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## THE PROMISE

### *Imagine a world . . . .*

Times move on. It shows that we truly are living in a new century and a rapidly changing world when a writer considers it necessary to explain who *The Beatles* were, but for those who don't know or have forgotten, *The Beatles* were one of Britain's major rock and pop successes of the 1960s, a band of four singing artistes and widely seen as symbols of a revolutionary new age — the *swinging sixties*. The group consisted of John Lennon, Paul McCartney, George Harrison and Ringo Starr. It broke up in 1970 and the artistes went their separate ways. Separated from *The Beatles* John Lennon now wrote what was to become his personal 'hymn' in praise of his own anti-religion, anti-nationalist view of the world. Remember, these were the years of 'flower power'! Called *Imagine*, his song (recorded and released in 1971 in his second solo album — also called *Imagine*) invited people to imagine a world where there was no hell below us, and above us, only sky. Imagine, sang Lennon, a world where there was no religion and all the people lived life in peace. A world where there were no countries — so nothing to kill or die for. The song was, in Lennon's words, 'chocolate-coated' for public consumption. By this he apparently meant he wanted the *Imagine* album

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to be a commercial success, rather than a critical success, as had been his first solo album, *Plastic Ono Band*. But the song struck a chord, in more ways than one. At the height of the cold war people were very frightened of the prospect of total annihilation, and had vivid memories of the Second World War, just a generation earlier. Besides, the Western world was throwing off the yoke of Christianity (as many saw it) and had not 100 years of Darwinism proved that there is no God and that we are all here by chance? So, better make the most of life — it's short, in any case — and find a way to co-exist peacefully and live happily ever after.

Superficially, *Imagine* is attractive. It invites us to find a way to live together, to build an elusive peace and to focus on the here and now. It sees religion as the primary culprit in mankind's woes, and wants to replace God with . . . Man. As religion, in the shape of Christianity, has always sought to make people consider the effects of their actions, and to lead a happily sober and upright life before a holy God, those children of the swinging sixties were bound to be on a direct collision course with Christianity as the established faith, if not with 'religion' as a whole. Perhaps this begins to explain the popularity of Lennon's hymn. Sadly we will never know just how Lennon's own life and beliefs might have developed. He was assassinated in New York in December 1980. It may be that *Imagine* was unduly naïve. Few still talk with any real sense of conviction of a building a totally peaceful world, although it remains the holy grail of the intellectual political classes. The Lord Jesus was rather more realistic and honest when he affirmed quite simply that wars and rumours of wars will persist — right up until the end of human history (see Matthew 24:6).

There is today, however, a growing interest in the idea of the benefits of a confluence of religions. Mankind is

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troubled by the world that we have built for ourselves. Globalisation means that individual people are more intimately aware than they ever have been, of the belief systems of *other* peoples and races, right across the world. We live in an age when the concept of ‘diversity’ has been thrust upon us, and many now promote that idea as a means to demonstrate how people of all religious persuasions can live together in ‘peace’ and harmony. The exclusive claims of Christianity as providing the sole means to peace with the Divine — of salvation — are considered by many — both within and outside of the Christian church, to be simply wrong. How could a Deity, God, allow religions to develop when only one of them is authentic? It is just plain unfair of Him to do so. So the idea must be wrong. Most people do not consider God to be unfair or indeed capricious, so there must be something wrong with the traditional claims of Christianity and it is time that they were changed. Again, there must be a superficial attractiveness to the idea that all religions are acceptable to God and that it does not really matter what you believe so long as you are sincere and tolerant. But the fact that something is popular does not make it right. And the more important question, surely, is this: just how *has* God revealed Himself to His world? As a righteous and loving Saviour, or as a sort of Chief Executive Officer of a religious conglomerate with multiple brands but one (loose) unifying theme? It is these questions that we are embarked upon to explore in this book.

There are many religions and many philosophies in this world. There always have been, and always will be. Because of this extraordinary juxtaposition of ideas and ideals, a veritable religious-collage making up a sort of identikit picture of a god-like figure, this book will *not* attempt to analyse all *the religions* in depth. The task would be quite

