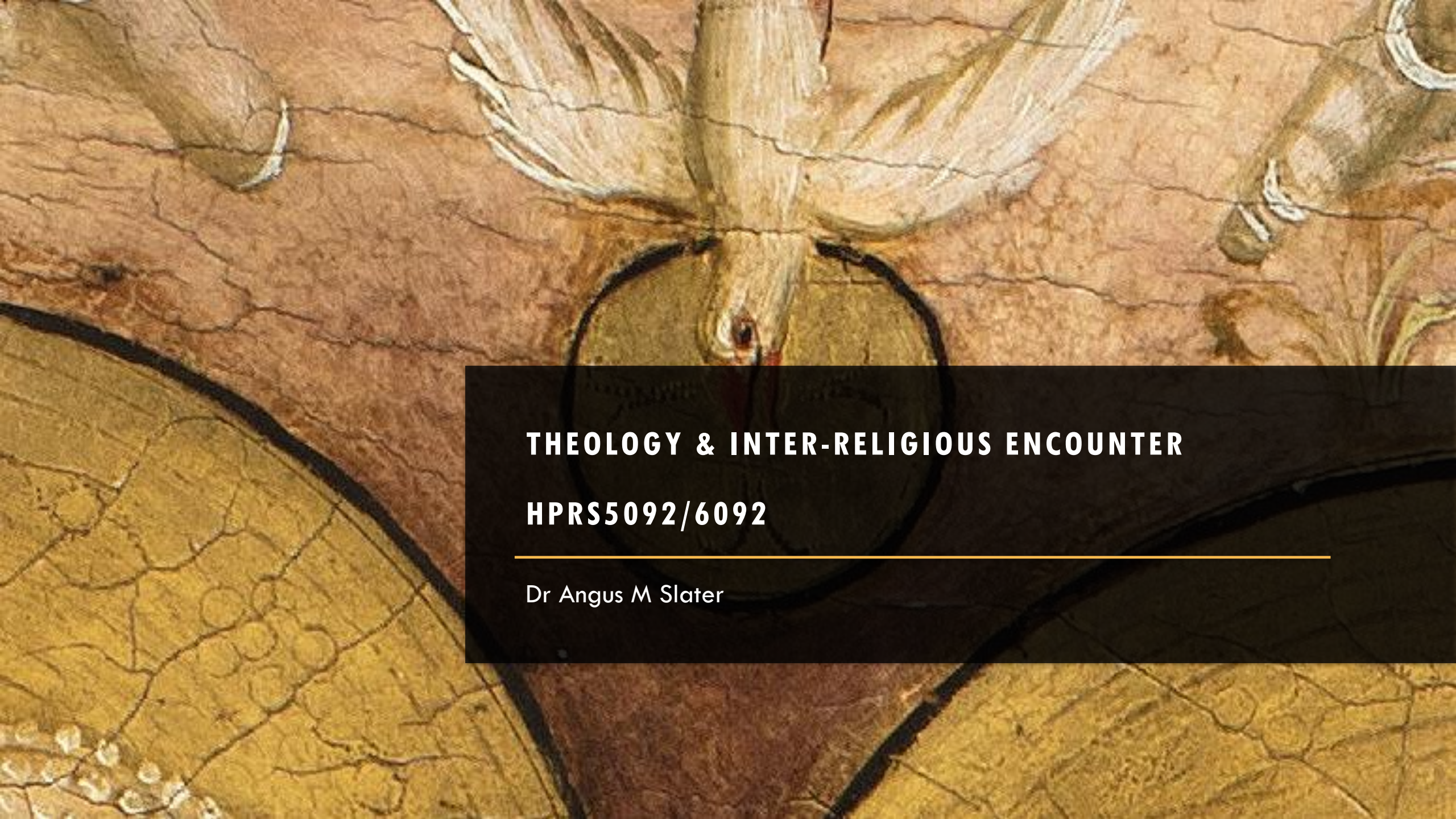




THEOLOGY & INTER-RELIGIOUS ENCOUNTER

HPRS5092/6092

Dr Angus M Slater

REVISION

In the previous section, we turned to the first position for consideration under the typology of the theology of religions, that of exclusivism.

We examined some of the roots of exclusivism, clarified a number of its characteristics, and had a look at the various different forms of exclusivism that are apparent.

In doing so, I hope you picked up on the internal variety of the exclusivist position and some of the theological reasoning underpinning it – as could hopefully be seen from the different theologians examined.

