

PREVENIENT GRACE AND UNIVERSAL ATONEMENT IN THE THEOLOGY OF WILLIAM BURT POPE

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This article examines William Burt Pope's interpretation of prevenient grace: it does so by showing its rootedness in his Christology and in particular his understanding of the atonement. The contours of his theology of prevenient grace are analysed in relation to anthropology, pneumatology and the soteriological goal of prevenient grace. Finally his interpretation of the relationship between Christianity and other faiths is used to illustrate the significance and potential of his theology in a contemporary context.

William Burt Pope (1822-1903) was probably the most significant British Methodist theologian of the nineteenth century, however to the loss of contemporary Methodist theology, his profoundly Christocentric and Trinitarian exposition of the Wesleyan theological tradition has been sadly neglected.¹ This is particularly true of his theology of prevenient grace which takes up and develops the more scattered references in the writings of John Wesley,² and was described, by Herbert B. Workman in 1909, as his 'most lasting contribution to Methodist theology.'³ From a more contemporary perspective José Míguez Bonino proposed that it could make a significant contribution to the development of a contemporary

¹ The only significant studies of Pope's theology I was able to locate are Dale Elden Dunlap, 'Methodist Theology in Great Britain in the Nineteenth Century: With Special Reference to the Theology of Adam Clarke, Richard Watson, and William Burt Pope,' PhD dissertation, Yale University, 1956 and Robb Wicke Shoaf, 'The Theology of William Burt Pope: A Nineteenth Century Wesleyan Systematic,' PhD dissertation, Drew University, 1990.

² For Wesley's understanding see Charles Allen Rogers, 'The Concept of Prevenient Grace in the Theology of John Wesley,' PhD dissertation, Duke University, 1967, and J. Gregory Crofford, *Streams of Mercy: Prevenient Grace in the Theology of John and Charles Wesley* (Lexington: Emeth, 2010).

³ Herbert B. Workman, 'The Place of Methodism in the Life and Thought of the Christian Church,' in W. J. Townsend, H. B. Workman and George Eayrs, *A New History of Methodism*, vol. 1 (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1909), 1-73, 53.

Methodist theology by providing resources for responding to the challenges articulated in liberation theologies.⁴

The lack of attention to Pope's theology of prevenient grace is striking given its relevance to the pressing issues of the development of a Christian theology of religions in the context of the growth of Christianity in the non-western world and the rise of secularism and religious pluralism in the western world. Pope wrote in the context of a renewed encounter with non-Christian religions as a consequence of British colonial imperialism and the renewal of Christian mission that accompanied it. Pope at one time considered becoming a missionary in India. His brother, George Urglow Pope, was a missionary in India and became an acknowledged expert on Tamil literature.⁵ Pope's theology of prevenient grace provided him with the theological spectacles through which he interpreted this new awareness and knowledge of other faiths. Remarkably, his theology of religions, which in some ways reflects his colonial context and in other ways transcends it, anticipates developments that have emerged in the twentieth century often related to the proposals of Vatican II. In common with these perspectives, Pope viewed revelation and salvation in Christ as a corrective to and fulfilment of non-Christian religions.⁶ His approach to these issues thus provides a case study for the significance of his work in our contemporary context.

This article is an attempt to stimulate new interest in Pope's theology and its potential contribution to contemporary theology by providing an analysis of his understanding of prevenient grace as it

⁴ See 'Wesley in Latin America: Theological and Historical Reflection,' in *Rethinking Wesley's Theology for Contemporary Methodism*, ed. Randy L. Maddox (Nashville: Kingswood, 1998), 169-182 and 'Salvation as the Work of the Trinity: An Attempt at a Holistic Understanding from a Latin American Perspective,' in *Trinity Community and Power: Mapping Trajectories in Wesleyan Theology*, ed. M. Douglas Meeks, (Nashville: Kingswood, 2000), 69-83. I have attempted to take up Míguez' proposal in 'The Prevenient and the Penultimate: Towards a Methodist Theology of the Political for the Twenty First Century,' unpublished paper, Thirteenth Oxford Institute of Methodist Theological Studies, 2013

<http://oimts.files.wordpress.com/2013/09/2013-3-field.pdf> accessed 12.10.2014.

⁵ See R.W. Moss, *The Rev W.B. Pope, D. D.: Theologian and Saint* (London; Robert Culley, n.d.), 28, and Robert Eric Frykenberg, 'Pope, George Urglow (1820-1908),' *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/35572>, accessed 12.10.2014

⁶ Paul F. Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religion* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2002), 63-106 provides a careful analysis of this fulfilment model which he portrays as a twentieth century Roman Catholic development deriving from the work of Karl Rahner.

is expounded in his two systematic works *A Compendium of Christian Theology* and *A Higher Catechism of Theology*.⁷ The analysis of Pope's theology is challenged by a characteristic feature of his writings - his use of provocative but often ambiguous or enigmatic statements. While such statements are stimulating and suggestive for further theological development their meaning and relation to the argument in a particular context are not always clear. His biographer, R.W. Moss, quotes him as responding to a question about the meaning of a passage in the *Compendium*, 'I don't quite know what it means; but the more I think about it, the nearer I come to knowing what I must have meant when I wrote it.'⁸ Hence in the analysis that follows some of these statements will be quoted in their provocative ambiguity as a stimulus to further thought without attempting to fully discern the authorial intention.

