

IRENÆUS AND MODERN RESPONSES TO THE CHALLENGE OF RELIGIOUS PLURALISM

In recent years, numerous authors have cited second-century antecedents of an openness to the value of non-Christian religions or, at least, to the salvation of non-Christians, i. e. those who do not have explicit faith in Jesus Christ. Some favorably impressed by Karl Rahner's concept of 'anonymous Christianity' have suggested the anticipation of his ideas, or other forms of optimism, in the works of theologians of the second- and third-century, including those of Irenaeus. Examples of such a claim can be found in the works of James Dupuis,¹ Gerald O'Collins,² Eugene Hillman,³ Ishanand Vempeny,⁴ Pietro Rossano,⁵ Clark Pinnock⁶ and John Sanders.⁷

Heinz Schlette, at the conclusion of his study of the judgment passed on the religions in

¹James Dupuis, "The Salvific Value of Non-Christian Religions," in *Service and Salvation: Nagpur Theological Conference on Evangelization*, ed. Joseph Pathrapankal (Bangalore: Theological Publications in India, 1973), p. 218; *IJT* 15 (July-September 1966):pp. 106-20. The article is also reproduced in *Jesus Christ and His Spirit: Theological Approaches*, ed. James Dupuis (Bangalore: Theological Publications in India, 1977), pp. 3-19.

²Gerald O'Collins, *Fundamental Theology* (New York: Paulist Press, 1981), p. 125.

³Eugene Hillman, *The Wider Ecumenism* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1968), p. 38.

⁴Ishanand Vempeny, *Inspiration in Non-Biblical Scriptures* (Bangalore: Theological Publications in India, n.d.), p. 61.

⁵Pietro Rossano, "Theology and Religions," in *Problems and Perspectives of Fundamental Theology*, eds. René Latourelle and Gerald O'Collins, trans. Matthew J. O'Connell (New York: Paulist Press, 1982), pp. 303, 305.

⁶Clark Pinnock, *A Wideness in God's Mercy: The Finality of Jesus Christ in a World of Religions* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), pp. 36, 41, 97.

⁷John Sanders, *No Other Name: An Investigation into the Destiny of the Unevangelized* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1992), p. 240.

the history of the Church, suggests that it “brings out all the more urgently the need to take up and work out possible starting points, perhaps in the teaching of Scripture and the Fathers, for a positive evaluation of non-Christian religions.”⁸ I have attempted such a study in the work of Irenaeus, in particular.⁹

THE CONTEXT IN WHICH IRENAEUS WROTE

The major extant work by Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*,¹⁰ was written to counter the errors of Gnosticism, particularly its identification of special knowledge as the instrument of salvation and the claim to have such knowledge (AH I,6,1; III,2,2). In the Gnostic concept of salvation, one's possibility of being saved was determined in large measure by the ‘class’ within which one comes to exist. The spiritual class of people have perfect knowledge through their relationship with the Aeons and their salvation is certain (AH I,7,5). The *hylic* or material, on the other hand, cannot be saved (AH I,6,2; III,22,1; V,6,1; V,12,2). Although paganism was not a particular concern of the Gnostics, it can be assumed that most of those who were not Gnostic, or who were not within the Church, were in this unsavable category. Irenaeus, and most of the Church, were viewed as being in the third group, the psychical, who may be saved through good works and faith, and whom the Gnostics were trying to bring to knowledge of the truth.

A difficulty we encounter when putting to Irenaeus the question of the salvation of the unevangelised is that he had no concept of the unreached, who loom so large in our own attempts

⁸Heinz Robert Schlette, *Towards a Theology of Religions*, trans. W. J. O'Hara (Freiburg: Herder, 1966), p. 28.

⁹Terrance Tiessen, *Irenaeus on the Salvation of the Unevangelized*. ATLA Monograph Series no. 31 (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press), 1993.

¹⁰Adelin Rousseau, Louis Doutrelau, Bertran Hemmerdinger and Charles Mercier, eds. and trans. *Contre les Hérésies*. Sources Chrétiennes, nos. 99, 100, 152, 153, 210, 211, 263, 264, 293,

to understand the prospect of salvation for people today. Irenaeus believed that the world had been evangelised in the time of the apostles (AH IV,36,5; cf. IV,39,3; Proof 86¹¹). From his perspective, the Church was spread throughout the world and had a unity of faith wherever it was found (AH I,10,2). As Jean Daniélou aptly describes Irenaeus's view, his "ecclesiastical frontiers are identical with those of the known world of his day."¹² It was on the assumption that everyone has the necessary revelation that Irenaeus understood the judgment of those who do not believe to be just. In countering the position of second-century Gnosticism, Irenaeus stressed very strongly the exclusiveness of Jesus Christ as the one through whom knowledge of the Father is gained. He also taught that salvation was possible only through the ministry of the Holy Spirit and that the Holy Spirit limited his work to the institutional Church. No salvation was possible, therefore, outside of the Church. It is easy to see how Irenaeus could be cited as one whose view of salvation exclusively through the Church clearly indicates the eternal judgment of all who are not part of the Church. A careful analysis of the theology of revelation in the work of Irenaeus indicates, however, that significant aspects of his thought point in a more hopeful direction.

294 (Paris: Editions de Cerf, 1965-82). This will be referenced in the text of the paper as AH.

¹¹Joseph P. Smith ed. *Proof of the Apostolic Preaching*. Ancient Christian Writers: The Works of the Fathers in Translation, vol. 16 (Westminster, Maryland: Newman Press, 1952). This will be cited parenthetically in the text as "Proof."