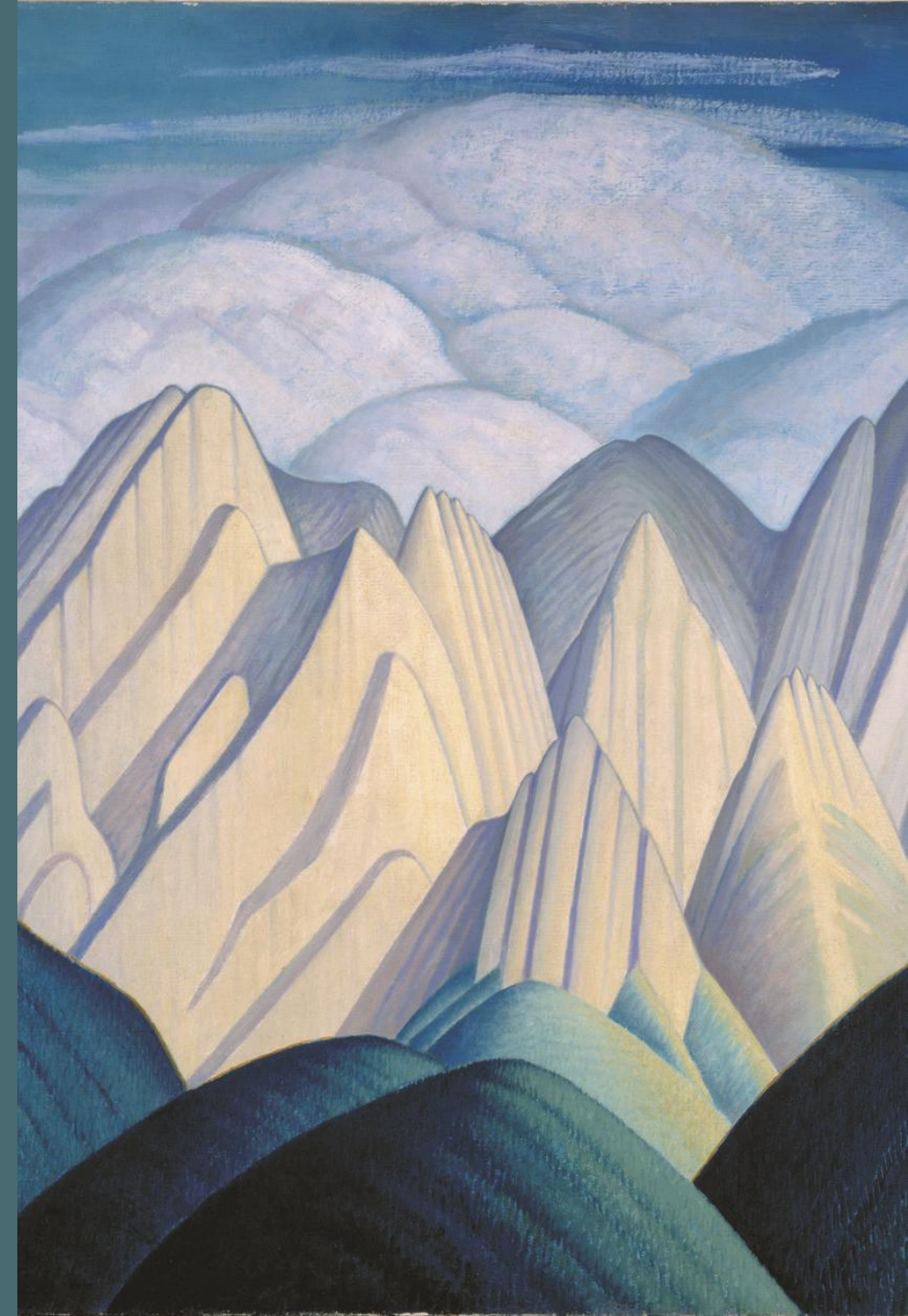


REVISION

You also had two readings to complete — a piece by Mara Brecht entitled “What’s the use of Exclusivism?” and a piece by Stetson entitled “The Meaning of Christian Exclusivism”.

Stetson’s piece outlines some of the main critiques of Exclusivism within the Christian tradition, as well as offering some rebuttals to them. He defends the location and importance of exclusivism, particularly against charges of morality.

Similarly, Brecht’s piece is also a form of defence of exclusivism, but one which highlights different reasons. Read them both with this in mind.





**BRECHT M, “WHAT’S THE USE OF
EXCLUSIVISM?”**

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Again, before we dive into the specifics of another position within the typology, I want to take a moment to tease out some of the key aspects of the reading and to highlight some critical questions.

In doing so, some of the operative assumptions and arguments utilised within it should become apparent – this kind of critical reading is key skill to develop over the course of your studies and will allow you to engage with the topic at a deeper analytical level.

In each case, the question posed highlights something that will become more relevant and important as we move through different typological positions.



In a sense, exclusivism follows naturally from religious conviction.⁵ If Christians *really* believe Jesus' message that salvation comes only through him and believe in the necessity of discipleship, then how could Christians also affirm the salvific significance of other religious traditions? Such an affirmation would be at least in tension and at most incompatible with the central convictions of Christianity. While this characterization of exclusivism may seem severe, it is not as though exclusivists are not aware of the contentiousness of their position. Netland, for example, states that exclusivism is "especially difficult . . . to maintain once [one is] exposed to the great religious figures in other traditions."⁶ Exclusivists acknowledge the compelling power of other religious beliefs, practices, and leaders. Indeed, exclusivists themselves may even find such things compelling.

BRECHT M, “WHAT’S THE USE OF EXCLUSIVISM?”

What sources do exclusivists use to argue for the centrality and uniqueness of salvation?

Can Christians affirm salvation in other traditions AND in Christianity?

What obstacles exist for Christian’s adopting a non-exclusivist position?

