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Editorial

OUR WITNESS TO THE UNIQUENESS AND FINALITY OF THE LORD JESUS CHRIST IN A PLURALISTIC WORLD

The finality of the Lord Jesus Christ can be meaningfully discussed only in the context of human society—religious and secular. To discuss the issue abstractly is to reduce theology to ideology which always leads to cold rationalism, aggressive divisiveness, to intolerance and ultimately to violence. Rationalistic debates on the doctrine of God between Christian and Muslims, and between Marxists and Capitalists give ample evidence of such conflicts. When Christian doctrine is reduced to cerebral equations, the gospel becomes a valley of dry and lifeless bones.

I

Biblical truth comes to us by revelation of Almighty God, but it comes to us clothed in human cultures and empowered by the Spirit of God. The same Spirit who overshadowed and inspired the biblical writers illuminates the mind of the reader or hearer, so that the words of Scripture become the Word of God to those who have ears to hear. The Lord Jesus Christ is not a mythological figure or merely a fact of ancient history, but because he was a historical person who died and rose again, we can hope to encounter him as the living Lord Jesus Christ. He is neither a ghost to be feared nor an illusive figure of human imagination. In him symbol and reality are one as they are nowhere else. Only when we posit the reality of the living Christ can we talk meaningfully about his finality. If he is not objectively true he can never be subjectively supreme or final. Relative to other lords and manifestations of the gods he remains the only way to the Ultimate Reality, however it may be conceived.

The crucial question of objectivity, uniqueness, finality and certainty of experience goes to the heart of the contemporary Christological debate. A symposium of scholars who reject the traditional and orthodox interpretation of Christian theology, was published under the title *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness: Towards a Pluralistic Theology of Religion*, (Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books, 1987). The views of the editors, John Hicks and Paul F. Knitter, are well-known through their writings. Hick's theological pilgrimage has taken him from a Christo-centric theology to theocentric religion to value-centred experience. All claims to objectivity have been lost in a sea of subjectivity. In his important book, *No Other Name* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books 1985), Paul Knitter gives a helpful but critical survey of Christian attitudes towards world religions. After tracing views that emphasize that all are relative, all are essentially the same and all have common psychic p. 4 origins, he contrasts the conservative evangelical model, which he virtually equates with Barthianism, with main line Protestant views which argue for revelation but reject salvation only through Christ.

He is more sympathetic to the post-Vatican II model of religions as ways of salvation through which the grace of Christ operates and authenticates religious experience. Finally he advocates a model of the incarnation as a meaningful myth that is not a onetime event, but an ideal for all, rooted in the belief in one universal logos or wisdom of God (p. 191). This myth becomes a reality in the praxis of interreligious dialogue. Doing precedes knowing. It is thus in the common search for meaning for life and ethical behaviour that Jesus Christ becomes a meaningful figure.

Christopher Duraisingh follows the same path when he states 'It is not through our *a priori* doctrinal formulations on God or Christ, but rather through our collective human search for meaning and sacredness that the 'universe of faiths' could be adequately understood.' (*IRM*, JULY 1988 p. 399). Thus salvation from human suffering and

oppression becomes the central motif for the truth claims of any religion. It is the search for a unitary experience of one claim to truth in dialogue with other claims to truth. All claims to objective revelation are given up in favour of a basket of subjective experiences of liberation. The often unacknowledged assumptions of this new hermeneutic include the following:

- a. that human consciousness and experience flow from the autonomous human mind which is not dependent on divine self-revelation. This concurs with the assumptions of Hindu and Buddhist philosophies. It is pure subjectivity.
- b. that there is no possibility of inner certainty of objective truth. Bishop Newbigin observes that the loss of faith in the possibility of knowing objective truth 'is at the heart of the sickness of our culture'. In even stronger language he adds: 'We are witnessing the collapse of the whole glorious human enterprise of seeking to know the truth to make contact with reality, to know God as God truly is. It is the mark of a culture that—in the words that Gilbert Murray used to describe the end of the glorious civilization of Greece—has lost its nerve. We are in the midst of a dying culture'. ('Religious Pluralism and the Uniqueness of Jesus Christ' in *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* Vol 13, No 2, April 1989, pp. 55, 52). That the Ultimate Reality is unknowable, beyond all person-hood and all moral attributes, is a common assumption in Asian religions. [p. 5](#)
- c. that moral evil is reduced to non-moral categories of ignorance or social failure. This is reflected in Cantwell Smith's oft repeated claim that there is no such thing as idolatry; all symbols are aids to experiencing the transcendent. This assumption ignores the possibility of demonic powers having objective existence. This gives no adequate basis to account for the behaviour of a Hitler or an Idi Amin, or for racial apartheid or caste brutalities. In the face of religious fanaticism and brutality, dialogue is now understood to be powerless. It has no answer to the evils of our societies which are steadily getting out of control.

II

We need to explore a methodology for constructing a theology of the finality of the Lord Jesus Christ in the context of the religious and ideological plurality of our one world. It is essentially an exercise in hermeneutics.

Vital and relevant theology emerges from a dialogue between the given revelatory and authoritative text, a relative and ever-changing context and the interpreter-cum-communicator who lives in a creative tension between identity with the message of the text and identity with the cultural context; his own inherited context and that of those to whom he or she is called to witness. This interpreter-cum-communicator also changes. He or she is progressively transformed into the image of Christ as a member of the body of Christ, the Church, and thus grows in human and social maturity as a member of one or more cultural societies.

A living Christology then emerges from this dialogue between an unchanging anchor and two relatives. The starting point may be at any point in the debate and begin with any one of the three foci but because the anchor is trustworthy and final, the movement will always be towards a deeper knowledge of Christ as Saviour and Lord to obedience in Christ's mission in the world. It is a movement from created time and space towards the eternal. In the words of the Lord Jesus' prayer to the Father: 'And eternal life means knowing you, the only true God and knowing Jesus Christ whom you sent' ([Jn. 17:3](#) TEV). We may think of this growing in the knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ as a spiral rather than as a straight line, for in our daily pilgrimage our rationality at times slips into

irrationality and we justify our prejudices and hurts. We rebel against the Spirit who leads us to Christ; or may fail to understand the Scriptures and manipulate them for our own self-centred purposes. Then again we may fail to rightly judge and [p. 6](#) understand our culture. We recognize that we will always see through a glass darkly. We will never know the Lord Jesus Christ in his fullness; otherwise we would be equal to God.

However, we affirm that it is possible to know God in Christ, and to believe and experience his uniqueness and finality, because the Holy Spirit is our teacher and guide. We need not drown in a sea of subjectivity, but with Paul affirm 'I am still full of confidence, because I know whom I have trusted and I am sure that he is able to keep safe until that Day what he has entrusted to me' ([2 Tim 1:12](#) TEV).

III

The making of theology must be faithful to Scripture and be contextually relevant. In this discussion I want to emphasize only one point—the necessity of doing theology both from above and below. The incarnation fuses into one the Lord from heaven and 'the man for others' without loss of the identity of either. The uniqueness and therefore finality of the Lord Jesus Christ is that there is no dichotomy between being 'true God from true God', and 'For us men and for our salvation he came down from heaven; by the power of the Holy Spirit he was born of the virgin Mary and became man' (Nicene Creed). Through its history the Church has struggled to understand this apparent paradox, at times proclaiming a docetic Christ without recognizing it (a common evangelical failing); at other times assuming an adoptionist view of Christ merely as a revolutionary who liberates from poverty and oppression. The authors of *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness* openly espouse a Christ from below and relegate the Lord from heaven to mythology. Hick's earlier symposium, *The Myth of God Incarnate* (1977), laid the foundation for the wide ranging *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness*.

However, Jesus leaves us in doubt as to his self-understanding as the Son of man from heaven who will return in the power of the Father, and yet as the one who came to serve and not to be served. His acknowledgement of his power over nature and demonic spirits convinced his disciples of Christ's finality and power. This conviction and this experience were sealed by the work of the Spirit evident in Christ when Peter replied, 'You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God' ([Mt. 16:16](#)). John affirmed that those words are written 'that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God and that through your faith in him you may have life' ([Jn. 20:31](#)). Paul's reflection on the person and the work of the Lord Jesus Christ is found in every letter. The Christological hymn of [Philippians 2](#), the cosmic reign of Christ in [p. 7](#) [Ephesians 1](#) and [Colossians 2](#) declare his supremacy. The author of the letter to the Hebrews points to the divine radiance of the Son and also to the cries and tears of the Lord in prayer. Those who deny his finality do so on other grounds than that of the scriptural text.

IV

Our missiological witness to the finality of Christ brings us to the heart of our concern today.

The Scriptures give witness to the particularity of his birth and to the universality of his mission. In our dialogue with the plurality of our culture, we are amazed at the narrow parameters of his life evidenced in the particularity of his birth in a humble Hebrew home, his work at the carpenter's bench, his sensitivity to Jewish customs and his identity with Old Testament faith in the Temple and synagogues Yet as Christian art worldwide shows,

he is worshipped as an Indian Christ, a black Christ or as an Italian Christ. I am frequently moved to a fresh commitment to him when I gaze on a large painting in our home by Alphonso of Madras, which portrays an Indian Christ washing his disciples' feet. Christ was both a Jew and a man who belongs to the whole human race and to every culture, for 'in the fullness of time God sent his Son born of woman' ([Gal. 4:4](#)). He is the second Adam, the firstfruits of a new creation, yet he is rooted in Jewish culture. He is 'the same yesterday, today and forever'.

However, there is the danger of turning every symbolic presentation into an idol. Esther Augsburger in her sculpture of Christ washing the disciples' feet left his head faceless—a fact that has led to valuable discussion with people of other faiths who come to the garden in front of the Chapel of the Union Biblical Seminary, Pune, India. His ethical teachings are common to other faiths, but in his person and his saving work, he stands alone.

Further, all religious faiths make one religious truth the focus of their spirituality, be it the sovereignty of God, the unity of Ultimate Reality, freedom from suffering, the veneration of ancestors, the appeasing of spirits and so on. But in Jesus Christ there is such a comprehension of truths cohering in one person that I am constrained to worship him who said: 'I am the way, the truth and the life; no one goes to the Father except by me' ([In. 14:6](#) TEV). This challenges us to contextualize our witness to Christ. To those who live in fear of evil spirits, or of offending their ancestors Jesus is *Christus Victor*; to those who seek to submit to God the otherness of God in Christ is ever present; to those burdened with the cycles of rebirth, his resurrection offers eternal [p. 8](#) life now; while to those burdened with guilt and remorse he offers liberation and peace.

In a world of escalating violence he is the peace maker breaking down the dividing wall between Jew and Gentile.

Finally, our witness to the Lord Jesus Christ is inseparable from our participation in the new community, the Church. He is head and we are members of the body. Where the Church is truly a sign that the kingdom of God has come and a sign-post to the kingdom that has yet to come, it is the envy of people of other faiths. It is not without significance that all the reform movements of Hinduism have tried to create a community modelled on the church. But unless Jesus Christ is crowned as Lord and Saviour, the Church remains a community no different from any other and the spirit of communalism takes over. We bow in adoration to him who says,

'I am the Alpha and the Omega, who is and who was, and who is to come, the Almighty' ([Rev. 1:8](#)). [p. 9](#)

The Uniqueness of Christ¹

R. T. France

¹ Adapted from an address delivered at the 1980 conference of the Fellowship of European Evangelical Theologians at Altenkirchen, West Germany, in August 1980. The overall theme of the conference was 'Who is Jesus?—the Modern Challenges for Christology'. This address was designed to explore the biblical basis for Christological discussion.

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This article is as important for its methodology as for its content. The author, known for his careful exegesis, sets out the data on which exegetical studies must be based, beginning with the evidence of the whole rather than with the details of the particular. He counters the unacknowledged docetism of popular piety by raising key issues on the life and knowledge of Jesus as a first century Palestinian Jew. He then discusses the divinity of Jesus and why the first Jewish Christians were slow and reluctant to speak and write of Jesus as God. The author traces the remarkable development in these first believers from the worship of Jesus to doctrinal formulations about him and his relationship to the Father and the Holy Spirit. In this progression from function to Christological formulations he agrees with C. F. D. Moule that this high Christology was not something imposed by Christian devotion on a purely human Jesus, but was rather the inevitable development of a response to Jesus which had been there from the beginning. The author's comments on the Chalcedon redefinition of the problem, on the meaning of kurios and on the significance of kenotic theories are helpful. The basic appeal of this article is for a both/and rather than an either/or Christology. It is a good foundational article on the uniqueness of Christ.

Editor

To deal adequately with probably the most important, and certainly the most controversial, area of New Testament studies, namely Christology, in a single article is clearly impossible. I cannot hope to give a satisfactory discussion of even the most important divisions of the subject, still less to provide the detailed exegetical work which must underlie such discussion. All I can attempt is to offer some very general comments on the nature of the New Testament evidence and on the proper approach to it, together with some indications of areas which are likely to be of special importance for evangelical theology. [p. 10](#)

Such a paper cannot be in itself a contribution to today's Christological debate. It aims only to uncover some of the raw materials which must be used in that debate. The New Testament provides no explicit answers to questions about the union of the two natures in the one person of Christ, nor about the precise changes of condition involved in the incarnation. But it does offer the data out of which the answers must be constructed if they are to bear any relation to the historical reality which posed these questions in the first place. In the New Testament, and only there, can we hope to see where the whole dogmatic process began, in the life and teaching of the man whom his followers came to worship as God, and in the earliest constructions placed upon that life and teaching by those who were closest to him, and whose experience of him led them to the confession of the faith which today's debate is exploring. Quite apart from dogmatic views of the authority of the Bible, the evidence of the New Testament cannot be ignored, for this is where it all began, and without it there would be no Christology to debate!

The title of this paper refers to the 'uniqueness' of Christ, rather than only to his 'divinity'. The humanity of Jesus, so often merely assumed, must also be brought into the discussion before we can approach the crucial questions of Christological debate today. In evangelical discussion it is particularly important to include this aspect, because at least in popular piety there is a strong tendency to a form of unacknowledged docetism; a Jesus about whom the 'real' truth is that he is God, and whose humanity is a convenient temporary vehicle, but not to be taken very seriously when it comes to discussing the possible limitations on his knowledge or his power, or the degree of his conditioning by the cultural milieu of first-century Palestine.

In most areas of theology, human rationality prefers an 'either/or' to a 'both/and', and Christology is no exception. It is undeniably more comfortable to focus on only one side

of a tension which strains human logic, and perhaps it is inevitable that human language must so proceed if it is to say anything intelligible. The danger comes when the statement of one side of the tension is taken to exclude the other; as when popular piety cannot attribute real human emotions and choices to its divine Jesus, or when the contemporary theologian finds it impossible to put any real meaning into talk of the divinity of his truly human Jesus. But if theology is really *theology* (God-study) it is not *prima facie* likely that it will be restricted to the bounds of normal human experience, or of the logic which is the codification of that experience. If it is true that, in Christ, God became man without ceasing to be God, there is little point in trying to explain the [p. 11](#) consequences in terms of a logical 'either/or'. This paper tries, therefore, to keep in mind the possibility of a 'both/and'.

1. THE HUMANITY OF JESUS

There is no need to spend time in demonstrating from the New Testament that in general terms Jesus lived a truly human life. No one seriously disputes, or is unaware, that he was born in the normal way (irrespective of the means of his *conception*), grew through childhood to maturity, was hungry and thirsty, ate, drank, became tired and slept, worked, joked, laughed, wept, and eventually died a real and horrible death in real agony of soul and body. Some Christians are less happy in acknowledging Jesus' human emotions; but again the New Testament is clear in attributing to him joy, sorrow, compassion, love, surprise, indignation, anger; and these emotions are evoked in the course of normal human relationships and encounters.

In addition to the emotional disturbance caused by human relationships (e.g. [John 11:3](#), [5](#), [33](#), [35f.](#), [38](#)), the gospels show us that Jesus' special mission brought him into severe emotional stress. It is impossible to miss this note in sayings like [John 12:27](#), and in the synoptic accounts of the prayer in Gethsemane, and it would be hard to see the cry of dereliction on the cross as a dispassionate theological statement. The New Testament does not present a Jesus who strode untroubled towards his destined end, but one who, fully aware that his mission must be one of suffering, nonetheless experienced real and agonizing conflict and temptation in accepting it, one who, in the words of Hebrews, 'learned obedience through what he suffered' ([Heb. 5:7-9](#)).

The fact of Jesus' temptation, also stressed by Hebrews ([2:18](#); [4:15](#)), poses a similar problem. The 'temptations' recorded in the gospels are not so much inducements to break the moral law of God, but rather explorations of the strength of the relationship between Father and Son ('If you are the son of God ...')—questions which were to culminate in the real possibility of a rift between God's will and Jesus' obedience in Gethsemane. It was the price of incarnation.

This is an area in which some Christians find the language of the New Testament hard to accept. The 'either/or' approach requires that a divine Jesus should not be the victim of the frailties and uncertainties which afflict the rest of us in our fumbling and often unwilling following of the will of God. It cannot accept such a real disjunction between the Father's will and the Son's obedience. But this is the language the New [p. 12](#) Testament uses, and it is proper for us as evangelicals to take it seriously, even if it does force us towards an unwelcome 'both/and'.

The problem becomes more acute in the area of Jesus' knowledge. It is undeniable, of course, that the gospels present Jesus as endowed with, and at least on occasions using, a supernatural awareness of people and of circumstances, including a knowledge of future events; there is no need to provide documentation of this well-known feature. But it is equally true that there were things of which the Jesus of the gospels was ignorant. The

one explicit statement of his ignorance related to the 'day and hour' of the *parousia* ([Mk. 13:32](#)). That is a basic datum which, however inconvenient, must be taken into account in any biblical Christology. Sometimes Jesus asked factual questions of the sort which would apparently have been pointless if he already knew the answer (e.g. [Mark 5:30–33](#); [6:38](#); [9:21](#)). These were apparently things which he had to learn, and learning seems to be an essential part of human existence. It is not easy to envisage the baby Jesus as equipped with all factual knowledge, and indeed Luke tells us explicitly that Jesus 'increased in wisdom' ([Lk. 2:52](#), and cf. vv. [46ff.](#) for his learning). So the New Testament compels the dogmatician to taken into his scheme a Jesus who had to ask questions and learn facts, and who on at least one major matter professed himself ignorant.

In language, culture, and historical circumstance, Jesus was a Palestinian Jew of the first century. His life-style, though in some ways unique, was that of an itinerant teacher not unlike some of the 'charismatic rabbis' of that period.² This fact is no problem for Christian belief in the incarnation: indeed it is essential to it. But it brings with it the question of whether Jesus' cultural distance from today's world means that some aspects of his life and teaching are at best irrelevant and at worst misleading for contemporary Christians. Thus it is often stated that Jesus shared the assumptions of his time on such diverse matters as the authorship of Old Testament books or the existence and activity of demons—assumptions which are at variance with those current in western culture today. Here the confessions of Jesus' limited knowledge is carried over the assertion that either he was in error, or he is deliberately accommodated himself to the erroneous ideas of his contemporaries. It is, then, crucial for those engaged in Christological debate to decide how far the cultural conditioning, necessarily involved in a real incarnation, itself necessarily implies not only ignorance but actual error. To this we shall return in our final section. [p. 13](#)

The biblical portrait of Jesus is of a real man, with real emotions and human reactions, who had to learn obedience to the will of God and did not find it easy, whose knowledge was limited, and who lived and spoke as a first-century Palestinian Jew. All this belongs to the essential raw materials of Christology which claims to be based on the evidence of the New Testament.

And that is where an either/or Christology so often stops. Given such evidence of the real manhood and human limitations of Jesus, what need is there to enquire into his alleged divinity? It is plainly excluded, and must be attributed to pious mythology rather than to any objective evidence about the real Jesus. But the New Testament, which insists so firmly on his real humanity, will not allow such an either/or. The Jesus of the gospels, truly human as he was, was certainly not ordinary, and there are features in the portrait which suggest strongly that to speak of him as God—however long it may have taken—was, in C. F. D. Moule's terminology, not an 'evolution' under the influence of mythological ideas in other circles, but a 'development' of something which was inherent in the New Testament witness from the beginning.³ To the evidence for this thesis we now turn.

2. THE DIVINITY OF JESUS

² See G. Vermes, *Jesus the Jew* (Collins, London 1973) ch. 3.

³ C. F. D. Moule, *The Origin of Christology* (CUP, Cambridge 1977). This distinction, spelled out on p. 2, is central to Moule's thesis, and uncovers a fundamental difference between modern approaches to NT Christology. The terms used may not be the most helpful, as they have different connotations for different people, but the point is crucial: did the NT writers superimpose an alien image of a divine Jesus on an originally purely human figure, or was their developed Christology merely the working out of the truth about Jesus which had been implicit from the beginning? Moule argues consistently for the latter.

a) Explicit statements of Jesus' divinity

Christians who have long been familiar with orthodox Christology are sometimes surprised to discover on how few occasions the New Testament explicitly calls Jesus 'God'. There are, of course, the classic Christological passages (such as [Phil. 2:6-11](#); [Col. 1:15-20](#) [cf. [2:9](#)]; [Heb. 1:2-4](#)) which speak of his relationship to God in terms which allow no other interpretation, but even these passages avoid the bald statement that he *is* God. The only such deliberately Christological passage which takes this step is [John 1:1-18](#) (see verse [1](#) and [18](#), [p. 14](#) assuming the reading *theos* in the latter⁴), which, with the climactic confession of Thomas in [John 20:28](#), forms the framework for the book that, more than any other in the New Testament, explores the relationship of Jesus with the Father which makes such explicit statements ultimately inevitable.

Apart from these statements in John, explicit attributions of divinity to Jesus are confined to a few incidental phrases, mostly in the later writings of the New Testament, and none of them (except perhaps [Heb. 1:8](#)) in the context of Christological discussion. We cannot discuss them in detail,⁵ but the more probable cases are as follows: [Acts 20:28](#), 'the church of God which he purchased with his own blood'; [Romans 9:5](#), 'Christ ... who is over all God blessed for ever'; [2 Thessalonians 1:12](#), 'the grace of our God and Lord Jesus Christ'; [Titus 2:13](#), 'our great God and Saviour Jesus Christ'; [Hebrews 1:8](#), 'To the Son (he says), "Your throne, O God, is for ever" '; [2 Peter 1:1](#), 'our God and Saviour Jesus Christ'; [1 John 5:20](#), 'his son Jesus Christ. This is the true God'.

I refer to these as 'the more probable cases',⁶ because it is remarkable that in none of them is there complete agreement that Jesus is in fact referred to as God. In almost every case, the Greek syntax can be construed in a sense which avoids this attribution. Even in [1 John 5:20](#), where the syntax is clear, there are several different antecedents suggested for the pronoun *houtos*. And in most of them there are significant textual variants which testify to early uncertainty over such unfamiliar expressions.

These uncertainties of syntax and text are a graphic illustration of the fact which is already clear from the small number of such references, namely, that it did not come easily to most of the New Testament writers to speak of Jesus explicitly as God. Such language was apparently almost too daring, and still caused some embarrassment to the early copyists of the New Testament documents (cf. also the variants in the text of [John 1:18](#)).

This fact is sometimes used as an argument against the divinity of [p. 15](#) Christ as a New Testament theme. It occurs so seldom, and with such uncertainty, we are told, that clearly these passages are out of tune with the rest of the New Testament, and represent an alien mythological idea imposed on the simple portrait of Jesus, the man of God.

b) Implicit evidence for the worship of Jesus

i) Introduction

There is another explanation which accords more closely with the facts of what we actually find in the New Testament, and this is that these explicit attributions of divinity

⁴ This reading, supported by p. 66 and p. 75, is now accepted by most commentators and printed in the more recent Greek texts. English versions have been slower in recognizing it: it is noted in the margin of the RV, RSV, JB, and NEB, but has now been accepted into the text of the TEV and NIV.

⁵ See the useful presentations in A. W. Wainwright, *The Trinity in the New Testament* (SPCK, London 1962) pp. 53-74; O. Cullmann, *The Christology of the New Testament* (ET2, SCM, London 1963) pp. 306-14; R. E. Brown, *Jesus: God and Man* (Chapman, London 1968) pp. 6-28.