¹²Jean Daniélou, *Gospel Message and Hellenistic Culture; A History of Early Christian Doctrine Before the Council of Nicaea*. Vol. 2, trans. and ed. John Austin Baker (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1973), p. 150. Cf. Hans Küng: "At one time—the Fathers of the Church and the flowering of Patristics—the *ecclesia catholica* extended more or less throughout the known world. The Church had a secure place . . . in the whole of the inhabited world; it even seemed for a period that the whole world was Christian. Given these limited geographical perspectives, it was easier to formulate an axiom like 'no salvation outside the Church'. It was taken for granted that more or less every human being would be brought face to face existentially with the Christian message" (*The Church*, trans. Ray Ockendem and Rosaleen Ockendem [London:

THE SITUATION OF THE ‘NON-CHRISTIAN’

Irenaeus speaks of those outside the Church as unbelievers (AH IV,6,5), Gentiles (AH III,25,1), pagans (AH II,9,2), the ungodly (Proof 2), and sinners (Proof 2). They are the people who do not acknowledge God as Creator, nor appreciate the providence of God which they enjoy (AH III,25,4; IV,26,6; Proof 8). They are people who serve the creature and worship ‘idols of demons’ (AH III,6,3) who know God's commandments but do not do them, who do not believe in the Father and the Son (AH IV,1,1). While recognising that not all of these people have had the same opportunity of divine revelation, Irenaeus contended that no one is completely without revelation and that judgment would be proportionate to the revelation which people have had. The assumption is that those who are outside of the Church have deliberately chosen to reject Christ (AH V, 27,1; cf. IV,22,2; IV,27,2).

THE PROSPECT FOR SALVATION OF THE ‘Unevangelised’

It is misleading, at best, to claim that Irenaeus was a fore-runner of ‘anonymous Christianity.’ Better ground might be found in the Logos Christology of Justin Martyr or Clement of Alexandria. For Irenaeus the “seed of the Word” was not found in pagan philosophers, but in the Old Testament prophecies (AH IV,10,1; IV,25,3).¹³ Irenaeus believed that those who lived before the Incarnation of the Word were saved if they had responded in faith to the various modes of revelation by the pre-incarnate Logos. This included creation and providence (IV,6,6-7; IV,20,7; IV,22,2), the ‘cosmic cross’ (AH V,17,4; V,18,3; Proof 34), theophanic appearances (AH III,11,8; IV,10,1; IV, 25,3; V,15,4; Proof 12,25,45), and the Law and the Prophets (AH IV,2,3; IV,6,6; IV,7,2).

Burns and Oates, 1967], p. 313).

¹³Cf. Albert Houssiau, *La Christologie de saint Irénée* (Louvain: Publications Universitaires

Irenaeus believed that, after the ascension of Christ, only those are saved who are members of the institutional Church in which the Spirit is at work, and who believe the ‘rule of truth’ that encapsulizes the apostolic faith of the Church (AH III,4,1; III,11,8; III,24,1-2; V,20,2). However, if Irenaeus had known of large groups of unevangelised people, there are factors in his theology which indicate that he *might* have allowed for the possibility of the salvation of individuals outside of the institutional Church. Specifically, there are nine points in the teaching of Irenaeus which provide grounds for hopefulness.

1. God wills the salvation of humankind who are condemned only in consequence of their voluntary unbelief and disobedience.

Irenaeus makes it very clear that people will be condemned because they chose not to believe and obey God's command, not because of any lack of necessary divine grace. Human beings are free agents who have power to obey God's command voluntarily.

For there is no violence in God, but good will is always present in him. And because of this he gives good counsel *to all*. And he has placed in people the power of choice, as also in angels—for angels are rational beings—in order that those who have been obedient might justly possess the good, given certainly by God, but kept by themselves. But those who have not been obedient shall justly not be found with the good and shall receive the deserved punishment, because God kindly gave the good; but they themselves did not diligently keep it precious, but despised his supereminent goodness (AH IV,37,1, italics supplied).

Irenaeus apparently assumes that everyone has had the opportunity to respond appropriately to the God who “gives good counsel *to all*” (IV,37,1 [emphasis supplied]). If people do not believe in God, the fault does not lie in God for having failed to call them, but in

those who do not obey (AH IV,39,3).

2. *The revelation by the Word in creation and providence is life-giving, and necessitates a response of faith on the part of humans, which is made possible by an illumination by the Word.*

A critical issue in regard to the salvation of those who do not hear the Gospel has to do with the sufficiency and efficacy of general or natural revelation. It is widely taught among evangelicals, based on a reading of Romans 1-2, that general revelation gives a sufficient knowledge of God to make people guilty of suppressing it, but that it is inadequate to lead people to salvation. There is significant controversy about the meaning of a passage in Irenaeus's *Adversus Haereses* II,6,1. Alexander Roberts has translated the passage thus:

For since the invisible essence is mighty, it confers on all a profound mental intuition and perception of His most powerful, yea, omnipotent greatness. Wherefore, although "no one knows the Father, except the Son, nor the Son except the Father, and those to whom the Son will reveal Him," yet all [beings] do know this fact at least, because reason, implanted in their minds, moves them, and reveals to them [the truth] that there is one God, the Lord of all.¹⁴

The translation by Roberts of "quando ratio mentibus infixus" as "reason, implanted in their minds," appears to indicate a natural knowledge of God. This reading was also followed by M. A. Dufourcq, M. Vernet¹⁵ and Jules Lebreton,¹⁶ among others. More recently, a number of

¹⁴*Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 1:365.

¹⁵Cited by Louis Escoula, "Saint Irénée et la connaissance naturelle de Dieu," *RScRel* 20 (May-October 1940), p. 252.