I. The Christological Centre of Pope's Theology

In tune with the rest of Pope's theology, his understanding of prevenient grace is rooted in and shaped by his Christology and in particular by his understanding of the atonement. Fundamental to his Christology is the relationship between the historical life, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and the eternal life and purposes of the triune God. Pope portrays this relationship through two dialectically related affirmations. The first is that Jesus Christ is the ultimate revelation of the triune God; a revelation that reaches its most profound expression in the crucifixion. Hence the life, and particularly the death, of Christ reveal the dynamics of the life and purpose of the Trinity. The second is that the significance of the life, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ can only be understood in relation to the eternal purpose of the Trinity.

Pope roots his understanding of the saving mission of Christ in the eternal purpose of the triune God. In the eternal counsel of the Trinity the Son was designated as the vicarious representative of humanity as a whole and of all human beings and thus 'ordained to

⁷ William Burt Pope, *A Compendium of Christian Theology Being an Analytical Outline of a Course of Theological Study, Biblical, Dogmatic and Historical*. Volumes 1-3 (London: Wesleyan Conference Office, 1880), hereafter referred to as Pope, *Compendium*; William Burt Pope, *A Higher Catechism of Theology* (London: T. Woolmer, 1885), hereafter referred to as Pope, *Higher Catechism*.

⁸ Moss, 87.

take human nature.’⁹ Hence ‘we can speak of the incarnation as a Divine reality before time was.’¹⁰ The purpose of the vicarious representation of the Son and the associated assuming of human nature was for the renewal of human nature and the reconciling of humanity to God. It is the eternal response of the Trinity to the eternal divine awareness of Adam’s fall. The Son is thus eternally constituted as the second head of humanity prior to the creation and fall of Adam, the first head.

This eternal reality was actualised in history through the incarnation when the Son assumed a human nature that ‘was the perfect realisation of the eternal idea of mankind.’¹¹ Yet he is the representative of fallen humanity and comes in the likeness of sinful flesh. Pope thus states, ‘Christ in his person is the Son of man, and as the new Adam, the Head and summary of mankind, stands in the stead of all he represents. All that He is and does and suffers He is and does and suffers for the entire human family.’¹²

The historical incarnation was both a means and an end. In itself it was the accomplishment of salvation, for in the assumption of our humanity the Son of God accomplished reconciliation between God and humanity. Thus Pope states, ‘When the Son of God became man the human race was declared to be a saved race.’¹³

The incarnation is also a means to an end – Christ’s atoning death. In Pope’s understanding the atonement has two dimensions. Firstly as the vicarious representative of humanity Jesus Christ lived a life of righteousness, fully obeying and loving God and loving his fellow human beings. This righteousness was consummated in his death on the cross. Thus in his death he offered to God a life of active obedience on behalf of humanity satisfying the demands of divine justice and expiating ‘the punishment due to the guilt of human sin.’¹⁴ Second, this obedience, consummated on the cross, was simultaneously an endurance of the punishment for sin. Thus as the vicarious representative of humanity his passive obedience was ‘a propitiation of the Divine displeasure.’¹⁵ The consequence of Christ’s vicarious action is reconciliation and redemption. The atonement thus removed the barrier between God and humanity, reconciled

⁹ Pope, *Compendium*, 2: 90.

¹⁰ Pope, *Higher Catechism*, 163, see also *Compendium*, 2: 46, 117.

¹¹ Pope, *Compendium*, 2: 117.

¹² Pope, *Compendium*, 2: 270.

¹³ Pope, *Compendium*, 2: 143.

¹⁴ Pope, *Compendium*, 2: 264.

¹⁵ Pope, *Compendium*, 2: 264.

God with humanity and established peace. Pope describes it thus: 'Man was in Christ reconciling God to himself by the most precious oblation.'¹⁶ However, the dilemma of humanity is not only enmity with God; it is also its bondage to sin and the consequences of this bondage; that is, captivity to the devil and death as the penalty for sin. Thus the second dimension of the atonement is that it frees humanity primarily from bondage to sin and its consequences. Drawing on the language of redemption and ransom in the New Testament, Pope argues that the life of Christ is the payment for the liberation of humanity from sin. He does not provide an explanation of how Christ's death frees humanity, rather he emphasises the metaphorical character of the terminology and sees this as 'faintly reflecting an eternal reality.'¹⁷

While the atonement is actualised at a particular point in history this event does not bring about a change in God or in God's relationship with humanity. The death of Christ did not reconcile a hostile God to humanity. It is the historical actualisation of the eternal purpose of God. 'The self devotion of the *One Mediator* dated before He became *Christ Jesus Man*: His incarnation was a testimony in time of an eternal fact in the Divine counsel.'¹⁸ The atonement is pre-eminently the expression of God's love for humanity out of which God desires to redeem all human beings. Reconciliation and redemption are thus the Triune God's eternal purpose for humanity involving all three persons of the Trinity. 'The Father is the God Who sends his Son; the Son is God Who takes our nature that in it he may redeem us; the Holy Ghost is God, Who orders the process of our salvation from alpha to the omega.'¹⁹ The atonement was God's act of reconciliation and redemption, it was the Triune God who expiated humanity's sin and propitiated the divine displeasure.