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impossible in a short book. Comparative religion is the task of a lifetime's study — perhaps — although this author would argue that an undue emphasis on *the religions* is actually injurious to people and is not what God wants. Far from it, in fact! Nevertheless we will look at specific beliefs of *the religions* where it is helpful to compare and contrast them with traditional Christianity. Already we have hit a problem: in defining Christianity we must acknowledge that there are a huge range of people that would call themselves 'Christian' but who do not in practice believe its basic tenets. Whilst Christianity has rightly been called a 'broad church', the question must be faced and answered — just how broad can it become and still be true to its core beliefs? An analogy may help: in the UK if a member of parliament ('MP') representing the Labour Party happens to believe in and votes for all the policies of the Conservative Party and only a few, if any, policies of his own party, is he truly a Labour MP? He may say he is. He may think he is and be able to rationalize his 'distance' from what Labour actually stands for. But any objective observer from outside Parliament will conclude, with no difficulty, that he is not truly a Labour man, no matter what he was when he first became an MP. The author will develop this theme further in this book because, if people are prepared to be honest with themselves, and with others, and with God, they will recognize and acknowledge that there are an increasing number within the Church who would find it difficult to put their hand on their heart and say 'I am a Christian.' And it is true that a growing band within the umbrella of the Church are beginning to openly acknowledge that they are not in fact Christians by any biblical definition. There are probably others who *would* so acknowledge, if they were being totally honest with themselves. This reality of non-believers

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within the Church must be of more than a passing interest to non-Christians who may actively be searching for truth. They have a right to know whether those who claim to be Christians are in fact, something different. As total honesty in this regard is (sadly) not always to be expected, this book will explore some simple biblical yardsticks by which an enquirer should measure where people actually stand. The dangers of division within the Church are acknowledged and it is not the desire of this author to create new ones. Also acknowledged is Christ's call for unity amongst His followers — something that is championed in this book. But we are not called by the Lord Jesus to find unity at *any* price. Indeed He warns us of wolves disguised in sheep's clothing and of false teachers invading the Church (e.g. Matthew 7:13–23).

This question about the nature of God (and ultimately that is what this whole subject really boils down to) is just too important to ignore. If God is as the pantheists or religious-syncretists want us to believe 'He' or 'It' is, then 'He' or 'It' has a lot of questions to answer. If, on the other hand God is as the Holy Bible clearly states He is, then *we* have a lot of questions to answer!

Who is likely to be reading this book? There are perhaps three broad types who will have a real interest in this whole area:

- (1) Those who are of what the author later defines as '*the religions*'.<sup>1</sup> In other words, those who follow a faith system that is not Christianity, but who, nevertheless, are still interested in the biblical claims of Christianity and how they compare with their own beliefs. These might be described as people who are willing to undertake a religious self-audit.
- (2) People of no religion and/or agnostics, but who remain

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<sup>1</sup> See chapter 11

interested in knowing what Christianity has to say about the nature of God.

(3) Church attending Christians who want to remind themselves in a (hopefully) humble and expect manner, of what the Holy Bible has to say about the nature of God and the nature of Jesus the Messiah.

What precisely, then, is the ‘promise’ held out by pantheists, or syncretists (and are these two groups the same as what we will later define as Godists?) A pantheist in this context is one who believes in more than one ‘god’. Hinduism is perhaps the archetypal pantheist religion although some Hindus believe that their various gods are part of a greater god. A syncretist, according to the Oxford dictionary, is one who tries to reconcile differing schools of thought. In the context of this book it is someone who wants (and believes in) the melding of *the religions* so that in some way — a way that is perhaps not defined, or is ill-defined — they should increasingly become one. Syncretistic religion in its current fashion seeks to encourage the so-called ‘higher religions’ (another term that is ill-defined!) to recognize that they all worship the same deity/deities and will increasingly rejoice in each others’ separate ‘revelations’ of deity. The most obvious outworking of this belief-system at the time of the writing this book is the so-called ‘multi-faith service’ where different religions come together under one roof, ostensibly to ‘worship’ one or more gods. We will delay defining Godism whilst we review the multi-faith agenda.

### **The Multi-Faith Agenda**

Because in the West we live in open societies, and because those societies have for more than a century been the primary engine of global economic growth and societal

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development, we have seen a steadily increasing extent of migration from developing countries to the West. Because of the West's generally exponential economic growth and improvement in living standards and living expectations, there has been a perceived need to invite people from other cultures to take on many of the more basic jobs. This in turn has led to the development of expatriate populations of immigrants, who either cannot or will not meld with their host communities. A form of physical and societal ghettoisation of immigrant communities has developed in many Western countries. Sometimes those of new cultures live in separate areas, in other cases they live close to the host community but decline to integrate with them. Immigrant populations in most Western countries have been sufficient in number to make a reality of the idea of a multi-cultural society. There has been little or no debate about the long term consequences of these societal developments, and indeed until the 2001 Islamist attack on the New York World Trade Centre in what has universally become known as 9/11, Western middle and governing classes tended to see multi-culturalism as an unalloyed positive and welcome development. In the words of one UK Labour politician, Britain had become a collection of different cultures unified by a common language. The same ideas were in vogue around the rest of the Western world at the turn of the twenty first century. Living within a multi-culture society of different but equal citizens, what could be more natural than the idea of a multi-faith society of different but equal religions? To suggest that one religion is right implies that others are wrong and this in turn runs the risk of committing the unpardonable modern sin — the risk of causing offence! If God is the Deity of the whole world, then all of the 'higher' religions must in their own

