

REVIEWS

Gerald O'Collins, SJ. *Salvation for All: God's Other Peoples*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008. (ix + 279 pp.) [ISBN: 978-0-19-923890-3]

Gerald O'Collins is an Australian Roman Catholic theologian who, after 32 years as Professor of Theology at the Gregorian University (Rome), is now Research Professor of Theology at St Marys University College, Twickenham. As an elder statesman of theology O'Collins has established himself as one of the finest theologians working today. His numerous books and articles have established him as an articulate, thoughtful, and faithful representative of classical Christianity.

In the present work O'Collins aim is to examine Scripture and ask what it has to say about those peoples outside the covenant of Israel or the established Church, what O'Collins calls 'God's other peoples.' O'Collins acknowledges that most of Scripture is about those within the covenant community and that God's other peoples are peripheral, but, he sets himself the task of examining what God thinks of these other people and what status they may have in terms of being saved or otherwise. The express focus of the work is a biblical survey which occupies ten chapters, with six chapters summarising the findings and brining them into something of a systematic theology. According to O'Collins, this is one of the few works, perhaps the only such work to attempt to simply present what Scripture has to say about God's other peoples.

Given the credentials of O'Collins and the stated purpose of the work, this book should have been compelling reading and opened up further dialogue on this important subject. Unfortunately this is not the case. The basic premise of O'Collins work appears to be that from Genesis to Revelation Scripture witnesses to God's favourable dealings with many peoples who are not in a formal covenantal relationship with God, and that this relationship is a saving one. O'Collins thus presupposes and presents a strong form of inclusivism, albeit a nuanced one. The problem, however, is that there is just is not enough information in Scripture to support O'Collins' supposition. It is not clear in his case studies that the peoples under review are not part of a covenanted

relationship with God. It is not clear that these so-called 'other peoples' have not come into direct contact with followers of Yahweh or disciples of Christ. Where there is information on God's attitude to these 'others' it is universal in scope and does not refer to salvation. For instance, O'Collins makes much of the universal scope of the Noahic covenant and concludes that God looks favourably on all humanity in a 'decentralized' form of benevolent universalism (p. 12).

In addition to individuals being singled out by O'Collins the religions more generally are also affirmed by him. In a treatment of astral religion O'Collins concludes that all religions, even if inferior to the religion of Israel, are divinely approved (p. 20). In the extended discussion O'Collins claims that God gives astral religions to the nations, that God creates all religions, and thus they are all positive roads to experiencing Yahweh. Thus, while the cult of Israel and the NT church are the supreme examples of God honouring religion, they are not the only ones. To further illustrate, O'Collins finds the stories of Ruth, Naaman the Syrian, Ballam, Amos, the sailors of the Jonah story from the Old Testament, and from the New Testament centurions, the districts of Tyre and Sidon, the demoniac of Gadara, the Samaritan leper, and others to support his case. And yet in each of these stories God's direct revelation is known to the person in question or a general revelation is affirmed but no saving component of the message is included. Thus O'Collins is forced to make ludicrous and unfounded conclusions from the scant evidence he can muster.

Other evidence O'Collins finds includes the fact that the New Testament speaks of Jesus' salvation for all, that at the end-time banquet all the nations will be present, that redemption is for Jew and Gentile, and other such statements. From these O'Collins concludes that all who want to will thus be saved (a form of universalism but universalism as such). O'Collins pays special attention to the Pauline phrase 'all things' and concludes that believers and unbelievers alike are included in God's salvation. According to O'Collins, the burden of Scripture points to the fact that the basis of eternal salvation is merciful deeds, regardless of faith in Jesus Christ or Yahweh. Those who do merciful deeds but are outside of Christ are called 'holy Gentiles' and have an equivalent status to new covenant believers (see p. 134 especially).

O'Collins bases his conclusions on several clear presuppositions: the universal work of Christ necessitates a universal salvation; the sending of the Spirit on all flesh necessitates the salvation of all; and the final eschatological summation of all things in Christ entails that all peoples

who wish to be are in a right relationship with God, regardless of their response to Christ during their lifetime.

Such conclusions on the part of O'Collins put him outside the realm of orthodox Christianity and, perhaps more pertinently, outside the official teaching of the Roman Catholic communion of which he is a part. He writes on p. 2 that instead of the traditional Roman Catholic commitment to *extra ecclesiam non salus* it should be an *extra ???*. One senses the freedom O'Collins perhaps feels in his newly acquired distance from Rome – geographically and perhaps theologically.

It is disappointing that a work which promises so much delivers so little. O'Collins indulges in special pleading, illegitimate inferences, in drawing conclusions from arguments from silence, and in assuming the answers to questions before the evidence has been examined. From a theologian as good as O'Collins this is as surprising as it is disappointing.

Myk Habets

J.L. Walls, and J.R. Dongell. *Why I Am Not a Calvinist*. Downers Grove: IVP, 2004. (230pp.)

R.A. Peterson, and M.D. Williams. *Why I Am Not an Arminian*. Downers Grove: IVP, 2004. (224pp.)

The two volumes under review came out in the same year and were helpfully devised as companion volumes. The idea is a good one: to present the fundamental objections of each system by advocates of the opposing system. The discussion throughout these volumes is marked by an irenic tone, a healthy respect for the other system and its advocates, and an appreciation for the Great Tradition from which both streams of thought flow. A welcome omission in these works is the often-uncharitable polemical nature of the debate that has marked more than one interchange on this topic in the past. This does not mean that the two volumes are not direct, hard hitting, and at times blunt. Both present a coherent, consistent, and lucid discussion of the issues and as such provide a useful overview of these historic systems.

The issue of Arminianism and Calvinism is a perennial one amongst evangelical Christians and in recent years the discussion has become something of a flashpoint, at least in North American evangelicalism. In an Australasian context this may not be quite so acute but systems of