⁶ 'Less probable cases' would include [Gal. 2:20](#); [Col. 2:2](#); [Jas. 1:1](#).

to Christ are the culmination, delayed but inevitable, of an understanding of the person of Jesus which is there developing throughout the New Testament. It is, by and large, only in the later writings that it comes explicitly to the surface, but the idea was there with increasing force from the beginning. It is this explanation which I want to explore now.

First, a very obvious but very important point must be stated. *The earliest Christians were Jews*, and it was within a Jewish milieu that the formative thinking of the Christian church took place. Perhaps only those who have lived in a non-Christian monotheistic culture (e.g. Islamic) can fully appreciate the significance of this fact. The Jew was brought up from childhood in the uncompromising insistence that there is only one God, and that to offer divine worship to any being other than Yahweh is unthinkable offensive, the most fundamental of all sins. It was in this insistence that Judaism found its distinctiveness and its coherence. Its dogmatic monotheism was its greatest glory. So for a Jew to speak of a man as God, or to attribute divine powers and offer worship to him, was as impossible as for a Muslim today to hear with equanimity that Jesus is the Son of God.

It is surely no wonder, then, that the explicit attribution of divinity to Jesus came slowly and reluctantly; the wonder is that it came at all within this milieu. Nor is it surprising that we find a few passages in the New Testament drawing a distinction between Jesus and God which Christian orthodoxy sometimes finds uncomfortable, such as [Mk. 10:18](#); [Jn. 17:3](#); [1 Cor. 8:6](#); [1 Tim 2:5](#). What is remarkable is that these passages are few, and, as we shall see, do not reflect an overall tendency in early Christian thought; it is the general absence of such explicit distinctions which is more typical of the New Testament.

It was *Jews*, then—despite all their race's ingrained hostility to such language—who first started speaking and thinking of Jesus in divine terms, however hard they may have found it to say this in so many [p.16](#) words. Such a radical change of outlook did not happen by accident, nor as a result of wishful thinking. It must have been caused by an overwhelming weight of facts and experience, before which even the most hallowed conventions of religious language must ultimately give way. It is in the evidence for this underlying compulsion, rather than in the eventual explicit God-language, that the New Testament's most impressive witness to the divinity of Jesus is found.

The evidence is varied in character. It includes the attribution to Jesus of divine functions and attributes, the use of titles with divine implications, the use of Old Testament texts about God as if they apply to Jesus, the coupling of Jesus and the Father in a way which makes their names apparently interchangeable, prayer to Jesus, and ultimately formal worship of him. These and other traits occur in the New Testament in an unduly profusion which makes systematic presentation difficult. They testify not to a carefully formulated doctrine, logically applied to life and worship, but to the gradual development of a consciousness of the more-than-human significance of Jesus; a consciousness born more of spiritual experience than of logical deduction, but one which from the time when Jesus was visibly present among his disciples could never be denied, and grew inexorably until John could proclaim clearly 'The Word was God'.

In the brief compass that this paper allows I can only hint at the extent of this evidence, but I hope a crude summary, in the form of a roughly chronological development, will indicate something of the cumulative force of this informal evidence, compared with which the formal 'Jesus-is-God' language is no more than the icing on the cake.

ii) The ministry of Jesus

The essential basis for the New Testament writers' perception of the significance of Jesus must, of course, be what Jesus himself said and did.

Now it is obvious that Jesus did not go about Palestine proclaiming himself to be God, nor did his disciples during his lifetime offer him formal worship as God. In the situation of first-century Judaism this would be unthinkable, and the modern Christian exegete must be very cautious in reading divine worship into the normally polite address *kyrie* ('Lord')⁷ or the conventional respect or appeal implied in the verb *proskynein* (usually 'worship')⁸ when he finds them in the gospel narrative, however much deeper meaning these terms may have p. 17 gained by the time the evangelists recorded the incidents. Jesus undoubtedly appeared to his contemporaries as a man among men.

But he did not appear, nor did he present himself, as an *ordinary* man. There can be no doubt that he spoke of himself as the Son of God and referred to God as 'Father' (note the quite new use of 'Abba' in prayer, [Mark 14:36](#))⁹ in a way which implied a unique relationship between himself and the Father. [Matthew 11:25-27](#) stands out in the synoptic gospels as the most far-reaching expression of this relationship;¹⁰ but before it is on that account dismissed as later Christian theologizing,¹¹ the question must be raised of what lesser meaning could plausibly be given to Jesus' use of Son-of-God language to refer to himself in a culture (Palestinian Judaism) which was not in the habit of referring to individuals as sons of God,¹² still less of allowing individuals so to refer to themselves. The scandal caused by his language, according to John's account ([5:17f](#); [10:29-39](#), etc.), rings true to the inevitable implications of such language in that setting. Individual sayings may be disputed, but it would take a very radical criticism to eliminate altogether Jesus' claim to a special relationship between himself and his Father,¹³ and the implications of that claim must rank high among the evidence for his more-than-human status.

Other aspects of Jesus' language reinforce this evidence. His claim to perform the divine function of forgiving sins was deliberately pursued in the face of the suggestion of blasphemy ([Mark 2:1-12](#)). He presented himself as the ultimate arbiter of men's destiny in [Matthew 7:21-23](#), and, in the remarkable judgement scene of [Matthew 25:31ff.](#), he not only placed himself in the divine role of judge, but also p. 18 described himself as the king,

⁷ For the contemporary significance of *kyrie* see Moule, op. cit., pp. 35ff.

⁸ *ibid.*, p. 175f.

⁹ J. Jeremias, *The Prayers of Jesus* (ET, SCM, London 1967) pp. 11-65.

¹⁰ J. Jeremias, *New Testament Theology I* (ET, SCM, London 1971) pp. 59-61, has argued that Jesus is simply making an observation about the relations between any human father and his son. Linguistically this is possible, though it may be questioned whether it would be a true observation. But even if this were the right exegesis, it is hard to see what point such an observation could have in this context except to illustrate the exclusive mutual knowledge of Jesus and his Father, i.e. to express the same Christological point by a parable rather than by direct statement.

¹¹ A full recent discussion of its authenticity is given by J. D. G. Dunn, *Jesus and the Spirit* (SCM, London 1975) pp. 27-34.

¹² The evidence collected by M. Hengel, *The Son of God* (ET, SCM, London 1976) pp. 41-56 for the use of this term in Jewish literature hardly adds up to a refutation of this statement. Some of the instances he cites are from writings not likely to reflect usage in mainstream Judaism in Palestine, and others fall short of demonstrating 'Son of God' as a title applied to a living individual. He cites nothing remotely similar to the gospels' account of Jesus' language about himself.

¹³ See R. J. Bauckham, 'The Sonship of the Historical Jesus in Christology', *SJT* 31, 1978, pp. 245-60, for a good discussion of the authenticity of such language.

using language to describe his eschatological appearance which clearly echoes the theophanic language of e.g. [Daniel 7:9f](#); [Joel 3:1–12](#) ([Heb. 4:1–12](#)); and [Zechariah 14:5](#).¹⁴

This last passage is an outstanding example of a remarkable trait in Jesus' teaching: the use of Old Testament language about God as if it applied to himself. I have tried to set this out in more detail elsewhere¹⁵ but some examples would be the use of [Psalm 8](#) (the praise of God) in [Matthew 21:16](#) (the praise of Jesus by the children); the mission to seek and save the lost ([Lk. 19:10](#)), drawn apparently from the divine shepherd of [Ezekiel 34:16, 22](#); the stone of stumbling ([Isa. 8:14f](#)) in [Luke 20:18a](#); and the repeated application to John the Baptist of the prophecies of [Malachi 3:1; 4:5f](#) ([Heb. 3:23f.](#)), where the messenger/Elijah is the assertion of the indestructibility of Jesus' words ([Mk. 13:31](#)) when compared with what is said of God's word in [Isaiah 40:8](#). It is interesting, too, to notice how often the parables of Jesus apply apparently to Jesus himself a figure used prominently for God in the Old Testament: such as shepherd, sower, bridegroom, lord, and king.¹⁶

Such tendencies of language (and more could and should be added if time allowed) are the more impressive because they are so unobtrusive. They are evidence, not of a crusade by Jesus to establish his claim to a special status, but of an assumption of a special relationship with God which does not need to be defended. It is a staggering assumption in the setting of first-century Judaism, and yet it pervades much of the teaching and activity of Jesus. A critical approach to Jesus' sayings would need to be designed with the specific intention of excluding all such claims if it was to succeed in dismissing all such language from the authentic teaching of Jesus, and even then it would not have an easy task!

I have concentrated on Jesus' *sayings*, because the evidence of verbal claims, explicit or assumed, is less ambiguous. I am cautious of an apologetic which finds in Jesus' *acts*, and particularly in his miracles, clear evidence of his divinity. A miracle is not in itself proof of [p. 19](#) the divinity of the one who performs it, for in that case, many of the disciples of Jesus in the New Testament and since must also be divine. Nor should we forget the very considerable numbers of miracles—many of them of quite similar character—attributed to other great and godly men of the period, whether pagan or Jewish. The presence of supernatural power, even if granted to be divine, is not proof of the divinity of the person through whom it operates. Even the supreme miracle of the resurrection is presented in the New Testament as the evidence of God's power and of his acceptance of Jesus, rather than as Jesus' act of divine power. Jesus' miracles are certainly intended to be read as signs of his messianic authority, even of his 'glory' ([Jn. 2:11](#)), but they are not presented in the New Testament as evidence for his divinity. They are the responses of Jesus' *exousia* to the needs of those around him. Of course they are consonant with his personal divinity, and the character and concentration of miracles in Jesus' ministry can fairly claim to be unique. But a faith based on the evidence of miracles is not encouraged in the New Testament (e.g. [Jn. 2:23–25; 4:48; 6:26–29; 20:29](#)).¹⁷

¹⁴ See my *Jesus and the Old Testament* (Tyndale Press, London 1971) 143f, pp. 157–9

¹⁵ *ibid.*, pp. 150–9.

¹⁶ This point is brought out in an unpublished thesis by P. B. Payne, 'Metaphor as a Model for Interpretation of the Parables of Jesus with Special Reference to the Parable of the Sower', University of Cambridge 1975. See also the appendix to Payne's article 'The Authenticity of the Parables of Jesus' in *Gospel Perspectives*, vol. II, ed. R. T. France and D. Wenham, (JSOT Press, Sheffield 1981) pp. 338–41.

¹⁷ See further my *The Man They Crucified* (IVP, London 1975) pp. 76–9.

The evidence of the sayings, then, is a safer starting-point. But when the extraordinary *exousia* assumed in the sayings, and recognized in his teachings by his hearers (e.g. [Mt. 7:28f](#)), is seen to be supported by the *exousia* of his deeds, then it is hardly surprising to find his disciples forced to ask: 'Who is this?'. If, during his ministry, they did not reach the point of making open confession of his divinity—and this, as we have seen, is hardly surprising—the foundations were laid in their experience for an awareness of his more-than-human character, which was to break out with remarkable speed into the worship of Jesus not very long after his death and resurrection.

iii) Acts

The very selective account of the earliest Christian church given in Acts does not of course engage in direct discussion of the divinity of Jesus. But Luke's presentation of the first Christian preaching shows the direction in which their understanding of Jesus was developing. He is already seen as the saviour ([4:12](#)), the author of life ([3:15](#); [5:31](#)), the giver of the Spirit ([2:33](#)), the giver of repentance and forgiveness ([5:31](#)), and the coming judge ([10:42](#); [17:31](#)).

But the title in which, above all, this earliest Christology is focused is *Kyrios* ('Lord'). The address to Jesus as *kyrie* during his ministry need have been no more than politeness, but the resurrection has now [p. 20](#) marked him out as in a unique sense *Kyrios* ([2:36](#)). It is well known, of course, that *ho Kyrios* is the regular LXX version for the divine name, and that therefore its implications, when applied as a title to an individual in a Jewish milieu, are hardly less startling than those of *theos* itself. In the very speech in which the declaration of [2:36](#) is made, the title is used four times in LXX quotations with reference to God. It was not long before New Testament Christians were using the title so indiscriminately—sometimes of Jesus and sometimes of God the Father—that often it is impossible to tell which is intended; it almost seems that, like many Christians in their use of 'the Lord' today, they did not see any practical difference. This process had not, of course, gone so far in the early preaching in Acts, but it is not hard to see the process beginning in the uses of *Kyrios* from [Acts 2](#) onwards.

Already, in the early chapters of Acts, we see Stephen at his martyrdom praying to Jesus, and hear Ananias describing Christians as those 'who call upon thy name' ([9:14](#)), this phrase occurring in a prayer to *ho Kyrios*, who is shown by this clause and by verse [17](#) to be Jesus. Thus within a very short time of his death and resurrection, Christians were praying to Jesus and could be identified as those who call on his name.

iv) Paul

Prayer to Jesus, which we have seen already developing in the earliest period of the church's life, has become so normal by the time of Paul's letters that he can define Christians as 'those who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ' ([1 Cor. 1:2](#), a regular Old Testament formula or prayer to Jesus—*Maranatha*, 'Our Lord, come' ([1 Cor. 16:22](#))). For a formula of the Aramaic-speaking church to be so widely known that it could be used without explanation in a letter to Corinth, it must have been already a venerable tradition; so that prayer to Jesus was clearly an accepted pattern long before Paul wrote, and the Christological implications of this are obvious. As Moule drily comments, 'One does not call upon a mere Rabbi, after his death, to come.'¹⁸

¹⁸ Moule, *op. cit.*, p. 41.

It is therefore natural that the worshipping congregations are the churches *of Christ* ([Rom. 16:16](#)), and he is the head of the church ([Eph. 1:22f](#); [5:23](#)). Baptism is *into Christ*, and the main act of worship is *the Lord's* supper.

Jesus has become, then, the focus of the faith and obedience of [p. 21](#) Christians, and they now find their unity and their whole religious experience 'in Christ'. The famous and much-discussed phrase, which occurs some eighty times in the Pauline letters, testifies in at least some of its uses to a sense of identification with, and indeed incorporation into, Christ which is reflected in many other ways in Paul's language about 'dying with' Christ, Christ 'living in' me, the church as Christ's body, and so on. This sort of language is not easy to analyse, but it indicates a view of the risen Christ as more than a mere individual; as not only the object of faith and worship, but the one who incorporates in himself those who belong to him, and from whom they derive their spiritual life. Such language indicates a superhuman person, and when used by a Jew it is hard to see how it could be applied to anyone other than God.

So it is not surprising to find in Paul's letters the frequent coupling together of the names of God and of Jesus Christ as the source of spiritual blessing. Thus all but two of the Pauline letters begin with the greeting, 'Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ', and such prayers as [1 Thessalonians 3:11](#) and [2 Thessalonians 2:16](#) expect God and Christ together to meet the Christians' needs.

Divine functions are attributed sometimes to God, sometimes to Christ; this is true for instance of revelation, forgiveness, judgement and vengeance. It appears as if it really did not matter to Paul which name he used. Thus we read in his letters of both 'the gospel of God' and 'the gospel of Christ', 'the church of God' and 'the church of Christ', 'the kingdom of God', 'the kingdom of his Son' and 'the kingdom of Christ and of God', and even 'the Spirit of God' and 'the Spirit of Christ'. God and Christ have become almost interchangeable in Paul's mind as the focus of Christian faith and the source of spiritual blessing.

To us, with many centuries of familiarity with Christian terminology, this may not seem so remarkable. But here was a Pharisaic Jew, only some twenty-five years after the death of Jesus as a blasphemer, habitually placing him on a level with God as if there were no difference! What a wealth of development in thought and experience must lie behind such a radical conversion of language!

Perhaps even more amazing is Paul's view of Christ as the agent in creation. Creation is in the Old Testament an exclusively divine activity; the subject of the verb *bara'* is always God. Yet Paul can speak in [Colossians 1:16f.](#) of Christ as the one 'through whom' everything has come to be (cf. [1 Cor. 8:6](#)), in words which are closely similar to what he says of God in [Romans 11:36](#). He may well have been [p. 22](#) influenced here by Jewish ideas of Wisdom as God's agent in creation, but the striking fact remains that he is attributing to the recently crucified carpenter of Nazareth a role in the original creation of the world.

v) *Later New Testament writings*

We have looked only at the evidence for the earlier stage of the development of the church in the first century, but already we have seen the growth of an attitude of worship towards Jesus which made it inevitable that more and more explicit divine language should be applied to him. Such language must necessitate careful reflection on who Jesus was, leading even within Paul's letters to the classic Christological statements of [Philippians 2:6-11](#) and [Colossians 1:15-20](#); [2:9](#). A study of the remaining New Testament writings would reveal the further development of this process into the formal presentations of the divinity of Christ in [John 1:1-18](#) and [Hebrews 1:1-3](#). We would see, too, the increasing concentration on the idea of Christ's pre-existence, raised by Paul's statement of his role

in creation. And we would see the growth of the trinitarian language which emerges in so many incidental ways in the New Testament, achieving formal presentation in the baptismal formula of [Matthew 28:19](#), but underlying the forms of expression chosen in a wide variety of contexts. It is in the context of this sort of thinking that the explicit attributions of divinity to Jesus which we discussed earlier could find a place, and from that point there was a natural development to the uninhibited use of divine language about Jesus by Ignatius and the other writers of the post-apostolic church.

We cannot survey all the material in this article, but the point I want to make is that this high Christology was not something imposed by Christian devotion on an originally purely human Jesus, but rather was the inevitable development of a response to Jesus which had been there from the beginning; the recognition that in him they had met with God. It was this recognition, expressed from the earliest post-resurrection period in prayer and worship offered to Jesus, which necessitated the development of more formal Christological, and, in due course, trinitarian language; for you cannot worship a man who himself worshipped God, without asking what this means for your monotheistic theology. It is this worship of Jesus, with the experience of his religious significance on which it is based, which is the root of New Testament Christology, and which reaches its triumphant climax in the book of Revelation in the vision of all heaven joining to worship [p. 23](#) the Lamb who was slain, and all creation offering homage jointly 'to him who sits upon the throne and to the Lamb' ([5:13](#)), a couple who are intriguingly referred to in [Revelation 22:3f.](#) by singular pronouns!

c) Is New Testament Christology functional?

A sharp distinction is sometimes drawn between an 'ontological' and a 'functional' Christology: that is, on the one hand, a Christology which concentrates on the question 'Who is Jesus?' in terms of his eternal being and his relationship with the Father; and, on the other hand, a Christology which focuses on the *work* of Christ, and builds its understanding of who he is from the experience of what he has done. This distinction corresponds roughly to the current tendency to contrast Christologies which are constructed respectively 'from above' and 'from below'. Which of these Christologies do we find in the New Testament?

What we have seen of the development of the understanding of Jesus' more-than-human nature, through the church's experience of his teaching and of his saving work after the resurrection, points strongly to a functional origin for New Testament Christology. (I am talking in this section, of course, not of Jesus' own self-understanding but of the process by which his followers came to share it.) It was as men met with Jesus, and met with God in and through him, that they came to the realization of who he was. There was no ready-made trinitarian scheme from which they could deduce his divinity, nor any existing pattern which made incarnational language natural to them. On the contrary, we find evidence of some reluctance to reach, or at least to express openly, the ontological conclusions to which their experience gradually compelled them. Or, to put it another way, worship preceded Christological formulation, Christians found themselves led to think and speak of Jesus in divine terms, or at least in terms which implied divinity, and to pray to him and worship him, and *therefore*, as a result of this 'functional' approach, were obliged to think out and express in ever more 'ontological' terms what was his relationship with the Father.

The New Testament gives evidence, then, of a natural progression from functional to ontological thinking and language. Historically, Christology began with the dawning awareness that Jesus was more than just a man of God, and developed under the pressure to provide an explanation of the startling facts which they knew through their experience

to be true—until it reached the point of formal ontological [p. 24](#) Christology. In this, New Testament Christology is typical of the process by which man is led to the perception of God's revealed truth. It is seldom delivered to him fully formed, and indeed, if it were, he would be hard put to it to make any sense of it. But God comes to him in the familiar experiences of life, and by gradually transcending those experiences leads him to recognize truth which transcends the familiar and the secular. Indeed, that is surely what incarnation is about—God entering into real human life and experience—and this applies as much to the process by which this amazing truth is perceived as to the event itself.

I am not arguing, then, for a functional as *opposed to* an ontological Christology in the New Testament, but rather for a *progression* from the functional to the ontological. What began in experience and worship, led on very naturally and properly to doctrinal formulation. And the ontological formulation is there in the New Testament: in the classic Christological passages of [Philippians 2](#), [Colossians 1](#), [Hebrews 1](#), and especially [John 1](#), and in the eventual willingness openly to call Jesus 'God'. This is the proper, indeed the inevitable, outcome of the more functional thinking of the earlier period. It is not the evolution of a new form, but the result of a continuous and unavoidable development of truths which were present from the very beginning of Christian experience in the ministry of Jesus.

On the question whether New Testament Christology is functional or ontological, constructed 'from below' or 'from above', I maintain, then, that the answer must be to refuse the 'either/or' and insist here also on a 'both/and'. They are not opposites; rather each requires the other.

3 WHAT DOES INCARNATION IMPLY

We have considered the nature of the New Testament evidence, firstly for the true humanity of Jesus, and secondly for his divinity, and we have seen that both are clearly taught there. Jesus was a man, and Jesus is God. To state the two truths side by side is to raise immediately the central problem of Christology: how can one person be both man and God; indeed what does it mean to say of a single individual that he is fully human and yet also divine? The New Testament poses the problem, and the Christological controversies of the following centuries set about answering it, until the Council of Chalcedon gave the definitive statement.

But it is a remarkable fact, and it is at least one of the reasons why [p. 25](#) Christians today debate how useful the Chalcedonian definition really was, that in fact Chalcedon did not produce an *answer*, but rather a refined statement of the problem. It did rule out several unacceptable answers, and in so doing performed a necessary and valuable service; but after all the careful qualifications of the Chalcedonian definition, we are still left with the paradox of one person who was both God and man. Even Chalcedon does not tell us *how* this could be.

Does the New Testament then offer any help in the search for an answer to this question? It affirms clearly, as we have seen, both the humanity and the divinity of Jesus. But it also goes further and speaks of the union of the two in terms of *God becoming man*: most unmistakably in [John 1:14](#); but also in such passages as [John 17:5](#); [Romans 8:3](#); [2 Corinthians 8:9](#); [Galatians 4:4](#); and [Hebrews 2:9-18](#); [10:5ff.](#), which speak of the Son of God being sent into human life, or of a 'descent' from heaven to earth, from divine glory to humble humanity. But the passage which seems to come closest to spelling out what this means is [Philippians 2:6-11](#), which traces Jesus' progress from 'the form of God' and 'equality with God', through birth in human, servant form, back to exaltation and glory. This pattern of descent and ascent, of previous glory leading to temporary humiliation

and thus back to glory, is reflected in many ways in the thought of different New Testament writers.

But there is one phrase in [Philippians 2:7](#) which has seemed to many to offer a fuller explanation of what was involved: *heauton ekenōsen*, 'he emptied himself'. Coming after the mention of Jesus' previous existence 'in the form of God', yet not grasping at or hanging on to 'equality with God', and before the mention of his human birth, this phrase holds out the hope of some insight into *how* the transition could be effected. It has thus become the focus of the various Christological viewpoints which are called 'kenotic', which see the key to Christology in the voluntary surrender by God the Son, for the period of his incarnation, of those attributes of divinity which are felt to be incompatible with truly human existence.

Which attributes were surrendered is differently assessed from one kenotic theory to another, the variation depending not so much on the exegesis of [Philippians 2:7](#) as on the interpreter's understanding of what it means to be human. Indeed, exegesis of [Philippians 2:7](#) as such plays very little part in kenotic Christology, the text being used rather as a convenient peg on which to hang a theory derived from other considerations, than as itself the source of the doctrine. The verb *ekenōsen* here need refer to no more than the surrender of the glory and 'status' of heaven, for the context is an ethical exhortation not to [p.26](#) cling to privilege and self-esteem.¹⁹ In fact, despite its etymology, *kenoun* in the New Testament (where all uses are by Paul) elsewhere always refer to the removal of validity or importance, not of any identifiable 'content'.²⁰ 'He made himself insignificant' would seem to be the Pauline sense of the phrase.

