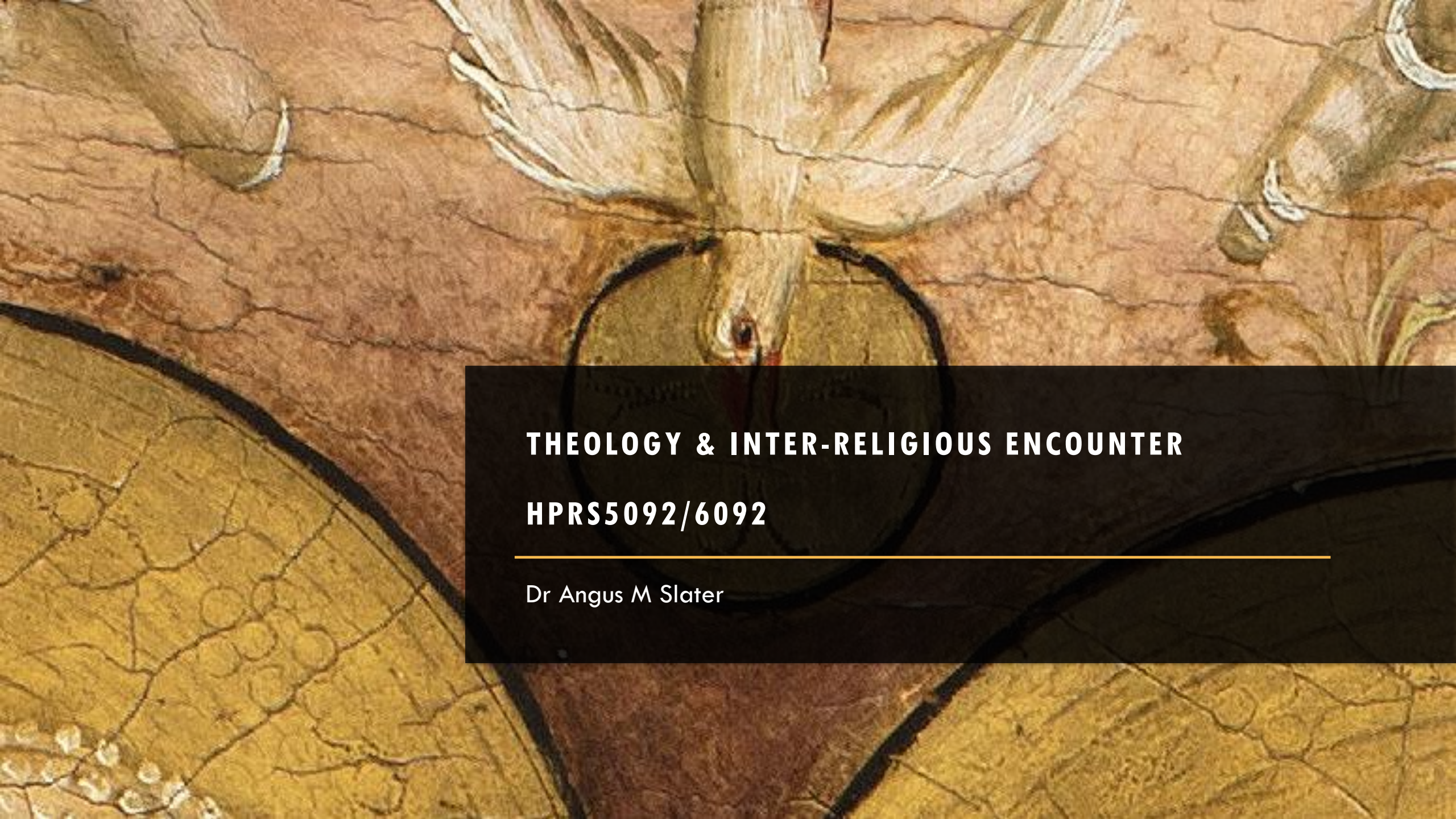




THEOLOGY & INTER-RELIGIOUS ENCOUNTER

HPRS5092/6092

Dr Angus M Slater

REVISION

In the previous section, we completed our discussion of the classic typology of the theology of religions, by examining the position of pluralism. Along with the previous sections on exclusivism and inclusivism, these sections should have given you a firm handle on the general positions seen within this field of theology.

In examining pluralism, we found a number of differing positions within it, ranging from people like Hick to people like Heim. In both cases, the pluralist position, that salvation in whatever form is available through differing forms of religious belief, could be discerned, but the mechanics and specificities vary.

