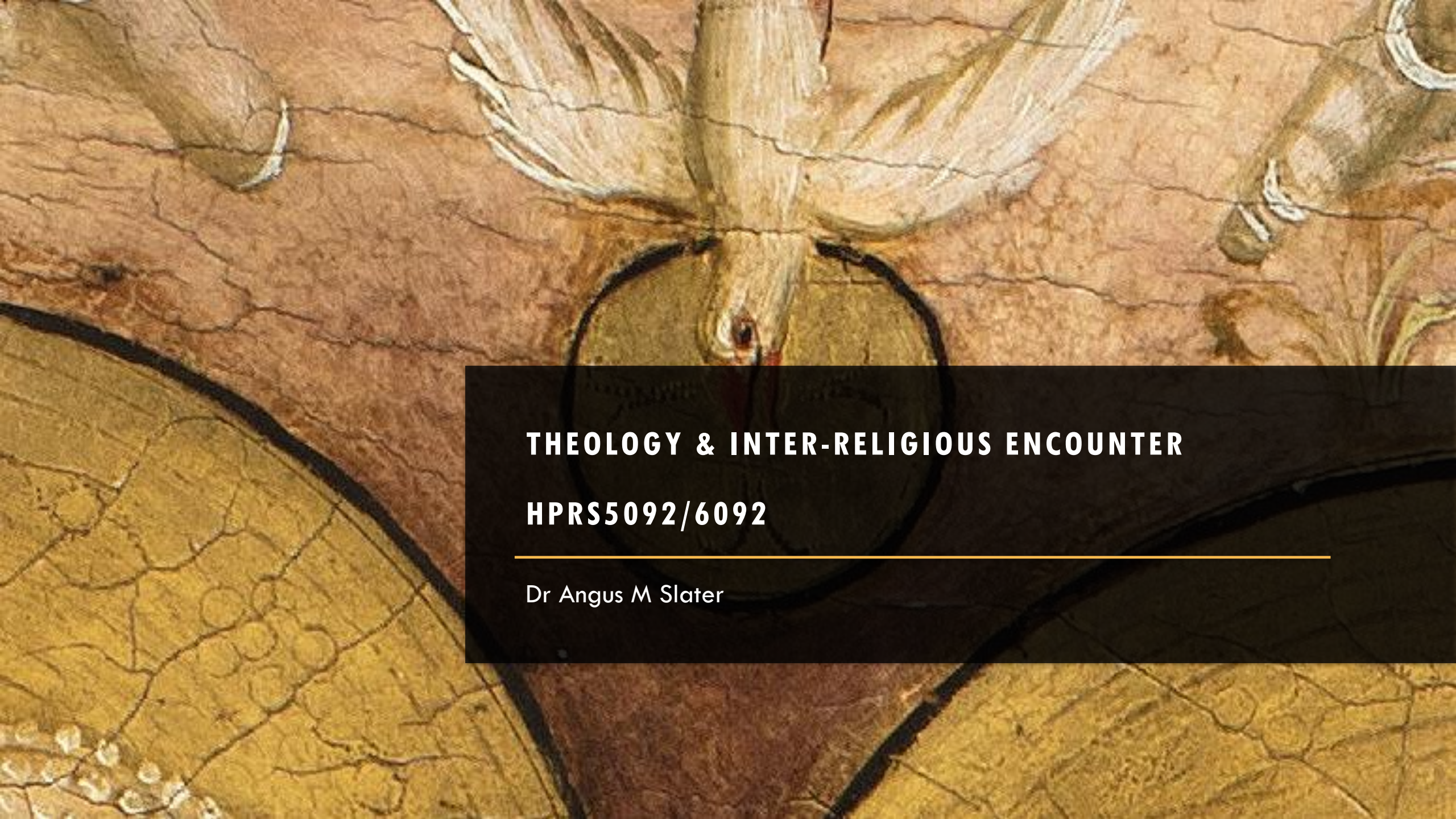




THEOLOGY & INTER-RELIGIOUS ENCOUNTER

HPRS5092/6092

Dr Angus M Slater

REVISION

In the previous section, we examined the way in which the shift towards 'modernity' had an impact on the presumptions and obsessions of the Christian religion, with the increased visibility and importance of other religious traditions requiring some form of explanation on behalf of the Christian tradition.

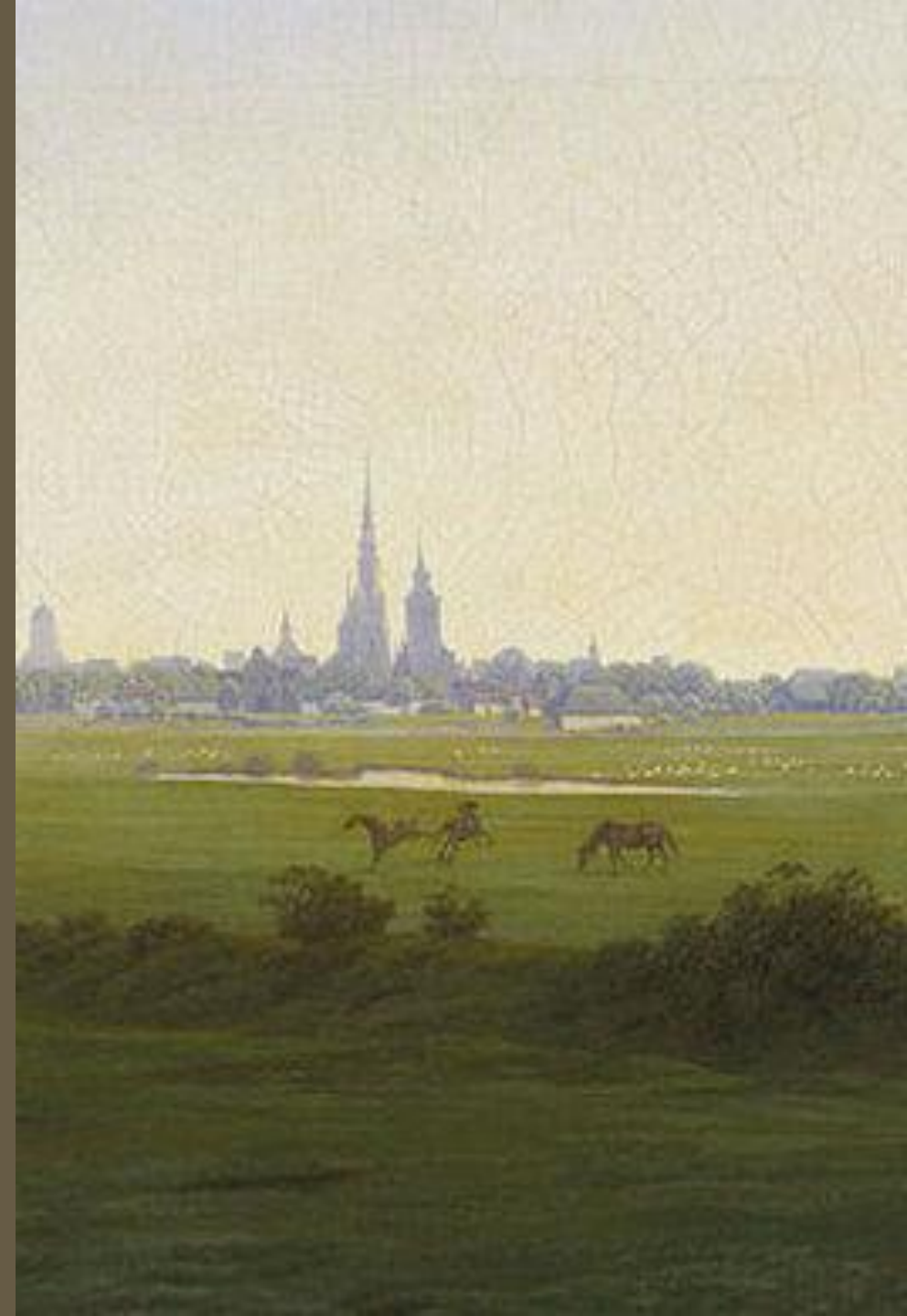
We also examined the various characteristic changes that define the shift to modernity, some of which have continued to have a vast impact on the nature of our contemporary society. Ranging from urbanisation to individualisation, each emerges and changes the nature of our world.



