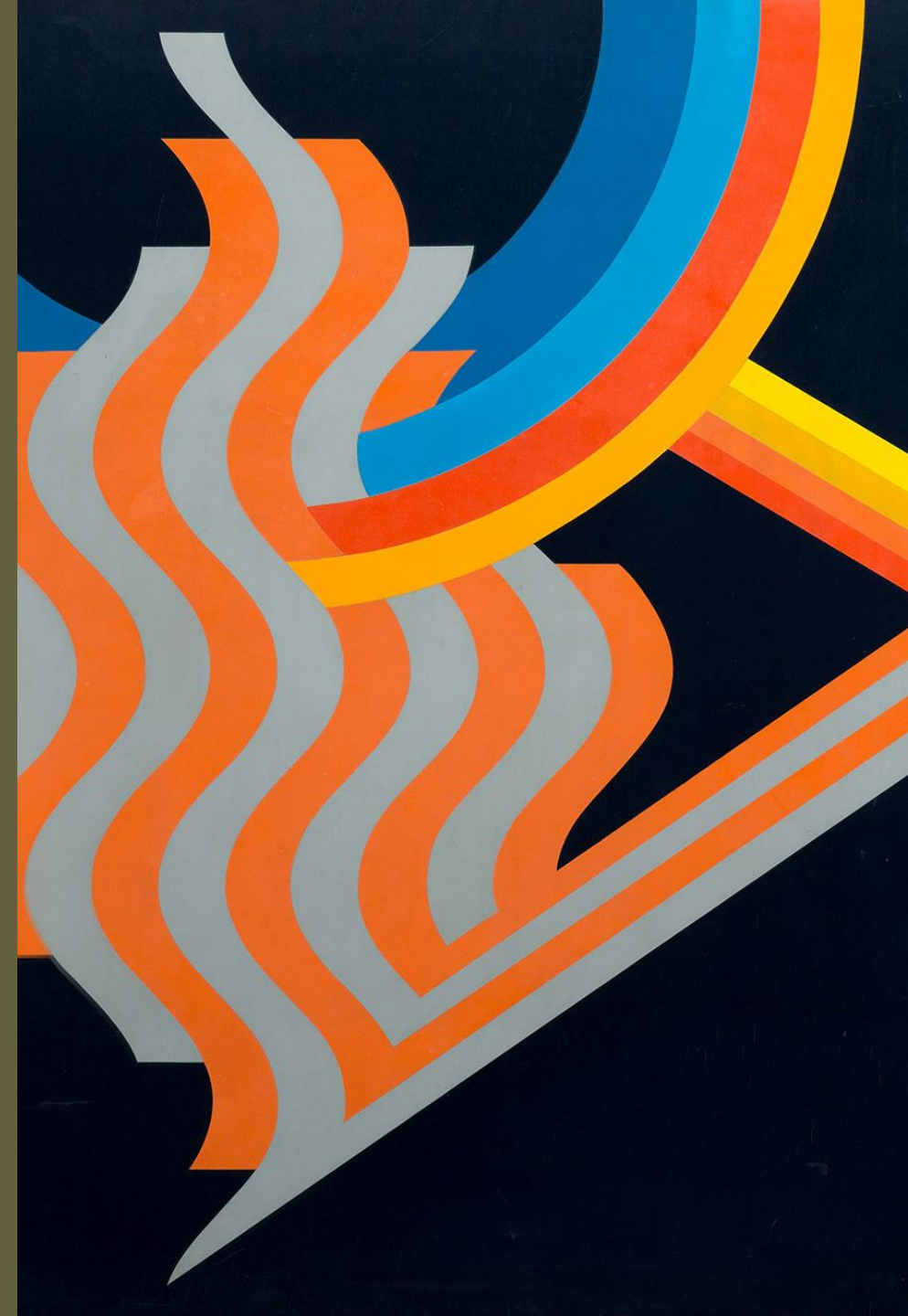


JOHN HICK

Hick uses the philosophy of Immanuel Kant to support his position. In his epistemology, Kant claims that we do not perceive things as they actually are, but as they are mediated to the mind via the senses.

Kant makes a distinction between the noumenal (things as they are) and the phenomenal (things as they appear to be).

This distinction between the noumenal and the phenomenal is applied by Hick to the relationship between religions and the Real. We do not have a direct perception of the Real, only a perception mediated through our cultural experiences.



JOHN HICK

Accounts of God represented by figures such as Jahweh, Allah, the Trinity, or Shiva represent recognition of the divine presence but different cultural mediations of that divine presence.

In his work *An Interpretation of Religion*, Hick engages with the conflicting truth claims of the various religions. Hick states that we have to be tolerant of different claims that are not central articles of faith.