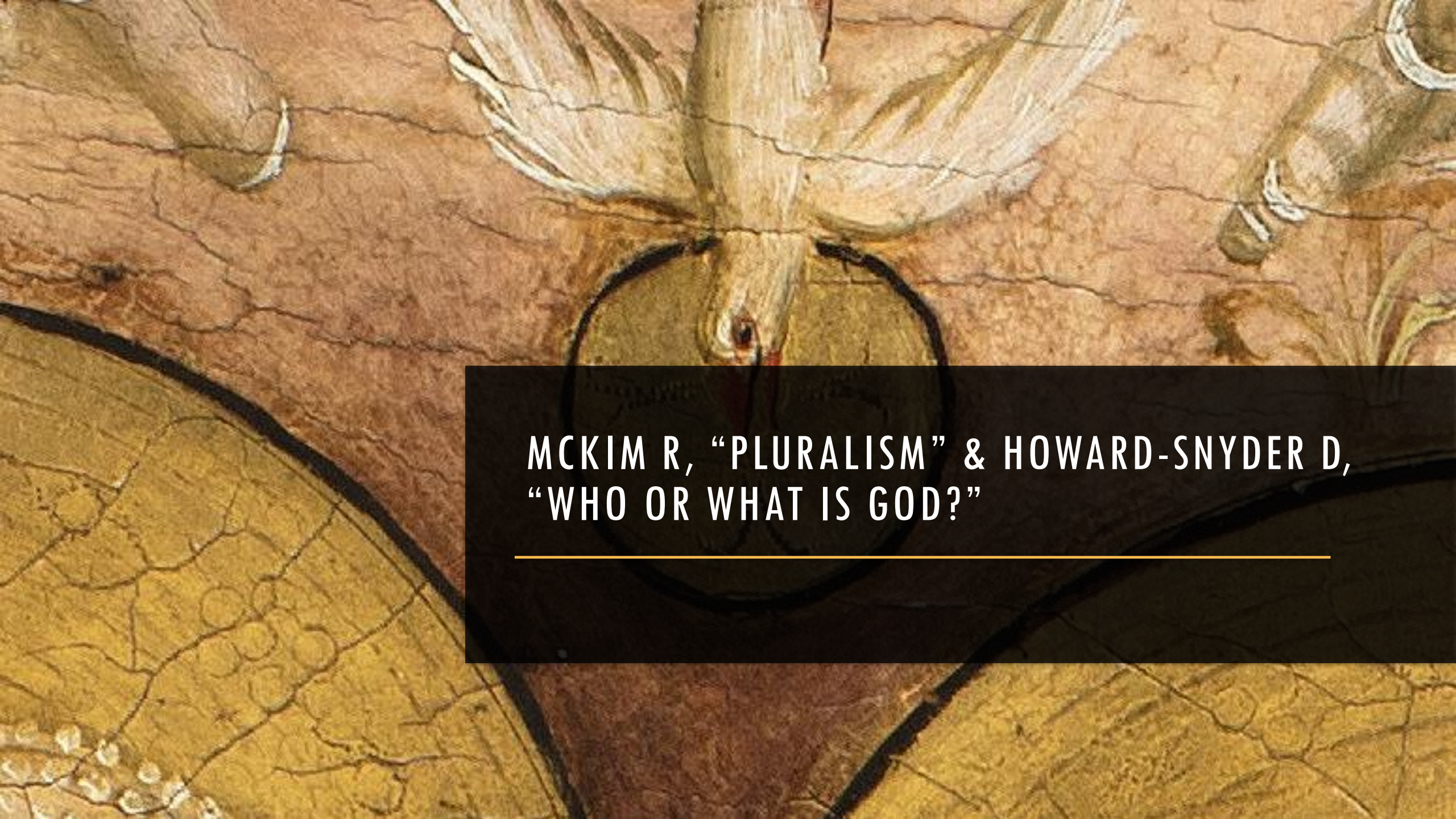


REVISION

The pluralist position has had a very strong influence on other aspects of theology you may come across in your studies, particularly in soteriology (the study of salvation) where it connects to issues of universalism and in feminist theology where it connects to feminist critiques of theology's particularity.

You also had two readings to complete – a piece describing the critical outlines of the pluralist position by McKim, and a piece interrogating the particularities of John Hick's position by asking what exactly is meant by God in his work.





MCKIM R, "PLURALISM" & HOWARD-SNYDER D,
"WHO OR WHAT IS GOD?"

MCKIM, PLURALISM & HOWARD SNYDER, HICK

The two readings set offer very different approaches to learning about pluralism. The reading by McKim offers a sketch of pluralism in a general way, outlining the key philosophical and theological commitments of the positions.

In contrast to this, Howard-Snyder's piece engages with a particular form of pluralism, that of one of its leading proponents John Hick, and asks some very critical questions of its framing of the nature of religion and God.

How is pluralism best understood? Let's start with truth. It is natural to begin a discussion of pluralism about truth by considering a claim such as this:

PT1 A number of religions do equally well in terms of truth.

As is clear from earlier discussions, the idea that a number of religions do equally well in terms of truth admits of further clarification. For example, there is the percentage of the claims of the relevant traditions that are correct, the total number of truths that they possess, and so on. But I will not revisit these matters here. And as before, in this discussion, too, I will sometimes drop the words "about truth."

Some scholars take PT1 to be pluralism about truth. Thus Harold Netland takes religious pluralism, which he reasonably characterizes as a position concerning both truth and salvation, to be the view that "there is rough parity among religions concerning truth and soteriological (salvational) effectiveness" (Encountering Religious Pluralism: The Challenge to Christian Faith and Mission, 12). And as we have just seen, Abdolkarim Soroush says that "[all] are equally rightful in what they believe," and he presents this as part of his "pluralistic" position.

MCKIM, PLURALISM

Why do we tend to start with truth and pluralism?

What questions flow from an acceptance of PT1?

Netland states “*there is rough parity among religions concerning truth and soteriological (salvational) effectiveness*” as his pluralism. Is this a reasonable proposition?

These points bring to the fore another feature of pluralism: a position merits this name only if the views whose compatibility it asserts would otherwise seem incompatible.

Pluralism is, therefore, an inherently bold, surprising, and controversial view, one that sets out to render compatible what would otherwise seem incompatible.

Hence pluralism-like views that pertain to those areas with respect to which the monotheistic religions agree, such as whether there is a deity that is omnipotent, omniscient, and benevolent, are not properly classified as pluralistic.

MCKIM, PLURALISM

What are the processes by which compatibility may be asserted?

On what ground does pluralism adjudge compatibility?

Why is agreement not pluralism?

A second familiar objection is that Hick's proposal, as construed here, is religiously inadequate. It says that none of the properties or qualities that are attributed to the various relevant realities that are posited by the different traditions may be attributed to the Real as it is in itself.

Accordingly, the Real as it is in itself is neither good nor benevolent nor just, for example. Nor does it act in history; nor is it the source of any particular revelation. There is a high price to be paid for going this way if we look at matters from many conventional religious perspectives.

HOWARD SNYDER, HICK

Why do none of the properties of God apply to Hick's notion of the Real?

What categorical distinction causes this and how do religious traditions evade it?

What process of pluralism causes this retreat from specificity?