REVISION

In doing so, these changes also have a profound impact on theology as a whole, but specifically with the emergence of a 'theology of religions' within the Christian tradition.

You also had two readings to complete – one by one of the fathers of the theology of religions, Wilfred Cantwell Smith, and the other, by one of the fathers of the contemporary typology of positions within the theology of religions, Alan Race.



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.

RACE A, 'INTERFAITH ENCOUNTER'

RACE A, 'INTERFAITH ENCOUNTER'

Before we dive into the specifics of different positions within the typology of the theology of religions, I want to examine the reading you were set written by Alan Race in a little more detail.

In doing so, I hope you are able to tease out more precisely some of the operative assumptions and arguments utilised within it – 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.



The Indian Christian theologian, Stanley Samartha, once asked the question: 'Can it be that it is the will of God that many religions should continue in the world?'¹ The question is rhetorical because it seems to expect the answer 'yes', with an implicit hint that such an answer might free the Christian community from its obsession with categorizing other religions as a problem. Most Christian answers to the challenges of religious diversity have explained this diversity as a function of either error or moral failure. But Samartha has opened the door to the scandalous possibility that other religions are the products of divine intention rather than human accident – with the consequence that they have a theological right to exist and be heard!

In asking his question, Samartha inevitably betrays his own Indian religious ethos, which classically celebrates diversity as the norm. But he is also responding to the full accumulative weight of the new global context. It is not only the *matter of fact existence* of many religions but also their *persistence* as vibrant contexts for 'transcendent vision and human transformation' that requires explanation. Can there be more than one revelation of Ultimate Reality, on the same human level, as it were, as Christianity?

RACE A, 'INTERFAITH ENCOUNTER'

Does the idea that other religions are the product of moral failure make sense within the Christian tradition given their continuance?

What might be the arguments on either side?

Does the fact of continuing religious diversity make the question of salvation more pressing?

Why might this be the case?

of Christ. For example, Christoph Schwöbel has written: 'From the perspective of Christian faith there is no escape from the universality of God's presence in the particularity of religions. The particular constitution of this conviction, however, excludes the theological possibility of talking about a plurality of revelations in the religions.'¹⁹ Schwöbel insists that we only know about the universal presence of Ultimate Reality by virtue of Christ. Of course, if revelation is defined as a Christian term then there will obviously be no revelation outside the Christian appreciation of it! But it is exactly this confinement of terms which the experience of plurality calls into question. Christian revelation speaks of the revelation of the love of God in Christ. Are we to think that nothing of love could be discovered outside the Christian revealing of it? Schwöbel would not wish to confine the reality of love to Christian practice only; far from it. But the belief that it is permissible for a Christian to recognize the love that is bound to exist elsewhere only in terms of its Christian definition seems to me to be frankly odd. The scriptures, theologies and practices of other religious-traditions are full of references to love.²⁰

RACE A, 'INTERFAITH ENCOUNTER'

Can Christian revelation be totally reduced solely to “Love”, or does it require specificity?

What is specific, if anything, about “Christian love”?

Does the recognition of aspects of “love” in other traditions necessarily mean that we have to say they are the same?

What is operating to cause the similarity in this case?

Charlesworth's objection can be met by invoking the notion of ineffability, which all traditions acknowledge in their varying respects. Christian theology has always accepted that any image of God does not exhaust the reality of God and to that extent images of God are pointers to, or culturally conditioned interpretations of the ineffable character of God's ultimacy. Similarly, the Buddhist notion of 'emptiness' is best interpreted as the radical negation of all forms of religious apprehension which seek to offer a definitive characterization of Ultimate Reality that is uncharacterizable because it is ineffable. Edward Conze, the celebrated authority on Buddhism, has written about the analogous relationship between different views of Ultimate Reality: 'The Buddhist idea of ultimate reality is very much akin to the philosophical notion of the 'Absolute', and not easily distinguished from the notion of God among the more mystical theologians, like Dionysius Areopagita and Eckhart.'²⁸ And one merit of Hick's well-known distinction between 'the Real *an sich*' (ultimate transcategorical reality) and the 'personae' (the 'Gods' of theistic traditions) together with the 'impersonae' (the 'non-personal absolutes' of non-theistic traditions) – with the latter acting as manifestations of the former to human consciousness in different religious faith-traditions – is that it was developed in order to encompass both theistic and non-theistic religious experiences within an overarching hypothesis.²⁹ It does not equate the theistic images of God with Buddhist notions of Emptiness (or with advaita Hindu notions of Ultimate Reality as Brahman), and so on, but accepts their analogous comparability.

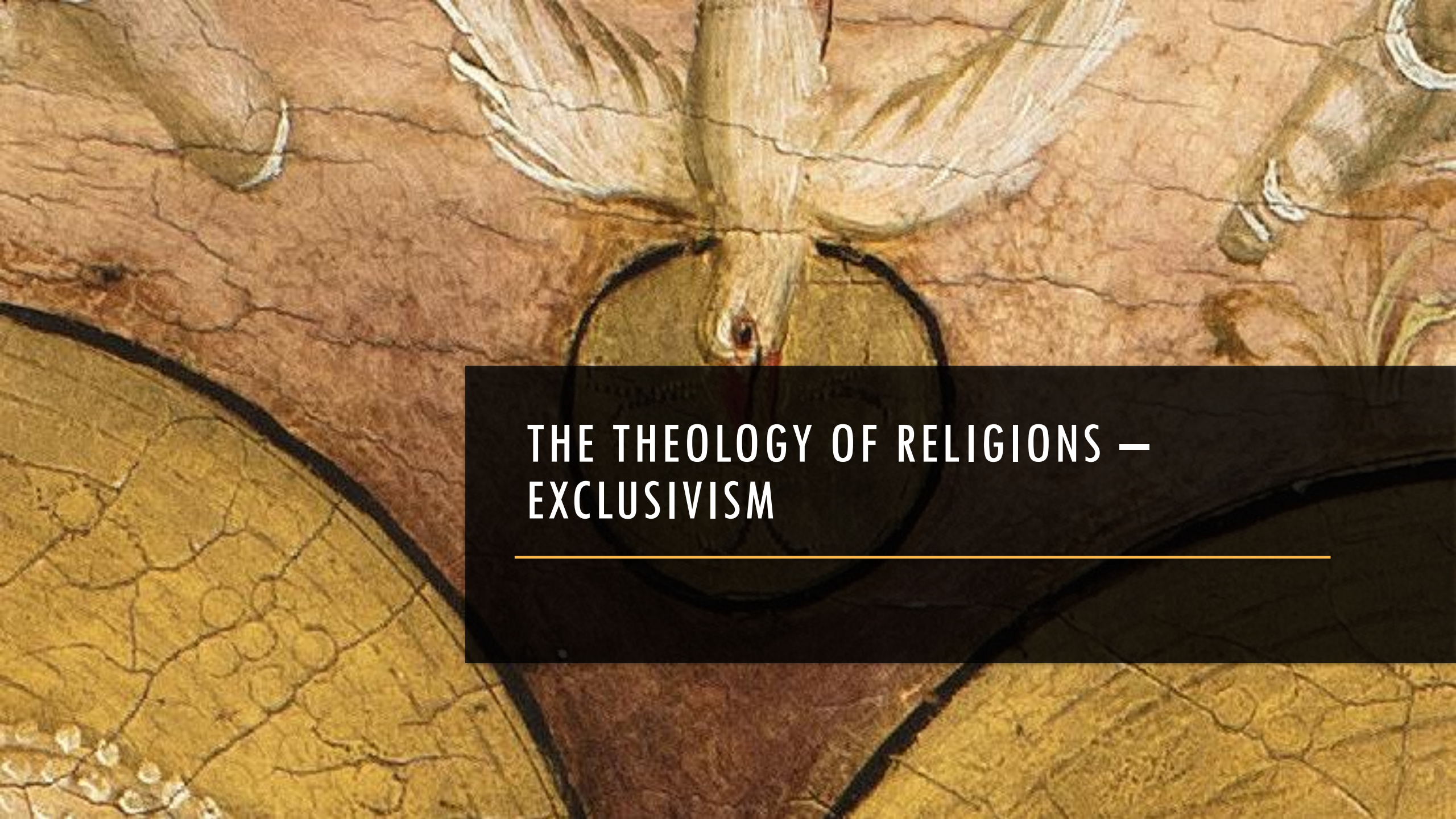
RACE A, 'INTERFAITH ENCOUNTER'

Is 'ineffability' a feature of all religions?