Over disputes on matters of faith, we have to accept that these are matters of faith. If we seek to impose our own faith on others we are encouraging intolerance and conflict and discouraging understanding and dialogue.

Perspective is everything.



A MORE PLURALIST PLURALISM



An interesting alternative form of pluralism, that highlights some of the difficulties of Hick's form of pluralism is the 'more pluralistic' hypothesis of S. Mark Heim.

Heim critiques most pluralistic forms of the theology of religions on the grounds that they are insufficiently pluralistic enough and that they rely on a fundamentally Christian foundation that is overly concerned with salvation.

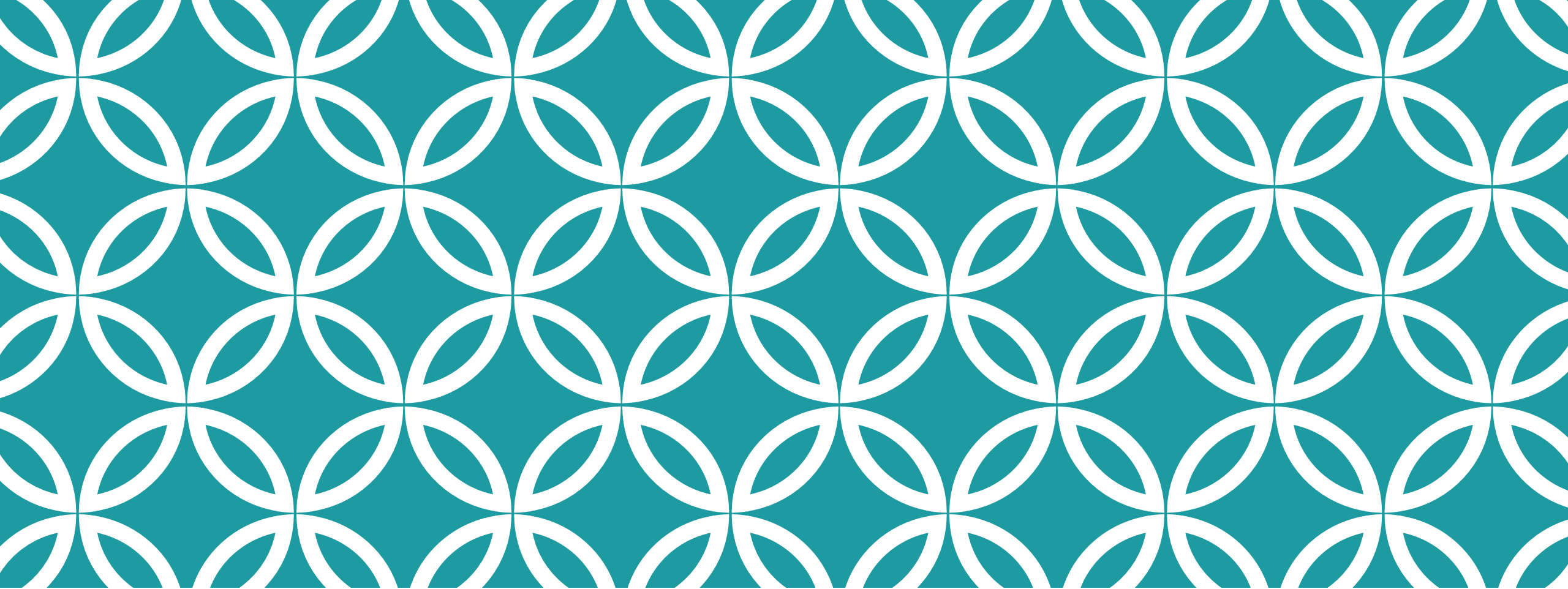
Hick's formulation posits a single form of salvation towards which all religious traditions are groping.

A MORE PLURALIST PLURALISM

Heim disagrees with this formulation as it seeks to impose a shared form of salvation onto a number of different religious ends as expressed by differing religious traditions – eg. Buddhist moksha and Christian heaven are distinct!

In contrast, Heim proposes what he calls a more pluralistic hypothesis – multiple religious ends and multiple religious paths towards those ends. Essentially, Christians will go to Christian heaven, and Buddhists will experience moksha.





TYPOLGY



TYPOLGY

We have spent a lot of time laying out this typology of the Christian theology of religions, particularly for a course that aims to engage with a number of different religions and their responses to difference.

Why is this?

Because the Christian assumptions apparent within the theology of religions continue to colour our approaches and methods of study in the field of interfaith studies and forms the foundations from which many alternative approaches are built. Without understanding the contours of the initial arena where academic attention to interfaith matters arose, we run the risk of de-contextualising our thinking, and presenting deeply Christian concerns as universal.



TYPOLGY

This is an important feature to grasp, not only because it colours almost all academic discussion, but because these assumptions can have real impacts — especially when the typology is mis-applied or applied outside its original context.