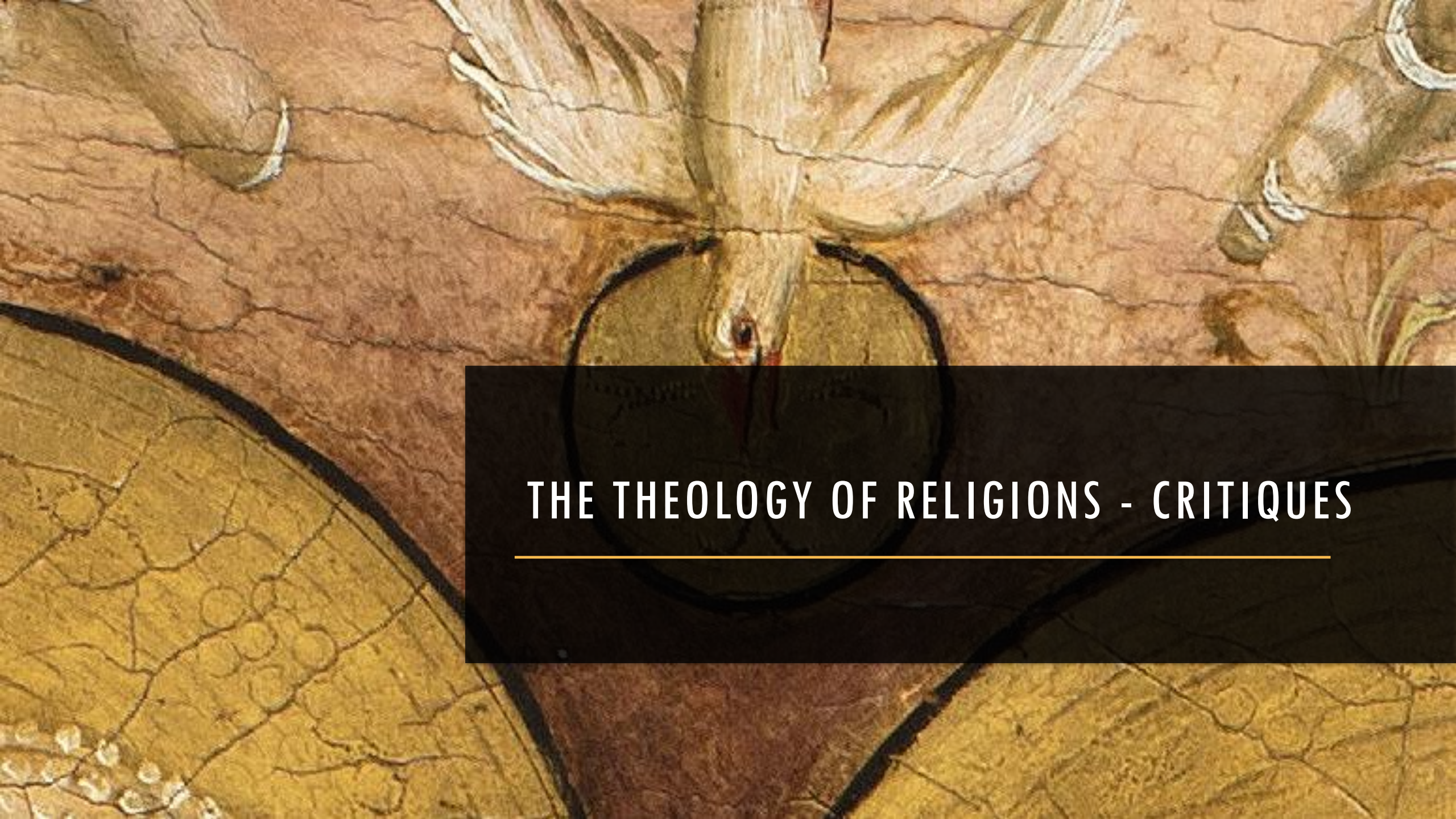
Using this understanding to model the ontological status of the personae of God, Hick says that “Jahweh, the heavenly Father, Allah, Shiva, Vishnu and so on are not objectively existent personal individuals with their own distinctive powers and characteristics,” but rather ways (“modes”) in which human consciousness is modified by “the universal presence” of God, shaped by the category of deity, resulting in “a powerful and deeply resonant sense of personal presence,” sometimes further schematized by distinctive aspects of the mentalities of specific theistic traditions, resulting in experiences distinctive of each of these traditions.

MCKIM, PLURALISM

For Hick, what is a religion??

Does this mean that religion is necessarily culturally specific?

Does this not transpose the question of pluralism to the cultural, rather than religious, plane?



THE THEOLOGY OF RELIGIONS - CRITIQUES

THE THEOLOGY OF RELIGIONS - CRITIQUES

I want us now to turn to learning about some of the major critiques that operate in the theology of religions, both of the typology as a whole, but also between the various positions within it.

Most of the interior typological criticisms have already been covered as we progressed through the typology itself, apart from the initial exclusivist criticisms.

I then want to examine a critique of the typology as a whole which is sometimes added as a fourth option, called particularism.

THE THEOLOGY OF RELIGIONS - CRITIQUES

An example of this is the critique of inclusivism from an exclusivist position that there is simply too much ambiguity in inclusivism. There are certain key questions which an inclusivist position fails to address.

How exactly does a religion become a vehicle for salvation – can this be gained / lost?

What determines which religion will become a vehicle for salvation, and how can we be assured of this?

How do we know that someone in one religious tradition might be disposed to believe another religious tradition if they heard the teaching of that tradition?



THE THEOLOGY OF RELIGIONS - CRITIQUES

A further argument is that in some ways religious inclusivism is insulting to other religious traditions e.g. Karl Rahner and his notion of 'anonymous Christians'.

Many adherents of other traditions such as Islam or Hinduism might feel insulted by being described as an "anonymous Christians"

Furthermore, some traditions openly deny the basic theology of other traditions - Islam, for example, denies the divinity of Christ and the need for the atonement.

How can Muslims be depicted as "anonymous Christians" when their very beliefs are opposed to the foundational doctrines of Christianity?