¹⁶Jules Lebreton, *Histoire du dogme de la Trinité des origines au Concile de Nicée*, Vol. 2

scholars have argued that *ratio* should be seen as a reference to the revelatory activity of the Logos.¹⁷ The most thorough and satisfying work on the passage has been done by Spanish Patrologist, Antonio Orbe,¹⁸ who analyses the text exhaustively within the context of Gnosticism. If we follow Orbe's analysis, Irenaeus was teaching that the Word, in his universal efficacy, manifests the Father in many ways according to his action upon all beings. By a rational way, he makes the Creator known through creation, just as, by way of faith, he reveals the Father by means of the Son. Thus, there is a universal knowledge of God which is attained through the revelatory work of the Logos in creation and providence. Irenaeus elsewhere indicates, however, that the Word's special illumination is necessary for any revelation to be salvific.

Less controverted is the clear indication in AH IV,6,6-7 that the work of God in creation and providence is a revelation of the Father *by the Son*.

For *by creation itself the Word reveals God the Creator*; and by the world the Lord the Maker of the world, and by the thing formed the craftsman who formed it, and by the Son the Father who generated the Son.

. . . The Son, serving the Father, brings all things to completion, from the beginning to the end, and without him no one is able to know God. For the Son is the knowledge of the Father, on the other hand, the knowledge of the Son is in the Father and is revealed through the Son. And this is why the Lord said: "No one knows the Son except the Father, neither the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son shall reveal him." For "shall reveal" does

(Parise: Gabriel Beauchesne, 1928), pp. 528ff.

¹⁷Among them are Louis Escoula (255-70), Juan Ochagavía (*Visibile Patris Filius; A Study of Irenaeus's Teaching on Revelation and Tradition*. *Orientalia Christiana Analecta*, no. 171 [Rome: Pont. Institutum Orientalium Studiorum, 1969], 77-790, Albert Houssiau ("L'exégèse de Matthieu 11,27b selon Saint Irénée," *ETL* 29 [1953]:334-36), and Adelin Rousseau ("Notes Justificatives" [SC # 293], p. 220.

¹⁸Antonio Orbe, "San Ireneo y el conocimiento natural de Dios," *Greg* 47 (1966), pp. 441-477, 710-747. For a detailed presentation of this argument see Tiessen, *Irenaeus*, pp. 101-18.

not exclusively have a future sense, as if the Word had only begun to manifest the Father when he was born of Mary, but it is stated generally, referring to all time. For, *from the beginning, the Son, who has been present with that which he formed, reveals the Father* to all whom the Father wishes and when and how he wishes. And this is why, in all things, and through all things, there is one God the Father, and one Word [the Son], and one Spirit, and one salvation to all those who believe in him (AH IV,6,6-7, italics supplied).

Of even greater significance is the indication in AH IV,20,7 that the manifestation of God which is made by means of creation is life-giving, although it is less valuable than the revelation of the Father which comes “through the Word and gives life to those who see God” (AH IV,20,7).

For the glory of God is a living man; and the life of man consists in beholding God. For *if the manifestation of God which is made by means of the creation affords life to all living in the earth*, much more does that revelation of the Father which comes through the Word, give life to those who see God (IV,20,7, ANF, italics supplied).

José González-Faus describes the last phrase as a “surprising parallelism,” because it indicates that revelation in creation is already salvific, at least germinally.¹⁹ It might be suggested that the life that is given is physical life but that scarcely does justice to the parallel that Irenaeus is making in the context of life as the vision of God.

Later, Irenaeus stresses the importance of providence to the salvation of those who lived before the incarnation. The Father did not only exercise his providence for the benefit of those who were alive in the time of Irenaeus, but “for all people without exception who, from the

¹⁹José González-Faus, *Carne de Dios: significado salvado de la Encarnación en la teología de san Ireneo* (Barcelona: Herder, 1969), p. 52.

beginning, according to their capacity, in their generation, both feared and loved God, and practised justice and piety toward their neighbor, and desired to see Christ and to hear his voice” (AH IV,22,2). It is difficult to say what capacity people with only natural revelation would have had “to desire to see Christ and to hear his voice,” though we can conceive of their ability to have a certain fear and love of God and a certain practice of justice toward their neighbor.

3. The Word's immanence in creation, symbolized by a cosmic cross, has a cohesive and reconciliatory effect upon all of creation which is not only physical, but also moral and supernatural.

In two difficult passages, in particular, Irenaeus speaks of a cosmic crucifixion of the invisible Word.

For the Maker of the world is truly the Word of God. However, this is our Lord, who in the last times was made man, existing in this world, and in an invisible manner he contains (or gives cohesion to) all created things, and is imprinted in the form of a cross upon the entire creation, since the Word of God governs and arranges all things; and this is why “He came to his own” in a visible fashion and “was made flesh,” and hung upon the tree, in order to recapitulate all things in himself (AH V,18,3).²⁰

And the sin that was wrought through the tree was undone by the obedience of the tree, obedience to God whereby the Son of man was nailed to the tree, destroying the knowledge of evil, and bringing in and conferring the knowledge of good; . . . So by the obedience, whereby he obeyed unto death, hanging on the tree, he undid the old disobedience wrought in the tree. And because he is himself the Word of God Almighty, who in his invisible form pervades us universally in the whole world, and encompasses both its length and breadth and

²⁰“ . . . et secundum invisibilitatem continet quae facta sunt omnia, et in universa conditione infixus, quoniam Verbum Dei gubernans et disponens omnia, et propter hoc `in sua' invisibiliter [Rousseau necessarily keeps the “invisibiliter” but points out that it is impossible in the context; the Armenian text has the same mistaken reading, which points to a common mistake in the Greek, where *oratōs* became *aoratōs*; it is a confusion found often in AH (SC 152, 302)] `venit, et caro factum est,' et perpendit super lignum, uti universa in semetipsum recapituletur.”

height and depth—for by God's Word everything is disposed and administered—the Son of God was also crucified in these, imprinted in the form of a cross on the universe; for he had necessarily, in becoming visible, to bring to light the universality of his cross, in order to show openly through his visible form that activity of his: that it is he who makes bright the height, that is, what is in heaven, and holds the deep, which is in the bowels of the earth, and stretches forth and extends the length from east to west, navigating also the northern parts and the breadth of the south, and *calling in all the dispersed from all sides to the knowledge of the Father* (Proof 34, italics supplied).