But if kenotic Christologies cannot claim to be derived from a convincing exegesis of the phrase in [Philippians 2:7](#) from which they derive their name, they cannot on that account be dismissed from consideration. For here at least is a serious attempt to explain how the apparently incompatible qualities of God and man can be predicated of one individual, i.e. to elucidate the paradox with which the New Testament presents us.

I believe that kenotic theories are likely to prove one of the most important areas for evangelicals to consider in today's Christological debates. Whether or not they openly espouse the term 'kenosis', a number of evangelicals are finding in this kind of belief a solution to some of the problems raised by modern scientific or critical views when compared with the teaching of Jesus. For if it can be accepted as New Testament doctrine that the Son 'emptied himself' of omniscience, among other divine attributes, the way is apparently open to believe that he shared the accepted ideas of his day which have now been shown to be wrong, and that therefore there is no need for the modern Christian to accept what he said on such culturally-conditioned issues as binding.

Many scholars today would have to confess to some unease, if not embarrassment, in treating as normative Jesus' apparent views on the authorship and interpretation of Old Testament books (e.g. David as the author of [Psalm 110](#), or Jonah as a historical account of a real person), or his reported exegesis of [Psalm 82](#) in [John 10:34ff](#), or his uncritical acceptance of the reality of demon-possession, particularly in cases where the symptoms suggest identifiable medical complaints. If these problems can be solved at a stroke by the argument that on these issues Jesus shared the mistaken ideas of his time, having shed his

¹⁹ It is, of course, widely believed that vv. [6-11](#) of [Phil. 2](#) are quoted by Paul from an existing Christian hymn. In that case, we cannot know the original context within which these words existed, but as they come to us they are incorporated in Paul's ethical exhortation, and this must be our guide as to how he understood them.

²⁰ The other uses of *kenoun* are [Rom. 4:14](#); [1 Cor. 1:17](#); [9:15](#); [2 Cor. 9:3](#); where the things 'emptied' are respectively faith, the cross, and Paul's boasting (twice).

divine omniscience as the price of incarnation, the appeal of such a course is quite understandable. Even more: if one shares the prevalent belief among non-evangelical scholars that Jesus was wrong about the [p.27](#) date of his *parousia*, it is convenient to be able to set aside the Christological difficulty of a divine person who could make mistakes, by invoking a kenotic view. It is, I suspect, as much the attraction of such explanations, as the intrinsic force of kenotic theories in themselves, which accounts for the popularity of these theories. Were earlier evangelicals, then, wrong in their traditional insistence on the infallibility of Jesus' teaching, and in their consequent reinterpretation of passages which were generally regarded as containing error? A number of evangelicals seem to be moving towards such a view.

The implications of incarnation as they relate to the limitations of Jesus' knowledge, are not discussed as an issue in the New Testament. But we are provided with important data which must be taken into account in formulating a Christology which claims to be biblical. We have seen earlier that the New Testament presents Jesus during his earthly ministry as a real man of first-century Palestine, sharing the culture and conditions of his people, as one who grew in wisdom, and had to learn information, and who on one important issue professed himself ignorant.

In the sense that he thus shared in the full human condition, the New Testament indicates that the Word really became flesh; he did 'empty himself' and share the limitations of humanity. Jesus was *real*, and there is no room for docetism. Kenosis in the Pauline sense of Jesus' abandonment of the glory of heaven and acceptance of the human condition in all its humiliation is a precious truth of the New Testament.

But to accept that Jesus was limited in knowledge and conditioned by his culture setting is not the same thing as to assert that he made mistakes and taught as truth the erroneous beliefs of his age. Admitted ignorance is not the same thing as purported knowledge which is false, any more than liability to temptation is the same thing as actual sin. Christians have always been able to accept that Jesus was really tempted but did not sin, as Hebrews explicitly states ([4:15](#)), and there seems no theoretical problem in similarly envisaging ignorance without error.

In fact the New Testament does not leave us to pious speculation here. Jesus said, for instance, 'Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away' ([Mk. 13:31](#)). If that is not culpable megalomania, it is surely an assertion that what Jesus asserted was true and reliable. It is not a claim to omniscience, as the very next verse makes clear; but in what Jesus did say, and did claim to know, it presents him as infallible. It is hard to square such things with the belief that because of Jesus' cultural conditioning the modern Christian need not take his statements as normative. [p. 28](#)

So again I want to appeal for a 'both/and' Christology: one which takes with the utmost seriousness the reality of Jesus' human limitations, of his 'self-emptying' to become one of us; but which refuses to apply the 'either/or' principle and to claim that therefore he did not speak with divine truth. I see no logical incompatibility between the assertion that Jesus was a true first-century man whose knowledge was limited and progressive, and the assertion that as God he made no mistakes and taught no falsehood. And I find in the New Testament ample grounds for making both assertions strongly.

What then of Jesus' supposed mistake about the date of his *parousia*? This is a matter for exegetical discussion of the passages which are thought to predict a return within a stated period, and this discussion must be seriously pursued, recognizing the widespread tension between imminence and delay in Jewish as well as Christian eschatology.²¹ It is

²¹ See on this the important article by R. J. Bauckham, 'The Delay of the Parousia', *Tyndale Bulletin* 31, 1980, pp. 3-36.

not self-evident that the Jesus who disclaimed knowledge of the date of his return in [Mark 13:32](#) was willing to set dates elsewhere. At any rate there is no need to short-circuit the debate by invoking an interpretation of 'kenosis' which was far from Paul's mind when he wrote [Philippians 2:7](#).

This paper has done no more than set out the broad outlines of an evangelical approach to the New Testament evidence for the uniqueness of Christ. As such it demands detailed exegetical support or modification at every point, without which it must appear a bold over-simplification of complex issues. But I believe it has been worth producing, if it enables us to stand back and take stock of the nature of the data on which our exegetical studies must be based, and thus to get our bearings for further study. Without such an exercise, we are in constant danger of becoming so engrossed with the investigation of one particular problem or pericope that we forget the massive cumulative effect of the New Testament evidence taken as a whole. We must never allow our doctrinal debates to make us lose touch with the historical reality experienced in so many different and yet richly complementary ways by the early Christians, which led them, against all the dictates of their culture and upbringing, to the conclusion that in the man Jesus 'the Word became flesh'. For that is what Christianity is all about.

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Theological Foundations for the Uniqueness of Christ as Hope and Judge

Stephen T. Franklin

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This paper, presented at the World Evangelical Fellowship Theological Commission consultation on 'The Unique Christ in a Pluralistic World' held in Manila in June, 1992, will be published with other papers in book form.

This thought-provoking analysis of the theological foundations for our understanding of and witness to the unique Christ deserves careful reading. The author argues that the uniqueness of Christ does not rest primarily in any doctrine, image or symbol, for they have analogies in other religions and belief systems—for example, the doctrine of incarnation. Nor does the uniqueness of Christ reside in our Christian religious experience, for there too there are parallels—for example, the experience of salvation by grace alone. Rather, he argues, the uniqueness is found in the 'historical-factual' meaning of events in biblical history—for example, the Exodus and the Resurrection. These are God's actions. Jesus Christ is the unique action of God. He distinguishes this evangelical understanding from the secular view of history as in liberalism and the mythological interpretation of John Hick and company. Further, the author's understanding of our 'existential-universal' experience of the historical-factual enables us to relate the present to the past and to the future. His treatment of the use of analogy, especially when it become idolatrous, brings a wholeness to the discussion. Some reflection on the way God interprets in his acts in history in verbal

revelation—for example, the meaning of the Cross, would have been helpful and necessary to the doctrine of the unique Christ.

Editor

For many Christians, a reference to ‘The Unique Christ as the Hope and Judgment of the World’ arouses vivid images of the end times: the day of resurrection and the final judgment. As evangelicals, we believe that the final resurrection and the final judgment will be actual events in (a perhaps profoundly altered) time and space. We also believe that the primary actor in these events will be Jesus of Nazareth—not as a [p.30](#) generalized image nor as a symbol, but as the specific God-man in all his individual personality.

These *future* events, however, do not exhaust the Christian meaning of either hope or judgment. Judgment is also a *present* reality. [John 3:18–21](#) teaches that those who do not believe on Jesus Christ are judged already. What we hope for, must, by definition, be in the future, but the possession of hope can be a present blessing. Peter describes Christian existence as characterized by faith, joy, love, and hope, all of which come from God through Jesus Christ ([1 Pet. 1:3–9](#)). In addition, judgment and hope are also linked to past history because they are based on God’s previous actions—above all, on the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ outside the city gates of Jerusalem early in the first century.

The Bible teaches that hope and judgment, whether past, present, or future, depend on the unique, specific individual whom we know as Jesus of Nazareth, as Jesus who is the Christ. The unqualified, unapologetic, joyful confession of the uniqueness, supremacy, and centrality of Jesus Christ marks evangelicals. Most of us reject any attempt to limit or reduce the claim that Jesus is the only way to God. For example, we reject the notion that Jesus is supreme *for us* when that is taken to imply that other roads, other saviours, other practices may legitimately be supreme for other people. Another example: while judgment itself belongs in God’s hands and not ours, daily life among non-Christians forces us—whether we like it or not and whether we try to avoid it or not—to evaluate the actions, practices, and beliefs of other people. In doing so, evangelicals take Jesus Christ to be the standard by which to make such evaluations. Such an appeal to Jesus Christ may offend not only non-Christians but even other Christians who have internalized the pluralism of our age. But, because Jesus Christ is supreme and unique, we have no other option. And as evangelicals, we steadfastly (but gently, kindly, and politely, I would hope) point all people to Jesus Christ as the universally and supremely valid way, truth, and life.

What I have written thus far is confession: the unique Jesus Christ is the final hope and judge of the world, both of the individual people in the world and of our social, political, economic, and cultural institutions. But in what does this uniqueness¹ rest? It is, after all, an [p.31](#) empirical fact that most religions—maybe all of them—offer some sort of hope and teach some sort of judgment. Islam is nothing if not adamant about the coming judgment (in which Jesus is said to have a major role!). And Buddhism, in addition to its final liberation, offers innumerable heavens, hells, and judgments and not just the one heaven, one hell, and one judgment heralded by Christianity and Islam. Next Sunday, most people sitting in the pew, even in so-called Christian countries, will have a friend or co-

¹ The organizers of this consultation chose the term ‘The Unique Christ’. By this phrase, I understand the special character of Jesus that justifies the biblical claim that Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life, such that no one comes to the Father except through him. Because of his unique (special, foundational, and particular) character, he is the unique (one and only) way to the father. The purpose of this paper is to search for that unique (special and particular) foundation of Christianity that leads us to say that Jesus is the unique (one and only) way to the Father. It should be clear from the context, when I am using ‘unique’ in the sense of ‘one and only’ and when I am using it in the sense of ‘special, particular, and peculiar.’

worker who accepts one of these alternative, non-Christian views. Our evangelical churches may confess the uniqueness of Jesus Christ as the world's hope and judge, but the everyday life of most members of those churches will challenge that confession. Our historical situation urgently demands that we demonstrate just how and why Christ is unique. We must make this demonstration not only to the larger world but for our own people as well.

THE UNIQUENESS OF CHRIST DOES NOT RESIDE IN DOCTRINES, IMAGES, OR SYMBOLS

Let me mention several places where the uniqueness of Christ does *not* reside. First, the uniqueness of Christ does not rest primarily in any doctrine, image, or symbol. Any important Christian doctrine or symbol will have analogies in other religions and belief systems.²

Individual Doctrines

Scholars of comparative religions commonly apply the notion of incarnation not just to Jesus but to many other figures and even to inanimate objects in other religions. The Shiite Muslims have their imams who are said to carry in themselves the full divine presence. While one might make the case that this Shiite teaching historically derives from the Christian model, it is harder to argue that the Hindu avatars of Vishnu stem from Christian models. Of course, the Hindu [p.32](#) avatars are not exact parallels to orthodox Christianity because most Hindu intellectuals would have a docetic understanding of them. That is, it is less significant whether or not there really was a fish swimming in the ocean in whom Vishnu dwelt than that we have the story or image of such a fish. In the case of Krishna, however, it does seem important to some worshippers that such an individual actually existed historically.³ As a high school boy living in the country of Panama, I made friends with a family who had emigrated from India to Panama. They had a poster, whose meaning at the time I did not grasp but whose incongruity even then was fully apparent. This poster included pictures of the traditional avatars of Vishnu (the boar, the fish, Krishna, etc.), but in addition, the poster had pictures of Jesus and, if I remember correctly, the Virgin Mary. Here Jesus and Mary had been absorbed into a pastiche of Hinduism and Roman Catholicism as incarnations of Vishnu.

The notion of incarnation can be extended—perhaps ‘stretched’ would be a better word—even farther. Inside certain traditional Japanese Shinto shrines, there is a ‘Holy of Holies’ holding a special object such as a mirror, or sword, or stone-jewel. This object is

² It would affirm that the ideational content of Christianity *ultimately* is special and particular. But, to jump ahead to my conclusion, the uniqueness of Christianity stems from ‘facts’ (God’s actions in history) and not from ‘ideas’ (such as doctrines, images, etc.). Given the specificity of the facts, we can move to the special and unique character of Christian doctrine, but we cannot proceed the other way around.

³ The story of Krishna’s dancing with the milk-maids would seem calculated, however, to encourage a docetic interpretation even of Krishna. In the story, a very handsome Krishna has attracted a group of admiring milk-maids, each wanting to dance with him. The story continues by telling us that each girl does dance with Krishna and that this dance creates an overwhelming ecstasy in her. Moreover, the girls were all dancing simultaneously! This is possible because the girls were ‘really’ dancing with each other. The ecstasy had turned each girl’s consciousness away from normal sense perception so that she did not notice her ‘real’—that is, her *external*—partner. And yet at a deeper level, each girl really—that is, *internally*, the true reality for which no quotation marks are needed—did dance with Krishna. I think it is fair to say that the story suggests that the Krishna in our souls is the important Krishna and that any external figure must be considered secondary.

called the shintai which can be translated as 'Divine Object'.⁴ The Divine Object provides a place for the presence of the Sacred. In a very general sense, one may say that most religious traditions—certain forms of mysticism, gnostic traditions, etc., may be exceptions—apprehend the divine presence through some very concrete object or person. The absence of such a concrete/person may even signal a turn toward philosophy and away from religion. Thus, considered as a theme, incarnation, far from being unique to Christianity, seems to be a universal possession of the religious heritage of mankind. p. 33

Combinations of Doctrines and Combinations of Images

This same logic could be extended to every other doctrine concerning Jesus Christ and the Christian religion. Creation, fall, sin, atonement, propitiation, resurrection, church, sanctification, the rule of God, and hope and judgment—these all have analogues in other religions. It must be immediately added that no analogy is exactly perfect. But every Christian doctrine has a counterpart in at least one other religion which is remarkably close—close enough to cause considerable uneasiness when our North American students and parishioners encounter them for the first time. And if we accept somewhat weaker analogies, then we will find almost endless parallels in other religions to each Christian doctrine.

It must also be added that the various Christian doctrines fit together to form an overall pattern, a gestalt, and an ethos. While at a rather abstract level, other religions exhibit analogies to the general gestalt of Christian doctrine, at a more concrete level, the gestalt of Christianity gives it a unique 'feel' or 'tone.' At the abstract level, one can make a good case, for example, that all religions have some vision of the ideal state of affairs (their version of creation), some statement of a deviation from that idea state of affairs (their version of the fall), and some statement of how to cope with those deviations (their version of salvation). Yet Christianity—and every other religion as well—fleshes out this abstract pattern in its own unique way. The world view presupposed by Christianity (with its creator God) and that presupposed, for example, by Zen Buddhism (with its stress on ultimate Emptiness) are clearly contradictory.

In addition, there is a middle zone between the meaning of a particular doctrine and the gestalt of the entire religion. In this middle ground, several doctrines in a non-Christian religion may combine in patterns that are hauntingly parallel to Christianity. A good example comes from the True Pure Land Religions of Japan. The Buddhist saint Shinran (1174–1268) despaired of ever working his way to salvation, and came to depend totally on the mercies of Amida. Amida had made a vow to bring all sentient creation into enlightenment even if this took countless eons of reincarnations, each reincarnation bringing greater perfection and merit. Shinran taught that faith in Amida allowed one to appropriate the infinite merits that Amida had built up through these endless reincarnations. Amida only asked that people should trust him to provide this salvation. Shinran clearly understood that if 'faith alone' counts, then his efforts as a monk were meaningless. So he gave up his monk's status, married a former nun, and began preaching his p. 34 message to the common people. The common people, who had neither the financial resources nor the social freedom to pursue the rigours of monastic meditation, could surely place their trust in Amida. Shinran, it should be added, had no desire to create a new Buddhist sect, but opposition from the established Buddhism along with the commitment of his followers resulted in a new Buddhist sect.

⁴ The common meanings of the terms 'shin' and 'tai' are 'god' and 'body'.

The parallel with Luther is astonishing. Certainly Shinran taught a Pauline-like doctrine of salvation by grace through faith. When, however, we expand the parallel between Shinran and Luther/Paul to other doctrines, some profound differences emerge. For example, there is no clear doctrine of creation, and there is no notion of an atonement through a vicarious death that pays the penalty of our sins. And Amida is neither the creator of the universe nor the incarnation of the creator-god. However much, and however appropriately, one may wish to speak of the Christ-figure in Amida-Buddhism, the entire gestalt of ideas differs dramatically between the two religions.

Conclusion

The conclusion I wish to draw is that doctrines, ideas, symbols, or images do not, by themselves, decisively distinguish the special character of Christ from other figures in world religions. Of course, the total gestalt of ideas concerning Christ is different from the total gestalt of beliefs in other religions (except at a highly generic level). Every other religion, however, can make the same claim for the uniqueness of its own pattern of beliefs. The specialness of Christianity, in short, is not special, if we attend solely to the ideational or symbolic structure of Christianity.

THE UNIQUENESS OF CHRIST DOES NOT RESIDE IN RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

Let me turn to a second area where the uniqueness of Christianity does not reside. The religious experience of Christians does not decisively distinguish between Christianity (or Christ) and other religions (or other saviours). I do not dispute that experience has a profound role in Christianity. Christians get experientially involved with their religion in many ways, some appropriate and some inappropriate—for example, in revivals, in worship, in sacramentalism, in mysticism, and in commitments to service as clergy, missionaries, and lay leaders. Evangelicals in particular would not dismiss the role of experience. We are known for our emphasis on a ‘personal relationship with’ or a **P. 35** ‘commitment to’ Jesus Christ—which surely has an experiential dimension. It should also be noted that quite beyond the evangelical world, Christians generally have emphasized the role of experience. The name of Schleiermacher comes immediately to mind. For Schleiermacher the primary meaning of a Christian doctrine as well as the norms for its truth were to be found in Christian experience. Many, many theologians have followed in Schleiermacher’s footsteps, arguing that the Christian religion has first and foremost to deal with our human experience of the divine, or, to phrase it differently, with the divine dimension in our experience.

Most theologians today, evangelical or not, would affirm the role of experience in Christianity. Nonetheless, the uniqueness of Christ cannot be established on the basis of our Christian experience. To whatever experience we might turn, we can find a similar experience in other religions. For example, other religions can certainly match the intensity of Christian commitment. Consider the depth of conviction that motivates many Muslims to holy battle or the passion that enables certain Hindus to walk on fire. Yoga, meditation, and mysticism (no matter how defined) can produce deep and powerful forms of ecstasy. Love for a god, for the ultimate, for a saviour can be found throughout the world. Nearly every religion has some parallel to glossolalia. The same is true of the experiences of atonement, forgiveness, and reconciliation. To take one example, sacramental experience extends far beyond Christianity. I have observed a ceremony at the Shinto shrine in Izumo in which the priests made offerings of cooked rice and sakè (rice-wine) to the gods of Japan, and then the believers ate the rice and drank the sakè as

gifts in which the gods made themselves available to those believers. And when visiting in India, I noticed that some of the ceremonies of worship ended with meals of divine-human communion.

It is sometimes said that (in non-Christian religions) men reach out to God, whereas God in Christ reaches out to men. It would follow that only Christianity offers the experience of grace, of being found by God. While this may be true as a Christian evaluation of the real nature of other religions, it is not true as a phenomenological or empirical description of the religious experiences to be found in these other religions. Many forms of bhakti in Hinduism as well as the True Pure Land sects in Buddhism claim to experience grace and to taste salvation as a gift.

In summary: our claim that Jesus is the unique judge and hope of the world cannot be rooted merely in Christian experience or in Christian doctrine. [p. 36](#)

HISTORICAL EVENTS AND THE CHRIST

Where then can we find the uniqueness of Christ? To move our discussion towards an answer, I wish to repeat a comment made earlier. Every religion has its own gestalt, its own ethos, and its own feel and tone. It is certainly permissible, therefore, to explore the specificity of any religion. To search for the specificity of a religion is to search for those factors, if any, which drive the religion towards its characteristic dogmas, rituals, theologies, ethical systems, and attitudes.

The Old Testament Events: Historical and Mythical

It is a well-worn but important observation that biblical religion emerges out of particular historical experiences. In the Old Testament, the Exodus stands as the great event of salvation, which is not to deny God saved Israel from her enemies many other times as well. The Exodus so overwhelms later Hebrew experience that most scholars, even on secular assumptions, hesitate to dismiss its historicity entirely.⁵ Gerhard von Rad, hardly an evangelical, goes so far as to argue that the Old Testament's formulation of its doctrine of creation—as a specific, one-time event—emerged out of Israel's profound reflection on those specific historical events in which she experienced salvation from her enemies.⁶ The important point to notice is this: when Israel experienced salvation, as in the Exodus, she experienced God's action. The focus is always on what God has done.⁷ [p. 37](#)

⁵ For example, John Bright in his *A History of Israel* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1959) argues that at least some portion of the people who later identified themselves as Israel experienced an actual escape from Egypt. His argument, at least in intention, seems to be based on secular standards of historiography.

⁶ See his *Old Testament Theology*, vol 1, *The Theology of Israel's Historical Traditions*, trans. D. M. G. Stalker (New York and Evanston, Ill.: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1962), 136–39.

⁷ Modern secular historical-consciousness differs radically, at this point, from the Hebrew sense of history which focussed on God's actions. Consider the Exodus as an example of a biblically important event. Contemporary secular scholarship tends to separate the 'real' Exodus from its 'interpretation' as God's action. The secular sciences of history, sociology, etc., can investigate the Exodus only insofar as it is a factor in human experience with observable causes such as the character of Egyptian slavery, the local geography, the wind, tides, etc. These historical, scientific, and academic perspectives, thus, encourage us to think of the observable (i.e., available for observation by any appropriately situated observer) aspects of the Exodus as the 'real' occurrence and to consider the claim that the Exodus is God's action as a secondary 'interpretation' or a 'religious addendum.' For the Bible, in contrast, the Exodus is both divine action and human experience; but the divine action is the primary factor and the human experience of the Hebrew nation, while obviously necessary, is nonetheless the secondary or derivative factor. (This raises some serious methodological issues concerning the extent to which the modern sciences—and in particular the

Israel had to defend her historical foundations against the mythically oriented religion of her Canaanite neighbours.⁸ The great scholar of comparative religions, Mircea Eliade, has taught us that a fundamental function of the myths of most early religions, including Canaanite religion, was to structure the current experience of the worshipper and put him into contact with the sacred.⁹

The myths of Baal were not intended to give historical information about what happened at one particular time, but were intended to put us into the contact with what is true at all times. The mythic 'time' of the stories of Baal is really the sacred dimension of reality that is equally present at all 'historical times.' The same applies to the sense of space in mythic religions. There is no contradiction between a myth which pictures creation as beginning in the centre of my city, making it in the centre of the universe, and another myth in which states that creation began in the centre of your city, making it the centre of the universe. The respective myths function to place the believers in contact with mythic 'space' which is equally present in all spaces, not to provide a factual account of particular occurrences at specific locations.