Why does it matter if it is?

Is Christian 'ineffability' the same as Buddhist 'ineffability'?

Is ineffability sufficient to promulgate similarity at a theological level?



THE THEOLOGY OF RELIGIONS — EXCLUSIVISM

THE THEOLOGY OF RELIGIONS — EXCLUSIVISM

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

Generally, proponents of exclusivism would answer negatively to the question posed in the previous lecture - can non-Christians be saved?

Exclusivists (meaning those who hold the position of exclusivism) would generally argue that only one tradition can lead to salvation and that one must adhere to, and practice, this one tradition in order to attain salvation.



THE THEOLOGY OF RELIGIONS — EXCLUSIVISM

Within the Christian tradition, the exclusivist position would state that only those who have heard Christ's teaching and who have received Christ's grace will be eligible for salvation.

Exponents of the exclusivist position might quote the words of Acts 4:12:

“Salvation is to be found through Jesus alone.”

Or they might quote the words of Jesus in John 14:6:

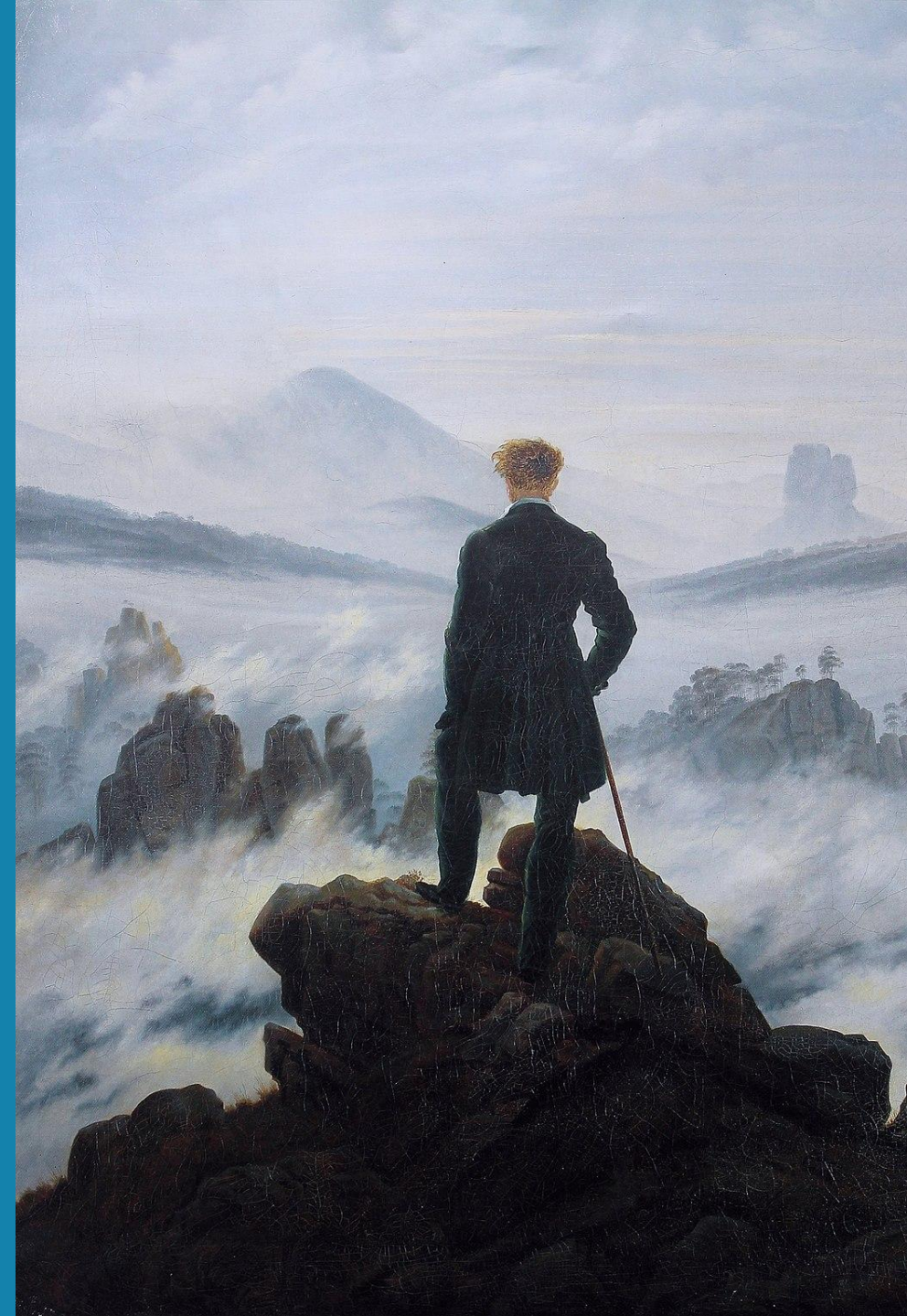
“I am the way, the truth and the life; No one comes to the Father but through me.”



THE THEOLOGY OF RELIGIONS — EXCLUSIVISM

Generally (and do note, I am speaking in generalities here), the exclusivist position would suggest that the traditions of other religions are so different from the correct one that it is inconceivable that salvation can be mediated through these traditions.

Salvation is purely available to those within a single tradition, which based on arguments from scripture and from within the tradition, is identified as the Christian tradition.



THE THEOLOGY OF RELIGIONS — EXCLUSIVISM

Exclusivism generally critiques both inclusivism and pluralism (two positions we have yet to address) for misrepresentation, both of Christianity and of other religions.

Exclusivism, as a theological position is often conflated with being exclusionary to those of other faiths, and gets a bad rap as being unwelcoming or dismissive of religious others.

It is important to realise however, that the position has nothing to do with how people of other faiths are treated or whether their beliefs are and should be valuable to them.