The atonement is however more than an actualisation of the purpose of the Triune God, for the death of Jesus Christ was the ultimate revelation of the Triune God. The actualisation of the atonement in history is the manifestation of an eternal reality always existing in the life of the Trinity. Pope thus argues that 'God is the Reconciler in the Atonement, in as much as He provides the sacrifice which propitiates himself: the very existence or possibility of the

¹⁶ Pope, *Compendium*, 2: 268.

¹⁷ Pope, *Compendium*, 2: 291.

¹⁸ Pope, *Compendium*, 2: 92.

¹⁹ Pope, *Compendium*, 2: 293.

sacrifice proves Him to be already propitiated.²⁰ Thus the 'atonement declares a propitiation already in the Divine heart.'²¹

The Lamb was slain...*before the foundation of the world*. Therefore whatever exhibition of wrath against sin and love to the sinner we now read in the cross must only be the expression of the same wrath and love in the mind of the Holy Trinity before the world was. Nothing has been added, nothing has been taken away from it, since. The whole matter or word of redemption was *settled in heaven*...All that Atonement means was transacted in the bosom of the Deity before the world was.²²

Elsewhere he states:

Our Lord was sent to declare a reconciliation with sinning human nature preceding and presupposing the sin that needed it, which was no other than the reconciliation of the mercy of love and the justice of holiness in the Divine nature itself through the Incarnation rendered possible by the adorable mystery of the Three Persons in the Godhead.²³

Hence Christ came as the 'Redeemer and Deliverer who had already saved the world in purpose and in effect.'²⁴

Pope emphasises that this locating of the atonement within the eternal life of the Triune God does not mean there is an eternal dissonance within the life of the Trinity. While the exact nature of the atonement lies beyond human inquiry Pope insists that within the mystery of the Triune life:

The Son does not propitiate an anger in the Father that He does not Himself share; nor does the Eternal Father represent a holy justice in the Divine nature which is to be satisfied by an atoning love only found in the Son; nor does the Eternal Spirit witness a covenant that solves a discord in which he has no part. ²⁵

The atonement is therefore an expression of the character and life of the Triune God and its concrete actualisation in human history through Christ as the vicarious representative of humanity.

²⁰ Pope, *Compendium*, 2: 282.

²¹ Pope, *Compendium*, 2: 272.

²² Pope, *Compendium*, 1: 348, emphasis in the original.

²³ Pope, *Compendium*, 2: 283.

²⁴ Pope, *Compendium*, 2: 143.

²⁵ Pope, *Compendium*, 2: 293.

As he states in another context, ‘The economical Trinity is the absolute Trinity.’²⁶ This historical manifestation in the death of Christ is to be understood as the public vindication of God’s government of the world.

As a consequence of Christ being the second Adam, and of the rootedness of the atonement in the character and life of God, the atonement has salvific consequences for all humanity – past, present and future. ‘Christ’s LIFE was one satisfaction for all offenders, and for every kind of offence summed up in one.’²⁷ Redemption is universal; all humanity and the complete human nature have been redeemed. Similarly, reconciliation is universal. ‘The entire world of mankind God is said to have reconciled to himself in Christ, inasmuch as the atoning sacrifice was the actual realisation of a purpose that had been regarded as wrought out from the beginning of human history.’²⁸

The result is that ‘the race in its unity is, notwithstanding sin, placed in a relation of peace with the Supreme Ruler.’²⁹ God’s government of the human race has always taken place within the context of the reconciliation between God and humanity actualised on the cross. As Pope states, ‘Under a decree of redemption virtually accomplished the whole world has lived and moved and had its being.’³⁰ It is only as a consequence of the atonement that a Holy God can relate to sinful humanity. The redemption accomplished by Christ is thus ‘a reality underlying all of human history.’³¹ This, however, does not exclude necessity for persons to reconcile themselves to God through faith in response to the gospel. Rather this personal reconciliation takes place within the context of, and is interrelated with, the universal reconciliation.

II. The Anthropological Consequences of the Universal Atonement

In Pope’s theology the atonement has consequences for the entire human race and for human nature. These consequences must be

²⁶ William Burt Pope, *The Person of Christ: Dogmatic, Scriptural and Historical* (London: Wesley Conference Office, 1875), 60.

²⁷ Pope, *Compendium*, 2: 290 – capitalisation in the original.

²⁸ Pope, *Compendium*, 2: 285.

²⁹ Pope, *Compendium*, 2: 286.

³⁰ Pope, *Compendium*, 2: 92.

³¹ Pope, *Compendium*, 2: 91.

seen against the background of two key elements in his anthropology; these are the creation of humanity in the image of God and the dual headship of the human race.