The early prophets—Elijah is the paradigm, but Samuel, Amos and others may also be mentioned—forced Israel to confront the Canaanite religion. Who is the God of Israel—Jahweh or Baal? On what did the existence of Israel depend—the historical Exodus and Covenant or the experience of the omnipresent, omnitemporal, true time and true space offered by the myths and rituals of Baal? Four hundred priests of Baal lost their lives at Mt. Carmel in conflict with Elijah precisely over this issue. The Old Testament records the growing awareness of Israel that her destiny depended on Jahweh alone. [p. 38](#)

Israel's incorporation of the mythic dimension¹⁰ into her religion

Yet Israel could not entirely avoid the mythic dimension of religion. Canaanite myth and ritual apparently focussed on the land, on sexuality and fertility, and on the seasons—on what we would call nature. Israel had to ask herself this question: if Jahweh's role is limited to past historical events (escape from enemies), then can he really be adequate to sustain the continuing existence of Israel? Did not Israel also need saving from droughts, famines, and infertility as well as enemy nations? Israel had to learn that Jahweh can be Israel's true saviour only if he is also the creator and, thus, master of heaven and earth. It is fascinating to observe how many of the stories about Elijah focus on Jahweh's capacity to control rain, famine, lightning, thunder, fertility, food, health, and even life and death, where such concerns were the special province of Baal. In short, Jahweh must be present, not just in history, but in nature as well, shaping our experience of the Holy in nature. That is, there must be a mythic dimension to Hebrew religion as well as a historical dimension.

There is, however, another and perhaps equally important reason why Hebrew religion had to incorporate the mythic dimension into its own religious consciousness. The prophets taught that Israel could expect Jahweh to continue to provide salvation from her enemies *because* God had brought Israel out of Egypt and *because* he had made a

social sciences—have the resources to deal appropriately with the Biblical record of *God's* actions in history.)

⁸ In its mythic orientation, Canaanite religion resembles much of Indian religion, Greek religion, gnostic Christianity, etc.

⁹ Of Eliade's many works, a good starting point is *The Sacred and the Profane*, trans. Willard R. Trask (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc., A Harvest Book, 1959). Another useful book with which to begin is *Cosmos and History: The Myth of the Eternal Return*, trans. Willard R. Trask (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, Harper Torchbooks, The Bollinger Library, 1959).

¹⁰ See footnote # 12 for a discussion of the meaning of 'mythic dimension' when applied to Biblical religion.

Covenant with Israel at Sinai. Somehow, therefore, the Exodus and the Sinaitic Covenant had to be made a part of the living experience of later generations of Hebrews. In short, the Exodus and Sinai stories had to be given a mythic dimension for later generations lest their significance be lost. The Hebrew community did this in various ways. One way was by having later generations periodically renew the Covenant ([Dt. 30:15–20](#), [Jos. 24:1–28, 2 Ki. 23:1–3](#), etc.). Joshua’s covenant renewal ceremony at Shechem is particularly fascinating because in the ceremony Joshua has God saying ‘I brought *you* out [of Egypt],’ ‘I brought *you* to the land of the Amorites,’ etc. By the time of Joshua’s renewal ceremony, however, only Caleb and Joshua himself had been adults at the time of the Exodus. Some of the oldest of Joshua’s listeners may have been children, but most had not yet been born when the Exodus occurred. Yet Joshua’s speech views all his listeners as if they had been full participants in these historical events. The Exodus and Sinai have become contemporaneous for the [p. 39](#) hearers, and these stories now have the role of structuring the hearers’ present existence, and of putting them into contact with God’s sacred power. In short, Joshua’s speech focusses on the present availability of the Exodus and Sinaitic Covenant for the new generation.

The historical-factual and existential-universal dimensions of events, stories, and doctrines

I wish to introduce some technical terminology at this point. On the one hand, insofar as they are particular, factual occurrences in history, the Exodus and the Sinaitic Covenant have a ‘historical-factual’ meaning. And, thus, stories that refer to them as real events may also be said to have a ‘historical-factual’ significance.¹¹ On the other hand, insofar as they are present realities in the lives of later generations of Hebrews, the Exodus and the Sinaitic Covenant have a ‘existentialuniversal’ meaning.¹² And, of course, stories about the

¹¹ Because of the tendency mentioned in footnote # 7—that is, the tendency of the modern social sciences, including historiography, to restrict the terms ‘factual’ and ‘historical’ to what is available to secular observation—I wish to emphasize as strongly as possible that I am using the term ‘historical-factual’ to refer to *God’s* action. Without doubt, God’s action in the Exodus was experienced by the original human participants. I am not, however, restricting the term ‘historical-factual’ to what the contemporary discipline of history or the modern social sciences can ascertain about the Exodus or Mt. Sinai.

It may help to clarify this issue by reference to the ‘historical Jesus.’ There are three possible meanings to this term: [a] the Jesus who is God’s action in space and time, who is proclaimed in scripture, confessed in the creeds, and believed by the faithful; [b] the Jesus insofar as the modern disciplines of history, sociology, etc., can recover information about him; and [c] the actual Jesus who really existed. It is the conviction of evangelicals that [a] and [c] are identical—that is, that the Jesus who is God’s action in space and time *is* the Jesus who truly and actually existed. At best, the historical Jesus as recovered by the modern social sciences—option [b]—is part of the real event, of what actually happened; and at worst, the historical Jesus of the modern historians is a fabrication that has nothing to do with what actually happened and may even falsify what actually happened. When I say that the deep structure of Christianity—what gives it its characteristic shape, doctrine, rituals, ethical stance, etc.—enters of God’s actions in history, and especially on Jesus Christ, I have in mind the combination of [a] and [c].

¹² All existential-universal language shapes the experience of the contemporary person and brings that person into contact with the Divine or the Holy. There is, however, more than one kind of existential-universal language. In the case of full-blown, genuine myth, a story is told. This story may or may not have actually happened. But even if that story is historically accurate, its connection with history is logically independent of its ‘truth’ and of its, capacity to structure our experience and to place us in contact with the Holy. In the case of Hebrew religion, in contrast, the function of existential-universal language is precisely to elicit God’s past savings acts into present significance and even into a kind of present reality. Thus the existential-universal language of the Hebrews contains a necessary link to historical actuality and differs profoundly from the existential-universal language of myth. When comparing Israelite with Canaanite religion, or Christianity with Indian religion, we must remember both the similarities and the differences of

Exodus and the [p. 40](#) Sinaitic Covenant may be used to structure the experience of later generations and to put these later generations into contact with the sacred power of Jahweh; such stories may then be said to have an ‘existential-universal’ dimension of meaning.

The terminology of ‘historical-factual’ and ‘existential-universal’ can be expanded to include all the major doctrines of Christianity. Thus the historical-factual resurrection is nothing less than God’s act of raising Jesus from the dead, outside the city gates of Jerusalem approximately 1,960 years ago. Yet the resurrection must also be made present to the later generations of Christian believers. In the words of an American spiritual, ‘Were *you* there when God raised (Jesus) from the tomb?’ The resurrection, through the power of the Holy Spirit, shapes our current experience of salvation, of self-understanding, and of access to God’s presence. Similar analyses could be made of doctrines such as incarnation, atonement, Pentecost, crucifixion, and even creation and judgment.

My basic thesis is that the specific character of Biblical religion and, thus, of Christianity stems from the priority given to the historical-factual dimension of the Bible’s basic teachings and doctrines. The basic content of the doctrine of the Exodus, for example, is God’s action of saving Israel out of Egypt. And if we want to know the fundamental meaning of the incarnation, we must appeal to God’s act in which he took on flesh in Jesus Christ. Both of these are particular events, located in the temporal sequence of history. In addition, the Exodus and incarnation also have an existential-universal dimension. The Exodus *is* a part of the contemporary, living experience of every later generation of Hebrews. And the incarnation *is*, in various ways, a present reality to every later generation of Christians as, for example, they experience Christ through the physical bread and wine of the Lord’s Supper, as they express practical compassion for physical suffering, and as they take joy in the physical aspects of their marriages. Nevertheless, neither sacraments nor ethical action nor Christian marriage carries any normative weight in itself; the actual historical and factual incarnation that began in Mary’s womb provides the basic [p. 41](#) meaning of the incarnation and serves as the norm for all the other experiential and universal meanings of incarnation. In short, because Biblical religion is rooted in specific historical events, and because the religious experiences of later generations are normatively grounded in the specificity of these events, it follows that a biblically based religion will emphasize its unique and particular characteristics and will resist the universalization of this historical specificity into mythic patterns whose truth-value is determined by the experience of the contemporary believer.

The Historical-Factual Priority of Jesus Christ

The New Testament presents Jesus Christ as God’s action. That is, the Christ-event is something that God did. In the Old Testament, God acts in, and as the cause of, certain events, such as rescuing Israel out of Egypt and of constantly refilling the jar of flour and jug of oil for the widow of Zarephath during the drought ([1 Ki. 17:7–16](#)). In the New Testament, those sorts of divine actions continue to occur. But, in addition, there is a new form of divine action—the life and teachings of a particular man, Jesus of Nazareth, are proclaimed to be the very action of God. (‘God proves his love for us in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us,’ [Rom. 5:8](#), and ‘Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father,’ [Jn. 14:9b](#).)

the different form of existential-universal language. The existential-universal language of the Hebrews is sufficiently like that of the religions oriented to myth that it is proper to speak of a mythic dimension to the Hebrew religion. At the same time, we must also keep in mind the profound difference between the Hebrew existential-universal language that is logically tied to history and the existential-universal language of myth that has no essential connection to history.

The Christian emphasis on the specific individual Jesus Christ and, thus, on his uniqueness, has several roots. First, insofar as God has acted in Jesus Christ, we have another case of God's action at a particular time and place in history. Therefore, in doctrines connected with Jesus Christ (incarnation, resurrection, atonement, etc.), the primary emphasis will be on the historical-factual foundation of those doctrines—that is, on Jesus Christ himself. Of course, somehow, the events in the life of Jesus must be made available for the experience of later Christians; that is, they must have an existential-universal function as well. Nonetheless, as part of the heritage of Hebrew religion, priority must be granted to the historical-factual event of Jesus Christ. The historical and factual Jesus of Nazareth, who is God's action, must be the norm by which we give content to all our Christological doctrines and by which we evaluate the appropriateness of our existential-universal appropriations of these doctrines.

Second, some weight must be given to the fact that in the New Testament, God's supreme action did not merely take place *through* a prophet or other person, but that God's supreme action *was* (and *is*) nothing less than a *person*. Particular, historical persons who actually [p. 42](#) lived have a specificity and power which is possessed by no other kind of event or object. They have, to use Martin Buber's classic phrase, an unrepeatable identity as a particular 'thou' that cannot be reduced to a fully describable and analysable 'it.'

Even the Exodus, while it certainly was a particular and specific event, was also an example of a class of events—namely, escapes from slavery or divine rescues. Fictional characters can often leave an impression of great specificity and uniqueness, but that is a by-product of the much greater specificity and unrepeatability of genuine, individual human beings. Of course, people can be put into various classifications of age, rank, sex, nationality, personality, occupation, residence, etc. But these categories, whether considered one-by-one or as an entire group, somehow miss the essence of the actual, individual, human being as he exists in time and space. To the extent, therefore, that Christianity rests on God's action in a *person*—and not just in a dramatic rescue out of slavery or even in raining fire down from heaven to consume Elijah's sacrifice on Mt. Carmel—we have an additional basis for expecting Christianity to focus on the specific, unique, unrepeatable Jesus of Nazareth who is God's own action.

The Bible provides a number of other avenues for approaching the figure of Jesus. We could, for example, trace the implications of the various titles and roles for Jesus Christ—Messiah Son of Man, Saviour, Lord, eschatological prophet, etc. And we could trace the New Testament's application to Jesus of various Old Testament passages which, in their original context, referred to Jahweh. In each case, we find that the New Testament roots its message in the historical-factual figure of Jesus Christ in all his specificity, idiosyncrasy, particularity, and individuality.

It may be worth noting that the later Christological and Trinitarian controversies are both a natural and a necessary continuation of the biblical emphasis on the historical Jesus of Nazareth. Modern advocates of pluralism—such as John Hick—are quite correct to attack both the notion of God-Incarnate and the related doctrine of the Trinity if they wish to undermine the notion of Christian uniqueness or normativity.¹³ Hick and company have reversed the priority of the historical-factual over the existential-universal; they have reversed the [p. 43](#) priority of God's specific action at a particular time and place over God's mythic presence at every time and place.

¹³ See John Hick, ed., *The Myth of God Incarnate* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1977). 'The Non-Absoluteness of Christianity,' in *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness*, ed. John Hick and Paul Knitter (New York: Orbis Press, 1987). And *An Interpretation of Religion* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1989).

Let's look briefly at some of the implications of calling the incarnation a myth, as Hick would suggest. It implies [a] the devaluation of the actual occurrence in Mary's womb as normative. God's presence in Mary's womb is 'just a myth' in the negative sense of myth—as a story about something that did not actually happen in real history. But, more positively, to call the incarnation a myth also implies [b] that it is a story which can be used to interpret and structure Christian experience. It can open up to our experience that sacred place, which being at no particular place is at every place, and that sacred time, which being at no particular time is at every time. Lastly, to call the incarnation a myth is [c] to recognize the possibility that other myths might also provide an access, a window to the divine. Other myths might connect the believer with the same aspects of the Sacred Mystery or with other aspects of the Sacred Mystery. In either case, since myths do not make any normative appeals to the history of God's actions, they do not necessarily conflict with each other. In short, to call the incarnation a myth is to imply that there is no place for Christian triumphalism nor for any claim that Jesus Christ is the norm by which to test all other claims to religious or ethical knowledge.

It is no accident, therefore, that evangelicals have maintained their commitment to a high Christology and to the doctrine of the Trinity. Both doctrines refer us back to the historical-factual ground of our Christian religion, to God's act in Jesus of Nazareth. We would affirm, of course, that Christological and other Christian doctrines *also* have existential-universal meanings; but these existential-universal meanings are secondary and under the norm of God's action in the specific, historical Jesus Christ. This return to the historical-factual foundations of our faith is a characteristic mark of Biblical religion and provides the underlying explanation for the specific and idiosyncratic form of Christian doctrines, rituals, theologies, ethical systems, and attitudes. This priority of the historical-factual Christ-event over its existential-universal dimensions may be called the 'Christian *a-priori*?¹⁴

¹⁴ Many theologians—including Schleiermacher, Ritschl, Troeltsch, Bultmann, Tillich, and Meland—who have placed a high emphasis on the existential-universal dimensions of Christian doctrine—have also wished to affirm the origin of Christianity in a particular event. The tendency, however, of such thinkers is to emphasize Christian origins as available to the social sciences, that is, as a part of human experience and insofar as they are available to secular modes of understanding human experience. They downplay the notion of a knowable act of God as the norm of our theological commitments.

I appreciate the contributions of each of these theologians and they are indeed sensitive to many of the themes that I have stressed. Nevertheless, I would argue that their analyses of 'history' actually focus more on the existential-universal side of Christian doctrine than on what I have called the historical-factual.

For example, Schleiermacher often rejoices in the presence of God in Christ—which sounds like what I have been stressing. But the presence of God in Christ, for Schleiermacher, seems basically to mean Jesus' possession of a 'God-consciousness' insofar as historical science can recover the human experience of God-consciousness. Since Schleiermacher has begun with human experience, we will not be surprised to hear that the God-consciousness in Jesus is the perfect development of a capacity that is potentially available to all human beings. The issue at stake is this: Schleiermacher's fundamental theological interpretation of the presence of God in Jesus emerged *out of* his analysis of the *religious experience* of Jesus and of Christians generally. Evangelicals *begin* by accepting the Bible's proclamation that *God* has acted decisively in Jesus Christ.

Of course, the divine action in Christ has impacted human experience in many ways. This impact means that the Christ event *is*, in part, intertwined with every other event in history, and, thus, modern historiography and the social sciences may undertake a legitimate but *partial* and *secondary* investigation of the Christ event. Indeed, because of this interweaving of God's action in Jesus into human experience, it is possible for Christian doctrine to possess an existential-universal side. Unlike Karl Barth, therefore, I would *accept* the analyses of Schleiermacher and company as profound investigations of the existential-universal dimension of Christian doctrine—which dimension, although secondary, is an important and necessary aspect of our Christian teaching and preaching. I would also *reject* these same analyses when understood as giving us the *basic* meaning of Christian doctrine (as Schleiermacher intended).

THE CHRISTIAN A-PRIORI

In the previous section we sought those factors that drive Christianity towards its distinctive forms. We found that underlying biblical religion P. 44 is a commitment to the radical priority of the historical-factual character of God's actions over the existential-universal appropriation of those actions by later generations. This we called the Christian *a-priori*.

There is nothing in principle, however, to prevent other religions from searching for their own *a-priori*—for searching for those factors which give the religion its characteristic doctrines, rituals, etc. As each religion finds its own *a-priori*, its own deep structure, we should expect to find both differences and similarities with Christianity, probably more differences than similarities. The significance of those differences/similarities for a particular religion will be determined by character of that religion's *a-priori*.¹⁵ p. 45

If we know the *a-priori* that gives a religion its gestalt and ethos, we can make some educated guesses about its likely response to the existence of other religions. Many religions, both in practice and in theory, give priority to the existential-universal dimension. This would be true of those religions with an orientation to the mythic (in Eliade's sense). A mythically oriented religion would, most likely, try to find some way of accommodating Christianity. A mythic religion can be quite accepting of other religions—at least as 'lesser' or preliminary religious paths. For example, Buddhism, which is

¹⁵ It is not a part of this paper to engage in apologetics. However, this would be the location, in terms of the paper's structure, to present a defence of the truth of Christianity. If my argument thus far is correct, then it should be possible to give good reasons which add up to a 'cumulative case argument' for Christianity. This may not be an incontrovertible 'proof' for Christianity, but it would indicate that Christianity is at least as reasonable an option as any other (including agnosticism) and perhaps the most reasonable option.

In outline, my case would run like this: I would presuppose that religious language can have meaning and that God or a Sacred Power of some sort exists. If these two factors are not granted then we would have to deal with those issues first. In the case of a discussion of religious pluralism, however, I would think that we could assume that religious language has meaning and that God or the Sacred is real. Assuming that there is no argument about those two claims, then the rest of my argument would run as follows.

[a] When one considers a religion, one enters into it and accepts, at least provisionally, its basic orientation. In the case of Christianity, this would be a provisional acceptance of the Christian *a-priori*, of the Christian commitment to God's acts in history, [b] If these events really did occur, then they would have had an impact on human experience. [c] Thus if there were good evidence that no such impact occurred, we would have to reject the Christian claims. For example, if the Jewish leaders or Roman authorities had produced the body of Jesus, sometime after his alleged resurrection, then Christianity, at least in its classical, orthodox form, would be false. It is important to note that apparently no one ever produced the corpse, and later anti-Christian polemic does not claim that the corpse was produced. [d] I would further expect the social sciences to be able to confirm that *some* aspects of these events did occur—specifically, those aspects which are a part of human experience and publicly observable. I would expect, for example, the balance of historical evidence to show that it is probable that there was man named Jesus and that his disciples truly thought that they had seen him after his death. [e] The Christian faith, based on the acceptance of the Bible's presentation of God's acts, claims to make those acts available to me now, as a part of my current experience—for example, in the Lord's Supper, or in a personal encounter with Christ, or in having a purpose for living, or in experiencing the forgiveness of sins. Since (1) there is no good evidence that these events did not occur; since (2) the original historical-factual events, if they did occur, had an impact on human experience, and since (3) there is good historical evidence for that impact, we may conclude that it is likely that our existential-universal experience of those events is veridical. [f] Given these foundations, the coherence of Christian doctrines, and the ability of the Christian faith to provide a coherent world-view becomes highly relevant evidence. [g] Analogies to Christian doctrine throughout other religions and in a wide variety of cultures becomes additional confirming evidence. Taken together, we have good reasons by which to justify a commitment to the Christian faith. Nonetheless, we must remember that it is the Holy Spirit who truly unites to Jesus unto salvation, and not logic nor historical evidence.

strongly oriented to p. 46 the existential-universal side of religion, actually needs other religions to co-exist with it. The myths, rituals, and meditational techniques of Buddhism are intended to provide insight into one's own ultimate identity. But for the full round of human existence—birth, marriage, fertility, etc.—Buddhism has little to offer and has no objection to the simultaneous practice of other religions.¹⁶ It must also be stated that most of the advanced mythic religions—Buddhism, Hinduism, gnosticism, etc.—perceive themselves as quite tolerant, although most of them also perceive themselves as the final or highest stage of religious truth. Such religions will certainly view Christianity as intolerant with its stress on particular divine actions—above all, the incarnation in Jesus Christ—as the norm for all religious claims. Advocates of such religions are likely to feel more comfortable with a mythic reinterpretation of Christianity in which the Christ-motif takes priority over the historical Jesus. Such a mythic Christ, then, would become just one more way of encountering the divine.

In theory, it is certainly possible for another, non-Christian religion to give priority to the historical-factual dimension, just as Christianity does. In that case, there would be an professed set of special events on which the religion would be based, where these events were divine actions or otherwise revealed the Sacred Power of the universe. This would create a very sharp conflict with Christianity. In principle, however, it would be impossible for both set of events to have occurred as reported by the respective religions. Thus, historical investigation of the professed events would be quite relevant in deciding between the two religions.¹⁷ In fact, it might even happen that historical investigations could actually settle the disagreement between such a religion and Christianity, because proof of the non-occurrence p. 47 of one of the central 'events' on which the religion was founded would decisively count against the truth of that religion. Any religion founded on historical-factual events runs a risk—namely, that the events did not occur or that they occurred in significantly different ways than reported by that religion. Finally it should be observed that such attention to historical facts simply is not relevant when interacting with religions that give priority to the existential-universal dimension.¹⁸

An Extension of the Existential-Universal Dimension of Christian Doctrine

¹⁶ Those forms of Buddhism stemming from Nichiren (1222–82) preach that, at least in Japan, Buddhism should be the only religion. So far as I am aware, however, Nichiren's Buddhism seems to be the only significant exception to the general Buddhist practice of friendly co-existence and division of labour with other religions.

Anyone who has lived in a Buddhist culture quickly becomes aware of Buddhism's mixing with other religions. For a sociological analysis of this phenomenon in a Theravadan setting, including certain limits to multiple religious participation, see S. J. Tambiah, *Buddhism and the Spirit Cults of North-east Thailand* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970).

¹⁷ As an illustration of the relevance of historical investigation to a certain type of religious dispute, consider that the Koran teaches that Jesus did not die on the cross, while the Bible teaches that he did. Historical evidence for the crucifixion of Christ, therefore, counts in favor of Christianity and against Islam, whereas any evidence that Jesus was not executed would tend in the opposite direction. Fortunately for Christianity, the evidence that Jesus was executed is quite compelling.

¹⁸ For example, Buddhists have invested considerable labour trying to uncover 'the historical Buddha.' And some Buddhists, when they 'take refuge in the Buddha,' have in mind the historical Siddhartha who lived in India. Nevertheless, supposed that it could be shown that the Buddha never existed or that his actual teachings were quite different from those we now know under his name, this would not undercut the foundations of Buddhism since the image of the Buddha is what counts more than the details of history. One of the most radical traditions of Buddhism states that 'if you meet the Buddha, kill him!'

The Christian faith begins with God's historical-factual acts, supremely Jesus Christ. It makes those past actions available in the present, which is the existential-universal dimension of Christianity. Stories, creeds, rituals, etc., can be used either historically-factually or existentially-universally, that is, to point to the original actions or to open up their present significance and presence.

The Bible, it should be noted, contains literature that does not directly fit into the scheme of historical-factual and existential-universal meanings as it has been developed thus far. The wisdom literature, for example, does not normally refer to God's saving acts in history, nor does it apply those acts to the present, nor does it tell stories (as myths do). The Book of Proverbs, for example, provides guidance for daily living and Job and Ecclesiastes challenge the standard wisdom of the people of Israel. This guidance is intended to enable one to live well before Jahweh, in short to connect us with Jaweh in our everyday life. In that sense, the wisdom literature may be said to have an 'extended' existential-universal meaning.¹⁹ I would argue, however, that even the wisdom literature functions only within the context of a primary p. 48 Hebrew commitment to God's historical-factual actions as the foundation of Israel's existence.

It is possible to expand the existential-universal dimension of Christianity to an even broader horizon. Scholars of, for example, literary analysis often find Christian categories, such as sin, redemptive suffering, atonement, etc., useful tools for analysing fiction, even fiction from non-Christian cultures. Anthropologists have found parallels to Christian categories in many cultures. We have already mentioned that each doctrine of Christianity has a close analogue in one or more non-Christian religions. And an entire discipline, the theology of culture, has used Christian categories to understand cultural phenomena.