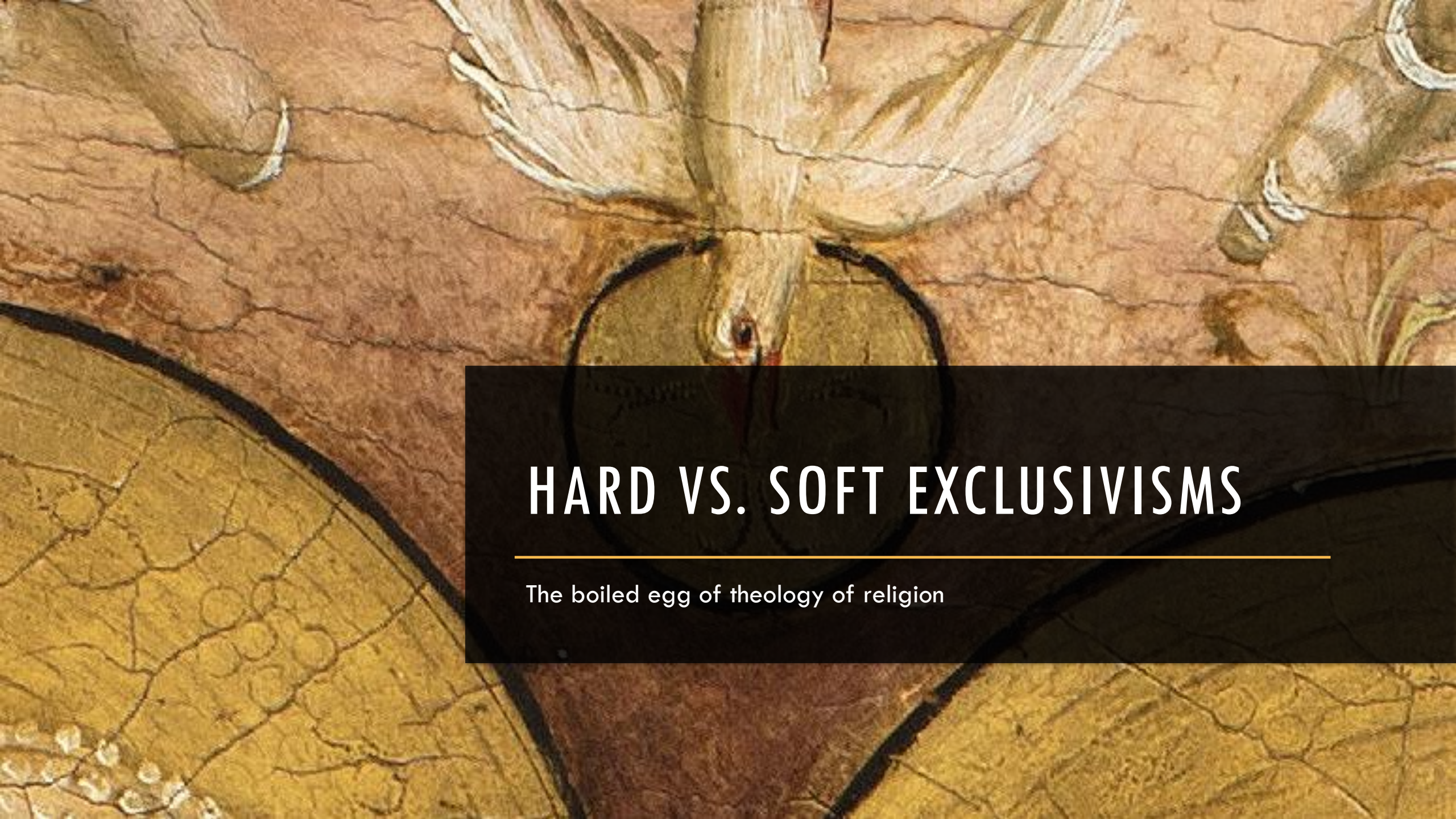
Exclusivism is a position that deals with truth, from within a Christian perspective.

For example:

Inclusivism is the position that those of other faiths can receive salvation through Jesus.

An exclusivist critique would focus on the way in which the inclusivist position compromises on the imperative for preaching and for good living – why bother to be a Christian at all, if you can still be saved by Jesus?

If believers believe that salvation is accessible to them outside of a particular religious tradition then they might be less inclined to preach that tradition to the non-believer.

The background of the slide is a detailed painting of a cracked eggshell. The egg is light brown with a network of fine cracks. A white dove with its wings spread is emerging from a circular opening in the egg. The dove's head is visible, and its wings are a mix of white and light brown. The overall scene is set against a dark, shadowed background, emphasizing the light and life emerging from the cracked shell.

HARD VS. SOFT EXCLUSIVISMS

The boiled egg of theology of religion

HARD VS. SOFT EXCLUSIVISMS

You may have noticed I was careful to speak only in generalities about exclusivism in the previous section. This is because within the typological position of exclusivism there are many different shades of opinion and thought.

Within this variety, sometimes a distinction is made between “hard” exclusivism and “soft” exclusivism:

“Hard” exclusivism has the following elements: to be saved you have to have heard and responded with faith and repentance to Christ's teaching.

“Soft” exclusivism contains the following features: to be saved you either have to have heard and responded with faith and repentance to Christ's teaching in this life or you must do so in some way in the next life.



HARD VS. SOFT EXCLUSIVISMS

Softer forms of exclusivism can drift quite close to a harder form of inclusivism, which we will be looking at more closely in the next section.

These positions, as we will come to see, are not quite as neatly categorisable as the typology of exclusivism / inclusivism / pluralism seems to suggest, and it is sometimes helpful to perceive them rather as three points along a varying spectrum of opinion.

One helpful way of parsing out the difference between a soft form of exclusivism and hard form of inclusivism is the question of whether alternative religions contain some revelatory truth or whether they do not.



HARD VS. SOFT EXCLUSIVISMS

Soft Exclusivists would tend to say that alternative religions do NOT contain revelatory truth, and that the only point of possible salvation for non-Christians is through hearing and responding with faith and repentance to Christ's teaching in or after this life.

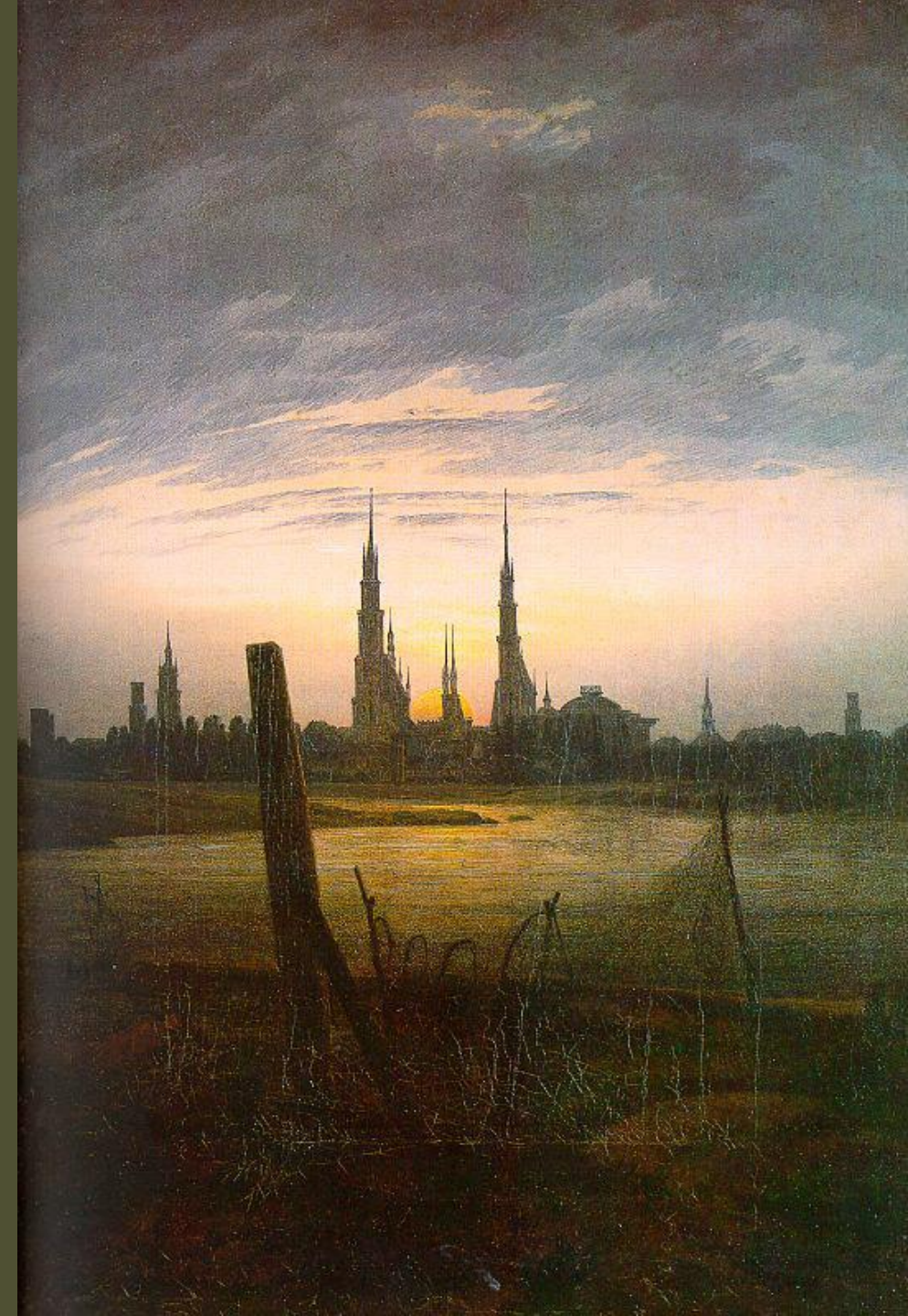
Hard Inclusivists would tend to say that alternative religions DO contain revelatory truth, but that this has to be completed through hearing and responding with faith and repentance to Christ's teaching after this life.