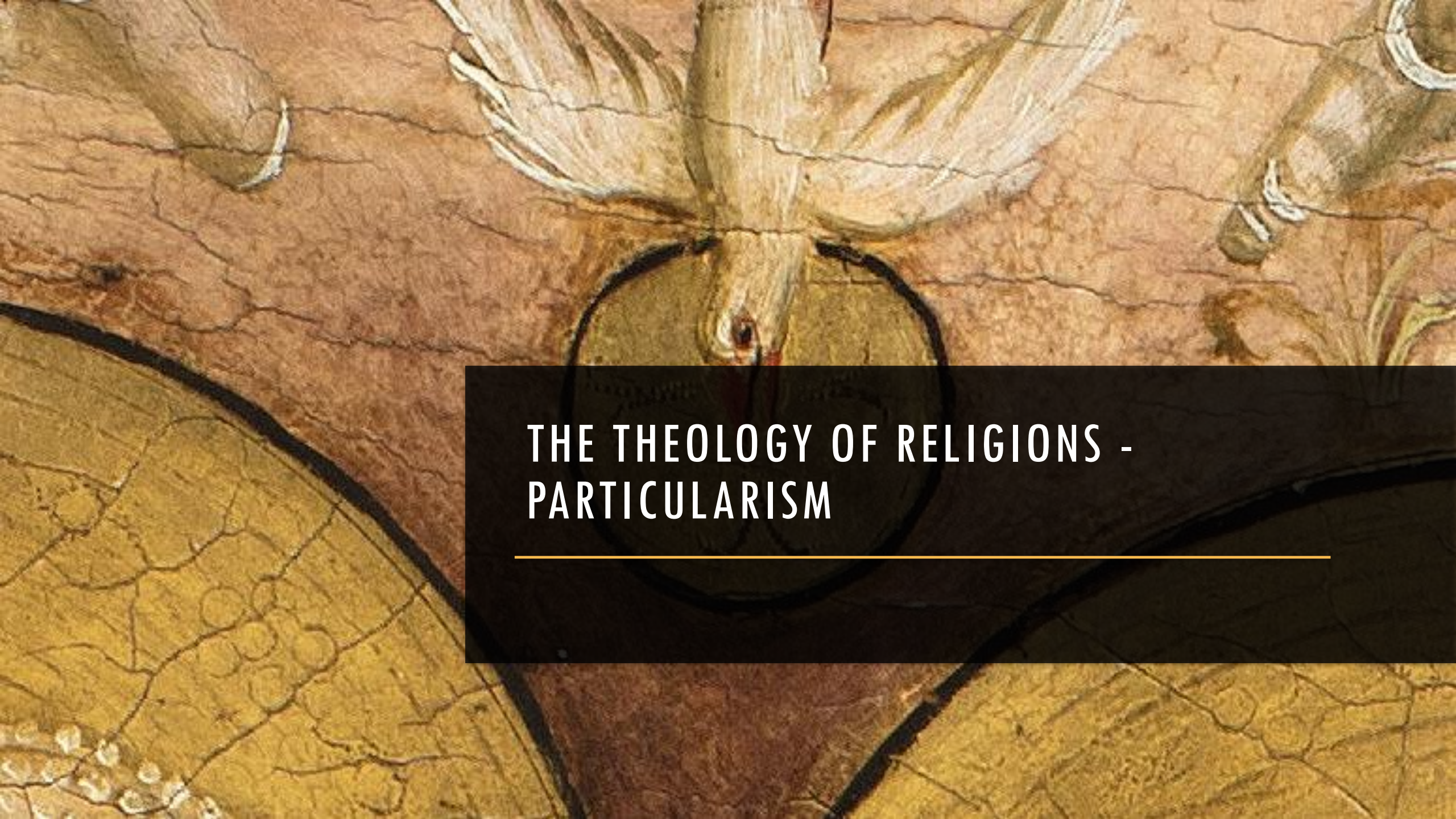
THE THEOLOGY OF RELIGIONS - CRITIQUES

Following on from this critique that inclusivism is insulting, the location of other religious traditions within an inclusivist paradigm can lead to the misrepresentation of other traditions as it encourages the interpretation of the beliefs of one tradition through the theology of another tradition.

Finally, it might be argued that all religious traditions are necessarily exclusive as all religious traditions are founded on particular beliefs, which are believed to be true.

You cannot accommodate the truth claims of a particular tradition with those of another tradition - what you have are competing truth claims.





THE THEOLOGY OF RELIGIONS - PARTICULARISM

THE THEOLOGY OF RELIGIONS - PARTICULARISM

Particularism is an odd beast in that it is sometimes presented as within the typology (being a form of exclusivism), as being another form of response which can be added to the typology, and sometimes as a rejection / critique of the entire typology.

Particularism is the general belief that the various religious traditions are *particular*.

In theology talk, this means that they represent **specific, non-comparable, and non-relatable things** e.g. their stories are *particular* to them.



THE THEOLOGY OF RELIGIONS

- PARTICULARISM

For example, a particularist may point out that the differing religious traditions all inhabit differently constructed social realities, which give rise to differentiated meaning, which give rise to fundamentally different accounts of reality.

Religions, because of their roots in historical and cultural backgrounds are VERY particular – think of all the cultural and social assumptions embedded within, and arising from, a Christian doctrine of Creation.

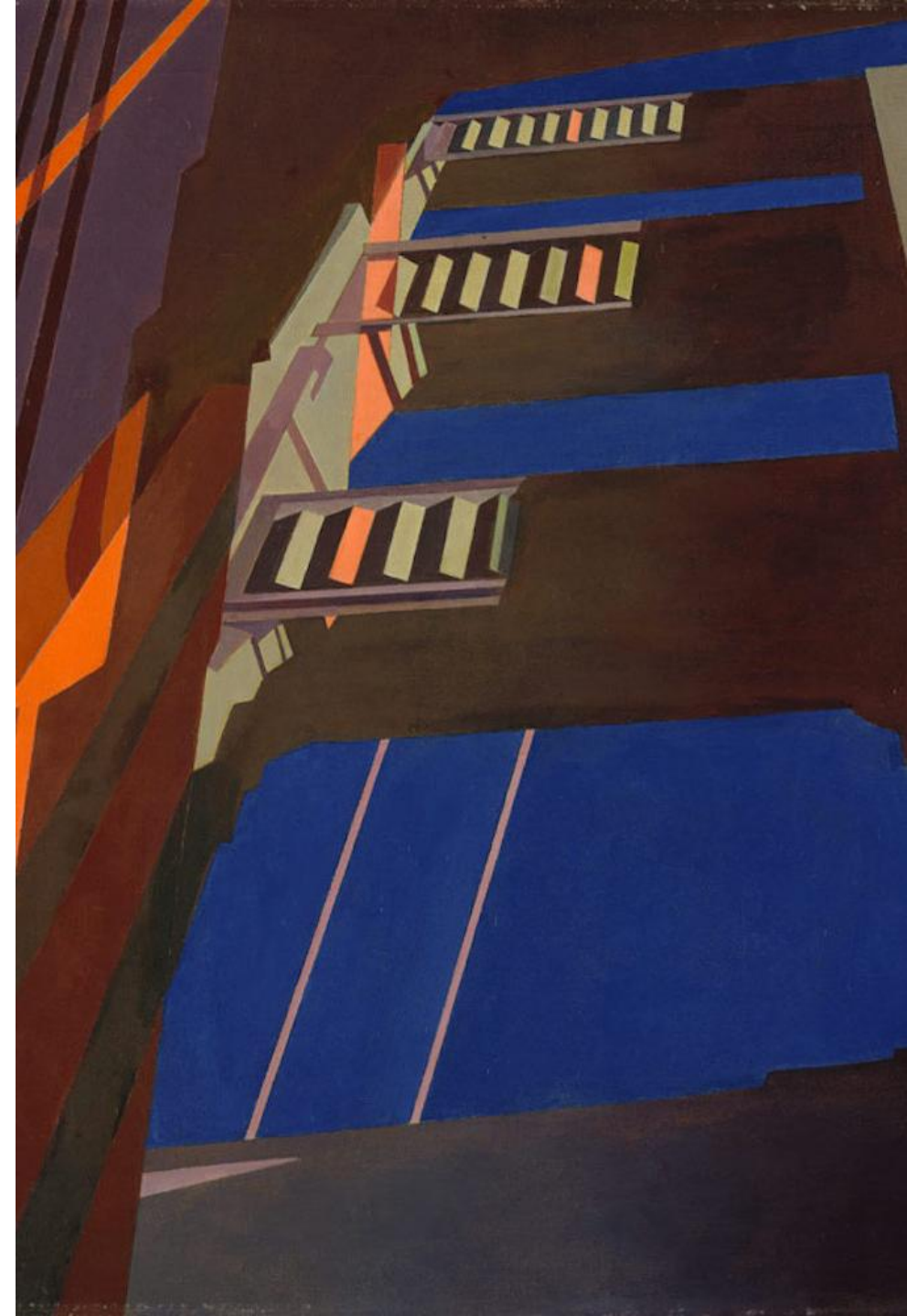


THE THEOLOGY OF RELIGIONS

- PARTICULARISM

Because of this, religions when they talk about aspects of their faith are talking about different things. We have to respect that difference – hence why particularism is sometimes seen as a critique of pluralism – and believe religions when they say different things.