Pope argues that an important element of what it means to be created in the image of God is to be created as 'a free spiritual personal agent.'³² This is an indestructible component of human nature which he designates the natural image of God. As various biblical texts describe human beings after the fall as bearing the image of God, Pope argues that this image is a permanent component of human nature unaffected by sin. However, New Testament authors also write of the renewal of human beings in the image of God. Hence Pope argues for a second dimension of the image of God, the moral image. The moral image is capable of being defaced and lost. Creation in the image of God establishes a particular relationship between humanity and the divine Son, for to be created in the image of God is to be created in the image of the Second Person of the Trinity who is the 'original, absolute archetypal Image of God.'³³ The unfallen Adam as the bearer of the divine image was indwelt, guided and governed by the Holy Spirit who unites the human soul with God.

The particular relationship between humanity and the Son is intensified in that the incarnate Son is designated in the eternal purpose of God as the second Adam. Hence in the counsel of the Triune God the human race stands in relation to both Adam and Christ, so that '[a]ll human life and destiny is bound up with the relations of these two: The First and the Last Adam.'³⁴ Adam was the organic and representative head of humanity. After his creation he entered into a probationary state on behalf of humanity so that when he fell into sin it had a twofold consequence for the human race. The first consequence is hereditary guilt as a result of which all humans are subject to death. The second consequence is hereditary depravity through which all humans have a bias towards sin; that is a bias 'to forget God, to serve the creature and to live for self.'³⁵ As such, human beings are powerless to save themselves. In Pope's understanding 'those who are born with a sinful bias are therefore condemned' rather 'than that being condemned they are necessarily depraved.'³⁶ In his *Compendium of Christian Theology*, Pope

³² Pope, *Higher Catechism*, 102.

³³ Pope, *Compendium*, 1: 427.

³⁴ Pope, *Compendium*, 2: 56.

³⁵ Pope, *Compendium*, 2: 64, 65.

³⁶ Pope, *Compendium*, 2: 55.

proposes that these two consequences are united in the withdrawal of the Holy Spirit from human beings.³⁷ Later in his *Higher Catechism of Theology* he argues for a partial withdrawal of the Spirit who remains present with the human race despite human sin.³⁸

However, humanity even before the fall does not exist only in Adam. Pope proposed that the human race 'was virtually redeemed before it sinned and before it existed.'³⁹ Hence '[t]he Fall of the world and its recovery were never separated.'⁴⁰ Humanity, and hence Adam himself, always existed in Christ. Thus Pope suggests that it 'might seem as if God, in the creation of man, took account of his coming fall and decreed redemption.'⁴¹ As he puts it less prosaically: 'Apart from Christ and in hard theory, the ruin of man was complete. But man has never been in such a far country as not to hear the appeal of the Father: the *far country* is still the land of Emmanuel.'⁴²

The interpretation of humanity as created in the image of God under the dual headship of Adam and Christ, which is integrally related to the universal atonement, has significant anthropological consequences. The first is that the universal effect of the atonement came into expression simultaneously with the fall, mitigating the consequences of human sin so that the fall was never total. Human nature is 'universally redeemed' so that humanity retained not only the natural image of God but also elements of the moral image.⁴³ While the fall led to the depravity of all human faculties, it did not lead to their destruction. 'The Human mind retains the principles of truth; the heart the capacity of holy affections, the will its freedom, not yet the freedom of necessary evil.'⁴⁴ Pope grounds this Christologically in two ways. Firstly, this is a consequence of the atonement that flows to the whole human race. Secondly, he

³⁷ See Pope, *Compendium*, 2: 59.

³⁸ See Pope, *Higher Catechism*, 131.

³⁹ Pope, *Compendium*, 2: 296.

⁴⁰ Pope, *Compendium*, 2: 92.

⁴¹ Pope, *Compendium*, 1: 430, he comments in *Higher Catechism*, 104: 'The creation of man is bound up with his redemption...St Paul, while he never speaks of man's creation as an eternal purpose, speaks of his redemption as such: especially in relation to the mankind of which Christ will be the Head.'

⁴² Pope, *Compendium*, 2: 63.

⁴³ Pope, *Compendium*, 2: 58.

⁴⁴ Pope, *Compendium*, 2: 59.

proposed, more speculatively, that Christ could not have assumed human nature if it was totally corrupted.⁴⁵

The second anthropological consequence is that while all human beings experience physical death as a consequence of Adam's fall, human nature has been reconciled to God, hence no human being is eternally condemned as a consequence of Adam's sin. Pope states that 'original sin as condemnation in the fullest sense, and as absolute doom, never passed beyond Adam and the unindividualised nature of man. It was arrested in Christ as it regards every individual, and changed into a conditional sentence.'⁴⁶ Human beings come under God's ultimate judgment when they reject the reconciliation offered in Christ for their sin.