Griffiths poses a range of questions he sees as generated by diversity. His questions are epistemological and framed self-reflectively: What should one think about *one's own* religious beliefs and commitments, given religious diversity? Should the awareness of religious diversity reduce one's epistemic confidence in one's own beliefs?¹⁵ From the outset Griffiths, a paradigmatic new exclusivist, shifts the burden of inquiry from “them” to “us.” Thus, the problem of diversity is not “what do we do about them?” but rather, given religious diversity, “how do we think about ourselves and our own beliefs?” Griffiths’s work focuses on the possible epistemological responses—many of which are *internally* directed—to the awareness of diversity.

BRECHT M, “WHAT’S THE USE OF EXCLUSIVISM?”

What should one think about one’s own religious beliefs and commitments, given religious diversity?

Does diversity of opinion have a connection to truth?

How do we think about ourselves and our own beliefs?

Netland states that the theological discussion of religious diversity has been predominantly a debate about the extent to which God operates in other religious traditions.²⁶ Construed this way, the discussion is essentially nonepistemological. The focus on God's presence and action, Netland claims, amounts to a functionalist or pragmatist interpretation of religion. In such a reading the guiding question is about God's function and religion's response. This reveals an underlying assumption that what is most important about religion—its very essence—is its function. If religions are

BRECHT M, “WHAT’S THE USE OF EXCLUSIVISM?”

What is a functional definition of religion?

What assumptions does this form of definition make?

What does a functionalist approach foreground about matters of religious diversity?

READINGS

What is a functional definition of religion?

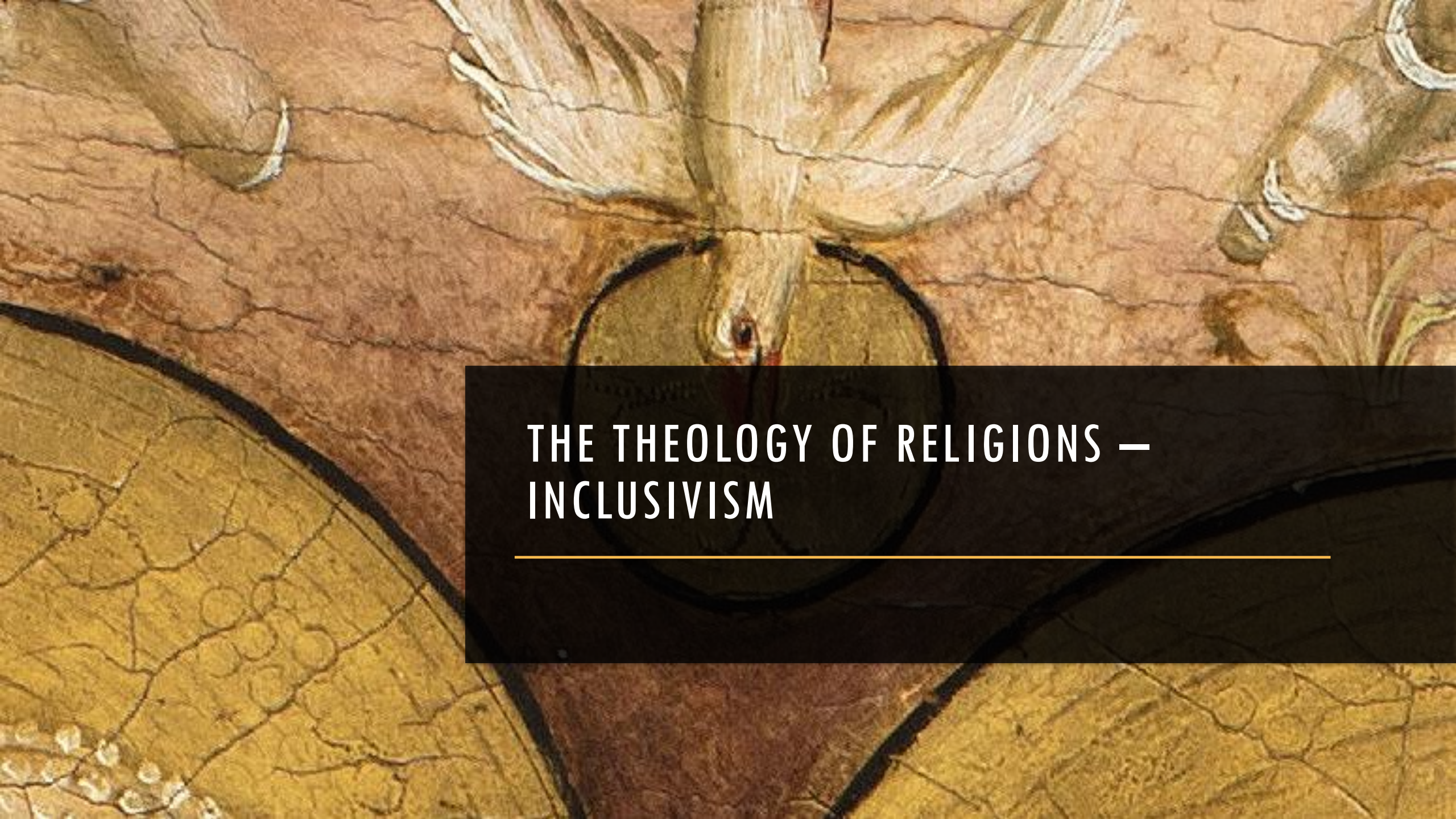
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THE THEOLOGY OF RELIGIONS — INCLUSIVISM

INCLUSIVISM

So, what is the position of 'inclusivism' within the theology of religions and what exactly does it mean?