Most significant to the particular focus of this study is the revelatory nature of this cosmic cross. Irenaeus speaks of it as “calling in all the dispersed from all sides to the knowledge of the Father” (Proof 34). On the basis of this statement, Antonio Orbe correctly indicates that the cosmic crucifixion is “oriented decidedly to the salvation of the dispersed elements.”²¹ The Logos is clearly not only a principle of physical cohesion, but also a principle of moral, and therefore of supernatural, unity, in the knowledge of the Father. The vertical arm of the cross symbolizes the influence of the Word in the illumination of the celestial beings, and also in his extension into the subterranean world. It is unclear what is the effect of his entrance into the latter, whether those contained there are being ruled and reprimanded or whether they are being embraced with an embrace which reconciles the inferior elements with the superior. Orbe is inclined to the latter view, because of a parallel in the *Acts of Andrew*, c. 14, and because the symbolism of the lateral arms confirms such an exegesis.²² This second reason seems particularly significant, as the horizontal arms clearly signify the reconciliation of east and west, of Jew and

²¹Antonio Orbe, *Los primeros herejes ante la persecución*, p. 228.

Gentile, or of the inhabitants of the earth. The activity of the Word in every direction therefore leads to one end, the knowledge of the Father, the one God. AH V,17,4 specifically refers the gathering accomplished by the outstretched arms to the two peoples scattered to the ends of the earth. There were two hands because there were two peoples, but there was only one head because there is only one God. Proof 34, however, is more general, taking in all elements dispersed in the universe.²³ AH V,18,3 likewise speaks more generally, relating this theme of the cosmic cross to that of the recapitulation of all things in the Word. More will be said on that subject in a moment.

4. In Christ's incarnation, obedient life, death and resurrection, a recapitulation of the history of fallen humanity was made which objectively accomplished the salvation of humankind.

The concept of recapitulation is so important in the theology of Irenaeus that it has been considered the focal point around which Irenaeus constructs his entire theology.²⁴ From the standpoint of the focus of this study, the striking thing about Irenaeus's teaching concerning recapitulation is its universal scope. Christ recapitulated Adam in himself (Proof 32). As Adam had no father, so the Word was born of a virgin (AH III,21,10), thus “virginal disobedience” was destroyed by “virginal obedience” (Proof 33). As Adam committed sin through disobedience in

²²*Ibid.*, pp. 223-24.

²³Orbe discerns a parallel to Jn 11:50,52 as well as *Acta Andrae, Evangelium Philippi* and other such works (*Ibid.*, p. 226). Smith sees an allusion to Jn 12:32: “And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all things to myself,” and Jn 11:51ff: “that Jesus should die for the nation and not only for the nation, but to gather together in one the children of God, that were dispersed” p. 173.

²⁴Daniélou, *Gospel Message*, p. 167; André Benoit, *Saint Irénée; introduction à l'étude de sa théologie*. Etudes d'histoire et de philosophie religieuses, no. 52 [Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1960], pp. 225, 231; Johannes Quasten, *Patrology*, vol. 1: *The Beginnings of Patristic Literature* (Westminster, Maryland: Newman Press, 1950), p. 295: “The heart of Irenaeus’s

regard to the tree, so Christ was obedient to God in being nailed to the tree, thereby “destroying the knowledge of evil, and bringing in and conferring the knowledge of good” (Proof 34).

Christ did more than simply recapitulate the first man. He recapitulated, in the shedding of his own blood, the shedding of the blood of all the righteous from Abel to Zechariah (AH V,14,1; cf. Mt 23:35ff; Lk 11:50). “He recapitulated the long history of humanity in himself and procured salvation for us in a concise way, so that what we lost in Adam, namely, to be according to the image and likeness of God, we recover in Christ Jesus” (AH III,18,1). “He passed through all the ages of life, restoring thereby all people to communion with God” (AH III,18,7; cf. II,22,4). He was what he appeared to be, “God, recapitulating in himself the old model (or form—*plasmationem*) of humankind, so that he might kill sin, and destroy death and make human beings alive” (AH III,18,7). He is the one who “has recapitulated in himself all the nations dispersed from Adam onwards, and all the languages and generations of humankind, including Adam himself” (AH III,22,3). In his own person he saved, at the end, that which had perished in the beginning in Adam, presumably, the human race (AH V,14,1). Christ recapitulated all things, in heaven and earth, spiritual and physical (AH V,20,2, citing Eph 1:10; Proof 30, 34; cf. AH III,16,6).²⁵

The doctrine of recapitulation, in later years, became a basis of salvific universalism, quite clearly in Origen, less so in Gregory of Nyssa. Irenaeus does not follow it to that

Christology and indeed of his entire theology is his theory of recapitulation.”