III. The Pneumatological Administration of Salvation

Within the economy of salvation Pope held that the particular work of the Holy Spirit was the administration of the redemption and reconciliation accomplished through the atonement. Pope deliberately used the word 'administration' to avoid two dangers. On the one hand he rejected the term 'application' as a word which assumed a Calvinistic understanding of a limited atonement sovereignly applied to the elect. On the other hand he proposed that the term 'appropriation' over emphasised the human dimension and thus tended to Pelagianism. The word 'administration' avoided these extremes and allows for the interactive drama of divine initiative and human response which characterises a Wesleyan understanding of salvation. As Pope emphasised, 'In every age the work of the Spirit in extending the Kingdom of God has been bound up with human agency.'⁴⁷

The Holy Spirit intervenes to administer the consequences of the atonement from the moment of Adam's fall. Pope affirms that, 'The Holy Ghost was given at the outset as, in a particular sense, the Ernest of redemption.'⁴⁸ In his *Compendium*, Pope argues that the

⁴⁵ Pope without argument adopts a particular solution to the historical discussion of the relationship between Christ's humanity and our fallen humanity; for an overview of this discussion see Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *Christ and Reconciliation: A Constructive Christian Theology for a Pluralistic Age*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013), 168-178.

⁴⁶ Pope, *Compendium*, 2: 59.

⁴⁷ Pope, *Compendium*, 2: 343.

⁴⁸ Pope, *Compendium*, 2: 296.

Spirit withdraws himself from humanity as a consequence of the fall, severing the original union with God. This constitutes spiritual death and renders sinners unable to save themselves. The Spirit is then given back to humanity, beginning the process of recovery from spiritual death. In the *Higher Catechism* he proposes an alternative understanding: that the Spirit remains in some sense present despite the fall. In both cases this is an outworking of the atonement. In both cases the consequence is that the 'state of nature' is a 'state of...preliminary grace.'⁴⁹ This grace is the presence of the Spirit within all human beings administering the consequences of the atonement to humanity. This grace influences all of humanity in a secret and hidden manner providing both a foretaste of and a preparation for the fuller redemption that is to come. It is the 'manifestation of Divine influence which precedes the full regenerate life.'⁵⁰

In this preliminary administration of salvation, the Spirit enters into the deepest recesses of the human person to draw them to salvation and to struggle with that which opposes God's salvific purpose. Human beings are totally dependent upon this work of the Spirit for their salvation, for they are enslaved to sin and powerless to save themselves. While exercising a powerful influence on persons the Spirit does not compel them; persons can and often do resist the influence of the Spirit. When persons respond positively to the Spirit's drawing and striving they experience a greater degree of the Spirit's influence. The consequences of the Spirit's work are thus dependent upon the human response to this preliminary grace. Pope writes, 'this prevenient grace is literally bound up with the human use of it being without meaning apart from that use.'⁵¹ Pope's views may thus be described as synergistic, though he used this term to refer to Lutheran views that he found to be inadequate and bordering on semi-Pelagian.⁵² A possible alternative would be to designate his views as Wesleyan synergism, that is, a synergism which emphasises the indispensable initiative of the Spirit and the absolute dependency of human beings on the work of the Spirit. It equally emphasises the necessary co-operation of human beings who can yield to or resist the work of the Spirit. The transforming influence of prevenient grace requires a person's positive human

⁴⁹ Pope, *Compendium*, 2: 390.

⁵⁰ Pope, *Compendium*, 2: 359.

⁵¹ Pope, *Compendium*, 2: 358, 359.

⁵² See Pope, *Compendium* 2: 77, 78, 389, 390.

response to the presence and work of the Spirit who in turn responds to the person. This grace does not save but it is directed towards salvation, preparing the person for regeneration, which they experience when they respond in faith to the gospel. The Spirit's drawing and striving can be described as having three interrelated facets.

First, prevenient grace counters human sinfulness. The Spirit brings about awareness deep within human persons of their deformed and enslaved state, giving rise to a sense of shame, loss and guilt. They are thus made aware that sin is alien to their nature. Positively the Spirit restrains human sinfulness, curbs the tendency toward evil and implants a desire for freedom from the bias to evil and a yearning for fellowship with God. The combination of these dimensions of the work of the Spirit limits the impact of the inborn bias to sin that humans inherit from Adam.

Second, prevenient grace overcomes the human powerlessness to do good and to save themselves that is a consequence of original sin. Pope goes into some detail to explain the relationship between the human bias to evil, the freedom of the will and the impact of God's grace. A brief summary will suffice for our purposes. Pope distinguishes between the human personality or person and the elements of a person's nature such as the will. Unregenerate persons are free in that their will is not determined by a power outside of the person. Hence the sinner is a free and responsible agent. However, the person who 'is behind and beneath' the will is in bondage to sin;⁵³ that is, their motives, thoughts, desires and feelings are shaped by the bias toward evil. The strength of this bias is increased as the person acts upon it developing sinful habits. Hence, while the will as an agent of initiating volition is free from external compulsion, its decisions are shaped by the person's sinful motives, thoughts and desires. Prevenient grace intervenes not by restoring the power of the will but by transforming and renewing a person's motives, attitudes and intellect. In doing so the Spirit works within the depth of persons influencing them and enabling them to resist sin, to choose that which is good, and to submit to God. The Spirit thus restores a person's moral ability. The extent of this restoration is dependent upon the response of the person to the work of the Spirit.