I believe that these uses of Christian categories simply extend their existential-universal meaning. To be sure, such highly extended applications of the existential-universal meaning of Christian doctrines no longer function to put the hearer into direct contact with the historical-factual acts of God that originally gave these doctrines their normative meaning within Christianity. But neither can the applicability of Christian categories outside the Christian religion be dismissed as accidental coincidence.

There are a number of places in which we might look to explain the applicability of Christian doctrines outside of Christianity. The doctrine of creation tells us that God is the maker of heaven and earth. If God is personal, as evangelicals surely believe, then we would expect his creation to exhibit characteristic traces of his individual character. Since God's character is supremely, normatively, and foundationally revealed in his historical-factual acts culminating in Jesus Christ, we should expect to find parallels or analogies between God's specific actions (which ground Christian doctrine) and his acts in creation. Another place we might look is the doctrine of the Logos, especially in the light of the claim that it was the Logos who became flesh in Jesus Christ. One might also point to general revelation or to the doctrine of common grace. If all human beings have an innate—albeit perhaps subconscious—awareness of God, then the character of the true God should have some impact upon all human religion, culture, and consciousness. Sin might distort this impact, but we should not expect it to be missing.

The Doctrine of Analogy and Christ as Hope and Judge of the World

¹⁹ There are some religions that do not seem to centre on divine actions, nor on the application of those divine actions to the present, nor on mythic stories. For example, Confucianism, at least in some of its early variations centres on wisdom and the ideal of the sage. Confucianism, thus, stresses the existential-universal side of religion, but this seems to be a different type of the existential-universal from that found either in Christianity or in the mythic religions.

Assuming that our argument has thus far been correct, it seems plausible to expect that certain analogies should hold between [p. 49](#) Christianity and other religions, other ideologies, other world views, and other value systems. I would like to use the analysis of analogy and metaphor offered by Ian Barbour.²⁰ According to Barbour, when I say that ‘Jane is a tiger,’ there are three different aspects to this metaphor. First, there is the positive analogy—areas in which Jane is quite explicitly like a tiger. For example, Jane is assertive and strong. Second, there is the negative analogy—areas in which Jane is quite obviously not like a tiger. For example, Jane does not have a furry tail or large fangs. And third, there is the open area—areas in which it is neither explicitly affirmed nor denied that Jane is like a tiger. This is the area for exploration, development, and creativity. Perhaps Jane is somewhat dangerous, or cunning, or has the capacity to move silently and gracefully, appearing where we do not expect her. Every powerful analogy has a large open space.

My suggestion is that the use of analogy and metaphor has an essential role in the development of Christian doctrine. The bedrock of Christian doctrine is, of course, the actual divine events in history, as recorded in Scripture. From that bedrock, we enrich our doctrines through a series of analogies. First, there is the analogy between the historical-factual event (such as Christ’s incarnation as reported in scripture) and its existential-universal appropriation in the Lord’s Supper, in our attitudes towards our bodies, etc. The foundation is the historical-factual incarnation in Mary. Insofar as later Christian experience is explicitly like that incarnation, it must be accepted. For example, we must be open to God’s presence in concrete persons, such as one’s neighbour or one’s pastor. Insofar as later Christian experience is explicitly unlike the historical incarnation, that later experience must be rejected. For example, Christians are not physically born of virgins without a human father,²¹ nor has the Logos assumed the flesh of anyone but Jesus. In addition, however, there is a broad open area in which we may explore the analogy between the historical-factual incarnation and our existential-universal application of it. As the church explores this open area, we gradually gain a richer and more nuanced understanding of the doctrine of the incarnation. Roman Catholics and Protestants alike agree that the extension of the incarnation to include icons (in the technical sense) is inappropriate; [p. 50](#) and Protestants would also hold that the use of the incarnation to justify the doctrine of transubstantiation is also inappropriate. This much we have learned from history. On the other hand, it does seem appropriate to appeal to the incarnation to justify Christian art and concern for human social welfare.

The second analogy holds between Christian events, doctrines, stories, etc. and their existential-universal echoes that we find throughout the world. Thus, to the extent that there is a ‘positive analogy’ between the presence of the Divine Object in a Shinto shrine and the Christian doctrine of incarnation, it should be affirmed. At the very least, the Christian is obligated to accept the focus on the concrete as the locus of the divine presence. To the extent that there is negative analogy, however, that aspect of Shinto must be denied. God’s presence in Jesus Christ is, for example, infinitely richer than in a mere rock or sword; and Christians should certainly reject the Shinto tendency to perceive, not the God who created that rock, but local powers who have chosen to inhabit that rock. And to the extent that the Divine Objects in Shinto shrines serve to legitimate the divinity

²⁰ *Myths, Models, and Paradigms: A Comparative Study in Science and Religion* (New York: Harper & Row, Pub., 1974), 44.

²¹ It is traditional, however, to see an analogy between Christ’s Virgin Birth and our spiritual rebirth. According to [John 1:12–13](#), people who believe in Jesus ‘because children of God—children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband’s will, but born of God.’

of the Japanese emperors and the sacred character of the emperor system, there is another negative analogy that must be vigorously rejected. Lastly, however, there is the open area, neither affirmed nor denied in the analogy between the Christian incarnation and the Shinto Divine Object. Here is the area for exploration.

God's actions in history, recorded in Scripture and culminating in Jesus Christ, constitute the cornerstone in this series of analogies. Direct agreement implies acceptance by Christians. Here Christ functions as a positive norm. Direct disagreement implies rejection by Christians. Here Christ functions as a negative norm.²² In the third case, the open area, Christ functions as an invitation for and guide to inquiry. This last area implies that Christianity can be enriched as it meets new cultures, new historical eras, and even other religions. This enrichment requires judgment and wisdom because there are no mechanical decision procedures guaranteeing a correct and proper evaluation of the open areas. It also takes time, even generations, to come to a decision. Each theologian and cross-cultural expert will have his own preferred areas and skills for exploration. I am personally p.51 interested in the Buddhist theme of Emptiness as a way of enriching our understanding of the kenosis ([Phil. 2:5-6](#)) and of the Cross.

It is important that we acknowledge the existential-universal application of Christian themes beyond the borders of Christianity for two additional reasons. First, it makes missions and evangelism possible. We sometimes talk of pre-evangelism or that preunderstanding necessary before the gospel can be a real option. In the deepest sense, God himself has done that pre-evangelism. By providing echoes of Christian themes in every culture and in every religion, he has given the entire human race some 'handles' that allow them at least a preliminary understanding of the gospel when it is preached.²³ Without these 'handles'—these echoes, these existentialuniversal applications of Christian themes—the Gospels would come as something totally incomprehensible to the non-Christian and, therefore, never as a true option.²⁴ One of the most extraordinary outcomes of the Christian missionary movement is the demonstration in actual practice that the gospel can be understood, at least to some extent, by members of every known culture, era, and religion. Second, the existence of these existential-universal themes throughout all cultures and religions is important evidence for the truth of Christianity. We hold that the same God whom we meet as Saviour in Jesus Christ is also the Creator.

²² At times the negative analogy can consist of mere mistakes and errors. At other times, the negative analogy seems to stem from sin. Negative analogy in the area of incarnation (God's presence in the concrete) is particularly open to idolatry. As we observe sin and idolatry in the negative analogical content of other religions and worldviews, however, we must not overlook our own sinful tendency to misappropriate and to misuse Christian doctrines, rituals, and symbols.

²³ In his book, *Peace Child* (Glendale, California: G/L Regal Books, 1974), Don Richardson has written a fascinating account of a custom among certain non-Christian tribes that profoundly echoed the Christian doctrine of the atonement. As an evangelical missionary, Richard used that custom as a point of contact between those tribes and the gospel. I would consider this custom to be an existential-universal echo of the historical atonement on the cross—an echo that made available to those tribes the preunderstanding which they needed to hear the gospel as a live option, but also an echo deeply distorted by sin.

²⁴ Langdon Gilkey has shown in his *Naming the Whirlwind: The Renewal of God-Language* (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1969) that the death of God movement of two decades ago arose, in part, out of Karl Barth's theology. By denying any point of contact—to use Emil Brunner's phrase—Barth effectively divorced Christianity from the general life of mankind. The gospel came as a 'bolt from the blue' and, therefore, as something inherently incomprehensible and isolated. As the Death of God theologians clearly and correctly saw, an incomprehensible and isolated 'God' is a dead god indeed. My argument is that the existential-universal echoes of the Christian faith to be found throughout the world function as that context that allows the gospel to be understood and appropriated as it moves into new situations or even into new generations.

Since we also hold that the Exodus, the Christ event, etc., as recorded in scripture most fundamentally reveal the nature of that Creator-Saviour God, we should expect to find analogies to those divine actions distributed throughout all the world. Of course, because p. 52 of sin, we should also expect those analogies to have limitations (negative analogical content). But a complete lack of existential-universal echoes throughout all history and all cultures would be convincing evidence that Christians have erred in identifying the Saviour God with the Creator God—if, indeed, there should be any ‘god’ at all.

Beyond Analogy: the Future Judgment and Hope as History

The Christian *a-priori* rests in the historical-factual acts of God in which he saves his people—supremely his act in Jesus Christ. The Bible extends this emphasis on specific actions both backward to creation and forward to the eschaton. Of course, creation and the eschaton also have profound existential-universal applications to our current experience, both to specifically Christian experience and to generically human experience. But these existential-universal dimensions do not exhaust the meanings of either creation or the eschaton. Creation is an event at the beginning of time. And the judgment and perfect reign of God will come at the end of history. Because our language is constructed to deal with vents and objects within history, within the stream of time, we should be quite humble when dealing with events at the beginning or end of history as we have known it. Nevertheless, the fundamental structure of Christian belief that God reveals himself primarily through his historical-factual deeds—leads to the expectation that both the beginning and the end are genuine events. And indeed, this is precisely what the Bible teaches.²⁵

Christians believe that the historical-factual Jesus is God’s act. Jesus is not just an existential-universal image. Jesus is also unique, even among God’s actions, for he alone is truly a person. As a person, he is a ‘thou’ with all the individuality and personality that only true, actually existent persons possess. This individuality and personality reveal the character of God, who is also personal, also a thou. Because of the deep sense of individuality that the Bible attaches to a person, to a p. 53 ‘thou’, only one human ‘thou’ could manifest the *full* presence of the divine ‘thous’.²⁶ If the unique person Jesus truly reveals the person-hood of God, then we should find the Bible connecting Jesus of Nazareth with all of God’s other actions. And indeed this is exactly what we do find.

God’s act of creation is attributed to the pre-incarnate Christ—that is, to the logos ([Jn. 1:1–5](#)). Because of the Bible’s deep sense of temporality, there is no hint in scripture that the humanity of Jesus was involved in that act of creation, only the logos. However, once the incarnation has occurred, then the actions of the logos never take place apart from the historical-factual Jesus. Having taken on flesh in Jesus Christ, God never shuffles off that

²⁵ To claim that the exchaton will be an actual event (or series of events) does not imply that every biblical description of these events must be taken literally. We can use symbol, code, and metaphor to describe actual events. The language, for example, describing the New Jerusalem as ‘made of pure gold, as pure as glass’ ([Rev. 21:18](#)) seems to me to be metaphor and should be taken as such. Many of our problems in interpreting scripture, when dealing with the creation and the eschaton, stem from our failure to realize that an event can be described symbolically without thereby compromising that event’s character as something that actually happens (or did happen or will happen).

²⁶ At this point, we have another approach for understanding the Trinity. The full presence of God in Christ is the Word. The full presence of God here and now is the Holy Spirit. More specifically, only the Holy Spirit can unite me, here and now, with the historical-factual Christ. It is the work of the Holy Spirit that creates a distinction between those existential-universal applications of God’s actions that provide salvation (above all, creating a union between the believer and the historical-factual Jesus) and those existential-universal myths, themes, and images that do not convey salvation.

flesh. Even now God is the incarnate God. Thus the final judgment is both God's act and at the same time, Christ's act. The deep-level structure of the Christian faith implies that the incarnate Christ is indeed the judge of the world. In addition, the final kingdom, the final eschaton, the final harmony has Jesus at its very centre. Paul says, in [Ephesians 1:9-10](#), that the historical Christ unfolds the divine mystery that all things will someday be united under one head, even Christ. And [Revelation 22:1](#) says that at the centre of the New Jerusalem will be a single throne, which is 'the throne of God and of the Lamb'.

The Christian *a-priori*, the deep structure of the Christian faith, declares the unique Christ to be both the hope and the judge of the world.

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Jesus in African Culture

Kwame Bediako

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To an evangelical Christian steeped in classical western systematic theology and missionary practice (and this includes many 'third world' Church and missionary leaders) this article may raise many difficulties. Its importance lies in the fact that the author, a Ghanian of the Akan clan, is an evangelical theologian struggling with his identity as an African and as a Christian and how he relates the gospel to the traditional beliefs and values of his people. He explores two areas: Jesus 'our Saviour' who reigns over the spiritual realm including evil spirits and is mediated to us by the Holy Spirit and secondly, the relation of Jesus Christ to God the Supreme Spirit Being (Onyame), creator and sustainer of the universe and to the ancestors or 'spirit fathers'—the living dead of the clan. He argues that the more rapid spread of Christianity among societies with primal religious systems than among other societies occurs because Africans find in Jesus Christ the reality and spiritual experience that meets the needs and fears of their traditional religious beliefs and practices. He criticizes the early missionaries for creating an unnecessary dichotomy in the converts' religious experience. However, the author is careful to show that the gospel judges those elements of primal faith that are contrary to biblical revelation (for example, witchcraft and the occult), replaces others and points to the 'new story' of the incarnation, crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ. He shows the importance of the Epistle to the Hebrews as a bridge to the knowledge of salvation in Christ.

Editor

CHRISTIAN FAITH AND AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGION IN RETROSPECT

One of the most telling commentaries on the presentation of the gospel of Jesus Christ in Africa is the following statement:

Christ has been presented as the answer to questions a white man would ask, the solution to the needs that western man would feel, the Saviour of the world of the European world-view, the object of the adoration and prayer of historic Christendom. But if Christ were to appear as the answer to the questions that Africans are asking, what would he look like?

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It was made by one of the more perceptive and sensitive missionaries to Africa of our time and describes neatly the general character of western missionary preaching and teaching in Africa since the arrival of missionaries on our continent during the 19th century. It also raises a question which must be faced by African churches and African Christians of today who are convinced that Jesus Christ is the *universal* Saviour and thus the Saviour of the African world, and who feel that the teaching they have so far received is inadequate.

And yet the negative side of missionary history in Africa must not be exaggerated, for several reasons. Firstly, the vitality of our Christian communities bears witness to the fact that the gospel really was communicated, however inadequate we may now consider that communication to have been. There is always more to the 'hearing' of the Word of God than can be contained in the actual preaching of it by the human agents; the Holy Spirit is also present to interpret the Word of God directly to the hearers. Therefore we must allow the mercy and providence of God to override the shortcomings of human achievements.

Secondly, African theological thinkers now share in the inheritance of the gospel as the apostle Paul proclaimed it, the gospel that set the early Gentile Christians free from Jewish Christian attempts to impose upon them the regulations of the Jewish Law. Paul grasped firmly the universality of the gospel of Jesus the Messiah, and by insisting that the gospel includes all peoples without reserve, gave Gentile Christians the essential tools for assessing their own cultural heritage, for making their own contribution to Christian life and thought and for testing the genuineness and Christian character of that contribution. For many years now African theologians have refused to accept the negative view of African religion held by western missionaries and have shown consistently the continuity of God from the pre-Christian African past into the Christian present. They have therefore, like the apostle Paul, handed to us the assurance that with our Christian conversion, we are not introduced to a new God unrelated to the traditions of our past, but to One who brings to fulfilment all the highest religious and cultural aspirations of our heritage. In this way the limitations in our missionary past need no longer hinder the growth of Christian understanding and confidence in our churches.

A further reason touches on the nature of African traditional religion itself, and its encounter with the Christian faith. The common western missionary view of traditional religion was that it formed 'the religious beliefs of more or less backward and degraded peoples all over the world', and that it held no preparation for Christianity'. Yet in more recent years, it has been shown that Christianity has spread most rapidly in 'societies with primal religious systems', that is, religious systems akin to African traditional religion. These societies are the Mediterranean world of the early Christian centuries, the ancient peoples of northern Europe and modern 'primalists' of Black Africa, Asia, South America and Oceania. This fact of history has led to the question whether there might be 'affinities between the Christian and primal traditions?' It shows clearly that the form of religion once held to be the furthest removed from the Christian faith has had a closer relationship with it than any other. Indeed, since primal religions have been 'the most fertile soil for the gospel', it has been argued that they 'underlie therefore the Christian faith of the vast majority of Christians of all ages and all nations'. John Mbiti, probably the best known African theologian outside of Africa, has repeatedly argued that Africa's 'old'

religions have been a crucial factor in the rapid spread of Christianity among African peoples. They were a vital preparation for the gospel.

This argument stands the western missionary view of African religions on its head and so opens the way for a fresh approach to how we may understand the relation of Jesus as Lord and Saviour to the spiritual realities of our context.

Jesus as divine conqueror in the African world

On the wider African scene, John Mbiti has written two articles which deal with African understandings of Christ, drawn largely from evidence from the Independent Churches. His view was that it is within these churches that African Christians have been able to express more freely their experience of the Christian faith than in the mission-dominated or historical churches (that is, the mainline denominations). Though the distinctions between 'independent' and 'historical' churches are now less meaningful than they once were, Mbiti's articles did indicate that there was something to write about, that there are characteristically African understandings of Christ. In this area, as in much else, he has been a pioneer.

By way of illustration I shall highlight two major points he makes in those studies. The first is that Jesus is seen above all else as the *Christus Victor* (Christ supreme over every spiritual rule and authority). This understanding of Christ arises from Africans' keen awareness of forces and powers at work in the world which threaten the interests of life and harmony. Jesus is victorious over the spiritual realm and particularly p.57 over evil forces and so answers to their need for a powerful protector against these forces and powers.

The second important point is that for African Christians the term 'our Saviour' can refer to God and sometimes to the Holy Spirit, as well as to Jesus. Jesus, as our Saviour, brings near and makes universal the almightiness of God. This means that he 'is able to do all things, to save in all situations, to protect against all enemies, and is available whenever those who believe may call upon him'. It also means that the humanity of Jesus and his atoning work on the Cross are in the background, and Jesus is taken to belong essentially to the more powerful realm of divinity, in the realm of Spiritpower. Though Mbiti considers this view of Christ as inadequate, he does stress that the methods and context of present-day evangelism need to be reexamined and that there needs to be also a 'deeper appreciation of the traditional African world, whose grip is so strong that it exercises a powerful influence on the manner of understanding and experiencing the Christian message, however that message may be presented'.

These considerations bring us near the heart of the problem that confronts us now: how to understand Christ authentically in the African world. To make my reflections more concrete, I propose to relate them as far as possible to the religious belief and world-view of the Akan peoples. Being an Akan myself, I shall be dealing with realities with which I can easily sympathize. For I believe such reflection can be authentic only in context. I shall be setting forth some of my own concerns with regard to my own Akan world of ideas and beliefs.

JESUS AND THE ANCESTORS IN AKAN WORLD-VIEW

Accepting Jesus as 'our Saviour' always involves making him at home in our spiritual universe and in terms of our religious needs and longings. So an understanding of Christ in relation to spirit-power in the African context is not necessarily less accurate than any other perception of Jesus. The question is whether such an understanding faithfully reflects biblical revelation and is rooted in true Christian experience. Biblical teaching

clearly shows that Jesus is who he is (i.e. Saviour) because of what he has done and can do (i.e. save), and also that he was able to do what he did on the Cross because of who he is (God the Son), cf. [Colossians 2:15ff](#). Since 'salvation' in the traditional African world involves a certain view of the realm of spirit-power and its effects upon the physical and spiritual dimensions of human existence, our reflection about Christ must speak to the questions **p. 58** posed by such a world-view. The needs of the African world require a view of Christ that meets those needs. And so who Jesus is in the African spiritual universe must not be separated from what he does and can do in that world. The way in which Jesus relates to the importance and function of the 'spirit fathers' or ancestors is crucial.

The Akan spirit world on which human existence is believed to depend, consists primarily of God, the Supreme Spirit Being (*Onyame*), Creator and Sustainer of the universe. Subordinate to God, with delegated authority from God, are the 'gods', (*abosom*), sometimes referred to as children of God (*Nyame mma*) and the ancestors or 'spirit fathers' (*Nsamanfo*). The relative positions of the 'gods' and the ancestors are summed up by Dr. Peter Sarpong, the Catholic Bishop of Kumasi and an authority on Akan culture:

While God's power surpasses all others, the ancestors would appear to tilt the scale in their favour if their power could be weighed against that of the lesser gods. After all are the deities not often referred to as 'the innumerable gods of our ancestors', the spokesmen of the human spirits?

John Pobee formerly of the University of Ghana, has also underlined the importance of the ancestors in the religious world-view of the Akan. He has devoted a whole book to developing some aspects of an Akan Christian theology. He concludes that

Whereas the gods may be treated with contempt if they fail to deliver the goods expected of them, the ancestors, like the Supreme Being, are always held in reverence or even worshipped.

We shall not discuss here whether ancestors are worshipped or simply venerated. We need only to recognize that the ancestors form the most prominent element in the Akan religious outlook and provide the essential focus of piety. Pobee's comment on the ancestors is therefore well-founded:

Perhaps the most potent aspect of Akan religion is the cult of the ancestors. They, like the Supreme Being, are always held in deep reverence or even worshipped. The ancestors are that part of the clan who have completed their course here on earth and are gone ahead to the other world to be elder brothers of the living at the house of God. Not all the dead are ancestors. To qualify to be an ancestor one must have lived to a ripe old age and in an exemplary manner and done much to enhance the standing and prestige of the family, clan or tribe. By virtue of being the part of the clan gone ahead to the house of God, they are believed to be powerful in the sense that they maintain the course of life here and now and influence it for good or ill. **p. 59** They give children to the living; they give good harvest, they provide the sanctions for the moral life of the nation and accordingly punish, exonerate or reward the living as the case may be.

Ancestors are essentially clan or lineage ancestors. So they have to do with the community or society in which their progeny relate to one another, and not with a system of religion as such, which might be categorized as 'the Akan religion'. In this way, the 'religious' functions and duties which relate to ancestors become binding on all members of the particular group who share common ancestors. Since the ancestors have such an important part to play in the well-being (or otherwise) of individuals and communities, the crucial question about our relationship to Jesus is, as John Pobee rightly puts it: 'Why

should an Akan relate to Jesus of Nazareth who does not belong to his clan, family, tribe and tradition?’

Up to now, our churches have tended to avoid the question and have presented the gospel as though it was concerned with an entirely different compartment of life, unrelated to traditional religious piety. As a result, many of our people are uncertain about how the Jesus of the Church’s preaching saves them from the terrors and fears which they experience in their traditional world-view. This shows how important it is to relate Christian understanding and experience to the realm of the ancestors. If this is not done, many of our fellow African Christians will continue to be men and women ‘living at two levels’—half African and half European—but never belonging properly to either. We need to meet God in the Lord Jesus Christ speaking immediately to us in our particular circumstances, in a way that assures our people that we can be authentic Africans and true Christians.

John Pobee suggests that we ‘look on Jesus as the Great and Greatest Ancestor’ since, ‘in Akan society the Supreme Being and the ancestors provide the sanctions for the good life, and the ancestors hold that authority as ministers of the Supreme Being’. He considers some of the problems involved, but because he approaches the problem largely through Akan wisdom sayings and proverbs, he does not deal sufficiently with the religious nature of the question. In addition, he does not let the biblical revelation speak sufficiently in its own terms into the Akan situation. He too easily assumes similarities between Akan and biblical (for him ‘Jewish’) world-views, underestimates the potential for conflict and so does not achieve real encounter. For if we claim as the Greatest Ancestor one who, at the superficial level, ‘does not belong to his clan, family, tribe and nation’, the Akan non-Christian might well feel that the very grounds of his identity and p. 60 personality are taken away from him. It is with such fears and dangers, as well as the meanings and intentions behind the old allegiances, that a fresh understanding of Christ has to deal.