Generally, proponents of inclusivism would answer negatively to the question - can non-Christians be saved by their own religions? – but positively to the question – can non-Christians be saved by Christ?

Inclusivists (meaning those who hold the position of inclusivism) would generally argue that only one tradition can lead to salvation, but that the choice or ability to access this salvation may be available to those who have not practiced that faith during their lives.



INCLUSIVISM

Another way of phrasing this is that inclusivism is an outlook based in the belief that only one tradition can mediate salvation..... however, the saving power of that tradition is available to people of good intent who are outside that tradition.

There are a number of passages in the New Testament which, it might be argued, express sympathy with, and the possible acceptance of, other religious traditions.



INCLUSIVISM

Similarly to many exclusivist thinkers, inclusivists draw on Scripture to support their theological position.

In Acts, Chapter 10 there is a reference to a Roman centurion called Cornelius, who had a vision of an angel and who was used by God to provide hospitality to Peter.

In response to Cornelius' hospitality Peter says of Cornelius:

"I now realise how true it is that God does not show favouritism, but accepts men from every nation who fear him and who do what is right."
(Acts 10:34-5)



INCLUSIVISM

This position has been increasingly adopted within mainstream Churches over the last 100 years or so, as questions of the morality of excluding non-Christians from salvation have emerged.

It has been part of the belief of the Catholic Church since Vatican II (1976); it has been accepted by the Commission of the Church of England since the 70's; and it informs the theology of many mainstream Protestant denominations today.



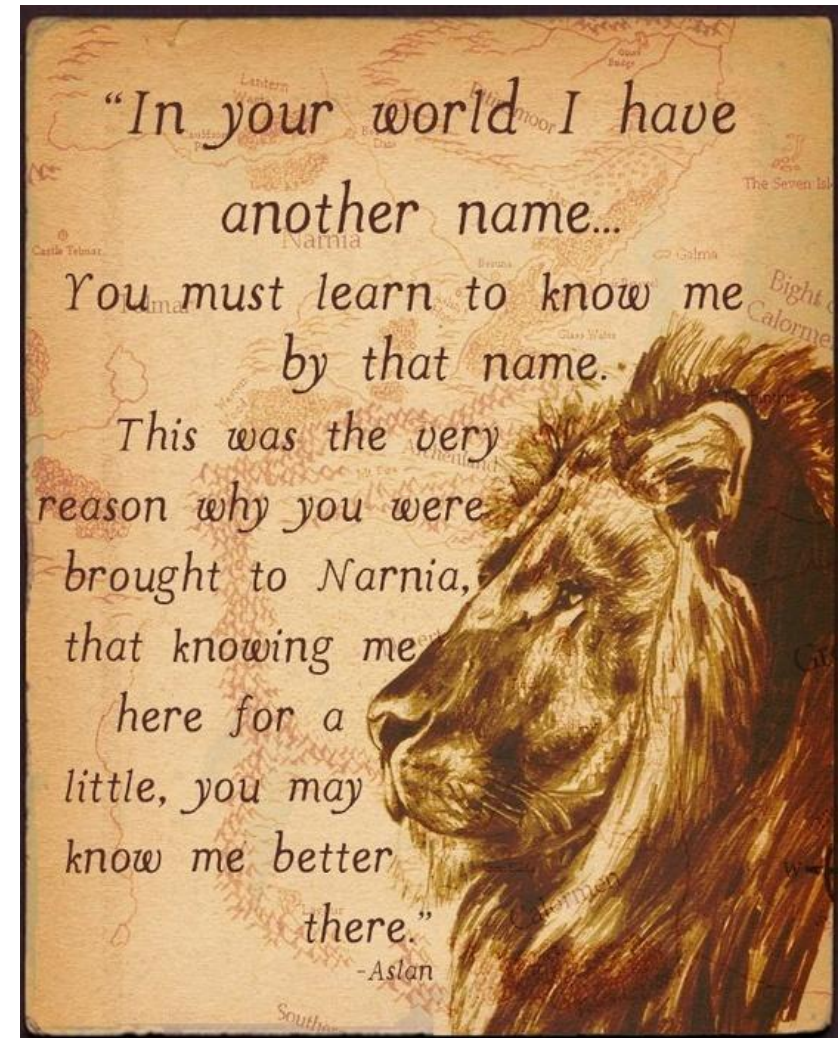
INCLUSIVISM

An example often used to illustrate this is that of CS Lewis, author of the Narnia series, but also a Christian thinker and writer.

In his scholarly book “Mere Christianity”, Lewis writes:

“We do know that no person can be saved except through Christ; we do not know that only those who know Him can be saved by Him.”
(Lewis, 1966, p.65)

While in the novels a similar theme is apparent in the presentation of Aslan as a Christ-figure within Narnia – Christ, but in another form.



INCLUSIVISM

As with exclusivism, there are many different shades of opinion and argument which populate the typological category of inclusivism, with a variety of different emphases and particular distinctions that relate to the question of salvation.