If religions are all talking about different things, then the only way to engage with other religions is from an internal perspective.



THE THEOLOGY OF RELIGIONS - PARTICULARISM

A similar thing occurs when religions talk about the same thing – for example, about love.

When we use the term ‘love’ it comes with a great deal of social, cultural, ethnic, religious, and cultural baggage – we may understand love through understanding Romeo & Juliet, while someone else may understand love through the example of Shiva and Parvati.

While this may seem facile, it points to a dividing line between our language (which may be shared), and the meaning of that language to us (which may be much more difficult, if not impossible, to share fully).



THE THEOLOGY OF RELIGIONS - PARTICULARISM

Particularism highlights the move away from religious truth in pluralism and towards culture – but particularism makes the point that culture is just as difficult as religion.

This is a big debate in the study of religion – can we separate religious things from cultural things, to what extent is one formed by the other, and what exactly do we mean by culture?

Culture is the abstract, learned, shared rules and standards for generating behaviour and understanding experience



THE THEOLOGY OF RELIGIONS - PARTICULARISM

Abstract – culture is ideas in people's heads, that are sometimes expressed through specific objects

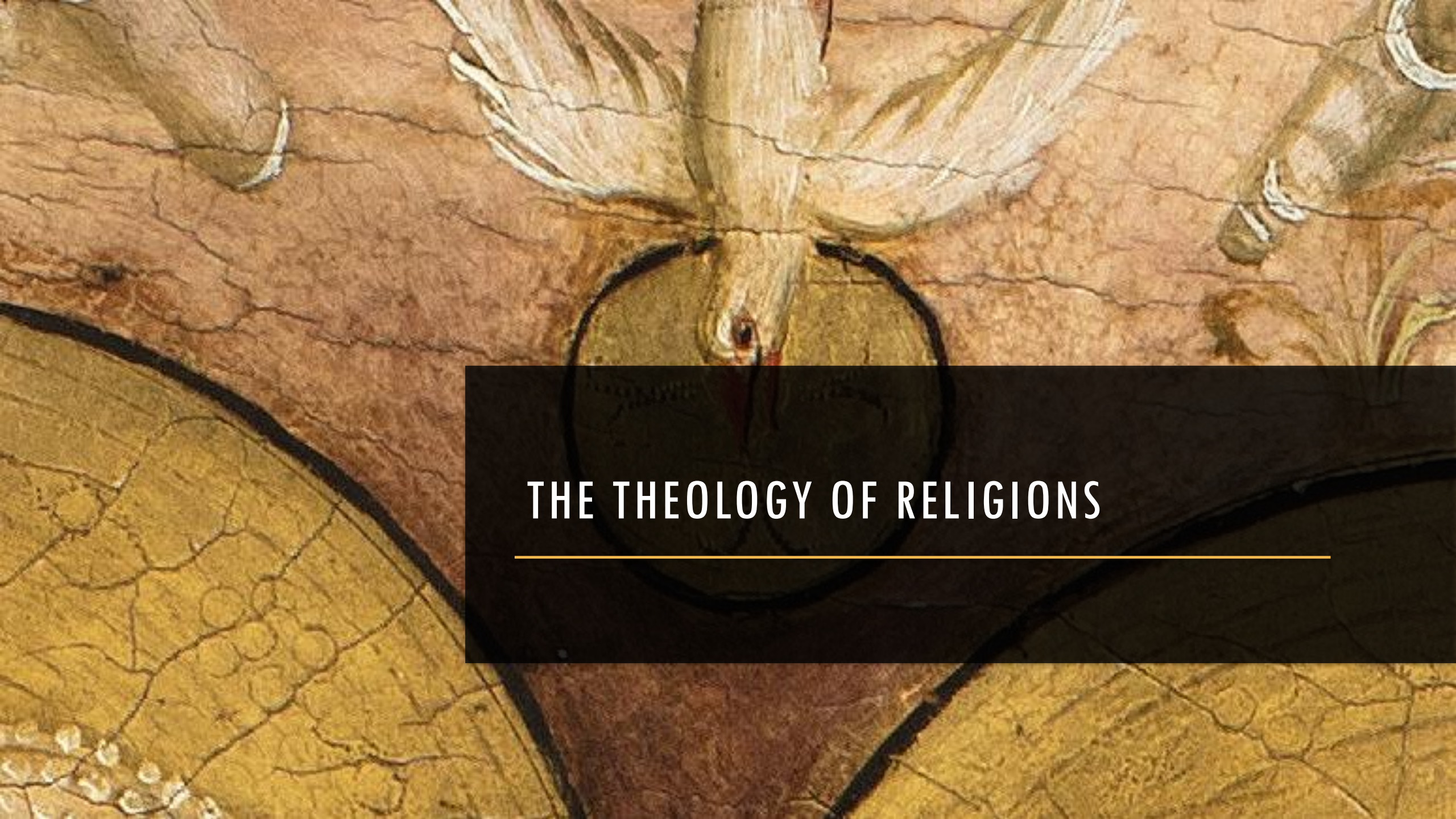
Learned – culture is learned, not genetically programmed

Shared / Social – culture is formed through socialisation and interaction, not personal