THE UNIVERSALITY OF JESUS CHRIST AND OUR ADOPTIVE PAST

I suggest that we should read the Scriptures with Akan traditional piety well in view. In this way we can arrive at an understanding of Christ that deals with perceived reality of the ancestors. I also recommend that we make the biblical assumption that Jesus Christ is not a stranger to our heritage. I therefore start from the universality of Jesus Christ rather than from his particularity as a Jew. By doing this I do not disregard the Incarnation; rather I affirm that the Incarnation was the incarnation of the Saviour of all people, of all nations, and of all times. Also, by insisting on the primacy of Jesus’ universality, we do not seek to reduce his incarnation and its particularity to a mere accident of history. We hold on to his incarnation as a Jew because by faith in him, we too share in the divine promises given to the patriarchs and through the history of ancient Israel (cf. [Ephesians 2:11–22](#)). So those promises belong to us also, because of Jesus. Salvation, though ‘from the Jews’ ([Jn. 4:22](#)), is not thereby Jewish. To make Jesus little more than a ‘typical’ Jew is to distort the truth. There is clearly more to him than Jewishness. His statement in [John 8:43–44](#) that a Jew could have for father, not Abraham at all, but the devil, was outrageous from the Jewish point of view. What counts is one’s response to Jesus Christ. Here we find one of the clearest statements in Scripture, that our true human identity as men and women made in the image of God, is not to be understood primarily in terms of racial, cultural, national or lineage categories, but in Jesus Christ himself. The true children of Abraham are those who put their faith in Jesus Christ in the same way that Abraham trusted God ([Rom. 4:11–12](#)).

Consequently, we have not merely our natural past, for through our faith in Jesus, we have also an 'adoptive' past, the past of God, reaching into biblical history itself. This also—aptly described as the 'Abrahamic link'—is our past.

In the same way, Jesus Christ, himself the image of the Father, by becoming one like us, has shared our *human* heritage. It is within this *human* heritage that he finds us, and speaks to us in terms of its questions and puzzles. He challenges us to turn to him and participate in the new humanity for which he has come, died, been raised and glorified. p. 61

THE GOOD NEWS AS OUR STORY

Once this basic, universal relevance of Jesus Christ is granted, it is no longer a question of trying to accommodate the gospel in our culture; we learn to read and accept the Good News as *our* story. Our Lord has been, from the beginning, the Word of God for us as for all people everywhere. He has been the source of our life, and illuminator of our path in life, though, like all people everywhere, we also failed to understand him alright. But now he has made himself known, becoming one of us, one like us. By acknowledging him for who he is, and by giving him our allegiance, we become what we are truly intended to be, by his gift, that is, the children of God. For he himself is the Son of God, originating from the divine realm. If we refuse him that allegiance, we lose that right of becoming children of God. Our response to him is crucial because becoming children of God does not stem from, nor is it limited by, the accidents of birth, race, culture, lineage or even 'religious' tradition. It comes to us by grace through faith.

This way of reading the early verses of John's Gospel, from the stand-point of faith in Jesus Christ as *our* story, is valid and necessary. The beginning of the Gospel echoes the early verses of [Genesis 1](#). We are meant to appreciate the close association of our creation and our redemption, both achieved in and through Jesus Christ ([Col. 1:15ff](#)). We are to understand our creation as the original revelation of God to us. It was in the creation of the universe and especially of man that God first revealed his kingship to our ancestors and called them and us to freely obey him. Working from this insight, that our creation is the original revelation to, and covenant with us, we, from African primal tradition, are given a biblical basis for discovering more about God within the framework of the high doctrine of God as Creator and Sustainer, which is deeply rooted in our heritage. More significantly, we are enabled to discover ourselves in Adam (cf. [Acts 17:26](#)) and come out of the isolation which the closed system of clan, lineage, and family imposes, so that we can recover universal horizons.

However, 'as in Adam all die ...' ([1 Cor. 15:22](#)). Adam sinned and lost his place in the garden. Where the biblical account speaks of the expulsion of man ([Genesis 3](#)), African myths of origins talk of the withdrawal of God, so that he is continually in people's thoughts, yet is absent from daily living in any practical sense. The experience of ambiguity which comes from regarding the lesser deities and ancestral spirits as both beneficent and malevolent, can be resolved only in a genuine incarnation of the Saviour from the realm beyond. But p. 62 trinitarian doctrine is preserved, for the God who has become so deeply and actively involved in our condition is the Son ([Jn. 1:18](#)), whom to see is to 'see' the Father (cf. [Jn. 14:15ff](#); [Acts 2:38f](#)), and this is made possible through the Holy Spirit ([Jn. 14:23](#)).

JESUS AS 'ANCESTOR' AND SOLE MEDIATOR

Thus the gulf between the intense awareness of the existence of God and yet also of his 'remoteness' in African Traditional Religion and experience is bridged in Christ alone because 'there has been a death which sets people free from the wrongs they did while the first covenant was in force' ([Heb. 9:15](#)). How does this death relate to our story and particularly to our natural 'spirit-fathers'? Some suggest that ours is a 'shame-culture' and not a 'guilt-culture', on the grounds that public acceptance is what determines morality, and consequently a 'sense of sin' is said to be absent. This view is oversimplified and is challenged by African theologians and sociologists. However in our tradition the essence of sin is in its being an antisocial act. This makes sin basically injury to the interests of another person and damage to the collective life of the group. Busia's comment on the Ashanti is significant:

The Ashanti conception of a good society is one in which harmony is achieved among the living, and between the living and the gods and the ancestors.

Such a view of morality does not resolve the real problem of the assurance of moral transformation which the human conscience needs. For the real problem of our sinfulness is the soiled conscience and against this, purificatory rites and sacrificial offerings to achieve social harmony are ineffectual. And yet the view of sin as antisocial seems to be also biblically valid: sin is indeed sin against another person and the community's interest. But human beings are the creation of God, created in God's image, so social sin is also sin against God. The blood of Abel cried to God against Cain ([Gen. 4](#)). The Good News underscores the valid insight about the social nature of sin, but brings the need for expiation into a wider context. Sin is more than the antisocial act; the sinner sins ultimately against a personal God who has a will and purpose in human history.

Seen from this angle, our needs in our tradition make the insights about Jesus Christ in the Epistle to the Hebrews perhaps the most crucial of all. Our Saviour has not just become one like us; he has died for us. It is a death which has eternal sacrificial significance for us. It [p. 63](#) deals with our moral failures and the infringements of our social relationships. It heals our wounded and soiled consciences and overcomes, once and for all and at their roots, all that in our heritage and our somewhat melancholy history brings us grief, guilt, shame and bitterness. Our Saviour is our Elder Brother who has shared in our *African* experience in every respect, except in our sin and alienation from God, an alienation with which our myths of origins make us only too familiar. Being our true Elder Brother now in the presence of God, his Father and our Father, he displaces the mediatorial function of our natural 'spirit-fathers'. For these themselves need saving, since they originated from among us. It is known from African missionary history that sometimes one of the first actions of new converts was to pray for their ancestors who had passed on before the gospel was proclaimed. Such an action is an important testimony to the depth of these people's understanding that Jesus is sole Lord and Saviour. Jesus Christ, 'the Second Adam' from heaven ([1 Cor. 15:47](#)) becomes for us then the only mediator between God and ourselves (cf. [1 Tim. 2:5](#)). He is the 'mediator of a better covenant' ([Heb. 8:6](#)), relating our human destiny directly to God. He is truly our high priest who meets our needs to the full. (We shall have more to discuss on this all-important epistle of the New Testament, later).

From the kind of understanding held about the spirit-world, the resurrection and ascension of our Lord also come to assume great importance. He has now returned to the realm of spirit and therefore of power. From the standpoint of Akan traditional beliefs, Jesus has gone to the realm of the ancestor spirits and the 'gods'. We already know that power and the resources for living are believed to come from there, but the terrors and misfortunes which could threaten and destroy life come from there also. But if Jesus has

gone to the realm of the 'spirits and the gods', so to speak, he has gone there as Lord over them in much the same way that he is Lord over us. He is therefore Lord over the living and the dead, and over the 'living-dead', as the ancestors are also described. He is supreme over all 'gods' and authorities in the realm of the spirits. So he sums up in himself all their powers and cancels any terrorizing influence they might be assumed to have upon us.

The guarantee that our Lord is Lord also in the realm of the spirits is that he has sent us his own Spirit, the Holy Spirit, to dwell with us and be our protector, as much as to be Revealer of Truth and our Sanctifier. In [John 16:7ff](#), our Lord's insistence on going away to the Father includes this idea of this Lordship in the realm of spirits, as he himself enters the region of spirit, it also includes the idea of the protection and [p. 64](#) guidance which the coming Holy Spirit will provide for his followers in the world. The Holy Spirit is sent to convict the world of its sin in rejecting Jesus, and to demonstrate, to the shame of unbelievers, the true righteousness which is in Jesus and available only in him. But he is also sent to reveal the spiritual significance of God's judgment, this time not upon the world, but upon the devil, who deceives the world about its sin and blinds people to the perfect righteousness in Christ. Our Lord therefore, entering the region of spirit, sends the Holy Spirit to his followers to give them understanding of the realities in the realm of spirits. The close association of the defeat and overthrow of the devil ('ruler of this world') with the death, resurrection and exaltation of Jesus (cf. [In. 12:31](#)) is significant here. In addition the thought of the 'keeping' and the protection of his followers from 'the evil one' forms an important part of Jesus' prayer recorded in [John 17](#) (cf. [In. 17:9](#)), which is aptly described as his 'high priestly' prayer.

These are some of the areas for us to investigate when we begin to reflect on the Good News from the standpoint of the world-view of our heritage. Some important insights are in store for us, not from isolated passages of Scripture, but from entire and significant bodies of teaching in the Word of God.

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The Finality of Jesus in Africa

Roy B. Musasiwa

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THE HISTORICAL AND CURRENT SITUATION

The traditional missionary came to Africa, which was then considered a 'dark continent' and in effect said, 'Be a Christian and cease being an African.' Christianity became almost synonymous with Western culture. For example, those who wished to be baptized first had to renounce their African names and adopt Western ones.

We are thankful for the missionaries of yesteryear who brought Christianity to Africa. But because Christianity came dressed in Western culture, it was as superficially adopted as the Western culture itself was. The result was a kind of syncretism. Deep down, the African Christian remained an African and he secretly continued to practise his African Traditional Religion (ATR), which was so much a part of his culture. We in Africa are still suffering from the aftermath of an unbiblical missionary approach. In Zimbabwe, not less than 60% of those who identify themselves as Christians have one foot in ATR and the other in Christianity.

Reactions to this situation vary. One group accepts this situation as normal. In fact one major denomination now accepts that a person can practise both Christianity and ATR. Its priests officiate at certain ATR ceremonies, notably the 'kurova guva' ceremony to bring back home the spirit of a departed family member. Their rationale is that, in order to remain relevant, the church needs to identify itself completely with the people it seeks to serve.

A second group, Christian fundamentalists, condemn as demonic both ATR and the culture which gave birth to it. Even though this group believes that they are proclaiming a cultureless gospel through a literal interpretation of the Bible, they are in fact advocating Judaism and Westernism.

I identify myself with a third group which uncompromisingly holds to the finality of Jesus Christ for salvation and his incarnation in the various cultures of the world. I am an African by culture and a Christian by faith. But since I am an advocate of an integrated life, I call myself an African Christian and a Christian African. [p. 66](#)

THE GOSPEL AFFIRMS THE SUPREMACY AND FINALITY OF JESUS CHRIST

In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son whom he appointed heir of all things and through whom he made the universe. The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful Word. After he had provided purification for sins (i.e. by his substitutionary death and resurrection) he sat at the right hand of the majesty in Heaven ([Heb. 1:1-5](#)).

With this lofty affirmation of the glory and majesty of Jesus Christ, the Writer of Hebrew proceeds to demonstrate the supremacy of Jesus to angels, Moses, the Old Testament sacrificial system and the Levitical priesthood.

In Jesus, God made his greatest self-disclosure in human history. In Jesus, God did his greatest act to save man from the power and penalty of sin and reconcile his to himself. 'Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved' ([Acts 4:1-12](#)). Further, 'There is only one God and only one mediator between God and man, the man Christ Jesus' ([1 Tim. 2:5](#)).

HOW DOES THIS RELATE TO AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGION?

Before the gospel came to Africa, God had been speaking to our forefathers in various ways. God has always revealed himself in nature, in history and in man's conscience (cf. [Rom. 1:18-32](#)). This general revelation of God was combined with African religious philosophizing, speculation and superstition to produce what has now come to be known as African Traditional Religion. Because all people bear the imprint of God's image, we are not surprised to see some divine elements in ATR. For example, there is belief in one God, in life after death, and in an ethical system that closely parallels that of the Old Testament.

Indeed it pleased God to let ATR provide a dim, shadowy light in the past. Africa was not such a dark continent as the Western historians portrayed it.

But now that the sun (SON) has risen, the dim, vague candle light has been rendered obsolete. In Christ the evil elements of ATR have been abolished and the redemptive elements have been fulfilled and overtaken.

YES TO CHRIST, NO TO ATR

Because Christ is surpeme, final and sufficient, ATR has become unnecessary and must be put off by those who belong to Christ. There [P. 67](#) are additional reasons why we must not mix our Christian faith with ATR.

First, the very basis of ATR is communication with the departed. God has categorically forbidden this, as we read in the Bible (e.g., [Isa. 8:19](#), [Lev. 19-31](#), [Deut. 18:9-13](#)). Further, if the dead can no longer be conscious of, or active in what happens on this earth ([Eccl. 9:4-6](#)), it follows that it is impossible to communicate with them anyway. Therefore the various spiritual manifestations in ATR (e.g., possession, accurate divination) have probably originated from the devil and his demonic forces. After all, if the devil can imitate the angel of light ([2 Cor. 11:4](#)) is it not natural that he would also want to imitate our forefathers to deceive us?

Secondly, the so-called ancestral spirits are false gods/idols in Africa just as materialism is the false god of the West. A 'god' is whatever your heart clings to and relies on. I know that advocates and sympathizers of ATR would argue that Africans do not worship ancestral spirits, but they worship God *through* the ancestral spirits. This is true in theory only. In practice, followers of ATR are more conscious of the spirits than they are of God, who is considered too remote to be concerned with our daily affairs. So it is the ancestral spirits who have to be appeased, invoked and prayed to. From them come blessings and curses. For all practical purposes, they play the role of gods. And since the true God condemns idol worship ([Isa. 42:8](#)), Christians must consider ancestor worship as belonging to 'times of ignorance', (which) God formerly overlooked ([Acts 17:30](#)).

YES TO CHRIST, YES TO AFRICAN CULTURE

One reason why more than 60% of Africans also practise ATR is that ATR and African Culture are inextricably intertwined. ATR is not tagged on to African Culture as Christianity has unfortunately been an add-on for many people in the Western societies. ATR is not only part of African culture; it is also the ground motive of the culture. The biggest question therefore is whether (and if so, how) it is ever possible to say 'yes' to African culture and 'no' to the ATR that is so much part of it. The traditional missionary opted for the easy solution—a rejection of both and the substitution for both with the so-called Western Christian civilization.

The African found it impossible to live genuinely on borrowed culture. There was much beauty in his own culture and its expression through music, art, dancing etc. But that culture also had ATR at its [p. 68](#) centre with spiritual phenomena which were as real to him as concrete objects.

On the other hand, Christianity brought hope of eternal life and a number of material benefits in the present such as schools and hospitals. At the same time Christianity had so much form without visible spiritual power. The inevitable result was, and still is, syncretism.

Is there another way? Can we minister the gospel so that it roots out ATR from the African believer but still leaves him an African? This is not only possible but imperative.

The Christ who became incarnate among Jews in Palestine nearly 2000 years ago wants to be incarnated in all cultures where he is preached. He does not come to destroy the beauty in culture but only its evil aspects. He transcends culture but he comes through culture. In short, it will take the contextualization of the Gospel in Africa to eliminate syncretism.

CONTEXTUALIZATION: THE KEY TO ELIMINATING SYNCRETISM

ATR is, as we said, the ground motive of African culture. If syncretism is to be eliminated, the gospel of Jesus Christ must be the substitute *ground motive*, for the same culture. This is possible because the gospel is super-cultural, yet has to exist within culture—any culture. This presupposition must influence our ministry in a number of ways.

First, the reality, supremacy, finality and adequacy of Christ must be emphasized in our evangelism. Otherwise those who become Christians in Africa will subconsciously assume that what they need is Christ *plus* their ancestral spirits in order to realize their total being.

If Christ is to be real and supreme he must be seen, through us, to have greater love and concern for people's total welfare than the ancestral spirits do. Further, our ministry must be one of power encounter with demonic forces through prevailing prayer and the exercise of spiritual gifts. Without this, the ancestral spirits will continue to appear more powerful than Christ. In Africa, a Christianity which exists only in form but not in existential power cannot eliminate syncretism.

Second, the gospel must be culturally relevant and must begin by addressing itself to people's felt needs in order to open the way for meeting their real needs. The gospel transcends culture and judges culture. But the gospel can make sense only in the cultural context of the people to whom it is preached. Africa's rich heritage of music, expressiveness, extended family, etc., is a great vehicle for worship, evangelism and Christian nurture. [p. 69](#)

When the gospel becomes God's power for individual salvation and for cultural renewal, syncretism has to die a natural death. If the people get from the gospel what they hoped to get from ancestral spirits, if God's power and protection surrounds the converts so that they need not fear spirits, if the Holy Spirit ministers in the depth of people's hearts in the context of the cultural being, syncretism must necessarily expire.

We conclude, therefore, that the existence of wide-spread syncretism in Africa reflects more poorly on how the gospel has been or is being ministered than on the people who are practising syncretism. Jesus is indeed final. But we must minister in a way that makes our converts understand, appreciate and embrace his finality for their lives.

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Evangelical Responses to Religious Pluralism in Asia

Bong Rin Ro

This paper, presented at the German Evangelical Theologians' Conference on the Uniqueness of Christ, held at Tübingen, Germany August 1991, will be published with other papers in book form in German.

'A theology is created in Europe (Germany), corrected in England, corrupted in America,' said an European theologian in the 1960s, and 'crammed into the Third World' we may add in the 1970s and 1980s. Today we can say that a theology is created from particular cultural contexts in the Third World often will incorrect interpreted texts of the Scripture as proof-texts. Consequently, numerous contextual theologies have been created from the Third World and very widely discussed in the theological arena.

In Asia where all major living religions are reviving and where poverty, injustice and suffering are still prevalent in so many parts within the continent, the theology of socio-economic-political justice, peace and the theology of religious pluralism dominate the minds of Asian theologians. These two important areas of theological discussion were clearly portrayed by a Korean female theologian at the last WCC General Assembly.

I. THEOLOGICAL SHOW AT 7TH WCC GENERAL ASSEMBLY

This past February in Canberra, Australia, the 7th WCC General Assembly was held for two weeks with some 4,000 participants. This author attended the meetings as an observer. On the second day of the Assembly there was an exciting theological show with a group of Korean traditional dancers. Ms. Hyun-kyung Chung, young professor of theology at Ewha University, appeared on stage dressed in a white Korean traditional dress, known as the 'hanbok' and danced along with others, to invoke over twenty spirits of the dead and of nature along with the spirit of Jesus Christ,

Come. The spirit of Hagar, Egyptian, black slave woman exploited and abandoned by Abraham and Sarah, the ancestors of our faith ([Gen. 16:21](#)) ...

Come. The spirit of male babies killed by the soldiers of King Herod upon Jesus' birth ... p. 71

Come. The spirit of Mahatma Ghandi, Steve Biko, Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X, the struggle for liberation of their people ...

Come. The spirit of Earth, Air, and Water, raped, tortured and exploited by human greed for money.

Come. The spirit of the Liberator, our brother Jesus, tortured and killed on the cross.¹

Then she burned the paper which listed the spirits of the dead just as a Korean shaman (Mudang) invokes the spirit of the deceased in a trance. Finally she read her prepared major theological paper.

Since her return to Korea, there have been heated theological discussions on her presentation in Canberra and the WCC movement as a whole. Evangelical theologians criticized her theology of the Holy Spirit in four major areas. First, she did not consider

¹ Chung Hyun-Kyung, 'Come Holy Spirit, Renew the Whole Creation', a theological paper presented at the 7th WCC General Assembly in Canberra, Australia, Feb. 8, 1991, pp. 1-2.

the Holy Spirit in the Trinitarian context but as a spirit like other spirits. Secondly, she did not mention the Spirit of God to convict man for repentance of sins and for spiritual salvation but used it for the promotion of 'freedom, justice and integrity of man.' Thirdly, she used the shamanistic formula to invoke the spirits of the deceased ones and of nature; and fourthly, she compared the Spirit of God with the bodhisattva of Buddhism who refused to enter into nirvana for the sake of others.²

One interesting fact in Professor Chung's paper is that she used eight scriptural passages to prove her theology of the spirits. Her contextual theology is certainly an excellent illustration of modern liberal theologies which derive from contexts and collect Scriptural texts as proof-texts. Many other Asian theologies have been created since the end of the Second World War in a similar fashion in which theology starts from context to text.

II. TWO-PRONGED THEOLOGICAL ISSUES TODAY

Since the Theological Education Fund (TEF) put out the Third Mandate Period (1972–77)³ which emphasized the new concept of 'Contextualization' P. 72 in theological education, Asian theologians from different countries have produced different forms of Asian contextual theologies.

The author divides these Asian theologies into four categories:

1. Syncretism: Raymond Pannikar (Unknown Christ in Hinduism), J. S. Samartha (the Unbound Christ), M. M. Thomas (Salvation and Humanism)—Hindu Christian Church.
2. Accommodation theology: Kozuke Koyama (Waterbuffalo theology), Song Cheng Sen (Third Eye Theology), Lee Jong Yong (Ying Yang Theology and Theology of Change).
3. Situation Theology: Gustav Gutierrez (Liberation theology), Kazoh Kitamori (The Pain of God Theology), Kim Yong-Bok (Min Jung (mass of people) Theology).
4. Biblical oriented contextual theology: Evangelical Theologians' Task.⁴

However, these various Asian theologies are dealing with two fundamental issues in the Asian society, namely liberation theology which deals with socio-political-economic issues and religious dialogue and pluralism in dealing with other living religious of Asia. These two pronged theological issues are also intimately inter-related for the common purpose of establishing the just and peaceful society in this world.

A. Liberation Theology

Although Liberation Theology had its origin in Latin America in the early 70s, its implications have been felt around the globe by stimulating the creation of different contextual theologies. The Christian Conference of Asia (CCA) has been promoting an Asian version of liberation theology through the *CCA News* and other publications in terms of campaigning for human rights, economic justice and political freedom in our society. In fact, the CCA's deep involvement in socioeconomic-political areas in many countries in Asia plus accusations against their political leaders caused the Singapore police to seal off

² Kim Myung-Hyuk, 'Critical Evaluation of Prof. Chung's Lecture', *Christian United Newspaper*, March 17, 1991. Choe Hong-Suk, 'Critical Evaluation of Prof. Chung's Lecture', *Christian United Newspaper*, March 23, 1991. Bong Rin Ro, 'Theological Analysis on the Doctrine of the Holy Spirit of the WCC General Assembly', *Pastoral Monthly*, (May 1991), pp. 163–168.

³ Bong Rin Ro, 'Contextualization: Asian Theology,' *The Bible and Theology in Asian Contexts* (Taichung, Taiwan: Asia Theological Association), 1984, pp. 63–64.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 68–74.

the CCA office on Dec. 31, 1988, and to ask its foreign staff to leave the country within a week.

Four countries in Asia where liberation theology has impacted the local church level are India, the Philippines, Taiwan, and Korea. Liberation theology in the first two countries is more related to the economic exploitation of the poor; in the latter two, it is related to p. 73 political freedom. Street demonstrations led by ministers wearing their clerical collars and holding each other's shoulders are common scenes, particularly in Taiwan and Korea in recent years. The recent violent demonstrations with students throwing fire bombs and rocks at the riot police in the streets of Seoul had their headquarters at the most famous Roman Catholic cathedral in Myongdong, Seoul. The police finally forcefully entered the church to arrest the leaders of these demonstrations.