²⁵As José González-Faus has pointed out, in this latter passage two very important concepts of ancient theology were involved—the Pauline theme of headship and that of the second Adam. With regard to the first, Christ is presented as the head, not only of the “body of the Church,” but, through the Church, of the “body of humanity.” On this point, Irenaeus was preceded by Cyril of Alexandria (*De Inc. Verbi* 18,9,17). González-Faus thus sees in Irenaeus a certain continuity, as well as tension, between the two unions with Christ—that of humanity and that of the Christian (*Carne de Dios*, p. 175).

conclusion. In AH I,10,1, he looks toward the return of Christ as the time when Christ's recapitulatory work will be manifested, when "all things" will be gathered together in unity (citing Eph 1:10) and every knee shall bow to him and confess him (citing Phil 2:10,11). However, it will not be a time of universal salvation, but one of just judgment upon apostate angels, and ungodly, unrighteous and wicked people, who will be assigned to eternal fire. It will also be a time when immortality is conferred upon the righteous, on those who have kept his commandments and persevered in love (AH I,10,1). It is frequently recognised, therefore, that although Irenaeus's doctrine of recapitulation might logically lead to universal salvation, for Irenaeus it does not conclude that way.²⁶

It is clear that Irenaeus was not implying that the Incarnation would automatically save the Gnostic heretics, but he is stressing the necessity of that incarnate work of recapitulation to the salvation of *anyone*. Jean Daniélou comments on AH III,16,6, where Irenaeus discusses the taking up of humankind into Christ and the summing up of all things in himself, that "it is the human race as a numerical whole which is substantially saved in him."²⁷ The emphasis here is on "objective" redemption, on the necessity and efficacy of Christ's redemptive recapitulatory work, and not on the subjective application of it to all individuals, regardless of their response to it. This strong statement concerning the objective redemption accomplished by Christ for all people provides a plank in the foundation of a possible optimism concerning the ultimate salvation of those who do not reject Christ and who respond 'in faith' to God's other means of self-disclosure.

5. *Within the economy of salvation, the same reward (knowledge of the Son of God, or*

²⁶See for example Adhémar d'Alès, "La doctrine de la récapitulation en saint Irénée," *RScRel* 6-7 (1916), p. 199; Kim, p. 86.

²⁷*Christ and Us* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1961), p. 99.

immortality) is eventually given to all whom God calls, regardless of the particular stage of the economy in which they lived and in which they are called.

The goal of God's self-revelation is that people should ultimately see the Father and live. The triune God is moving people toward that end, first showing God prophetically through the Spirit, and then adoptively through the Son and, finally, in a paternal fashion in the kingdom of heaven. The Spirit prepares people in the Son, and the Son leads them to the Father, who gives incorruption to those who see him (AH IV,20,5). Even in the next world, however, our love of God will continue to grow as we contemplate him (AH IV,12,2). There, we shall continue to make progress in our knowledge of the same Father, Son and Holy Spirit, seeing God face to face, and no longer as through a glass (AH IV,9,2). We shall “receive the Kingdom for ever and progress in it” (AH IV,28,2).

In regard to the eternal reward which is immortality, or the knowledge of God, Irenaeus draws some significant conclusions from the parable of the workmen in the vineyard, in Matthew 20:1-16 (AH IV,36,7). In the context, he is stressing the unity of the economy of salvation under the disposition of the one God. He points out that the same God called some “in the beginning of the formation of the world,” and others at later times, including some at the end of time. However, there is only one vineyard because there is only one righteousness, and the Spirit of God is the one administrator who arranges all things. The reward is the same for all the workers in the vineyard, regardless of when they were called. Each of the workers in the parable received a penny with the royal image superscribed on it, and so each one who is called by God receives the knowledge of the Son of God, which is incorruptibility. The Incarnation, with its superior manifestation, is a giving of the reward first to those who were called at the end, but all will ultimately receive the same reward.

In a somewhat different vein, however, are the comments of Irenaeus on the three categories of fruitfulness, which Jesus describes in the parable of the soils (AH V,36,1-2, commenting on Mt 13:23). Jesus had predicted that when the seed of God's Word fell on fertile soil, some of it would produce a hundredfold, some sixty-fold and some only thirty. From this, Irenaeus predicts that there will be different degrees of blessedness for the just, according to their respective merits. The most worthy proceed directly to "heaven," the second group to "paradise" and the least worthy will "inhabit the city" (AH V,36,2). Noting this distinction of destinies, Brian Daley observes, however, that "Irenaeus seems to imply the possibility of growth and advancement toward closer union with God even after the judgment, until at last all distinctions disappear" (citing AH V,36,2 and II,28,3, where Irenaeus speaks of our eternal capacity to learn the things taught by God).²⁸ This reading of Jesus' distinction of levels of fruitfulness as levels of reward, through which the righteous will advance as they grow in their knowledge of God, raises an intriguing possibility in the context of this study. One might speculate that the difference between the soil producing thirtyfold and that producing sixtyfold could correspond to the differences that exist between those who have a clear revelation of the Son, through Scripture, and those who know him only through his presence in providence. Of course, a difficulty with this proposal is that it does not completely correspond to the features of the parable. On this hypothesis, the difference lies in the quantity or "quality" of the seed which is sown (gradations of revelation), whereas the parable assigns the difference to the varying fertility of the soil. As Irenaeus understood the parable, however, the concept has some prospect of positive development.

²⁸Brian E. Daley, S.J. *The Hope of the Early Church. A Handbook of Patristic Eschatology* (Cambridge: University Press, 1991), p. 31.