Thirdly, the Spirit is also the Spirit of enlightenment who enables a person to see God's revelation. Central to Pope's theology is his affirmation that 'Jesus Christ is Himself in Person and in Word the

⁵³ Pope, *Compendium*, 2: 363.

revelation of God.’⁵⁴ The Spirit has always been the Spirit of Christ. While God is ultimately revealed in the incarnate Christ; from the dawn of history God was revealed in the Son. By virtue of the Son being eternally constituted as the head of humanity destined to take human nature, ‘He is within our nature – generally in every man who shares it, specially in every regenerate soul – the living eternal “Word of life”.’⁵⁵ So that, ‘He makes the knowledge of God in some sense “common to man,” unveiling the Father through our own faculties and “in our own language wherein we were born” as “the light which lighteth every man that cometh into the world” or that cometh into the nature that he has made his own.’⁵⁶

The Spirit enlightens all human beings by enabling them to perceive the revelation of the Son. Pope understands this to have three elements. The first is an original revelatory promise given to Adam after the fall. Pope argues that through the work of the Spirit aspects of this promise continue to be remembered and articulated in diverse ways in different cultures and religions. Secondly, there is the re-inscribing of the law of God on the hearts of human beings so that they know in some form God’s moral requirements. All awareness of truth comes from the Spirit of truth. The third is God’s revelation in the nature and providence through which God is continually revealed to humanity. The consequence of the work of the Spirit is that we find throughout history, both in individuals and societies, perceptions of God’s revelation. Yet these perceptions are incomplete and distorted by human sin. The ultimate revelation is to be found in the birth, life, teaching, death and resurrection of Jesus. This revelation presupposes yet fulfils and completes all previous revelation.

The combined consequence of the first three facets is, negatively, that the evil that is innate within humanity, as a consequence of original sin and its consequences in human history, are ‘restrained, controlled and mitigated.’⁵⁷ Positively, the combination is that the Spirit inspires the person to search after God and the good, thus drawing them towards God. Hence from deep within the human person there now arises a desire for communion with God. This groping after God is expressed concretely and diversely in various non-Christian religions. Further, humanity is not as evil as it could

⁵⁴ Pope, *Compendium*, 1: 10.

⁵⁵ Pope, *Person of Christ*, 41.

⁵⁶ Pope, *Person of Christ*, 40.

⁵⁷ Pope, *Compendium*, 2: 58.

be; rather, evil is retrained and there are found human beings who are moral, just, merciful and compassionate.

Those who yield to the influences of the restraining and prompting Spirit of conviction, and strive to *cease to do evil and learn to do well*, are in the way of duty approved by God. It is wrong to say that all sincere works done before regeneration are only splendid vices, and counted by the Judge as evil: however true it is that they are not meritorious, and can do nothing towards justification, they are in a way the preparation for Divine acceptance. It is incorrect even to affirm that there is no ethical duty possible to the unregenerate...there is a religious life before the regenerate life, and it has its morals. There are *fruits meet for repentance*, which are also *the fruit of the Spirit*, though not yet the Spirit of regeneration.⁵⁸

Hence throughout human history, cultures, and religions we find signs pointing toward the fullness of redemption that came in Jesus Christ.

IV. The Soteriological Goal of Preventive Grace

Fundamental to Pope's understanding of preventive grace is that it is directed towards salvation. This salvific *telos* has two dimensions. The first is redemptive-historical. In this dimension, preventive grace was given to humanity in the wake of the fall to prepare humanity for the coming of the Redeemer. Secondly, it has a personal dimension: preventive grace prepares persons for, and leads them toward, conversion and regeneration.

In its redemptive-historical dimension, preventive grace anticipated the redemption that was to come in Christ and prevented humanity from falling into a state of total degeneration, preserving human nature 'from sinking below the possibility of redemption.'⁵⁹ It produced in human beings a longing for salvation, recalling to remembrance aspects of the original revelation and pointing to general revelation. As human beings responded to God's grace so God responded to them and this gave rise to a diversity of anticipations of the gospel in human religion and culture. This is a partial experience of redemption and a promise of its coming fullness. The coming of Christ is the historical fulfilment of this

⁵⁸ Pope, *Compendium*, 3: 193.

⁵⁹ Pope, *Compendium*, 2: 58.

anticipation of redemption. The Holy Spirit working through prevenient grace is 'the herald and forerunner of Christ.'⁶⁰ The coming of Christ reveals to humanity the salvation whose benefits they have already enjoyed. However, as the message of the gospel has not reached all people, there is a continuing aspect to this redemptive-historical dimension of prevenient grace in cultures and societies that have not been exposed to the gospel.

On a personal level there is a concentration or intensification of the universal prevenient grace that connects with the person's previous movement towards God in response to universal prevenient grace. This concentration accompanies the proclamation of the gospel and calls persons to salvation. Through this, the Spirit works deep within persons to convict them of sin, to draw them to God, and to enable and dispose them to respond in repentance and faith to the gospel. In all this the Spirit takes the initiative to make it possible for human beings to respond; yet human co-operation is imperative. It is possible for human beings to reject the work of the Spirit. Those who respond in faith and obedience experience the new birth. Regeneration is thus the consummation of the unfolding work of the Spirit in prevenient grace.