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various ways be right, although some would say perhaps not equally right. In other words some people hold the private view that some religions are 'higher' than others! There is also the vague concept of the *divine spark*, to be found in all humans, being some reflection of the Deity, a spark that must also therefore be present in all of these 'higher' religions as they seek to bring us closer to that Deity.

The multi-faith agenda is now pursued vigorously by Western politicians, as one plank in their cohesiveness policies. That is to say, those policies aimed at developing and maintaining a sense of togetherness within society, in an attempt to resist what could otherwise easily become the real and emphatic 'balkanisation' of Western countries. In a generally post-modern and therefore post-Christian society, there is some reason for the populace at large also to consider that *multi-faith* as opposed to *competing-faith* is generally a good thing, and therefore to be welcomed. At the time of writing the former UK Prime Minister Tony Blair had created the Tony Blair Faith Foundation which shared its values in its online mission statement. We consider it briefly, as a clear statement of the multi-faith agenda: ***'The Tony Blair Faith Foundation aims to promote respect and understanding about the world's major religions and show how faith is a powerful force for good in the modern world.'*** Most right thinking people would consider that 'respect' is a good thing. But it means very different things to different people. The Oxford dictionary talks of respect as being deferential regard, esteem, heed, reference and good wishes. Most Western people would respect the right of others to maintain their belief systems providing those same beliefs do not threaten others. But should, for example, Christians (or indeed any Westerners) be expected to respect Hindu temple prostitution or the Islamic concept of Dar-al-Harb?

*‘Faith is vitally important to hundreds of millions of people. It underpins systems of thought and of behaviour. It underpins many of the world’s great movements for change or reform, including many charities. And the values of respect, justice and compassion that our great religions share have never been more relevant or important to bring people together to build a better world.’* Again the word ‘values’ is one that needs consideration. Western politicians and especially British ones, speak of ‘values’ in almost hushed tones, as they try to establish ‘values’ that will unite people in social cohesiveness. So we are told we need to value ‘respect’, without being clear about just what respect is and to what extent it must be applied. We are to value ‘justice’, which again can be defined in very diverse ways. And finally we must value ‘compassion’. In a UK context (and probably in a Western context generally) all these words appear at first glance to be very reasonable and unobjectionable. But the question then must be asked (*and answered!*) as to whether the ‘great religions’ have the same concept of, for example, compassion. Again in the Hindu context, what *do* we understand of respect in terms of the *devadasi system*? Its roots go deep into Hindu history — but to most Western eyes the devadasi system is simply the exploitation of the lower castes. Are we really to respect this, and to consider this to be justice? *‘But religious faith can also be used to divide. We have seen throughout history and today we still see how it can be distorted to fan the flames of hatred and extremism.’* Most people can recognise this statement as true, especially today, in the twenty-first century. If ‘religious extremism’ can be successfully tackled by Tony Blair’s Foundation and similar initiatives, then most people would be happy enough. But the question has to be asked (and again honestly answered)

are the so-called ‘extreme’ beliefs actually mainstream beliefs? Is it only the West — and Western politicians in particular — that are in denial about the true and mainstream beliefs of at least some of the ‘great religions’? ***‘The Tony Blair Faith Foundation is a response to these opportunities and challenges. We will use the full power of modern communications to support and step up efforts at every level to educate, inform and develop understanding about the different faiths and between them.’*** Will the multi-faith agenda promote true ‘understanding’ or will it promote an apparently benign form of politico-religious propaganda? Already we see that so-called ‘religious education’ appears increasingly to be simply a servant to Western politicians’ social cohesiveness objectives. Current religious education, rather than comparing and contrasting religious beliefs in any systematic and scientific way, is yielding to superficially well-meaning attempts to evolve new ways to think about old religions. Rather than gaining systematic instruction, Western children are being taught what well-intentioned but non-expert politicians, aided and abetted by the religious education establishment, think that ‘*the religions*’ ought to believe! ***‘At the same time, the Foundation will use its profile and resources to encourage people of faith to work together more closely to tackle global poverty and conflict. By supporting such inter-faith initiatives, the Foundation will help underline the religion’s relevance and positive contribution.’***