In the next section, I want to highlight just a few thinkers of inclusivism which differ from each other — both in terms of their location of exclusivism, their own religious traditions and backgrounds, and in the specific mechanisms by which they propose the inclusion of non-Christian others to occur.



A painting of a white dove with its wings spread, perched on a dark circular object, set against a cracked, earthy background. The dove is white with a red beak and a red eye. The background is a textured, brownish-gold surface with visible cracks. The dove is positioned in the upper center of the frame, with its wings spread out to the sides. The dark circular object it is perched on is in the center of the frame. The overall composition is centered and balanced.

INCLUSIVISTS — PINNOCK, RAHNER, AND KUNG

CLARK PINNOCK

An important exponent of the inclusivist position within contemporary evangelical Christianity is Clark Pinnock.

Pinnock argues that salvation is mediated through Jesus Christ alone; but that there is a wider hope which offers the possibility of salvation for non-Christians, including those who have not been evangelised.

This is because Pinnock is concerned about the morality of excluding those who have not ever heard of Christianity from salvation, through no moral failing of their own.

In this, Pinnock states that other religions can provide a preparation for the reception of the Gospel.



CLARK PINNOCK

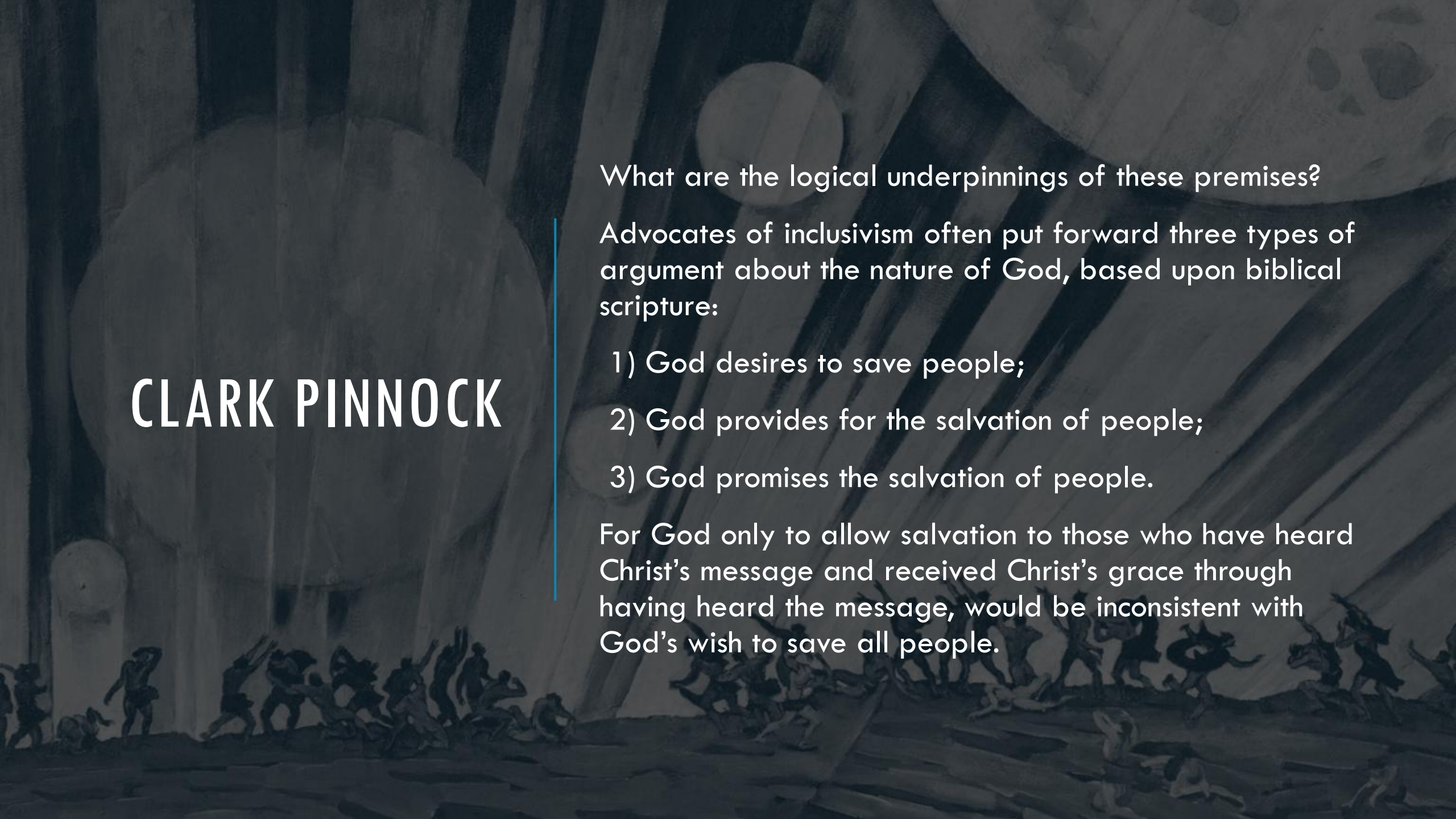
Pinnock uses the phrase “pre-messianic believer” to identify someone of a non-Christian faith who would be disposed to becoming a Christian if they were to hear Christianity preached to them.