Pope contrasts the Methodist understanding of prevenient grace with the Reformed theology of common grace. He affirms that prevenient grace is present in diverse ways and different intensities yet he maintains it is always directed toward the goal of salvation. There is continuity of grace from its most universal forms to regenerating, sanctifying and glorifying grace. There is no influence of the Holy Spirit that arises from the atonement that is not directed toward salvation. Hence the Reformed idea of common grace that restrains sin and enables human goodness, but is not directed toward human salvation is to be rejected. Pope states that Methodist theology 'will not tolerate the irreverent distinction between common grace and special grace, believing all grace was purchased at the cost of Christ's most precious blood, and is intended to lead to salvation.'⁶¹

This raises the question of whether it is possible for people who have not heard the gospel to be saved through the effects of prevenient grace. Pope insists that God's mercy 'in every age guided

⁶⁰ William Burt Pope, *The Peculiarities of Methodist Doctrine* (London: Wesleyan Conference Office, 1878), 10, quoted in Dunlap, 297.

⁶¹ William Burt Pope, 'Methodist Doctrine,' in J.O.A. Clark, ed. *The Wesley Memorial Volume, or, Wesley and the Methodist Movement, Judged by Nearly One Hundred and Fifty Writers Living or Dead* (New York: Philips and Hunt, 1881), 168-190, 179.

the instincts of the sincere...towards an unknown Saviour.’⁶² He rejects the idea that there will be a general eschatological condemnation of all who have not heard the gospel and argues that humanity will be judged on the basis of the revelation that they have received. Those who have not heard the gospel will be judged according to their moral conscience. He provides no systematic development of this preferring to leave it to the justice of God. Rather surprisingly, given his understanding of the universality of the atonement and of prevenient grace, he states that it is a mystery as to how this judgment on the basis of conscience can be reconciled with the affirmation that Christ is the only name given by which humanity can be saved.⁶³

V. Christianity and Other Faiths

The dynamics of Pope’s theology of prevenient grace can be seen in his interpretation of religions other than Judaism and Christianity. He interprets human religiosity as a product of a complex dynamic interaction of six factors. These are: the original revelation to humanity in the aftermath of the fall; general revelation in nature and the human person; the continuing work of the Spirit of God in all humanity; the human desire for God that arises out of the Spirit’s work; original sin and the consequent human bias towards evil; and the diversity of human cultures. In the case of Islam, he adds Christian revelation as a further element. The consequence of original sin and human resistance to the Spirit is that all religions other than Judaism and Christianity are corruptions of the original revelation yet elements of the original revelation remain; God continues to communicate with humanity and the Spirit continues to work within these religions. This work is seen in reformations which return these religions to greater faithfulness to God’s revelation. Further these religions give expression in a multiplicity of ways to the deep-seated spiritual longings of humanity.

Christianity is not merely one among the other religions as it arises out of the ultimate revelation in Christ. ‘God has in sundry times and diverse manners spoken to the human race, and finally consummated all in the words of His Son.’⁶⁴ Hence the Christian

⁶² Pope, *Compendium*, 1: 58, 59.

⁶³ See Pope, *Compendium*, 3: 416-417.

⁶⁴ Pope, *Compendium* 1: 60.

revelation 'is the last of many words.'⁶⁵ The non-Christian religions are to be evaluated against the norm of the ultimate revelation of God in Christ. This evaluation will result in the rejection of some elements of a particular religion, the affirmation of others and the attempt to show how the spiritual longings expressed through the religion are fulfilled in Christ. Pope thus asserts that: 'The Christian Religion explains the religiousness of mankind, and pays respect to the forms in which this has been expressed.'⁶⁶

The non-Christian religions are part of the process by which 'God has in every age been training the nations for the full disclosure of Himself.'⁶⁷ They are a preparation for the coming Christ, redemptive both historically and through the ongoing expansion of the church. Thus the revelation of God in Christ fulfils, corrects, and perfects the non-Christian religions. It explains and corrects their errors and affirms the truth contained within them. Truth is to be found scattered throughout the different religions. Pope provides examples of this in his discussion of the doctrine of creation (where he treats early Hinduism particularly favourably) and the incarnation.⁶⁸ Further he affirms that the Spirit is at work in members of other religions and argues that those who have not heard the gospel will be judged by the light that they have received and many will ultimately be accepted by God. However, Pope is confident that Christianity will in the long term succeed in overcoming all other religions. Even though eastern religions were strongly resistant to the influence of Christianity, Pope believed this resistance was slowly being surmounted. He thus confidently asserted that: 'No species of heathenism has ever effectually withstood the power of the Christian religion.'⁶⁹

VI. With Pope beyond Pope: Some Critically Constructive Proposals

A major critique of Pope's theology has been that he failed to engage and explore the intellectual and theological debates of his context and that he preferred instead to restate and reinvigorate the received

⁶⁵ Pope, *Compendium* 1: 59.

⁶⁶ Pope, *Compendium*, 1:52, 53.

⁶⁷ Pope, *Compendium*, 1:53.

⁶⁸ Pope, *Compendium*, 1: 367-381; 2: 147.