HARD VS. SOFT EXCLUSIVISMS

The reason I bring this up is to highlight the many different shades of opinion and argument which populate each of these typological positions, with a variety of different emphases and particular distinctions.

We must be wary of talking too often of these positions in a too general way – summarising and assuming similarities across different positions within these categories in a way that might not exist.

In the next section, I want to highlight just a few thinkers of exclusivism which differ from each other in their approaches all from similar traditions and in a similar time period.



EXCLUSIVISTS — BARTH, BRUNNER,
KRAEMER, & ALTHAUS

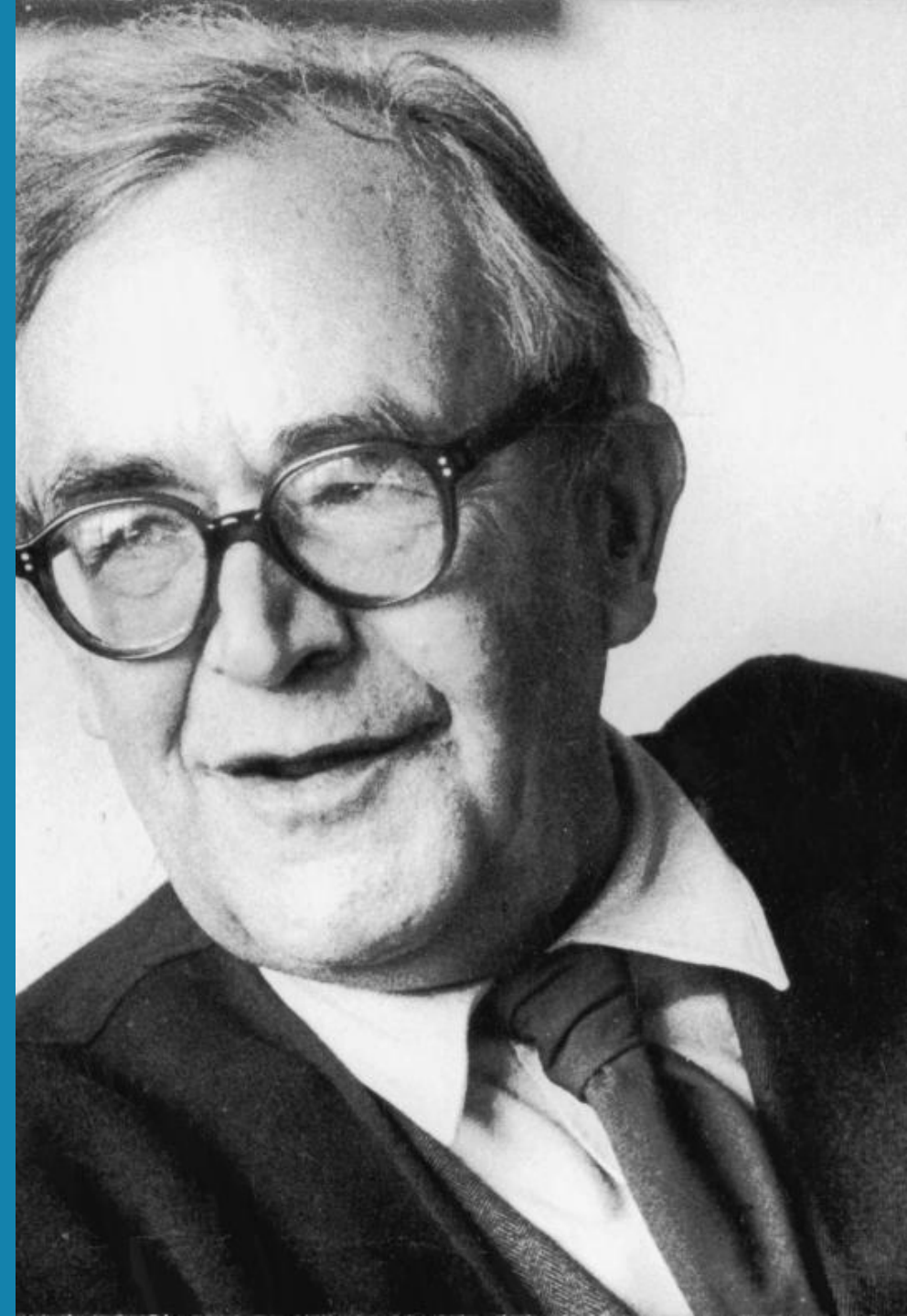
KARL BARTH — 1886-1968

An example of a theologian holding to an exclusivist account of other religions is Karl Barth, arguably the most important Protestant theologian of the twentieth century.

Barth is not very concerned with the theology of religions or with other faiths within his work, however Barth's theology has generally been regarded as exclusivist because of its other systematic commitment.

For Barth, Jesus is the self-revelation of God, and it is through Jesus, scripture, and the message of the church that God is known. Jesus alone has overcome the condition of bifurcation between God and humanity.

The very specificity of Jesus means that seeing similarities or salvation within other religious traditions is utterly impossible.