Minjung (mass of people) Theology provides the theological basis for instigating social and political revolution in South Korea. Dr. Hyunkyung Chung in her paper at the WCC General Assembly in Canberra stressed the importance of Minjung theology in liberating suffering people from their unjust society. She said,

I came from Korea, the land of Spirit of *Han*. *Han* is anger. *Han* is resentment. *Han* is bitterness. *Han* is grief. *Han* is broken-heartedness and the raw energy for struggle for liberation. In my tradition people who were killed or died unjustly became wandering spirits, the *Han*-ridden spirits. They are all over the place seeking the chance to make the wrong right. Therefore the living people's responsibility is to listen to the voices of the *Hans*-ridden spirits and to participate in the spirits' work of making the wrong, right. These *Han*-ridden spirits in our people's history have been agents through whom the Holy Spirit has spoken her compassion and wisdom for life. Without hearing the cries of these spirits we cannot hear the voice of the Holy Spirit.⁵

Certainly, Liberation Theologies such as Minjung Theology has awakened the conscience of both liberal and conservative Christians afresh to crucial mundane issues which cannot be avoided by the Christian church. Even though Liberation Theology has twenty years of history with massive literature and audio-visual materials, it will continue to be an important theological issue in the years to come until it loses its steam.

B. The Uniqueness of Christ and Religious Pluralism

A more serious theological discussion which is developing in Asia today is in the area of the relationship between Christianity and other Asian religions. Today's world is moving toward a pluralistic society both in the secular and religious spheres of life. Liberal theologians have criticized evangelical Christianity for its lack of acceptance, tolerance, and exploration of other religions, such as Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, Confucianism, Shintoism, etc. They say evangelical p. 74 Christianity is going against the trends of time. Dr. Sun-Whan Byun, President of the Methodist Theological Seminary in Seoul, a leading liberal theologian in South Korea, stated recently in a religious dialogue seminar for religious dialogue with a Roman Catholic theologian and a Buddhist monk:

The Korean church must depart from the traditional dogma that Christianity is the only true socio-historic religion and adopt a new theological attitude for the coming 21st century. We looked at the history of the Christian church, passing from the exclusive Judaistic culture which centered around the Jordan river to the paradigm of Greco-Roman culture which centered around the Irisos and Tiberu rivers. Now she must create a new theological paradigm which is based on the pacific region, especially the Han river of Korea. The Korean church at the present time has been increasingly isolated from other pluralistic cultures due to her preservation of non-creative traditional doctrines, extreme

⁵ Chung, p. 2.

biblical authority without new interpretations, and offensive attitudes towards other religions. The strong exclusive tradition of the church has maintained that Christianity is the only absolute religion and that other religions are under the domination of dark evil. Therefore, we must strive to bring changes quickly in our concept of missions with universalism and pluralistic mission concept.⁶

Dr. Byun declared that our religious theology today should not be 'missiological' but centred around religious 'dialogue,' and that we should discard the old-fashioned idea that Christianity has the only truth. Therefore, the task of modern theologians is not only Liberation Theology but also the liberation of religions from Christian absolutism. Many other liberal theologians of both East and West would say 'Amen' to Dr. Byun's concept of religious pluralism.⁷

Liberal theologians in the West who spend hours in research and writing often do not fully understand demonic influences of other living religions in Asia. Asians who live in the midst of these religions are fully aware of these evils. Asian Christians ought not to let 'outsiders' affect our understanding of the Scripture and of these religions.

The question of universalism and religious pluralism has been extensively discussed among Asian theologians. A number of renowned liberal theologians in Asia, such as M. M. Thomas and Stanley Samartha in India, D. T. Niles and his son Preman Niles of Sri Lanka, Kosuke Koyama of Japan and C. H. Song of Taiwan have written many books on Asian theologies and religious pluralism. [p. 75](#)

D. T. Niles of Sri Lanka, who was one of the key founders of the East Asia Christian Conference (ECAA) which became the Christian Conference of Asia (CCA), an Asian branch of the WCC, wrote *Upon the Earth* (1968). On whether a person who rejects Christ will be saved at the end, he wrote: "The New Testament does not allow us to say either yes or no to the question, "Will all men be saved?"⁸ God made us. God loves us. Jesus died for us. Our trespasses are not counted. When we die we shall go to Him who will be our judge. These affirmations are true of all men and for all men whether they know them or not, like them or not, accept them or not."⁹ His son, Preman Niles, an Old Testament theologian who headed up the Theological Committee of CCA, is another proponent of universalism within the ecumenical movement in Asia today.

Dominant theological liberal influences within the Church of South India and the Church of North India as well as the Roman Catholic Church have hampered the growth of the church in India. Religious syncretism and pluralism have become very popular in both Hinduism and the Christian Church. M. M. Thomas, former Director of the Christian Institute for Study of Religion and Society in Bangalore and former Chairman of the Central Committee of WCC, interprets salvation in terms of humanization by which man finds his true humanness which has been oppressed by social injustice, war, and poverty.

⁶ Byun Sun Whan, 'Christianity must come out of exclusive mentality,' *Christianity Newspaper*, Dec. 1990, p. 6.

⁷ John Hick, *Introduction to Religious Philosophy* (Seoul: Religious Book Pub., 1987), pp. 193–197. Paul Knitter, *No Other Name?* (Maryknoll: Orbis), 1985.

⁸ Harold Lindsell, 'Universalism,' *Let the Earth Hear His Voice* (Minneapolis: WorldWide Publications, 1975), p. 1207.

⁹ Louis King, 'New Universalism: Its Exponents, Tenets, and Threats,' *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* (Summer 1965), pp. 9–10.

Therefore, his views of salvation are horizontally oriented towards humanity at the expense of the vertical relationship with God.¹⁰

Christ's universality is taught by both Raymond Panikkar in *Unknown Christ of Hinduism* (1964) and Stanley J. Samartha in 'Unbound Christ'. Both emphasize that Christ is present in each person even in the life of a Hindu: therefore, the mission of the church is to bring Christ out of a Hindu instead of bringing Christ to the Hindu. Salvation is interpreted in terms of Hindu doctrine of *advaita* (non-duality or at oneness) which draws God, the world, and man together in a single conception of unbroken unity. Therefore, the cross and the resurrection of Christ are seen in context of *advaita* and not as a historical fact that accomplished the work of salvation. Samartha p. 76 opposes a concept of 'Christomonism' and asserts that all revelations are relative.¹¹

Two prominent liberal theologians must be mentioned here who have become prolific writers on Asian theology. Choang Sung Song, former Principal of Tainan Theological Seminary in Taiwan, speaks of Asian spirituality which ought to accommodate the gospel of Jesus Christ. The gospel which we have inherited from Western missionaries is a first or second eye theology (or first or second dimensional theology) and we need a third dimensional theology from our Asian culture.

We must go beyond dogmatism and syncretism. Dogmatism as the product of the age of Western religious absolutism and syncretism as the outcome of the era of liberalism should be superseded.... Exegesis of Christian faith in Asia must ... take place in multi-religious contexts.¹²

In his book *The Compassionate God* (1982) Song rejects the exclusive view of the atonement of Christ and affirms the merciful and compassionate God who will restore all men from everywhere and anywhere from all religions to himself.

Kozuke Koyama, a Japanese missionary who taught at the Thailand Theological Seminary in Chang Mai, north Thailand and former Executive Secretary of the Association of Theological Education in Southeast Asia (ATESEA), believes in God pervading the created order exemplified in a water buffalo in North Thailand plowing through a rice field of tranquility and also in the tapas, the Hindu symbol of divine heat-energy within the cosmos.¹³ Koyama does not see the need of spiritual conversion among Thai people but stresses the need of accommodating Thai culture by the Christian minority in Thailand in order to work together and to establish the just and peaceful society.

There is no doubt that religious pluralism has already become a crucial theological issue and that it will become more so in the future. This pluralistic concept has also influenced the evangelical constituency around the world. Some evangelical theologians, interested in p. 77 new directions, have developed more positive attitudes towards other religions and criticized the traditional Protestant theology of condemnation. When I attended the Evangelical Theological Society (ETS) meeting in San Diego, California, in November 1989 with some five hundred other evangelical theologians and missiologists in North America, religious pluralism was the hottest issue. When Dr. Clark Pinnock in a

¹⁰ M. M. Thomas, *Salvation and Humanisation* (Madras: CLS, 1971), p. 40.

¹¹ Bruce Nicholls, 'A Living Theology for Asian Churches: Some Reflections on the Contextualization-Syncretism Debate,' *The Bible and Theology in Asian Contexts*, ed. by Bong Rin Ro and Ruth Eshenaur (Taiwan: A TA, 1984), p. 125. See Knitter, pp. 156–157. See also Carl E. Braaten, 'Why Do We Say that He is?' On the 'Uniqueness and Universality of Jesus Christ,' Occasional Bulletin (Jan. 1980), p. 6.

¹² Choan Seng Song, *Christian Mission in Reconstruction* (N.Y.: Orbis 1977), p. 181.

¹³ Knitter, p. 136. See Kusuke Koyama, *Waterbuffalo Theology* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1974).

panel discussion criticized traditional conservative Christianity for its absolute dogmatism against other religions, there were sharp disagreements by three other panel members against Pinnock's ideas. This heated discussion awakened the sleepy mind of every person in the auditorium that afternoon.

III. 'FROM CONTEXT TO TEXT' METHODOLOGY IN ASIAN THEOLOGY

Most Asian Contextual theologies have one common characteristic in their hermeneutical methodology, i.e., 'from context to text'. The Asia Theological Association (ATA) has held 10 theological consultations for the last 20 years on different theological subjects, such as Contextualization/Asian theology, God in Asian contexts, Christian alternatives to ancestor practices, etc.¹⁴ Asian evangelical theologians, in fact, have had ample opportunities to discuss theological issues which are related to other Asian religions. One important conclusion out of the many theological consultations is the realization that hermeneutics plays the most important role in understanding Asian theology.

Dr. Yu Dong-Shik, former professor at Yonsei University Graduate School of Theology in Seoul, who is known as 'the Raymond Panikkar of Korea,' advocated the presence of Christ in believers of other religions. First of all, he rejects the monistic concept of Hinduism that teaches that all religions came out of one principal truth, Brahman; therefore, all truth is fundamentally one from which all other religious truths derive. Syncretism is an outcome of Hinduism and Buddhism. Dr. Yu in rejecting syncretism believes that God accomplished salvation through Jesus Christ. In explaining the relationship between Christianity and other religions, he uses the symbols of the sun and planets. The sun in itself emits light, but the planets and moon do not emit light from themselves; however, the planets and moon can reflect p. 78 light from the sun, and thus they can also produce light; therefore, as the light of the gospel of Christ shines upon other religions, the latter can also emit the light of Christ. Consequently, according to Dr. Yu, all other religions also have the hidden message of the gospel in themselves.

As Father Panikkar mentioned, the way that they (Hindus) receive their salvation is not from their own religion but from the Gospel of Christ. However, although they do not actually know the name of Christ, they do live under the grace of the Gospel not according to the Christian way but according to their own religious fashion.¹⁵

Therefore, Dr. Yu continues to say that according to the Christian perspective we should not divide this world fundamentally between 'inside' and 'outside' according to Paul Tillich's terminology of 'latent church' and 'manifested church', but we should rather consider all men of the world as God's children who belong to the church. He says,

If we call mankind Christians who receive salvation from God, then there is not a single non-Christian in this world. The only difference between Christian and a non-Christian is that the former realizes his salvation while the latter does not ... There are only two kinds of church; the church that realizes the fact (salvation) and the church that does not

¹⁴ ATA conducted a consultation on 'Christian Alternatives for Ancestor Practices' in Taipei, Taiwan, Dec. 1983 and the 7th ATA Theological Consultation on 'God in Asian Contexts' in Manila, Jan. 1985. Consequently, ATA published two books: *Christian Alternatives in Asian Contexts* (1985) and *God in Asian Contexts* (1988).

¹⁵ Yu Dong-Shik, *Korean Religions and Christianity* (Seoul: Christian Pub., 1965), p. 179 (in Korean).

recognize it. Therefore, history is the history of development of the hidden church as church.¹⁶

Dr. Yu suggests that the Christian must look at other religions from a new perspective for three basic reasons: first, the characteristic of the gospel itself; second, since every religion claims to be absolute, Christianity ought to abandon its exclusive claims and sense of superiority; third, it is an obsolete nineteenth century idea that since the white man dominates the whole world, Christianity also ought to model itself after Western Christianity, the white man's religion.¹⁷

Of course, both liberal and evangelical theologians recognize the necessity of contextual theology, and both groups of theologians also agree to avoid the domination of Western theological thinking in Asia. Nevertheless, one basic difference between the two camps is the hermeneutical methodology, i.e., the liberal theologian proceeds in his theology 'from context to text' while the evangelical theologian goes 'from the text to context.' p. 79

For example, Dr. Yu interprets [Ephesians 4:6](#) as a proof-text for his universalistic concept, 'One God and Father of all who is over all and through all and in all,' is interpreted as,

Therefore, if salvation is brought by Jesus Christ, Son of God, this blessed message must be given to all men everywhere. If the redeemed mankind is called Christian, there is not a single person in the world who is not Christian. The only difference is that one believes and receives the redemptive fact in Christ while the other does not realize it. If the place where Jesus is present is called church, then the whole world is the church.¹⁸

If one looks at the context of the passage, [Eph. 4:1-16](#) very carefully, one realizes that Paul is talking about the spiritual gifts of church leadership (vs. [7, 11](#)) which are given to a small number of people in order to equip the saints for the work of services to build up the body of Christ (v, [12](#)).

[Eph. 4:4-6](#) says,

There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called—one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.

Therefore, this passage does not refer to universal salvation as Dr. Yu interprets it. There are also many other scriptural passages that speak against universalism.

IV. ASIAN EVANGELICAL APPROACHES TO RELIGIONS PLURALISM

In the past, evangelical theologians were busy evaluating critically liberal theologians of the West as well as of Asia. However, there has been an increasing number of Asian evangelical theologians surfacing in the theological arena. In the past evangelical Christians and missionaries discarded any cultural values of heathen religions and stressed the spiritual conversion from the past way of life. Today, an increasing number of evangelical theologians are trying to find some common grounds between the Christian faith and other living religions. Both Ken Gnanakan and Bruce Nicholls of India start their

¹⁶ *Tao and Logos*, (Seoul: Christian Pub., 1978), pp. 96-97 (in Korean).

¹⁷ *Ibid.* pp. 98-99.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* pp. 96-97.

theology with the Doctrine of Creation, i.e. the natural revelation of God. Gnanakan says, 'My own stress on the need for our theology to start from Creation specifically aims at recognising a commonality on which God's revelation becomes accessible to all created beings.¹⁹ P. 80 This general revelation does not lead a person to his salvation but rather directs him to the special revelation in Jesus Christ.'

Nicholls, on the other hand, stresses the Trinitarian doctrine of God in the Asian context as Creator, Redeemer and Life-giver. The uniqueness of the incarnate Son of God in Jesus of Nazareth distinguishes him from other claimants to incarnation, while his resurrection from the dead has no parallel in other faiths. Salvation is only in Jesus Christ, but the Holy Spirit works beyond the frontiers of the Church.

Left-wing evangelical theologians, especially from the developing countries, who are very much concerned with social concern and poverty try to restudy the Christological issues in the Scripture in order to discover the social dimensional aspect of the gospel. Many Korean evangelical theologians expressed their concern on the mandate of the church. Even though the left-wing conservative theologians may hold all the traditional doctrines of the Christian church, their priority of their faith does not rest on the saving grace of Jesus Christ which provided the forgiveness of sin and external salvation. Dr. Kim Ki-Hong of Asian Centre for Theological Studies (ACTS) expressed his concern at the 8th ATA Theological Consultation on Urban Ministry in Asia:

Let us not substitute the biblical knowledge of God and man for a syncretistic contextualized point of view ... Let us not confuse the salvation of God with man-made ways of salvation. Without a proper knowledge of God, we can never diagnose people's problems correctly, and therefore any proposed solutions are in vain.²⁰

Another important theological matter which we should consider is the distinction between God's natural and supernatural revelation. Paul speaks about natural revelation manifested in God's created universe ([Rom. 1:20-21](#)) and man's inner conscience ([Rom. 2:15](#)) and also emphasizes that man can know God through the natural revelation. Furthermore, God has revealed himself through special revelation through the men of God in the Old Testament and Christ and the apostles in the New Testament. Therefore, one key question in our 20th century world is whether the believers of Asian religions and even atheists who receive God's natural revelation can obtain salvation without God's special revelation in Christ. Therefore, the fundamental theological question does not rest on the assumption of preservation of traditional theology, contextual theology, religious pluralism, liberation p. 81 of religions from Christian absolutism, but it rather rests upon how we would interpret the gospel of Jesus Christ in the Bible and how we should apply it to different contexts. Therefore, biblical hermeneutics is the key answer to evangelical theologians in the challenges from Asian contextual theologies and religious pluralism.

CONCLUSION

The relationship between Christianity and other religions is becoming increasingly acute today and will be more so in the future. Evangelical theologians must strive to understand the content of Christ's gospel first and teachings of other religions and our various contexts. They must also open their minds to see what is happening in the Asian

¹⁹ Ken Gnanakan, 'Pluralism and Some Theological Implications,' unpublished paper at WEF-Theological Commission Consultation, Wheaton College, June 18-22, 1990, p.7.

²⁰ Kim Ki-Hong, 'Key Theological Issues in Asia,' *Urban Ministry in Asia*, ed. by Bong Rin Ro (Taiwan: ATA, 1989), p.13.

theological arena and be willing to dialogue with those whose theological persuasion is different from theirs.

Evangelical theologians in Asia and around the world need to work together through theological discussions in order to produce more joint evangelical theological declarations on key theological issues such as Liberation Theology and religious pluralism for our time. For example The World Evangelical Fellowship-Theological Commission will conduct a consultation on 'The Unique Christ in Our Pluralistic World' at Wisma Kinasih (near Jakarta), Indonesia, June 16–20, 1992. The 10th ATA Theological Consultation will also be jointly held with the WEF-TC consultation in Indonesia. Through these consultations we hope to have a better understanding of the new theologies arising today.

Dr. Bong Rin Ro is Executive Secretary of the Theological Commission of the World Evangelical Fellowship based in Seoul, Korea. p. 82

The Authentic Jesus

John Stott

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An abridged extract from The Authentic Jesus by John Stott (1992).

Today nearly a million Moslems live in the United Kingdom. The second largest Hindu community in the world outside India (after Durban) is in Leicester, and there are Hindu temples in Birmingham and Wolverhampton, Manchester and Leeds, Coventry and Bristol, and numerous smaller towns.

This situation has had a profound effect on many Westerners who had never before questioned that, if they had any religious commitment, it was to Christianity.

How then are we to think of other religions? The word that immediately springs to most people's minds is 'tolerance', but they do not always stop to define what they mean by it. It may help if we distinguish between three kinds.

LEGAL TOLERANCE

Legal tolerance ensures that every minority's religious and political rights (usually summarized as the freedom to 'protest, practise and propagate') are adequately protected in law. This is obviously right.

SOCIAL TOLERANCE

Social tolerance encourages respect for all persons, whatever views they may hold, and seeks to understand and appreciate their position. This too is a virtue which Christians wish to cultivate; it arises naturally from our recognition that all human beings are God's creation and bear his image, and that we are meant to live together in amity.

INTELLECTUAL TOLERANCE

Intellectual tolerance is the third kind. To cultivate a mind so broad that it can tolerate every opinion, without ever detecting anything in it to reject, is not a virtue; it is the vice of the feeble-minded. It can degenerate into an unprincipled confusion of truth with error and goodness with evil. Christians, who believe that truth and goodness have been revealed in Christ, cannot possibly come to terms with it. What follows is divided into three mini-articles—one on false gods and modern idolatry, one on the uniqueness of Jesus and a final essay on evangelism and integrity. **P. 83**

IDOLS OF THE MODERN MIND

Attacks on the uniqueness of Christ

In the extreme form I have described above, intellectual tolerance is rare. A much more popular expression of it is syncretism, by which is meant the reconciliation or fusion of different religious beliefs into a single harmonious system. Dr. W. A. Visser't Hooft, a former general secretary of the World Council of Churches, has given this fuller definition of syncretism. It is 'the view ... that there is no unique revelation in history, that there are many different ways to reach the divine reality, that all formulations of religious truth or experience are by their very nature inadequate expressions of that truth, and that it is necessary to harmonise as much as possible all religious ideas and experiences, so as to create one universal religion for mankind'.

Dr. Visser't Hooft goes on to show how the shrinkage of the modern world, the search for the unity of the human race, and the distaste for religious controversy, have combined to make syncretism very appealing.

In 1984 the 'Inter-Faith Consultative Group' of the Church of England General Synod's Board for Mission and Unity produced a report entitled *Towards a Theology for Inter-Faith Dialogue*. After turning away from two opposite extremes, the one rejecting all dialogue and the other all mission and evangelism (paragraph 15), the report describes three possible positions, which it labels 'exclusivism', 'inclusivism' and 'pluralism', although it adds that each contains a range of views. 'Exclusivism' emphasizes the uniqueness of Christ as the only Saviour, the discontinuity between Christianity and other religions, and the primacy of evangelism (paragraphs 16, 17).

'Inclusivism' emphasizes that, although Jesus remains 'normative', yet God's saving power is not confined to him. Other peoples receive salvation, and other religions are forerunners of the gospel (paragraphs 18, 19).

'Pluralism' emphasizes that the different religions are culturally determined responses to God's revelation, and wants other religions 'brought into some kind of larger ecumenical relationship where the truths of each are seen as complementary to each other' (paragraphs 20, 21).

The report does not take with anything like sufficient seriousness the biblical rejection of syncretism, both its Old Testament polemic against idolatry and its New Testament affirmations (in the midst of a Graeco-Roman world which was completely syncretistic) of the absolute uniqueness of Jesus. **p. 84**

Some recent books have developed a much more radical challenge to the traditional understanding of the uniqueness of Christ. What they are advocating is not 'syncretism' (the attempt to combine different religions) but 'pluralism' (the recognition of different religions, each in its own integrity). In 1985 Professor Paul F. Knitter's book *No Other Name?* appeared, sub-titled 'a critical survey of Christian attitudes toward the world religions' and published by SCM.

When the early Christians wrote that Jesus was the one and only mediator between God and human beings ([1 Tim. 2:5](#)), and that there was salvation in no other name ([Acts 4:12](#)), they meant, according to Professor Knitter, not that he was 'absolutely the only' but rather that he was 'the one whom we must take seriously', the one to whom we ourselves are 'fully committed'. Theirs was the language not of theology but of testimony, not of truth but of love, as when a husband says to his wife,

'You are the most beautiful in the world' (pp. 182–6). He is making a subjective judgment; he does not expect his statement to be taken objectively or literally.

Then in 1987 *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness* was published, also by SCM Press, and jointly edited by John Hick and Paul Knitter. It is a symposium, and its 12 contributors are united in having abandoned both 'exclusivism' and 'inclusivism' in favour of 'pluralism' understood as 'parity', namely 'a recognition of the independent validity' of other religions. The pluralism which is advocated here would require us to abandon the concept of revelation, to give up believing that in Christ God has disclosed anything normative, exclusive or final, to surrender instead to relativism, and even to repent of our former affirmation of Christ's uniqueness as a form of 'idolatry'.

These books at least clarify what the issue is. It concerns Christ. The 'pluralism' they commend is derogatory to Christ. It can be held only by those who are prepared to diminish his stature, indeed to deny him as he is portrayed in the New Testament. The question before us is not about 'religion' or 'religions', but about Christ.

Bishop Stephen Neill has written: 'The old saying, "Christianity is Christ", is almost exactly true'. If then the uniqueness of Christianity is the uniqueness of Christ, wherein does his uniqueness lie?

THE UNIQUENESS OF CHRIST

In no other name is there salvation

We discover the uniqueness of Christ in his birth, death and resurrection. As for his birth, he was 'conceived by the Holy Spirit, [p. 85](#) born of the Virgin Mary', and therefore is both God and man. As for his death, he died for our sins, in our place, to secure our salvation. As for his resurrection, he thereby conquered death and possesses universal authority. Or, to express these historical events theologically, the uniqueness of Jesus lies in the Incarnation, the Atonement and the Exaltation. Each is unparalleled.