6. *The just judgment of sinful people, by God, assumes their voluntary rejection of divine saving revelation to all people.*

In response to the fatalistic determinism implicit in the threefold division of the Gnostics, Irenaeus stressed human freedom to choose between two possible destinies. In the Gnostic scheme, only the psychical had any choice. For Irenaeus, the justice of God's condemnation of people rests on the fact that they have been endowed with reason and free will. Although the Lord used the separation of wheat and chaff at harvest time as an illustration of judgment, there is an important difference between the illustration and reality. The wheat and the chaff are inanimate and irrational, and were by nature what they were. Human beings, on the other hand, have the power to decide whether they will become "wheat" or "chaff." Should they choose to be chaff, their condemnation would be just, because they made a free choice, even though it was an irrational one (AH IV,4,3).²⁹

From the beginning, humans were created free, with power over their own souls, so that they could obey God's precepts of their own volition, and not by any compulsion from God. God's will or purpose toward humanity is always good and he gives good counsel (*consilium bonum* or *gnōmēn agathēn*) to all, but people must give obedience to God and preserve that good which is given to them by God. They have the power to do good and will be justly condemned if they do not do it (AH IV,37,1). John Lawson has remarked that Irenaeus was so dominated by the interest in human personal moral choice "that his statements on free will sometimes sound almost Pelagian."³⁰ He rightly notices, however, that, in the preceding context of this statement

²⁹Cf. Antonio Orbe, *Antropología de San Ireneo* (Madrid: Biblioteca de Autores Cristianos, 1969), pp. 174-75.

³⁰John Lawson, *The Biblical Theology of Saint Irenaeus* (London: Epworth Press, 1948), p.

regarding human ability to do the good, the grace of God (his good will or counsel) precedes human working. “That `working of good' which is within human power would therefore appear to be nothing other than a steadfast holding on to the grace of God.”³¹

While Irenaeus clearly affirmed the necessity of God's grace prior to human choice of the good and the decision of faith in God, he did not consider that grace efficacious in a predestinarian sense. God's foreknowledge of all things includes a knowledge of who will and who will not believe, but it is not elective or reprobationary (AH IV,29,2; cf. AH IV,37,2; IV,39,4). How people respond to God's grace is left in the power of their own freedom. Faith in God is within human power, and they choose to believe or not to do so, of their own free will (AH IV,37,5). When people do not believe, the cause does not lie in a deficiency in God's call. God's light continues to shine but some people blind themselves to it. That they live in darkness is therefore their own fault and no fault of God's light (AH IV,39,3-4). However, God does judicially blind these unbelievers, giving them up to the darkness which they have chosen for themselves (AH IV,29,1; IV,39,4; III,7,1; V,27,2).

It needs to be noted again that this stress which Irenaeus places on human freedom to choose personal destiny is in a context of optimism regarding the opportunity provided for choice of the good. From the beginning, the Son has been present with his handiwork, revealing the Father to all whom the Father wills (AH IV,6,7). This included the revelation in creation, the preaching through the law and the prophets, the visibility of the Word in the incarnation, and

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³¹Ibid. As further indication of the priority of God's grace in human salvation, Lawson cites AH III,20,3, which clearly attests to humans' inability to save themselves, since there is no good in them (citing Rom. 7:18). The “good” of human salvation comes from God. Cf. also III,18,2, which states the impossibility of human attainment of salvation because of the subjection to the power of sin.

then the continuing working of the Word through the Church's proclamation and the inspired Scriptures. Irenaeus had no room in his experience for a category of people who have had no *opportunity* to believe. God's just judgment of people rests on their free response to his gracious self-revelation, and there does not seem to have been anyone, in Irenaeus's frame of reference, who did not have sufficient revelation to make an adequate moral response.

7. Those who believe and follow God are given a greater illumination of the mind.

Irenaeus taught that it is God himself who provides humankind with the power to 'discover' (*invenire*) him and who illumines people with a light from himself (AH III,24,2).³² Precisely because the Gnostics refuse to admit that the true God, Father and Creator, has communicated with the human race, and that he exercises his providence over the details of human life, they are bound not to know him (AH II,24,2).

The revealer of the Father is always the Word but the media by which God is manifested, and the aspects of his being which are revealed, vary. Thus: 1) by means of creation, God the Creator is revealed; 2) by means of the world, the Lord or Demiurge of it is revealed; 3) by means of the human body, the Artificer or Maker is revealed; and 4) by means of the Son, the Father who engendered him is revealed. The four media are objective and are offered to human consideration,³³ but Irenaeus distinguishes between seeing the objective medium and seeing *by*

³²"Lumen quod est a Deo non lucet eis."

³³José González-Faus notes a gradation in the verbs which Irenaeus uses in IV,6,6 (448). Thus we read: "per ipsam conditionem *revelat*"; "per Legem et Prophetas . . . *praedicabat*"; and "per ipsum Verbum *ostendebatur*." González-Faus suggests that the first alludes to the simple, objective manifestation that needs yet to be perceived and interpreted. The second enters by the senses, in this case by the ears. And the third is by sight itself. What González-Faus sees as important here is that the Incarnation is not an isolated episode, interesting only in so far as it gives a view of the horizon of the possibility for the salvation of human beings. It is rather a link in a horizon of possibilities still opening up, in the chain which goes from creation toward the

revelation of the Word.³⁴ He carefully distinguishes objective revelation, that is, the quadruple way for ascending to God from the saving revelation by means of which people get to God. From this arises the repeated formula: 1) all have seen, but not all have believed (AH IV,6,5); 2) all are addressed by the Word, but not all believed (AH IV,6,6); 3) all the people heard alike, but not all believed alike; 4) all saw and spoke of the Son and the Father, but not all believed.