As we noted at the beginning, the typology categorises Christian responses to the question of salvation in other religions. However, this has not stopped it being used to describe other religious responses to religious plurality, nor to describe social responses to difference.



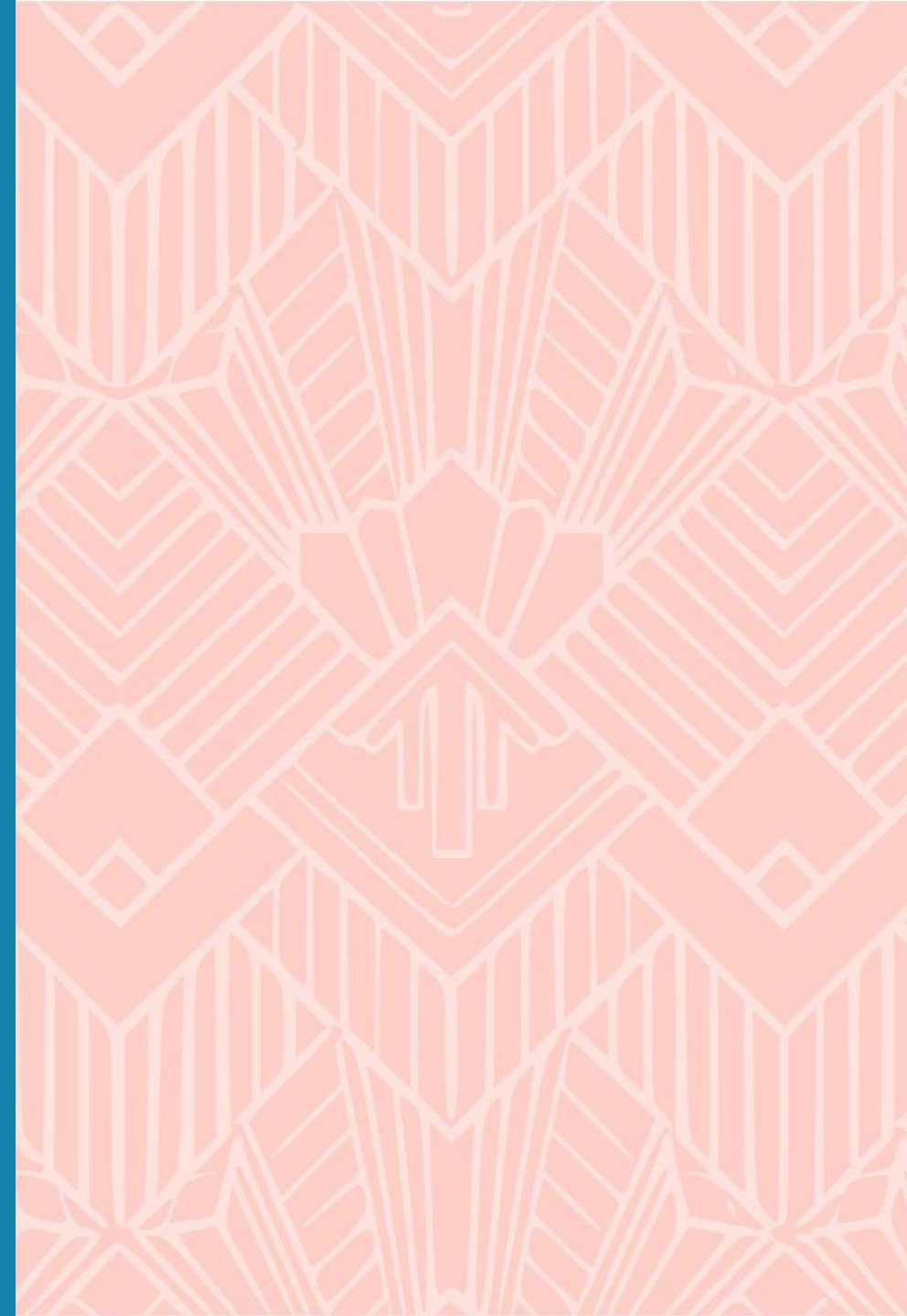
TYPOLGY

We often talk of being exclusive towards those not of our culture, or engaging in exclusive practices towards those of other faiths.

We sometimes laud the plurality and internal differences of our society as a strength.

We stress the importance of inclusion, but only through integration and erasure.

Each of these relates to attitudes towards the other, not to a specific position on the typology of exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism.



TYPOLGY

Yet, the philosophical and theological speculation related to differences regarding the salvation of religious others is an important area for considering our beliefs, our practices, and our social organisation even in non-religious contexts.

Even the liberal, secular, pluralistic, state has to wrestle with questions of truth, value, and meaning – and the implementation of decisions related to these questions.