Whether inter-faith initiatives truly represent the will of Almighty God is a key theme of this book. Plainly, where mutual understanding can help avoid suspicions and therefore break down barriers, then in principle most people would probably think of inter-faith ‘dialogue’ in positive terms. But is the multi-faith agenda truly honouring to Almighty

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God? There seems to be a secular assumption that multi-faith is *ipso facto* a good thing. But is it? What dangers does it entail? Has anyone troubled to undertake a religious risk-audit of where multi-faithism might lead? As expressed by the Tony Blair Foundation, the underlying objective seems to be to co-opt religions to become (inexpensive) delivery systems for government social programmes, such as ‘tackling’ global poverty. The slightly arrogant objective as expressed by the Blair Foundation seems to be to keep religious people away from their religions and help them to ‘see’ that, with Government support, they can become doers of good works — which presumably is considered to be honouring to ‘god’ — if ‘he’ or ‘it’ exists at all! Even more arrogantly, all this government inspired religious busyness will help to make *the religions* appear ‘relevant’ to the world at large. The Blair Foundation mission statement finally went on to ask for people’s support in realizing its objectives, vague those these were. And it concluded with an inevitable plea for financial donations!

At the time of writing this book, one Karen Armstrong,<sup>2</sup> a UK based religious author and well known campaigner for the multi-faith agenda was chairing an internet based campaign aimed at developing a multi-faith ‘Charter’ that would call for the universal upholding of a ‘Golden Rule’ that was said to exist in all religions (although precisely which religions were covered was not made entirely clear). According to early press-releases, the proposed Charter would be based on ‘the universal principles’ of compassion and respect, which were seen as being the Golden Rule at the heart of *the religions*. On the official website Armstrong stated that ‘the chief task of our time is to build a global

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<sup>2</sup> Karen Armstrong, an ex-Catholic, now describes herself as a ‘freelance monotheist’ – Public Affairs Television (PBS), interview with Bill Moyers, Jan 2002.

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society where people of all persuasions can live together in peace and harmony. If we do not achieve this, it seems unlikely that we will have a viable world to hand on to the next generation. Instead of being seen as part of the problem, *the religions* could make a vital contribution to this urgent undertaking.’ Various contributors on the website stated that *a militant kind of aggressive religiosity, or fundamentalism*, had grown in all the major ‘world traditions’ as a rebellion against an imbalanced world: people were rebelling against powerlessness and against humiliation, whilst religion itself focused more and more on ‘a narrow definition of religious dogma’. Every religion, said one contributor, had a history of intolerance. Armstrong herself said that she wanted people to ‘hear the compassionate voice of religion — to bring compassion to the forefront’. Noticeably absent from the initial video contributions was any mention of God!

The idea of a Golden Rule, as a sort of *religion outside of the religions*, was always likely to find support among ordinary people. It sounded so kind, so reasonable and so compassionate, as it aimed to make people forget their differences and live together gladly in peace. At a superficial level this was bound to be attractive. And it was music to the ears of politicians, who ultimately wanted their general populace to live peaceably and productively, serving society as a whole. Both the so-called Golden Rule and its attendant multi-faith Charter were, at the time of writing this book, being overseen and coordinated by a group called, with absolutely no sense of irony, *The Council of Sages*. These ‘Sages’ were well known religious types from various religions. Once the Golden Rule was crystallised and codified, it would be affirmed that:

- Compassion is celebrated in all major religious, spiritual and ethical traditions.

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- The Golden Rule is our prime duty and cannot be limited to our own political, religious or ethnic group.<sup>3</sup>
- Therefore, in our divided world, compassion can build common ground.

It seemed likely that, in the UK at any rate, the Golden Rule would become part of the curriculum in the so-called religious education establishment. It also seemed likely that the Tony Blair Foundation would find itself in complete agreement with the concept of a religious Golden Rule. As noted in the Foreword to this book, the UK British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) actively promotes multiculturalism. Increasingly the BBC's output in the early 2000s favored multi-faith initiatives and multi-faith reporting. In this regard it was seen by many in the UK as a foregone conclusion that the BBC's attitude to organized, traditional Christianity would become increasingly shrill and intolerant. At the time of writing this book the BBC had recently screened a drama depicting 'Christian terrorists' murdering a child in support of their anti-abortion campaign. Although completely fictional, the BBC insisted the drama was 'realistic' and 'well researched'. But the drama let slip the mask on how the BBC intended to treat Christianity in the early years of the twenty-first century. In the same spirit of multi-faithism, the BBC simultaneously screened series called *Around the World in Eighty Faiths* and *Extreme Pilgrim*, both hosted by Peter Owen Jones, a Church of England vicar. Both these television series sought to confirm that 'god' may be sought in many places in a veritable *sea of faiths*.