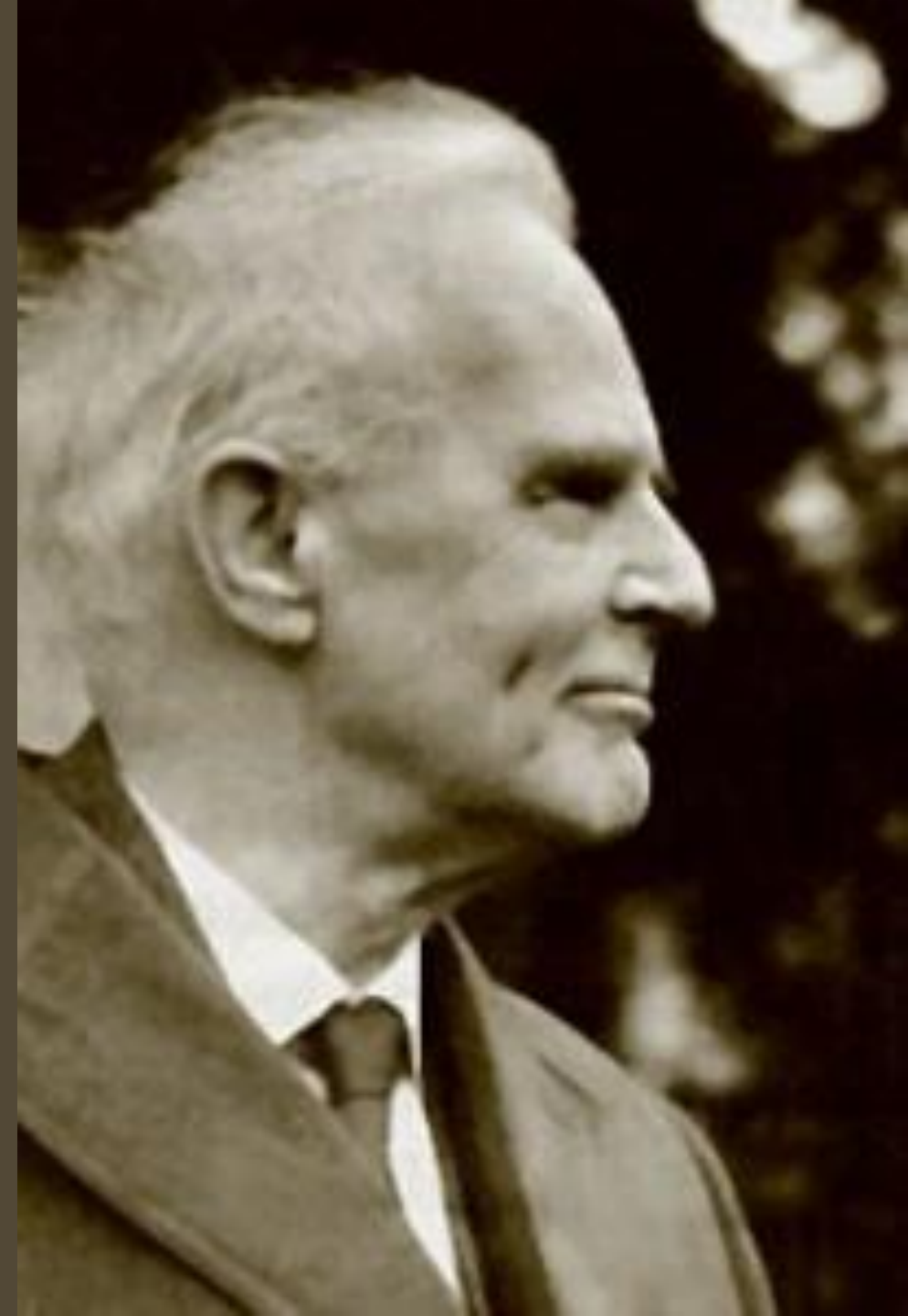


EMIL BRUNNER — 1889-1966

Emil Brunner shared Barth's outlook on this matter, though not on very much else, with them being most famous for fundamentally disagreeing over the importance of natural law to Christian theology (a discussion for another module!).

For Brunner, while elements of nature might suggest some ability to perceive and understand aspects of correct belief without the examples of Jesus and scripture, he regarded other religions as failing to provide any substantial source of moral reasoning.

As he put it, other religions may contain elements of the holy, but as mere stammering words compared to the truths of Christianity.

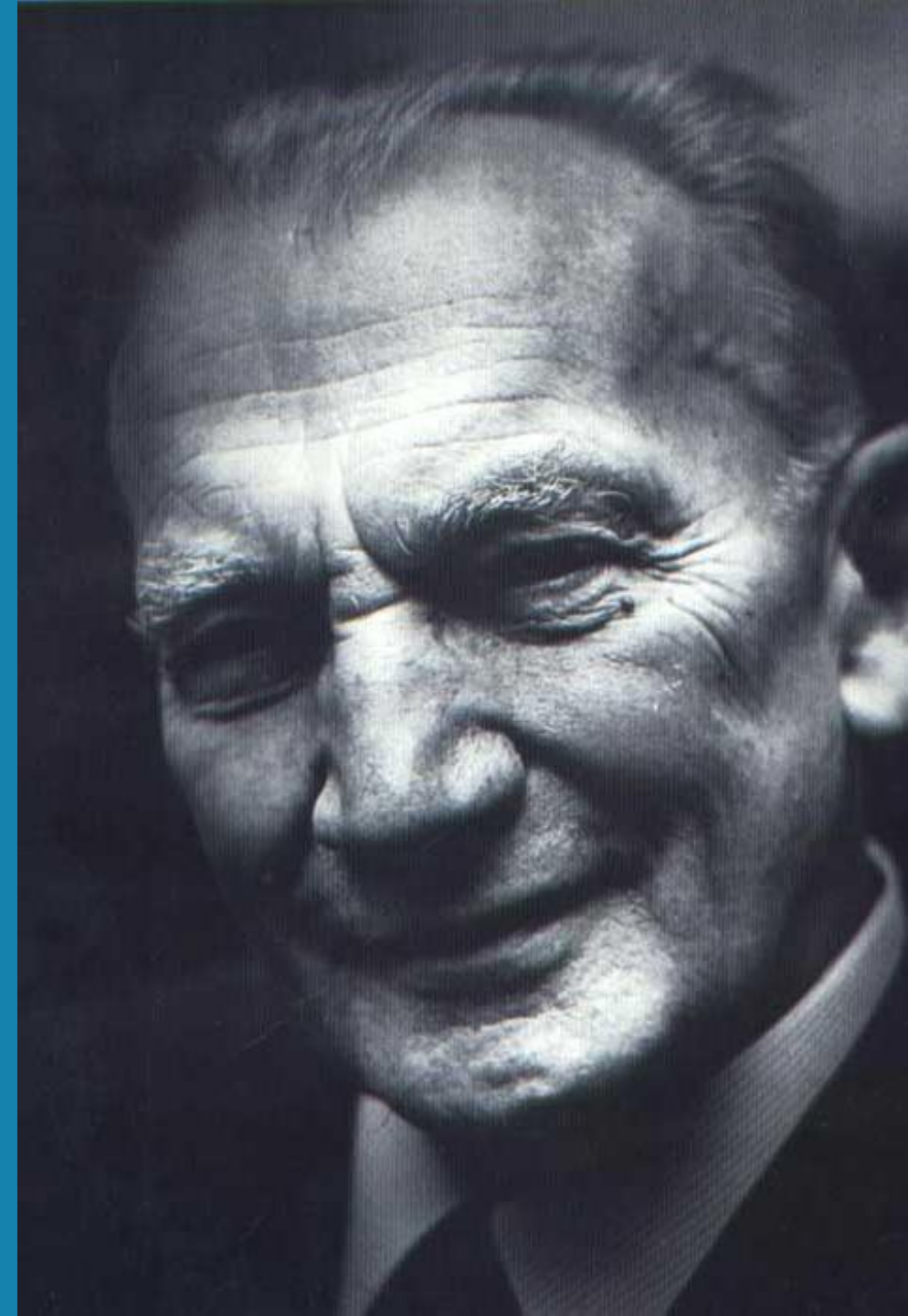


HENDRIK KRAEMER — 1888-1965

The theology of Barth and Emil Brunner had a major influence on the Dutch theologian, Hendrik Kraemer (1888-1965) and were presented most fully in his book *The Christian Message in a Non-Christian World*.

As part of this work, Kraemer outlined his belief that there was a complete discontinuity between God's revelation in Christ and non-Christian religious traditions.

The incarnation, the death, and resurrection of Jesus were unique events and nothing in any other religious traditions could be compared to these. Given this lack of comparability, he concluded that there is no salvation available to those outside the Christian church.