⁶⁹ Pope, *Compendium* 1:145.

tradition.⁷⁰ While aspects of this criticism are valid, his theology of prevenient grace opens up new perspectives that anticipate developments in twentieth-century theology and have the potential to contribute to twenty-first-century theology in the Methodist tradition. In concluding this article I want briefly to note three areas which merit further investigation and development.

The first is Pope's understanding of the relationship between time, eternity, history, and the divine counsel as expounded in his atonement theology. Pope presented what might be described as an Arminian surpralapsarian understanding of the counsel of the Trinity. The divine decision to create human beings and permit them to fall is dependent on the prior constitution of the Son as the vicarious head of humanity who will make atonement for human sin. Further this constitution of the Son as the Second Adam (and the atonement itself) is an aspect of the life of the Triune God that precedes not only the incarnation but also creation. He can thus state that: 'Time, with all its redeeming wonders is only the revelation of the mystery of eternity. And that mystery is the Christ of God.'⁷¹ Pope's intention is not merely to root his understanding of the atonement in the inner life of the Trinity but to argue that forgiveness was not something that had to be earned by the human Christ. It is something inherent to the nature and character of the Triune God. By locating the atonement within the inner life of the Trinity he provides a basis for an integrated and dynamic understanding of the interrelationship between creation and redemption that overcomes potential dualisms. Pope's exposition provides an important model of a Christological and Trinitarian understanding of the purpose of God which brings together creation, fall, prevenient grace and salvation into a dynamic relationship. As a consequence there is a coherency and consistency in his interpretation of the divine attitude toward and action in the world.

However, Pope's proposals leave a number of unanswered questions, which are compounded by the ambiguity of some of his formulations. If the atoning death of Christ is a manifestation of an already existing eternal reality, why was its historical manifestation necessary? Does the cross actually achieve anything or is it merely the revelation of something that already existed? While recognising that we are dealing with the divine mystery, a contemporary attempt

⁷⁰ See Thomas A. Langford, Practical Divinity, Vol.1, *Theology in the Wesleyan Tradition* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1983), 59-63.

⁷¹ Pope, *Person of Christ*, 33.

to develop Pope's ideas would need to give careful attention to this, particularly in the light of challenges raised by open theism to traditional understandings of the relationship between the divine purpose and human history.

A second critical issue is Pope's proposal that one effect of the atonement is to arrest the effects of the fall so that humanity is not as fallen as it could be. On the one hand, Pope's interpretation opens the way for a positive assessment of human life and culture as the outworking of the potential given by God in creation which was not seriously affected by the fall. On the other hand, it is questionable whether this lessening of the tension between sin and grace does justice to the New Testament portrayal of humanity outside of Christ as dead in sin. In developing Pope's ideas, further attention needs to be given to the dynamic interrelationship and interaction between God's creative purpose for humanity, human sin and its consequence, and the influence of prevenient grace. I would argue that such a dynamic understanding of prevenient grace should not be understood as a universal upgrade of all human beings but rather as the dynamic interactive presence of God in the midst of the human reality in all its complexity.

Thirdly, Pope's understanding of prevenient grace demonstrates an unusual valuing of non-Christian religions and philosophies. It is notable that his appreciation is not confined to the classical sources of western thought but includes an appreciation for other religions, notably Hinduism. While some of his thinking reflects the triumphalism of Victorian imperialism and the nineteenth-century missionary movement, other parts express a nuanced attitude which honours the agency of those who had not heard the gospel. He thus affirms not only that the various religions contain genuine reflections of God's revelation but also that the work of various religious reformers was a response to the Spirit of God. His critique of other religions must be seen in the light of his critique of some forms of Christianity. In various places he describes how the concrete reality of the church is a mixture of faithful response to the revelation of God in Christ and the distortions of human sin and fallibility. Thus when Pope refers to Christianity in relation to other religions he is referring to the revelation of God in Christ recorded in the scriptures; this revelation has been expressed imperfectly in the historical life of the church.

Conclusion

Much has changed in the religious world in last 120 years. While Christianity has grown strongly in Africa it has made less significant gains in Asia; Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism are living and vital religious traditions which show no sign of being 'overcome' (in Pope's imperialistic terminology) by Christianity. In Europe and North America, Christian influence is rapidly declining. A chastened and humbler approach to the other living faiths is required. Pope's contribution remains significant. It provides a way for viewing other faiths as genuine responses to God's revelation, which, like Christianity, are corrupted by sin. It affirms that the Spirit of God is present and working in them – thus when Christians bring the gospel to people of other faiths they recognise and affirm that the Spirit is already present and at work. It affirms a Christological basis for recognising God's work in other faiths but in such a way as to recognise the Spirit-enabled agency of the members of these faiths. It remains hopeful that those who have not heard the gospel may be saved but does not sacrifice the necessity of proclaiming the gospel. It could provide a basis for genuine dialogue with people of other faiths when it is recognised that in our encounter with them we might come to a fuller understanding of the revelation of God in Jesus Christ witnessed to in the Scripture. In the context of increasing religious pluralism, it opens the way for finding new ways to live together which both affirm the uniqueness of God's revelation in Christ and respects the faith and life of others.