There are two main premises that inform Clark Pinnock's inclusivism:

The first is that Jesus Christ is humanity's only saviour and mediator – thereby distinguishing his position from pluralism.

The second is that God's grace and salvation can be found outside the Christian tradition. – thereby distinguishing his position from softer forms of exclusivism.





CLARK PINNOCK

What are the logical underpinnings of these premises?

Advocates of inclusivism often put forward three types of argument about the nature of God, based upon biblical scripture:

- 1) God desires to save people;
- 2) God provides for the salvation of people;
- 3) God promises the salvation of people.

For God only to allow salvation to those who have heard Christ's message and received Christ's grace through having heard the message, would be inconsistent with God's wish to save all people.

CLARK PINNOCK

There premises are based on aspects of God's nature or character as revealed in scripture:

With regard to the first argument – that God desires to save all people – they might quote the words of Paul when he writes God “desires all men to be saved” (1 Timothy 2:4).

Similarly, in Peter 3:9 we read: God does not wish “for anyone to perish but for all to come to repentance.”



CLARK PINNOCK

With regard to the second argument — that God provides for the salvation of all people — one might quote a number of passages from the New Testament:

For example, John 12:32 refers to God drawing all men to God.

2 Corinthians 5:19 talks about God being reconciled to the world.

Titus 2:11 states “the grace of God has brought salvation to all men.”

Hebrews 2:9 talks of Christ tasting “death for everyone”.



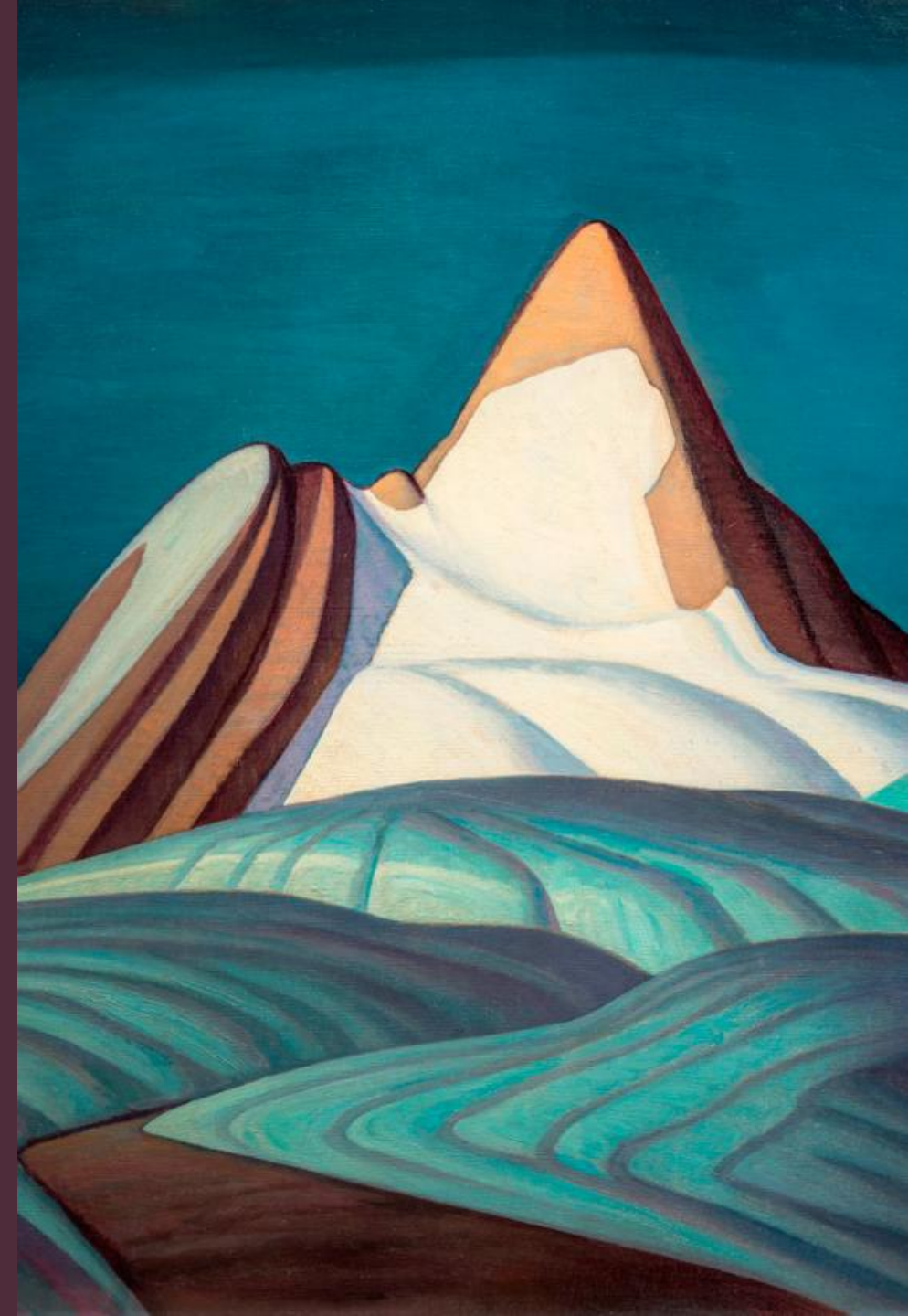
CLARK PINNOCK

With regard to the third argument — that God promises salvation to all people — a number of biblical passages can be used for support:

Ephesians 1:10 talks of the “summing up of all things in Christ”.