The demons saw and heard the Son (and in him the Father), the Pharisees and unbelieving scribes saw and heard, and the disciples of Jesus saw and heard, but not all equally believed in him. The objective medium and the aspect which is understood by it do not change. The difference is in the subjective element, namely, the Word that gives eyes and ears to one to see and hear savingly, and does not do so to another.³⁵ Even the evil spirits were capable of reasoning from the visible to the invisible, from creation to the Creator (AH II,6,2; IV,6,6), from the image to the one who molded it, from the Son to the Father, *but not savingly*. The revelation to which faith responds reaches only to those whom the Word illuminates.

It is within this framework that one can understand Irenaeus's comments regarding the necessity of a moral disposition if one is to rise to confession of one God the Father and Creator, from observation of providence (AH III,25,1). The Word could not reveal the saving knowledge of God while people were guilty of an idolatrous spirit and dominated by concupiscence. Thus Epicurus was incapable of a saving knowledge because of his dissolute way of life. The same was true of the demons.³⁶ The causal nexus between the world and its Author is self-evident,

“vision,” a chain which is an economy of the Word (pp. 155-56).

³⁴Orbe, “Conocimiento natural,” pp. 728-29.

³⁵*Ibid.*, p. 730.

³⁶*Ibid.*, p. 732.

whether or not there is ‘revelation’ by the Word, but by virtue of the illumination of the Son it becomes salutary.³⁷

Irenaeus indicates that “to those who believe and follow him he [God] gives a fuller and greater illumination of the mind” (AH IV,29,1). One can only conclude that there is a responsiveness on God's part to human response to the divine initiative in revelation. Those who reject God's light are blinded and those who accept it are given a greater capacity to look upon it. One can infer that, if pagans were to believe in the one God, the Creator, through the Word's revelation in creation, and were not to blind themselves to that revelation, their capacity for the knowledge of God would be graciously expanded.

8. People will be judged according to the privilege of revelation that they have received.

Irenaeus clearly stated the converse of the salvation of the obedient believer, namely, the judgment of the unbeliever. This he describes as a righteous act on God's part, shutting out in darkness those who have chosen darkness rather than God's light, that is, those who do not believe (AH IV,6,5). The just grounds of God's judgment of the unbeliever are therefore twofold: the universality of divine revelation and the freedom of human beings in response to God's revelation (Cf. AH V,27,1; IV,6,5-6). This raises an important question, however. While God has revealed himself to all humankind through the Word, not all have had that revelation in equal measure. Irenaeus states that God had addressed all people in the same way (*similiter*), by means of the creation of the world and the formation of human nature (AH IV,6,6). That is not a problem. However, he goes on to say that “all the people (*universus populus*) likewise heard” the Word speak through the Law and the Prophets, and *all* saw the Father in the Son (AH IV,6,6). Did Irenaeus think that all the peoples of the Old Testament times had heard the Law and the

³⁷*Ibid.*

Prophets, or does he mean by *populus* the people of Israel? The latter would seem to be the case. Likewise, there were many people in Jesus' day who did not see the incarnate Son. Irenaeus recognized that even in his own day there were barbarians who had not had the Scriptures, but they did have the oral proclamation of the Church (AH IV,24,2; cf. III,4,2).

It would appear that these statements must be considered in the context of the earlier discussion of judgment according to opportunity. No one is without some form of revelation, and all will be judged according to the degree of revelation which they have received (AH IV,28,1-2). It would seem, then, that the "all" who are addressed by the revelation in creation are a larger group than "all the people" who were addressed by the Law and the Prophets, and the "all" who saw the incarnate Son. The important point that Irenaeus is stressing is that *not all* believed the revelation at any of these levels. From the beginning, the Son has been present with his creation, revealing the Father to all, *in some manner or mode*, and all who do not "believe" are justly judged. Specifically, Irenaeus speaks of the judgment of those who experience God's providence in the sending of the sun and rain but who do not live in keeping with the bounty of God. These are people who have lived in luxury, but have blasphemed the God who provided for them, through a failure to attribute their blessing to him (AH III,25,4).

At least Plato was more religious than these deniers of divine providence (AH III,25,5), and some of the heathen Gentiles were moved by God's providence to call the Maker of the universe the Father (AH III,25,1). Rejection of God's providence, which all people experience, is clearly condemning (Cf. AH IV,26,6; Proof 8). Is it possible, then, that a grateful recognition of God's providence by those who do not know of Christ would be saving? Because of Irenaeus's assumptions regarding the evangelization of the world, he does not specifically address the condition of those who may have been beyond the reach of the Church (or of Israel, in the Old

Testament) or without knowledge of Christ. He neither assumes nor explicitly denies the salvation of Plato. However, it seems highly improbable that he is intending to indicate a salvation of the aforementioned “Gentiles.” Again, however, those were people who had rejected further revelation. What if they had had no revelation beyond creation and providence?

9. During the millennium, those who have not known the incarnate Word, but who have had some form of “anticipation” of him, will become accustomed to living with him and will be prepared for the vision of the Father.

Irenaeus's doctrine of the earthly reign of Christ plays a very important role in his scheme of salvation. It responds to two questions of his time: the salvation of the ancient righteous, and the salvation of the flesh.³⁸ Marcion had pushed his critique of the Old Testament so far that it excluded the salvation of the ancient righteous, avoided a judicial coming of Christ, and suppressed all promise of an earthly kingdom of Christ. In the Ptolemaean scheme, the psychics, including the ancient righteous (who were subjects of the Demiurge), could not attain to the Pleroma, but only to an intermediary order ruled by the Demiurge.³⁹ For Irenaeus, however, the righteous of both testaments will reign on earth with Christ before they enter the kingdom of heaven. In this way, they will prepare themselves, through the contemplation of the Son, for the immediate vision of the Father in heaven.⁴⁰

Christ did not come only for those who believed in him during his earthly existence, but “for all people without exception, who from the beginning, according to their capacity, in their generation both feared and loved God, and practised justice and piety toward their neighbor, and

³⁸Albert Houssiau, *La Christologie*, p. 130.