Patterned – culture produces patterns we follow, consciously or unconsciously

Culture informs **how we behave** and **how we understand**



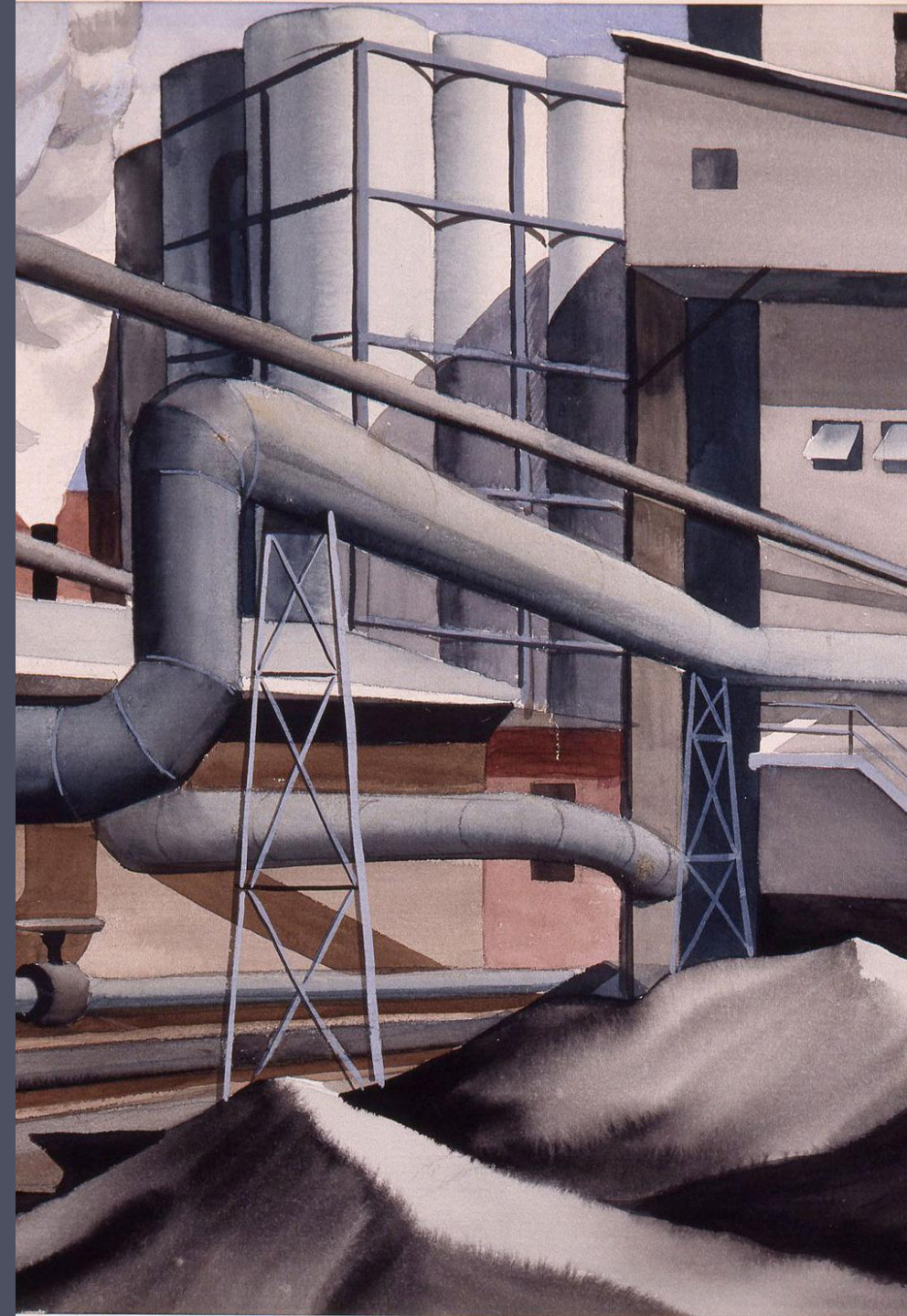


THE THEOLOGY OF RELIGIONS

THE THEOLOGY OF RELIGIONS - TYPOLOGY

So, you have seen the classic typology laid out — exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism — along with some of the critiques seen between the positions and some critiques of the typology as a whole.

The typology has then been applied to other contexts — e.g. social policy, religious reactions to social change, internally in non-Christian faiths — with varying degrees of success and is often used as a shorthand for general social attitudes (e.g. “acting inclusively”) towards social and religious difference.



THE THEOLOGY OF RELIGIONS - TYPOLOGY

These positions do, of course, lead us on to further and deeper considerations of the nature of difference in society. For example:

How do other religions conceive of the plurality of religious belief?

How do secular societies conceive of truth claims by others?

What is the nature of things like “fundamental British values” or “Chinese culture”?

How do our visions of social progress interact with current forms of difference?



THE THEOLOGY OF RELIGIONS - TYPOLOGY

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.

We cannot escape this reaction to difference – and this is where the typology is perhaps STILL useful



THE THEOLOGY OF RELIGIONS - TYPOLOGY

Positives

Clear distinction of differing positions within the typology

Useful categorisation of archetypal responses within Christian theology and within other contexts

Provides historical context and insight into the particularities of Christian responses to religious plurality

Negative

Soterio-centric – concerned only with salvation

Merging of categories – inclusivism into exclusivism, pluralism as inclusivism

Critical theological issues with all responses

Christo- / Euro- centric in application to other contextss

OTHER RELIGIONS AND THE TYPOLOGY

Other religions (not just Christianity) also have to react to the presence of religious plurality, yet differing religions have different concerns and approach the matter in different ways.

However, when it comes to evaluating truth, most religious answers can be seen to fall within one of the answers available to the typology

Of course these answers are specific – the answers given, while generally presented as the “traditional” answer, do not necessarily cover the variety of responses within the tradition.



OTHER RELIGIONS AND THE TYPOLOGY

For example:

Islam is generally seen to be an exclusivist religion, because of its concern with the revelation of the Prophet Muhammad, the uniqueness of the Qur'an, and the centrality of monotheism as correct belief.

Most Islamic thinkers on religious plurality believe that in order to avoid damnation, one must perform the *shahada*, the profession of Muslim faith, which states:

*There is no god
but God.*

*Muhammad is the
messenger of
God*

OTHER RELIGIONS AND THE TYPOLOGY

However, Islam's relationship with other monotheistic faiths is more complicated.

Specifically, Jews, Christians, and Sabian are known as 'Ahl al-Kitāb' which differentiated between those religious groups possessing revelatory scripture and those who do not.

This possession of scripture set those people apart as having access to some form of revelation, but that the truth of this was "completed" by Islam.

Another example of this, is the Islamic response to questions about those never reached by the preaching of Islam, the *ahl al-fatrah*.