Philippians 2:9-11 states that “every knee should bow” before Christ.

These passages have been used to argue that all beings will ultimately be reconciled to Christ.



ROMAN CATHOLICISM

As we saw in the previous section, the historic position of the Roman Catholic Church has been that only those within the Catholic Church are eligible for salvation – *extra Ecclesiam nulla salus*.

This was made official doctrine at the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215 and reaffirmed at the Council of Florence in 1442, however this position changed as a result of Vatican II (1962-1965).

The Second Vatican Council or Vatican II accepted the principle that adherents of other religious traditions could receive salvation, while maintaining the theology that Christianity is the one true religion.

According to the new formulation, those who have not received the message of Christ but who earnestly seek God can realise eternal salvation.



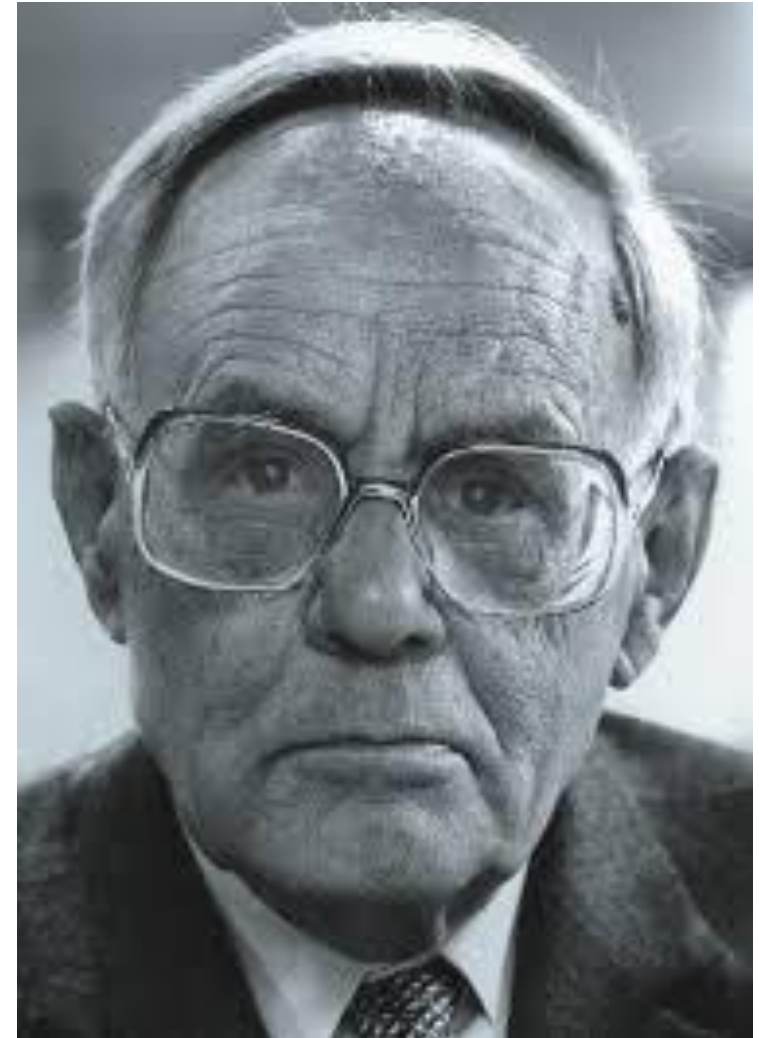
KARL RAHNER

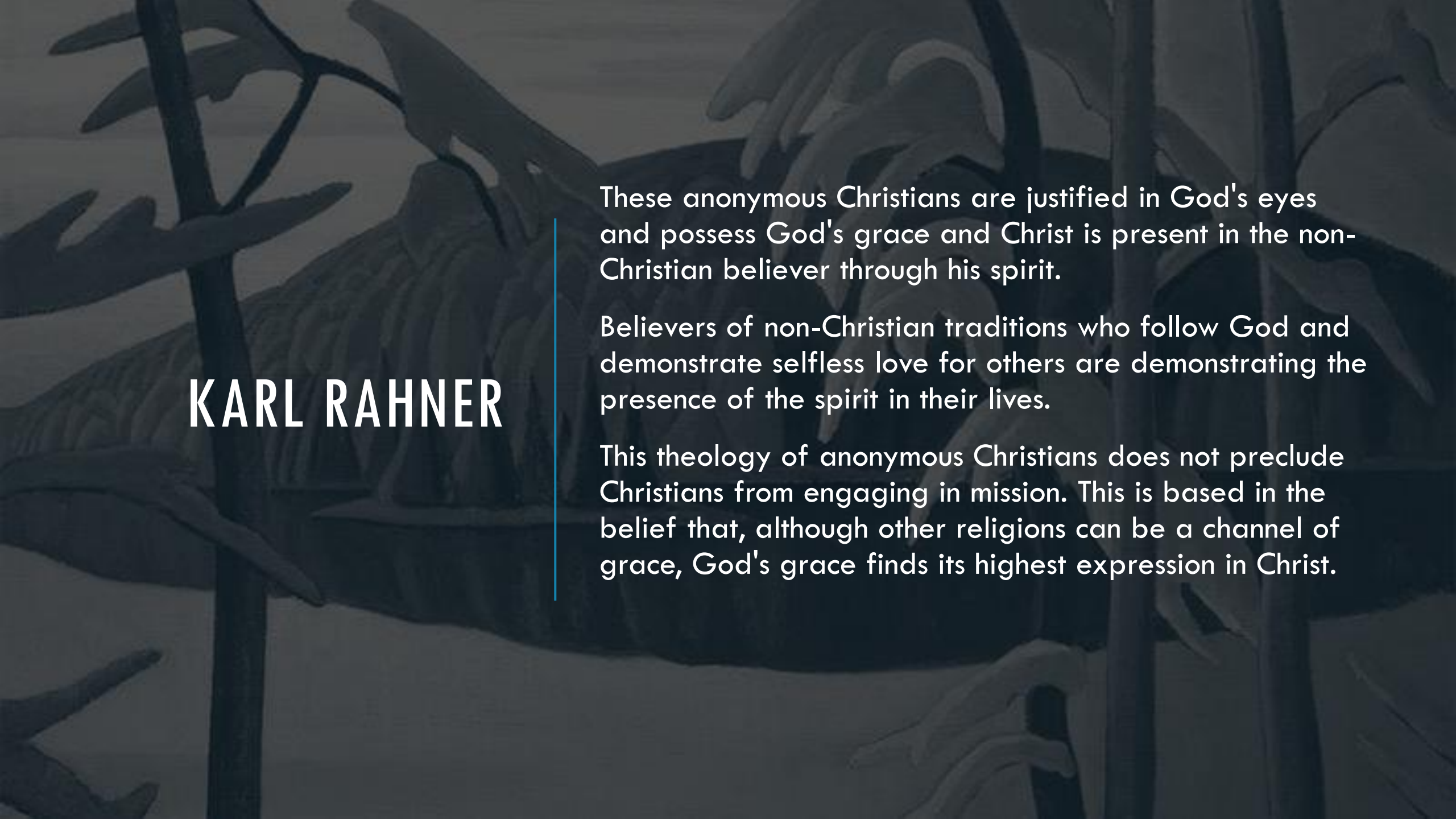
A key figure in developing this aspect of contemporary Roman Catholic thinking, is the scholar Karl Rahner, who was influential before, during, and after the Council.

In his work, Rahner proposed that human beings, being composed of spirit, are naturally inclined to seek God. This spirit is the thing that allows us to mediate God's grace in our lives, and our spirit can experience the presence of God's grace even before hearing the Gospel.

Given this, people of other religious traditions can experience God's grace, and potentially receive salvation.

Those who have experienced the Spirit of God in other religions Karl Rahner calls "anonymous Christians".





KARL RAHNER

These anonymous Christians are justified in God's eyes and possess God's grace and Christ is present in the non-Christian believer through his spirit.

Believers of non-Christian traditions who follow God and demonstrate selfless love for others are demonstrating the presence of the spirit in their lives.

This theology of anonymous Christians does not preclude Christians from engaging in mission. This is based in the belief that, although other religions can be a channel of grace, God's grace finds its highest expression in Christ.

KARL RAHNER