³⁹*Ibid.*, p. 129; cf. AH I,7,1; I,8,3.

desired to see Christ and to hear his voice” (AH IV,22,2).⁴¹ These people will be roused from their ‘sleep’ first by Christ, when he returns, and shall be raised and given a place in his kingdom (AH IV,22,2). Just as the righteous of the Old Testament prefigured the Church, so now the Church prefigures the earthly reign of Christ, in which they will receive the reward for their labors (AH IV,22,2). Thus, the righteous of the Old Testament will have the opportunity also to see Christ. The earthly reign of Christ is the “beginning of incorruptibility” (AH V,32,1)⁴² and the means by which “those who shall be judged worthy shall be accustomed little by little to comprehend God” (AH V,32,1).⁴³ They shall see God in the renewed world, receiving the reward for their suffering in the creation in which they suffered, and reigning in the creation in which they experienced servitude. Abraham will then receive the land which was promised to him (AH V,32,2; cf. V,34,1-35,1).

In any analysis of the salvation of the unevangelised, a critical question is how one can move from knowledge of God through his providence to vision of the Father, without going through the stage of knowledge of the incarnate Word. The answer to that question may be found, for Irenaeus, in the doctrine of Christ's earthly reign. The righteous of the Old Testament will become accustomed gradually to the knowledge of God, through that time spent in the presence of the incarnate Word. One could postulate that, in the same manner, a pagan who responded properly to the revelation in the providence of the Father through the Word could,

⁴⁰Houssiau, p. 129.

⁴¹See Latin text above, n. 15.

⁴²“Principium incorruptelae” or as Rousseau suggests, the “prelude” of incorruptibility (397), translating, he believes, *prooimion* (SC 152, 337).

⁴³“Qui digni fuerint paulatim assuescunt capere Deum.”

likewise, be raised at the return of Christ and could come to know the Father through the incarnate Christ and be prepared, thereby, for the vision of the Father. Within the scheme of Irenaeus, such a “proper response” to providence would, of course, require a special illuminating work of the Word, and it is still unclear whether that possibility was envisioned by Irenaeus or not. In any case, it is clear that this doctrine of an earthly reign of Christ, following his second coming and prior to the eternal state, is a *very* important step in the progress of humans toward the vision of the Father. It has an important place in any attempt to find in Irenaeus an indication that those who remain without knowledge of Jesus Christ in this life may nonetheless eventually achieve eternal life (in Irenaeus's scheme, immortality and incorruptibility) with the Father.

The critical problem is with regard to the anticipation of Christ that Irenaeus requires of those pre-incarnate righteous. Those “who from the beginning, according to their capacity, in their generation, both feared and loved God, and practised justice and piety toward their neighbor” (AH IV,22,2) are also described as having “desired to see Christ and to hear his voice” (AH IV,22,2). Those to whom Christ preached in the lower regions were “those who had hoped in him” and “who had announced beforehand his coming” (AH IV,27,2). Likewise, those who will be raised first at Christ's return and accustomed to the knowledge of God during the millennium are the ones who had “desired to see Christ and to hear his voice” (AH IV,22,2). In short, any attempt to find in Irenaeus a theology of “anonymous Christianity” will have to explain how the pagan who qualifies as an “anonymous Christian” can be said to anticipate Christ, to desire to see and hear him, and to hope in him. It would seem that, for Irenaeus, precisely their “anonymity,” that is, their lack of conscious knowledge of Christ (which in this age could not be anticipatory, except in the sense proposed by Rahner), would eliminate them from the class of the righteous “before Christ” for whom Christ's life and death were effective to

salvation.

CONCLUSION

A. Luneau generalizes from his study of the early Fathers that “the Fathers believed in the salvation of all men of good will, at least implicitly.”⁴⁴ On the other hand, Gustave Martelet is convinced that no Father, however optimistic he had been in regard to Gospel preparation, would have been prepared to dispense the pagans from an explicit conversion to the Lord. They would have to convert to be saved.⁴⁵ Regarding those who had explicit contact with Christianity, Martelet's generalization is certainly true of Irenaeus. It is not clear, however, what Irenaeus would have said about those without knowledge of the incarnate Word. His whole scheme of the economy of salvation describes a line of progressive revelation moving humanity towards vision of the Father, and he does not really address the situation of the person who is limited to revelation at the level of creation and providence. He speaks with some favour of pagans who are moved by God's providence to recognize their Creator, but the only ones whose salvation he specifically discusses are those who believe on account of the preaching of the Church. His whole focus in regard to divine judgment is on those who have known Christ and have rejected him.

The discussion above has identified nine points in Irenaeus's theology which may provide some ground for optimism concerning the salvation of the unevangelised. We do not know, of course, whether Irenaeus would have followed these points of his theology through to the conclusion which can be drawn from them, were he confronted with the situation which presses

⁴⁴A. Luneau, “Pour aider au dialogue: Les Pères et les religions non-chrétiennes,” *NRT* 89 (November 1967), p. 923.

⁴⁵Gustave Martelet, *Les idées maîtresses de Vatican II. Introduction à l'esprit du Concile*

upon us. Nevertheless, some benefit hopefully has been gained from this examination of the direction in which his theology was taking him, on this issue.

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