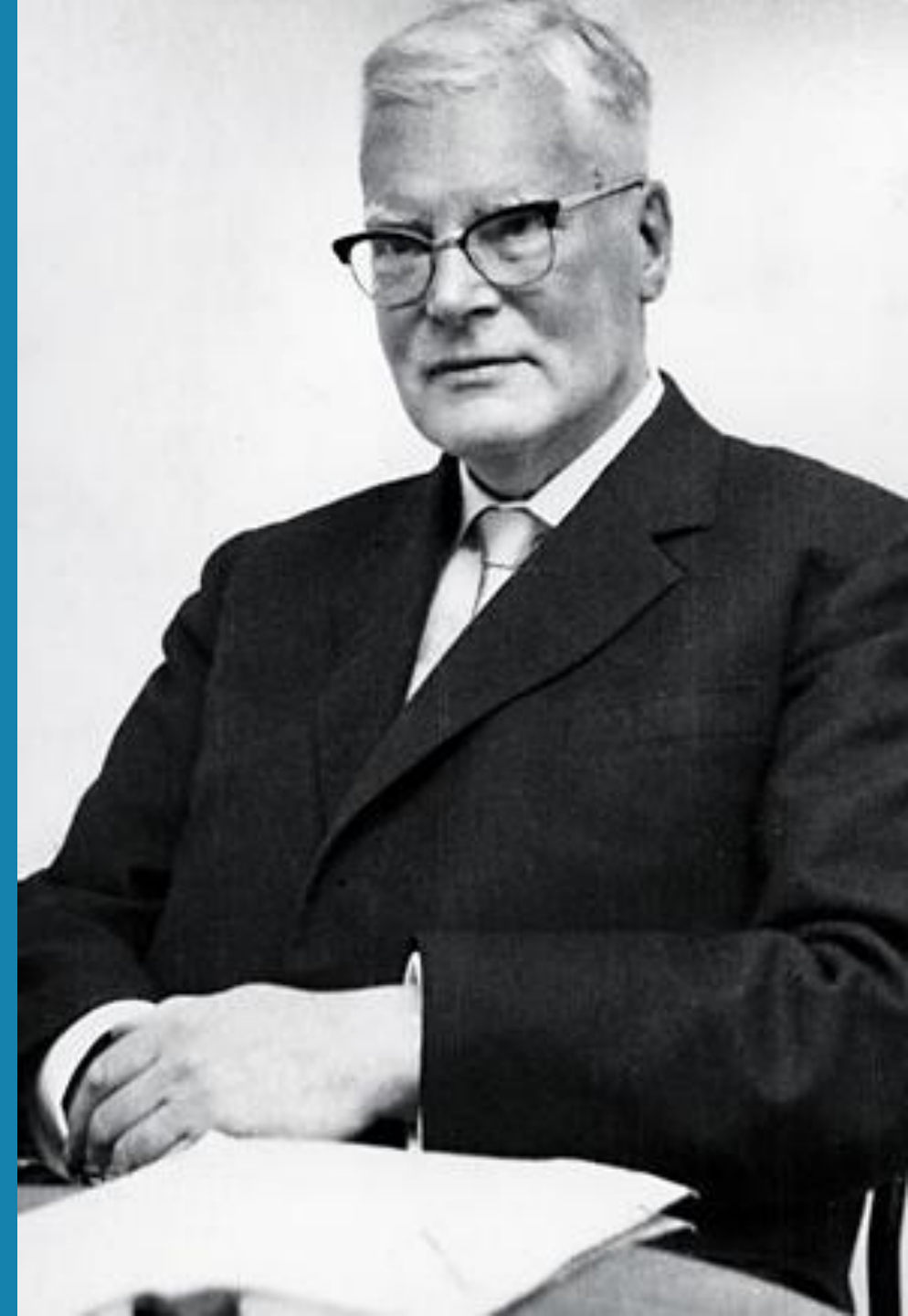
PAUL ALTHAUS — 1888-1966

The German Lutheran theologian, Paul Althaus (1888-1966) developed a slightly more moderate type of exclusivism in his work.

Althaus was prepared to accept that God could be revealed in or through non-Christian religious traditions. In other words, it is possible to have knowledge of God through other traditions and, therefore, a general knowledge of God without having to be a Christian.

For Althaus, a little like Brunner, this came about through an original revelation (that is, a general knowledge of God); and that the various religions were manifestations of that original revelation.

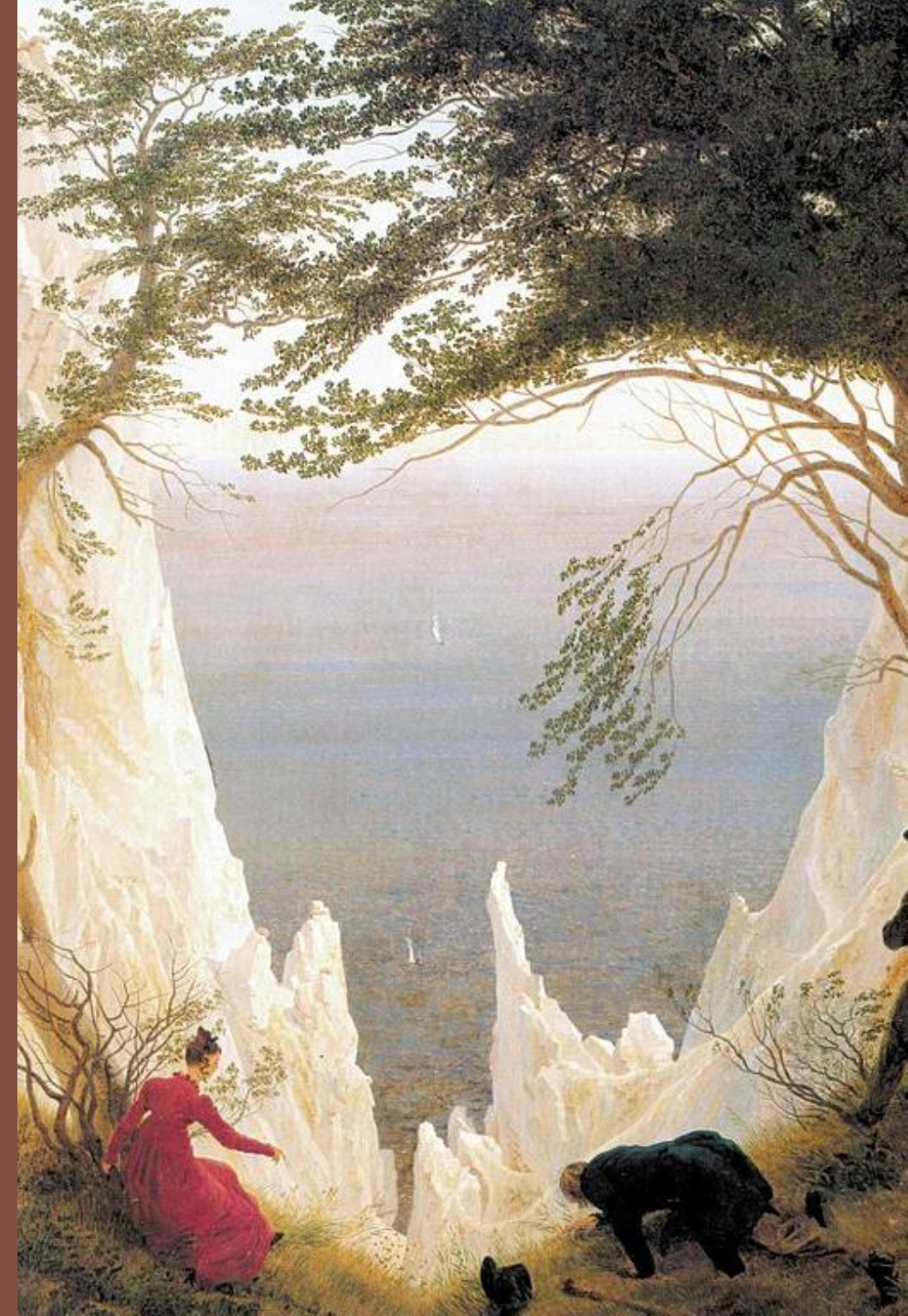
However, salvation is ultimately based on the transmission of the grace of Christ — in this sense, he is a softer exclusivist than his contemporaries.



EXCLUSIVISTS — BARTH, BRUNNER, KRAEMER, & ALTHAUS

These four figures — all from roughly the same time period, all from roughly the same geographic area, all working within broadly similar reformed traditions — are a great example of the diversity of thinking that occurs within individual positions within the typology of the theology of religions.

Often their theology of religions emerges from other commitments within their systematic Christian theologies, as with Barth and Kraemer and their attachment to the particularity of Jesus, or with Brunner and Althaus, and their attachment to elements of natural revelation.