OTHER RELIGIONS AND THE TYPOLOGY

Some Muslim scholars maintain that this group of people should have pondered over God's Creation till they perceive the truth. If they managed to reach the truth by their deep thinking, then they will be spared God's Punishment, but not otherwise

Other Muslim scholars state that people are to adhere to religious ordinances and to proclaim faith only if God sends them a divine legislation through a prophet. This group backs their view by citing the following verse:

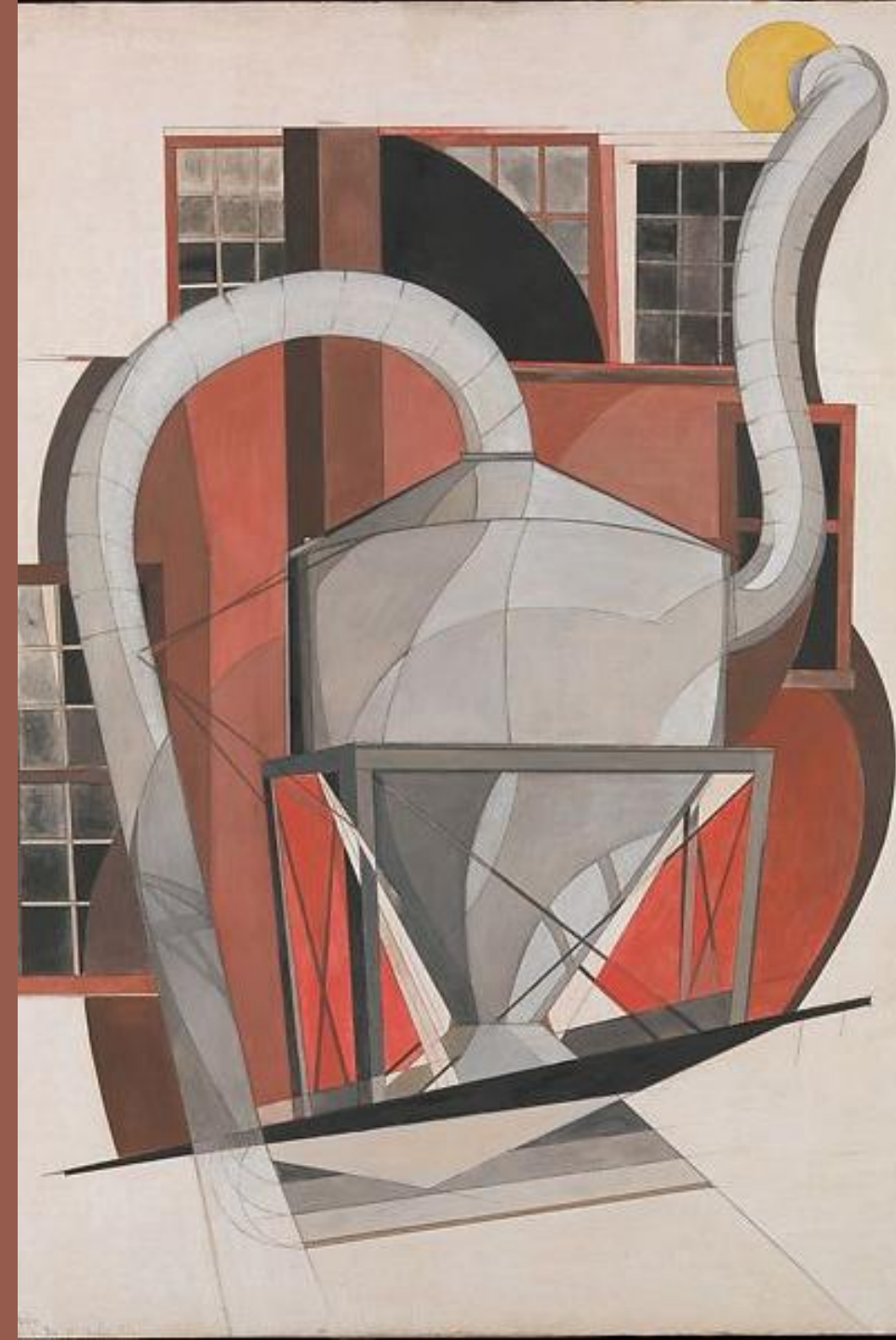
Whoever is guided is only guided for [the benefit of] his soul. And whoever errs only errs against it. And no bearer of burdens will bear the burden of another. And never would We punish until We sent a messenger.

(Al-Isra 15)

OTHER RELIGIONS AND THE TYPOLOGY

What we can see is that there are facets of the typological responses in all religious traditions.

There are exclusivist, inclusivist, and pluralist believers in different faiths – though what each individual is being pluralist / inclusivist / exclusivist about will change, as will their understanding of how these terms work within their religious traditions