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<sup>3</sup> Interesting to compare this so-called 'Rule' with the Holy Bible, Matthew 22:37, when Jesus was asked what is the greatest commandment. His answer is instructive.

### **The ‘promise’ of Godism**

Even before fully defining Godism we begin get a sense of its overall thrust and objective in the discussions above. According to Godist philosophy: ‘god’ (whoever ‘he’ or ‘it’ is) wants us all to live in harmony; our individual beliefs matter far less than the way we live our lives; old fashioned concepts such as sin and salvation, if they are to be accepted at all, need to be reinterpreted and constantly updated to fit with the complex and diverse world in which we live; and by recognizing that all religions are essentially the same, no matter what ‘superficial’ differences there may be, we can generate a feeling of the brotherhood of man — or perhaps in these days, the brotherhood and sisterhood of humankind! — and so find a way to a peaceful future of human harmony.

The need for a change of heart — some fundamental change in the individual leading to a totally new outlook on life and conduct of life — if it is acknowledged at all by the multi-faith creed, is seen only as a need to create a heart of compassion (or ‘love’) for our fellows. Providing we are compassionate, then our little peccadillos (we dare not call them sins!) actually do not matter very much, and ‘god’, in ‘his’ or ‘its’ various manifestations, will ultimately find a way to overlook any such shortcomings. Only serious misdemeanors, offences against our fellows when we should observe the Golden Rule and be compassionate, are categories of offences which really matter. For good measure, many Godists would add that offences against the environment are also likely to bring about the displeasure of ‘god’, as these offences show that we do not have compassion. In Godist philosophy the question of our eternal destiny is very much up to the preferences or ‘understanding’ of each individual. For some people there

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will be a hell to fear, although this notion is considered rather passé to most Godists ('how could a god of love send people to hell?')<sup>4</sup> The idea of hell is alright for those who need to believe in it, but it is a concept not for those of greater sophistication (in their eyes!) Nirvana and reincarnation are probably more comfortable options than hell, in any case, especially to those Westerners who do not understand the true nature of the Hindu caste system! In the Godist philosophy, 'heaven', however it may be understood, awaits virtually all people at some point — *if*, that is, there *is* such a thing as a hereafter!

So the promise of Godism, such as it is, is that *all will be well in the end* and we need to live our lives here on earth as considerately as we can, *showing compassion to all*. 'Love' is the keynote in all this, although love in the Godist sense has about it a rather sentimental quality and is more akin to the human emotion we think of as romantic 'love', rather than the more complex derivations found in the Holy Bible.

So we find ourselves back with *The Beatles*, who in 1967 released their song *All You Need is Love* which in its simple lyrical form managed to include the word 'love' 36 times! The song was written by John Lennon (with contributions from Paul McCartney) in response to a request from the BBC to compose a song that would be the UK's contribution to an international pop broadcast called *Our World*, to be beamed to 26 countries and watched by an estimated 400 million people. Lennon's song contained a simple 'message' aimed to be understood by all nationalities. 'It was an inspired song and they really wanted to give the

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<sup>4</sup> See the readily available book *The Road to Hell* by David Pawson (reprinted Terra Nova, ISBN 978-1-90194-952-0), and another short book on this theme: *How Can A God of Love Send People To Hell?*, John Benton (1985, Evangelical Press ISBN 0-85234-216-0).

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world a message,' said Brian Epstein, then *The Beatles'* business Manager. 'The nice thing about it is that it cannot be misinterpreted. It is a clear message saying that love is everything.' Lennon, never afraid to create propaganda out of art, was apparently fascinated by the power of slogans to inspire and unite people. When asked in 1971 whether songs like *Give Peace a Chance* and *Power to the People* were propaganda songs, he answered, "Sure. So was *All You Need Is Love*. I'm a revolutionary artist. My art is dedicated to change."

So to many people all you need is love; and if 'god' can be co-opted to provide religious imprimatur to the idea (never John Lennon's intention!) then so much the better. But *we* must ask ourselves once again *if we are being honest*, is the Godist philosophy in its various and diverse guises, honoring to the Deity we call God? Is the Godist philosophy consistent with the way (or ways) that God has chosen to reveal Himself? Of equal importance, is the Godist philosophy just a man-made religion with an identikit 'god'? And if it is just a man made religion, how does adherence to Godism affect the eternal destiny of those who hold these beliefs and teach others to do so, no matter how sincerely they may hold such views? These are big questions indeed!

We move now to look, with a due sense of reverence, more closely at the self-revelation of Almighty God in the pages of the Holy Bible.