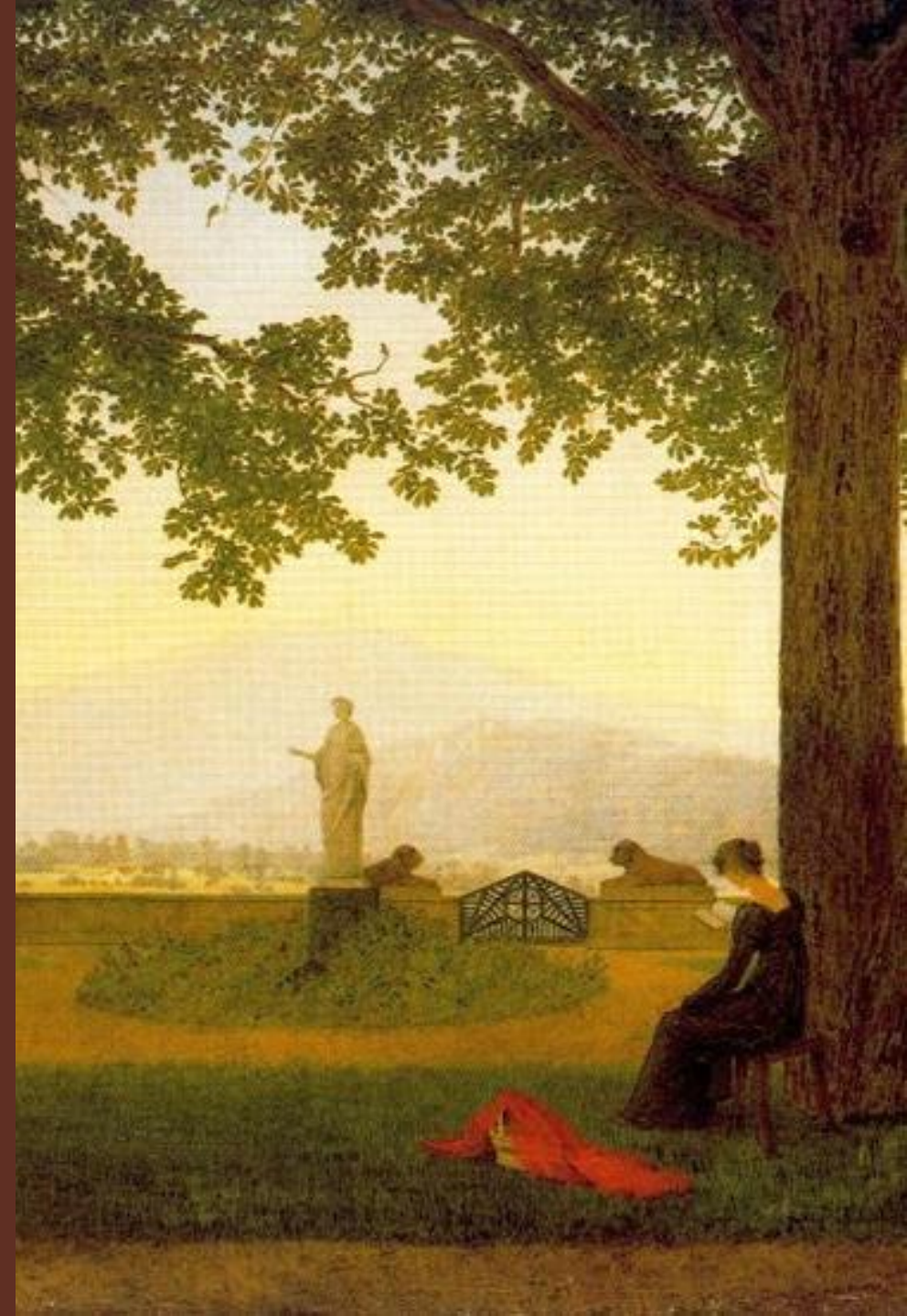


THE THEOLOGY OF RELIGIONS — EXCLUSIVISM

Fundamentally, exclusivism is an answer to a question about how Christianity can understand itself in the light of the existence of other religious traditions.

It is highly focused on the uniqueness and particularity of the Christian tradition, and takes seriously claims to exclusivity found within the scripture and teachings of the faith.

This is not to say that it is against other religious traditions, or their followers, in any way.



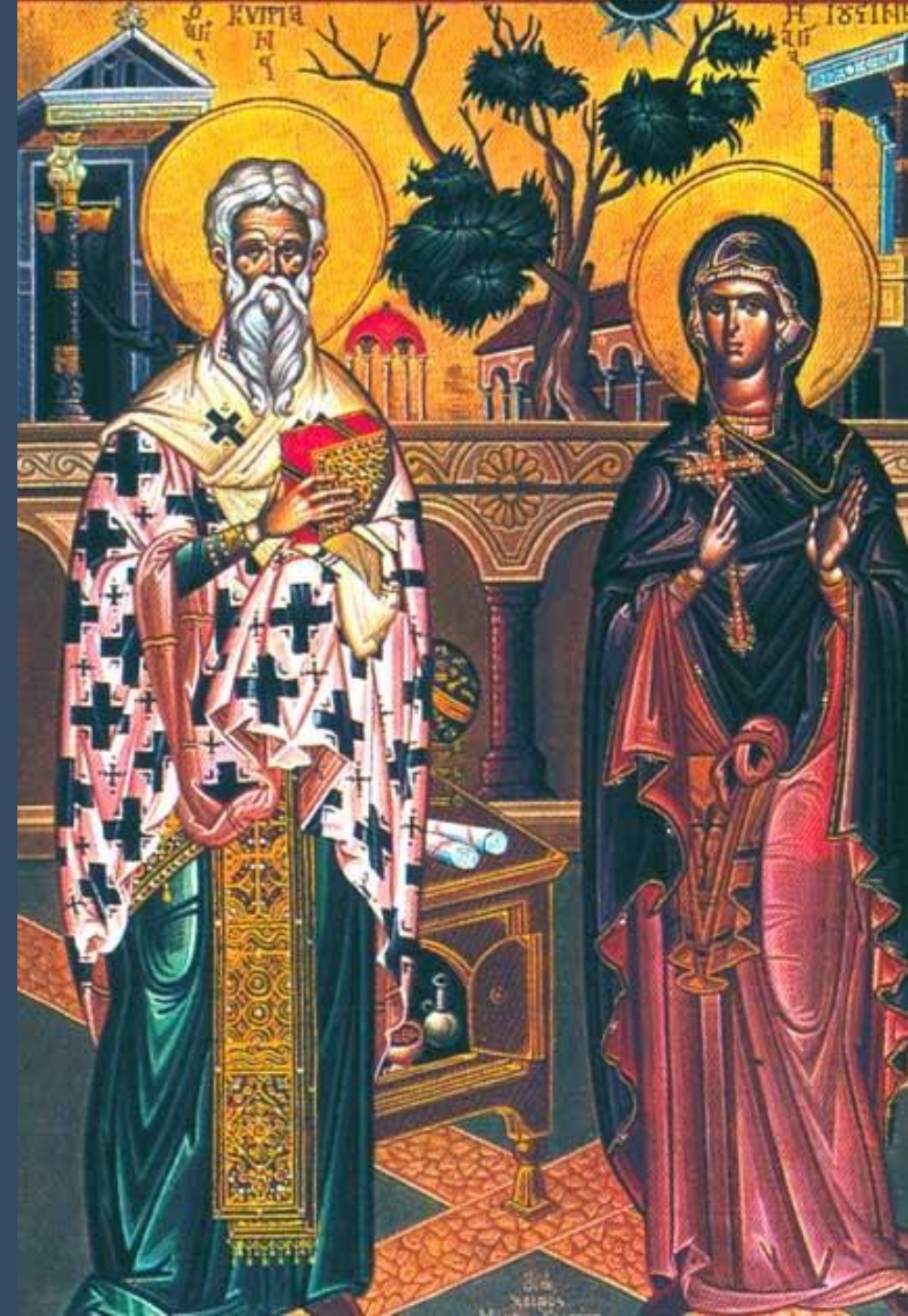
THE THEOLOGY OF RELIGIONS — EXCLUSIVISM

It is also, largely, the historic default of the Christian tradition, with this formulation providing the core principle in engagement with other religions, and perhaps mostly clearly formulated by St Cyprian of Carthage in the third century as:

“extra Ecclesiam nulla salus”

“There is no salvation outside the Church”

This should not, however, lead us to suppose that exclusivism is necessarily the most “conservative” or “original” Christian position...



READING

You have two readings to complete, both of which engage critically with the position of exclusivism. Next session, we will again look at some of the questions raised by these readings in more detail, so do take the time to read them over:

Brecht M “What’s the use of Exclusivism?”, *Theological Studies*, 73, (2012), 33-54.

Strange D “Exclusivisms: ‘Indeed Their Rock is Not Like Our Rock’” in Hedges P & Race A (eds) *Christian Approaches to Other Faiths* (London: SCM Press, 2013)