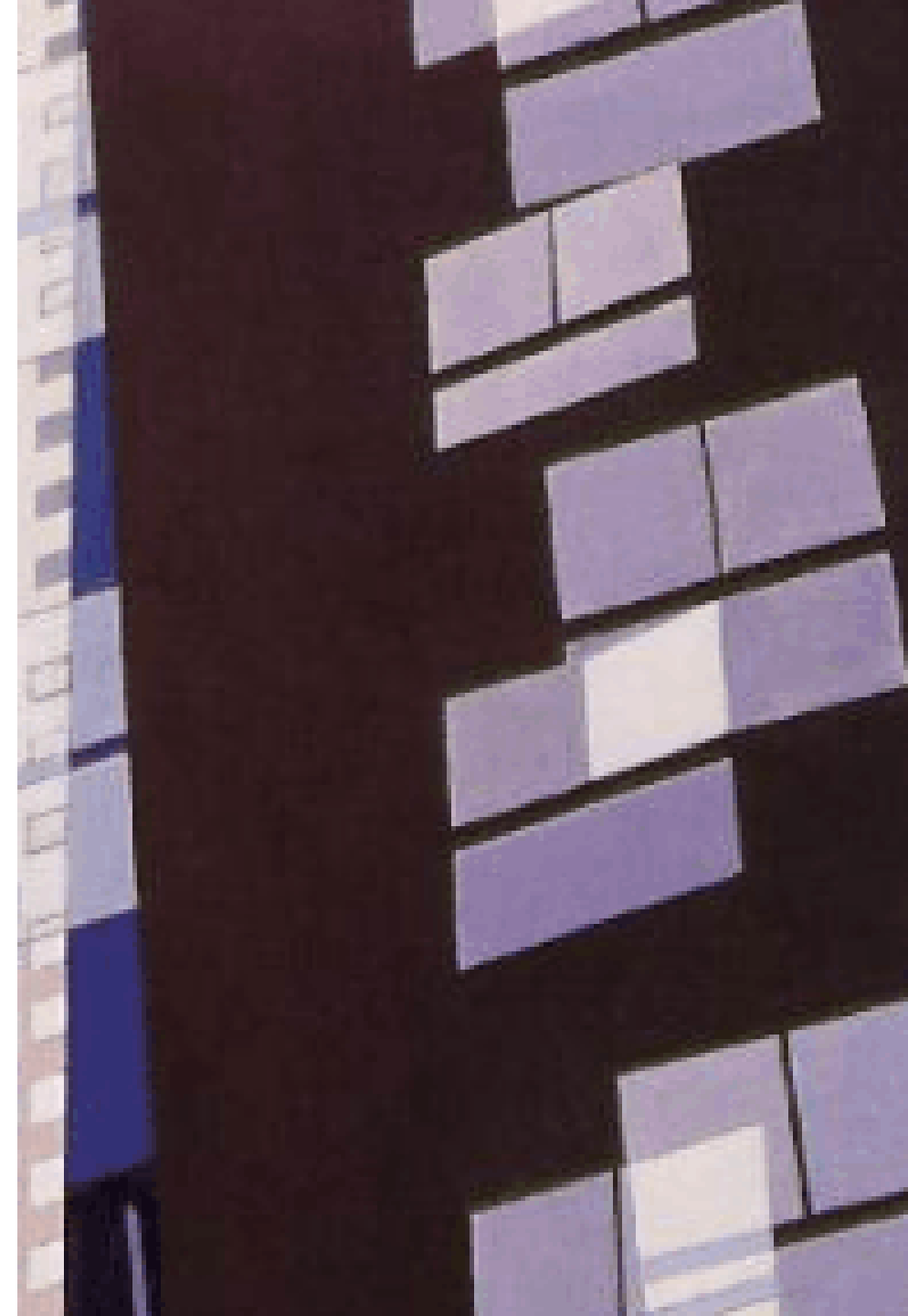


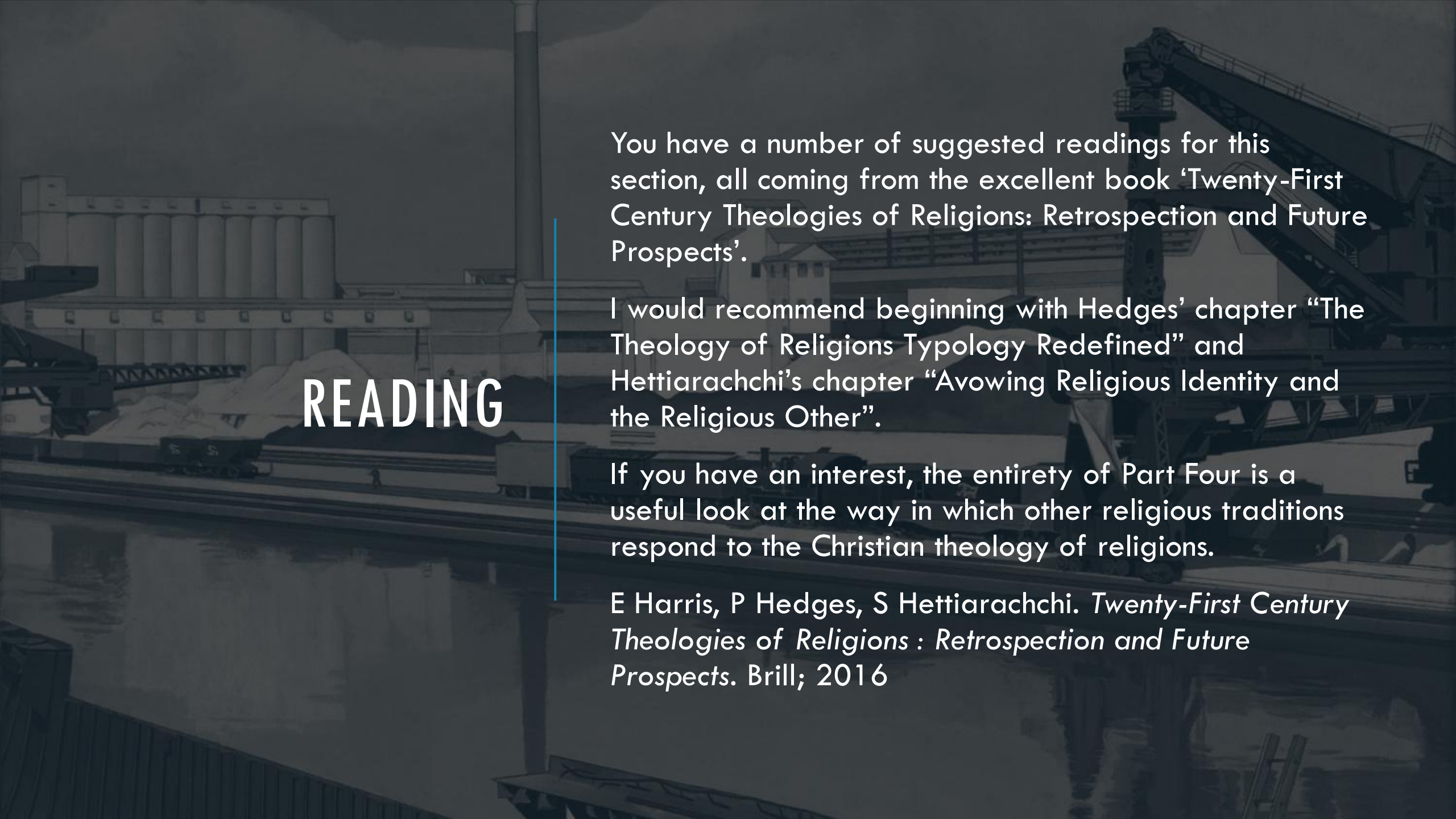
OTHER RELIGIONS AND THE TYPOLOGY

Islam – generally exclusivist re: truth and monotheism, also aspects of inclusivism re: monotheism, less representation of pluralism

Buddhism – generally pluralist re: truth and social harmony, but also aspects of exclusivism re: escaping samsara and Nichiren Buddhism

Hinduism – generally pluralist re: polytheism, but aspects of inclusivism re: avatarism, and some exclusivism re: hindu caste and identity



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READING

You have a number of suggested readings for this section, all coming from the excellent book ‘Twenty-First Century Theologies of Religions: Retrospection and Future Prospects’.

I would recommend beginning with Hedges’ chapter “The Theology of Religions Typology Redefined” and Hettiarachchi’s chapter “Avowing Religious Identity and the Religious Other”.

If you have an interest, the entirety of Part Four is a useful look at the way in which other religious traditions respond to the Christian theology of religions.

E Harris, P Hedges, S Hettiarachchi. *Twenty-First Century Theologies of Religions : Retrospection and Future Prospects*. Brill; 2016