This is where the practices of thinking embedded within the typology and the theology of religions become vitally important



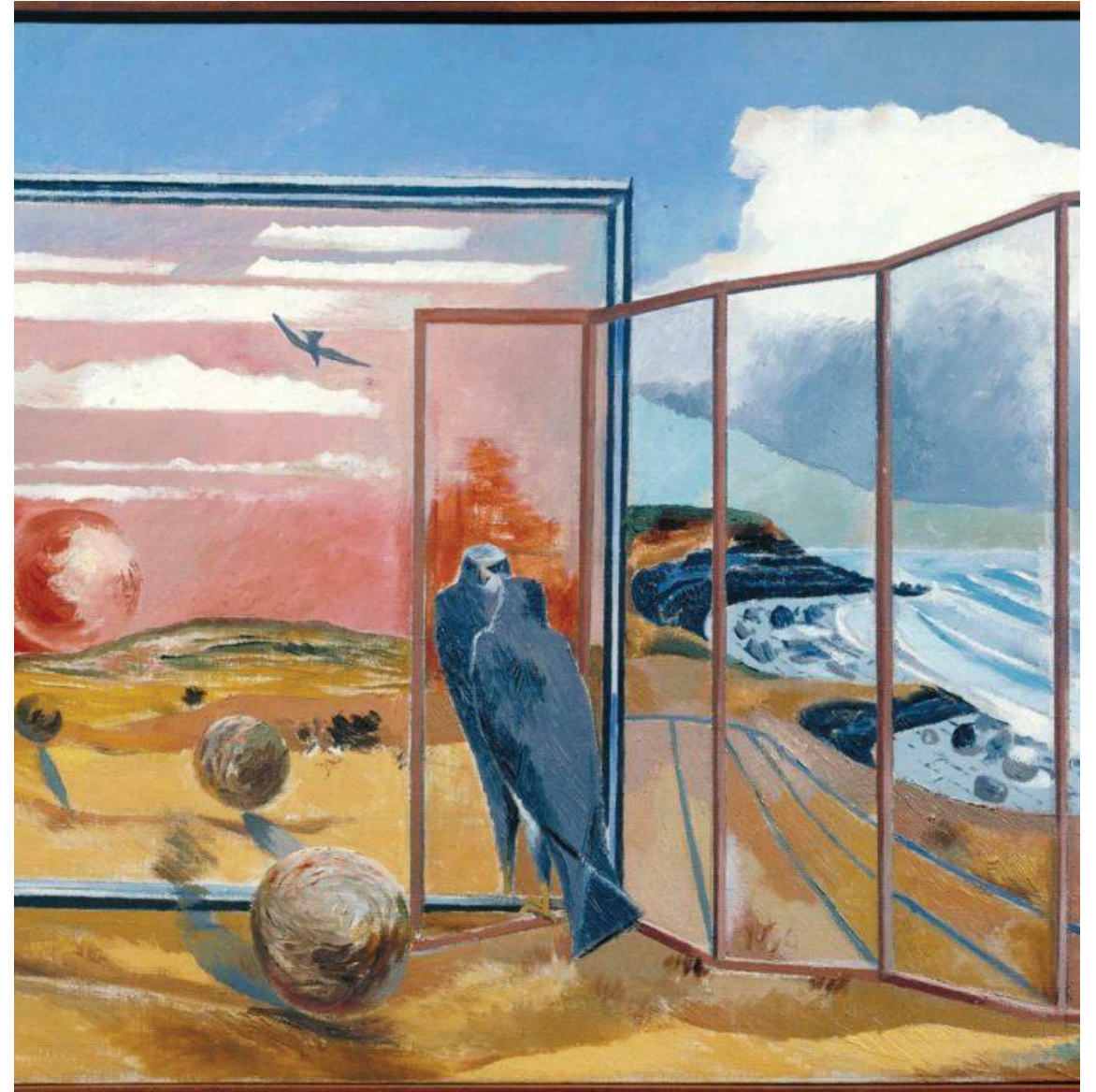
TPOLOGY

Some examples of this occur frequently in our contemporary societies.

How do societies conceive of truth claims by others – do we maintain an objective account of truth, or engage in relativism?

What is the nature of things like “fundamental British values” or “Chinese culture” and how might these be practiced?

How do our visions of social progress interact with continuing and desired social difference?



READINGS

Pannenberg W, “Religious Pluralism and Conflicting Truth Claims” in Hick J (ed) *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered*, Orbis Books, 1987.

D’Costa G, 1996, “The Impossibility of a Pluralist View of Religions”, *Religious Studies*, Vol.32, pp.223-232.

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Fegert M, 2013, “The Insufficiency of S. Mark Heim’s More Pluralistic Hypothesis”, *Theology Today*, Vol. 69 No. 4, pp.497-510.