For Rahner, not all religions give equally valid expression of the spirit.

Other religions consist of a mixture of revelation and error, which while allowing for the possibility of feeling the grace of God, do not allow for salvation solely through themselves.

It is in Christ's death and resurrection that God's manifestation in the Spirit has become apparent to humanity, and it is only through Christ's death that salvation can be assured.



HANS KUNG

Hans Kung was another contemporaneous Catholic theologian with Karl Rahner, who influenced the development of an inclusivist position within Catholic theology.

While sharing many of the same presuppositions and tendencies as Rahner, Kung was critical of the concept of “anonymous Christians”, which he regarded as patronising towards those of other faiths.

In the same way that a Christian would likely not care to be referred to as an “anonymous Hindu”, so a Hindu would not care to be referred to as an “anonymous Christian”.



HANS KUNG

For Kung, like Rahner, he believed that God's grace could be mediated through non-Christian religious traditions.

In doing so, Kung proposed that non-Christian religions can provide the means by which salvation can occur, but that Christianity remains unique relative to the elements that refer to Jesus and the Incarnation.

Kung states that although the Christian tradition can, and should, learn from other religious traditions and should engage with dialogue with them, that it is only Christianity that can provide the criteria for knowing what is and what is not the means to salvation within other religions.

In this sense, it is their similarity to Christianity which provides the grounds for salvation within other faiths.



READING

You have two readings to complete, both of which engage critically with the position of inclusivism. The first is a critique of an inclusivist position, mounted by a pluralist as we will examine in the next session, while the second, is a reflection on Rahner's inclusivism in a non-western context:

Race A, "Christianity and Other Religions: Is Inclusivism Enough?" in Hick J & Hebblethwaite B (eds) *Christianity and Other Religions*, (London: Oneworld, 2001)

Wong J, "Anonymous Christians: Karl Rahner's Pneuma-Christocentrism and an East-West Dialogue", *Theological Studies*, 55(4), 609-637