Incarnation

We begin with the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ. God's eternal Word or Son 'became flesh', taking to himself the fullness of our humanity. As a human being he lived for a while on earth. In consequence, people saw his glory, and in seeing him they saw the Father ([Jn. 1:14, 18; 14:9](#)). Thus the Father gave to the world in and through his incarnate Son a unique historical revelation of himself.

Other religions

Jews of course reject this. So do Moslems, since Mohammed in the Koran, misrepresenting it in grossly physical terms, repudiated the idea that Allah should ever beget a son. In Hinduism, however, many so-called 'avatars' (meaning 'descents', though often rendered 'incarnations') are claimed. The most celebrated are the incarnations of Vishnu in Rama and Krishna. Not only are the Indian claims historically dubious, but they speak of multiple rebirths, each of which was only temporary.

Christian response

The Christian affirmation, by contrast, is that in Jesus of Nazareth God took human flesh once and for all and for ever. The Incarnation was a historical and unrepeatable event with permanent consequences. Reigning at God's right hand today is the man Christ Jesus, still human as well as divine, though now his humanity has been glorified. Having assumed our human nature, he has never discarded it, and he never will.

ATONEMENT

Startling as it may sound, the Incarnation was with a view to the Atonement; his birth was with a view to his death. The very name 'Jesus' bears witness to the salvation of God which he came to achieve. For Christianity is in its very essence a rescue religion, and the rescue was accomplished at enormous cost. The gospel tells of a loving God **P. 86** who refused either to condone our sins or to visit them upon us, who took the initiative to come after us, and who pursued us even to the desolate shame and agony of the Cross. There God in Christ took our place, bore our sins, suffered our penalty, and died our death, in order that we might be forgiven, reconciled and recreated.

Unique to Christianity

There is nothing even approaching this in other religions. 'If any other religion has anything in the least like the doctrines of incarnation and atonement', wrote Bishop Stephen Neill, 'I have yet to find it'.

But it cannot be found. Emil Brunner was right to refer to 'the selfconfident optimism of all non-Christian religion', whereas in the gospel the whole emphasis is on the gracious 'self-movement' of God towards sinners and on self-despair as 'the ante-chamber of faith'. Buddhism sees the human predicament in suffering rather than sin, and in the 'desire' which it teaches is the root of suffering. Deliverance comes only through the abolition of desire by self-effort. There is no God and no Saviour. 'Strive without ceasing' were the Buddha's last words before he died.

Philosophical Hinduism locates the problem in maya, usually understood as the 'illusion' of our space-time experience. Popular Hinduism, on the other hand, teaches the inflexible doctrine of karma, that each person must eat the fruit of his own wrongdoings, for which there is no forgiveness, in an endless cycle (samsara) of reincarnations, from which there is no escape.

Islam does indeed proclaim at the head of every surah (chapter) of the Koran that Allah is compassionate and merciful. Yet it discloses no costly historical display of his mercy, and on closer inspection he is seen to be merciful to the meritorious, to those who pray and give alms and fast. The Koran has no message for sinners who deserve nothing from God except judgement and who have no merit to plead. Its symbol is the scales, standing for the weighing of merit against demerit, not the Cross, which speaks only of grace, of God's free and unmerited favour to sinners.

The merit of another

In different ways and with different emphases all the religions of the world proclaim the possibility of self-salvation, by self-reliance or the accumulation of merit; only the gospel proclaims salvation through the merit of another, who paid the price of sin in a unique, historical act of self-sacrifice. **p. 87**

Resurrection

The Resurrection is unique. There have been a number of resuscitations. Three are attributed to Jesus in the Gospels, two to the apostles in Acts (one to Peter and the other to Paul), and others have been claimed during the history of the post-apostolic Church. But there has been only one resurrection, namely that of Jesus Christ. By it God vindicated Jesus, defeated death and inaugurated his new creation.

In addition, Jesus' resurrection from death was the prelude to, even the beginning of, his exaltation as Lord. The 'right hand of God' is a readily intelligible symbol of the place of supreme honour and authority. Because of his pre-eminent honour, his 'name ... above every name' ([Phil. 2:9](#)), Jesus Christ is to be worshipped. Because of his pre-eminent authority, he is able to save, forgiving our sins and bestowing his Spirit upon us ([Acts 2:33, 38](#)). Moreover, the distinctive ministry of the Holy Spirit today is exercised in relation to Christ, as he himself foretold.

The Spirit 'glorifies' Christ, making his glory known ([Jn. 16:13](#)). The Spirit 'bears witness' to Christ, so that people believe in him ([Jn. 15:26](#)). The Spirit universalizes Christ, making him available to everybody everywhere ([Jn. 16:7](#)). The Spirit makes Christ's indwelling within us a personal reality ([Jn. 14:17](#); [Rom. 8:9](#); [Eph. 3:16](#)).

No comparable claims

No comparable claims are made, or could be sustained, on behalf of the great religious leaders of the world. Although Hindus talk of 'the Lord Krishna' and Buddhists of 'the Lord Buddha', they do not mean what we mean by 'the Lord Jesus'. For, to be sure, 'there are many "gods" and many "lords", yet for us there is but one God, the Father, from whom all things came and for whom we live; and there is but one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things came and through whom we live' ([1 Cor. 8:5](#)).

It is perhaps the combination of the 'all things' (the universe) and the 'we' (individual persons) that is most striking in this statement. Our claim is that the Lord Jesus both had a unique role in the creation of the universe and has a unique place in his followers' lives. The Buddhist does not claim to know the Buddha, nor the Confucianist Confucius, nor the Moslem Mohammed, nor the Marxist Marx. Each reveres the founder of his religion or ideology as a great teacher of the past.

Christians also look to Jesus as their teacher, but he is to us far more than that. We do claim to know him, as the Spirit makes him known to us. We dare even to echo Paul: 'I consider everything a loss compared [p.88](#) to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in him ...' ([Phil. 3:8](#)).

This, then, is the threefold uniqueness of Jesus Christ. Historically it lies in his birth, death and resurrection, and theologically in his incarnation, atonement and exaltation. Indeed, because in no other person but the historic Jesus of Nazareth has God become man and lived a human life on earth, died to bear the penalty of our sins, and been raised from death and exalted to glory, there is no other Saviour, for there is no other person who is qualified to save. We must therefore give full weight to, and not attempt to tone down, the great New Testament affirmations of the uniqueness and finality of Jesus.

'I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me' ([Jn. 14:6](#)). 'Salvation is found in no-one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved' ([Acts 4:12](#)). 'There is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all men' ([1 Tim. 2:5](#)). Only one way, only one name, only one mediator. The claim is exclusive; it carries with it the negative corollary that 'no-one comes to the Father' except through Christ, and that there is 'salvation ... in no-one else', since only he is the God-man, who gave himself as a ransom for men and can therefore be the mediator between God and humankind.

The implication of all this is inescapable. What is genuinely unique has universal significance and must therefore be universally made known, whereas, to quote Dr. Visser't Hooft again, 'there is no universality if there is no unique event'. Thus, uniqueness and universality belong together. It is because Jesus Christ is the only Saviour that we are under obligation to proclaim him everywhere. The 'inclusivism' of mission is precisely due to the 'exclusivism' of the Mediator. In addition, universal authority over the nations has been given to him; that is why he commissions us to go and make disciples of all nations ([Mt. 28:18f](#)).

EVANGELISM AND INTEGRITY

Faith sharing in diverse culture

Our task is more than to proclaim Christ, it is to persuade men ([2 Cor. 4:5](#); [5:11](#)).

Cormac Murphy-O'Connor, the Roman Catholic Bishop of Arundel and Brighton, has recently written a book on ecumenism in which he quotes a farewell letter from a Greek Catholic bishop in Galilee: 'As a [p. 89](#) Bishop, a preacher of the Gospel, I never tried to convert a Jew or Arab Moslem to Christianity; rather to convert them to be a better Jew, a better Moslem.' That is a fantastic misreading of the New Testament. If the Apostles (who were of course all Jews) had followed that line, there would never have been a Christian Church.

Instead, they preached, persuaded and pleaded. So must we. It is impossible for us to be neutral. We are both committed to Christ ourselves and committed to be his advocates, his ambassadors appealing to people to be reconciled to God ([2 Cor. 5:20](#)).

Yet this call to the worldwide persuasive preaching of the gospel needs to be hedged round with safeguards. For Christian evangelism has often been abused, and in consequence has fallen into disrepute. So let me list six things which the universal proclamation of the unique Christ does not mean.

1. Don't confuse Christ with culture

Some Western missionaries have made the mistake of exporting with the gospel their whole Western way of life, or have (often quite unconsciously) covered their gospel with a cultural overlay. Then their message has been rejected not because it was judged to be false but because it was perceived to be alien. One does not have to be a cross-cultural messenger of the gospel to make the same mistake. We are all creatures of culture, and seldom realize how much our outlook and therefore our teaching are conditioned by the background of our race, nationality and class. If our evangelism is to be authentic, we will seek to ensure that our gospel is biblical, not cultural.

2. Beware a crusading spirit

True evangelism does not mean that we are imbued with a crusading spirit. Evangelists must not be imperialists, dismissive of other people's cultures, and evangelism should never be either haughty in attitude or aggressive in style. Humility is the preeminent Christianity virtue and should characterize all our words and deeds. It is not appropriate to proclaim Christ unless we are manifesting in our proclamation something of his 'meekness and gentleness' ([2 Cor. 10:1](#)).

It is here that a legitimate distinction may be made between 'evangelism' and 'proselytism'. Different people define these words differently, and there is some justification in Bishop Newbigin's tongue-in-cheek conclusion: 'The only workable distinction is that evangelism is what we do and proselytism is what others do.' There is

a broad measure of agreement among churches, however, that 'proselytism' is a synonym for 'unworthy witness'. Moreover, the 'unworthiness' p.90 of a proselytising witness may refer either to our motives (concern for our own glory, instead of the glory of Christ), or to our methods (trust in psychological pressure techniques or in the offer of benefits on condition of conversion, instead of in the power of the Holy Spirit) or to our message (focusing on the alleged falsehood and failures of others, instead of on the truth and perfection of Jesus Christ).

Besides, there is no need to resort to any kind of 'unworthy witness'. For truth is going to prevail in the end. As Paul put it, 'We cannot do anything against the truth, but only for the truth' ([2 Cor. 13:8](#)). Those who use improper pressures are thereby admitting the weakness of their own case.

3. More than words

Evangelism does not mean that we do nothing but talk. It is certainly essential to verbalize the gospel, and, since God has himself chosen to speak, Christians should not share the widespread disenchantment with words. Nevertheless, God's Word also became flesh, so that his glory was seen. Just so, we cannot announce the good news of God's love if we do not also exhibit in concrete actions of love. This is a major rationale for combining social action with evangelism. When our light truly shines before men, Jesus said, it is our 'good deeds' that they will see and so give glory to our heavenly Father ([Mt. 5:16](#)).

4. And also dialogue

Evangelism does not mean that dialogue is excluded. At its simplest, dialogue is a two-way conversation, as exchange between people who are willing to listen as well as speak, to learn as well as teach. Dr. Christopher Wright has rightly argued, however, the 'learning' by Christians from non-Christian does not presuppose some 'deficiency in the Christian faith as such', so that other religions can add to the biblical revelation. 'No, it is one thing to accept that we are fallible and imperfect Christians who need rebuke and challenge, and to be willing to accept it from any quarter. It is quite another to envisage that in dialogue the revelation of God in Christ and the Scriptures needs correction, improvement or addition. It is one thing to challenge my faith; another to challenge the faith.'

Readiness to take part in dialogue is a sign of respect for the concerns and convictions of others. Dialogue must neither replace witness, nor even rival it as an equal. It is an activity in its own right, whose goal and reward are greater understanding of the other. For the Christian, it is also a necessary prelude to witness, for witness becomes wiser and more sensitive as a result. p.91

5. The author of all beauty

To engage in Christian evangelism does not mean that outside the Church we consider God inactive and truth absent. Not at all. God sustains all his creatures, and therefore 'is not far from any of them'. By creation they are his 'offspring', who 'live and move and have their being' in him ([Acts 17:27f](#)). Also Jesus Christ, as the logos of God and the light of men, is himself ceaselessly active in the world.

Because he is 'the true light coming into the world and giving light to every man' ([Jn. 1:9](#)), we dare to claim that all beauty, truth and goodness, wherever they are found among human beings, derive from him. This is an aspect of God's 'common grace', his love shown to all humankind; it is not, however, 'saving grace' which is given only to those who humbly cry to him for mercy.

6. Eternity in their hearts

The practice of evangelism does not mean (or at least does not necessarily mean) that we think there is no hope of salvation for those who have never heard of Jesus. What is their position? We can begin by making two points with assurance. First, there is no such thing as self-salvation. All human beings have sinned against the truth they have known, are therefore guilty before God, and are 'perishing' (that is the argument of [Rom. 1-3](#)). Nobody can achieve salvation by his own religious observances, good works or sincerity. Those who claim to be Christians cannot; nor can anyone else.

And Cornelius the centurion was not an exception to this rule. His story teaches that salvation is available to Gentiles as well as to Jews, and on the same terms; it does not teach that he attained it by his own righteousness, worship of God, prayers or generosity. On the contrary, he needed to hear the gospel and respond to it in order to receive salvation, life and cleansing ([Acts 11:14, 18; 15:19](#)). So self-salvation is impossible.

The second certainty is that Jesus Christ is the only Saviour, and that salvation is by God's grace alone, on the ground of Christ's cross alone, and by faith alone. The only question, therefore, is how much knowledge and understanding of the gospel people need before they can cry to God for mercy and be saved. In the Old Testament people were 'justified by faith' even though they had little knowledge or expectation of Christ.

Perhaps there are others today in a similar position, who know that they are guilty before God and that they cannot do anything to win his favour, but who in self-despair call upon the God they dimly perceive to save them. If God does save such, as many evangelical Christians [p. 92](#) believe, their salvation is still only by grace, only through Christ, only by faith. But of course it is hard for people to call on one they have not believed in, or to believe in one of whom they have not heard, or to hear if no-one preaches to them ([Rom. 10:14](#)).

It is much easier for people to believe once they have heard the gospel of Christ crucified. It is when they learn from the cross about God's mercy to sinners that they cry, 'God be merciful to me, a sinner!' As Paul put it, 'faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ' ([Rom. 10:17](#)).

These six caveats are necessary to safeguard evangelism from misunderstanding and abuse. But they do not make it one iota less necessary or less urgent. On the contrary, the whole Church is committed to take the whole gospel to the whole world. Because of the uniqueness of Jesus Christ, he must be universally made known.

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Uniqueness of Christ and Social Justice

Bong-Ho Son

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This paper, presented at the World Evangelical Fellowship Theological Commission consultation on 'The Unique Christ in a Pluralistic World', held in Manila in June, 1992, will be published with other papers in book form.

In this article Bong-Ho Son grapples with the issue of relating the exclusiveness of the uniqueness of Christ to the realities of social injustices in our society. While Christians cannot participate in Christ's work to satisfy God's retributive justice, they can be and should be agents for his distributive justice in society, as seen in Christ's teachings and ministry. The author discusses the root causes of injustice and the ethical problem of motivation. His own version of 'justice of basic needs for all' calls for a Christian life-style of sacrifice and simplicity.

Editor

UNIQUENESS AND JUSTICE?

Does the doctrine of the uniqueness of Christ have any relevance to social justice? is there any inherent relationship between them? Social justice implies a plurality of people, who enjoy equal basic rights. It seems, therefore, that to assert the uniqueness of any person is incompatible with the idea of social justice.

Worse still, is it not possible that the belief in the uniqueness of Christ is detrimental to social justice? The concept of uniqueness, whatever kind of uniqueness it may be, seems to imply an exclusive or privileged status and is contrary to the concept of social justice. Furthermore, Christian belief in the uniqueness of Christ can be misunderstood as, and is easily translated into, a unique position for Christians, and might be interpreted, wittingly or unwittingly, as a pretext for enjoying some special privileges in society. This belief may work subconsciously in the minds of some Christians in those societies where Christians occupy the majority or dominant status. In fact, some missionaries and [p. 94](#) evangelists from the West and from Korea tell unbelievers that faith in Christ will make them not only blessed in the next world but also rich and powerful in this world as well. Those who make these claims were preceded by the same Israelites who counted their status as God's chosen people as the ground for worldly privileges.

The doctrine of the uniqueness of Christ, furthermore, can be very offensive to non-Christians who think that it is discriminatory and unfair to them. Why should, they protest, Christ alone be the Saviour and why are only the believers in Christ being singled out to be saved? In any discussion about justice, believers in the uniqueness of Christ may not be in a comfortable position to defend themselves.

COMMON JUSTICE FOR ALL

It is plain that the uniqueness of Christ is an exclusively Christian belief and that social justice presupposes a universality in recognition and application of certain values. Any kind of social justice which is so uniquely Christian that it is unacceptable to non-Christians, especially to those who are really in need of justice would be meaningless. In this discussion, we are, therefore, not primarily concerned with justice among Christians but with social justice for all including non-Christians. Therefore, the concept of justice we are pursuing here should be of such a nature that, on the one hand, the uniqueness of Christ is relevant to it and, at the same time, it has to be sufficiently universal so that it may be acceptable and desirable to all those who are really in need of justice, including the non-Christian members of society.

At the outset, it must be made clear that social justice does not imply universalism in salvation. Those who freely refuse to acknowledge the uniqueness of Christ should not feel discriminated against when salvation through the unique Savior is refused to them. They are refused because they regard salvation as unimportant and uninteresting to them. Furthermore, if the Christian's confession of the uniqueness of Christ also involves,

as we will argue, sacrifice and suffering instead of worldly advantages, it would hardly offend those who are excluded from these disadvantages.

They would, however, feel really discriminated against if they were excluded from any social, political or economical benefits. The uniqueness of Christ, moreover, does not entail any exclusive rights of Christians in economic, political, or social realms. So it is in these areas alone where Christians and non-Christians share the same rights and where discrimination or injustice count. Salvation through Christ is p. 95 primarily, though not exclusively, spiritual, but social justice is primarily secular and secondarily spiritual. The common ground for the discourse on justice for both believers and unbelievers in the uniqueness of Christ is in the social, economical and political spheres of life.

When the Bible teaches that God establishes 'justice for all of the oppressed of the earth' ([Ps. 76:9](#); cf. [Jer. 9:24](#)), it is not meant only for the chosen people of God. 'The beneficiaries are not only oppressed Israelites (or Christians). There is one God and therefore one justice for all people and for all time.'¹ The justice which God establishes is a blessing for all people and it must be acceptable and recognizable as such by all people. Justice which is not perceived as justice would be meaningless. Our concrete experiences also show that Christians and non-Christians share basically a similar understanding of justice. We all understand what John the Baptist meant when he proclaimed: 'The man with two tunics should share with him who has none, and the one who has food should do the same' ([Lk. 3:11](#)). We also understand the apostle Paul when he taught: 'Our desire is not that others might be relieved while you are hard pressed, but that there might be equality' ([2 Cor. 8:13](#)). Christ is unique, but social justice has to be universal to be meaningful.

The fact that Christians and non-Christians share the same understanding and desire for social justice, however, does not yet prove conclusively that the uniqueness of Christ is relevant or inherently related to social justice. We may assume only that in God's government of the world there must be some organic relationship between the two important concepts. In what sense, then, is the uniqueness of Christ relevant to social justice?

JUSTICE IN RELATION TO BASIC NEEDS

Before we proceed to attempt to explicate the relationship, we should be clear about the kind of justice which is desirable for societies today and at the same time practically realizable. Theories related to social justice are not of much value unless they are practically applicable and helpful to meet the actual needs of those who suffer from injustices. A theory of social justice which is related to the doctrine of the uniqueness of Christ is apt to fall into abstract words. Justice is, however, a practical subject and the need of it is real and urgent. P. 96

The kind of justice which is particularly needed today is not so much retributive or non-comparative justice as distributive or comparative justice. It does not mean, however, that retributive justice is unimportant or the need for it has been sufficiently met. On the contrary, in many parts of the world today, even the minimum of retributive justice is not satisfied. Further, distributive justice is not entirely separated from retributive justice. Distribution without any consideration of desert would not be a complete justice. It is the fatal weakness of Marxist socialism that it stressed distributive justice too much and retributive justice too little.

¹ S. C. Mott, *Biblical and Social Change*, New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982, p. 61.

Nevertheless, more attention is paid today to social or distributive justice. In many cases, deficiency of retributive justice turns out to be the consequence of inadequacy in distributive justice. A proverb circulated recently in Korea illustrates this relationship: 'Have you money? Not guilty!; No money? Guilty!'

The formal principle of comparative justice, i.e., like cases to be treated alike and different cases to be treated differently, is not very useful in practical applications. The likenesses and differences of cases should be relevant so that the principle may have practical value. The criteria of relevance for various contexts of justice, or material principles of justice, have to be supplemented to the formal principle.² And the criteria of relevance for just distributions are much more difficult to agree upon than commonly supposed. Nonequalitarians hold that one should be rewarded according to one's deserts such as contributions, achievements, efforts, etc. Equalitarians insist that distribution of social goods should be made according to one's needs. Strict equalitarianism recommends that social goods be distributed to everyone equally for the simple reason that one is a human being, but Marx and Lenin envisioned a society in which the ideal, 'From each according to his ability, to each according to his need' would be realized.

Simple as they may seem, both views raise a host of difficulties when they are applied to concrete situations of society. For the nonequalitarian position, the following questions must be answered. Which among one's native abilities, acquired skills and abilities, family, race, colour, education, efforts, contributions, achievements, etc., or which combinations of these should be counted as one's desert so that reward for them is said to be fair and just? Further, how can one's merits, achievements, contributions, or efforts be measured? For the equalitarian, p. 97 the questions are just as complicated. Should one's needs be met regardless of one's efforts or contributions? How can one's needs be measured? Would a society be able to sustain itself if the needs of all of its members are met equally without considering their contributions? Given the incontestable fact that the majority of people are selfish in most circumstances in their daily lives, is it truly responsible to distribute social goods to everybody equally? Even if it is, is it practically possible to do so? The recent collapse of Communism in Eastern Europe is a clear proof that the equalitarian principle is neither possible nor even desirable.

As an alternative, I would like to propose what I call the justice of basic needs. It is a proposal to distribute social goods in such a way that basic needs such as the necessary amount of food, clothes, health care, and education may be provided for each individual simply because he or she is a human being, while luxuries, which go beyond the basic needs, be rewarded to each according to one's desert, i.e., one's contributions and achievements. It goes without mentioning that the provision of basic needs should take priority over the division of luxuries, and as the social wealth increases, the limit of the basic needs should be extended so that what have been formerly regarded as luxuries and distributed according to one's desert may now be distributed according to one's need.³ It is a mixture of equalitarian and nonequalitarian positions in social justice, or of the merits of both capitalism and of socialism.

The justice of basic needs has several advantages over other positions. It is, first of all, realistic in view of the given fact that most people are selfish, a general fact which

² cf. Joel Feinberg, *Social Philosophy*, Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1973, p. 100.

³ John Rawls' so-called difference principle says that 'Social and economic inequalities are to be arranged so that they are both (a) to the greatest benefit of the least advantaged and (b) attached to offices and positions open to all under condition of fair equality of opportunity' (*A Theory of Justice*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press 1971, p. 83). Especially point (a) above is similar in intention to the justice of basic needs principle, even though in method of implementation it may be a little different.

socialism and other optimistic visions of society have overlooked too readily. It, further, is not only concerned with equal division of a given pie but also with enlarging, or at least not reducing, its size by providing certain incentives for efforts in terms of luxuries, without sacrificing the basic necessities of the least advantaged. But by widening the scope of basic needs gradually as the social wealth grows, the poor are not left forever bound by the bare necessities of life. This would also encourage them to make greater efforts to increase the social wealth because an enlarged pie means greater possibility to share more. p. 98

Another advantage of the view is that it helps save social or personal resources available for justice by concentrating them on those who most need them. Attention is paid not so much to the general equality of all members of the society as to the protection of the basic rights of its members. It would be nice if distribution of luxuries among the privileged is also fair and just. But to be concerned with such a matter is itself a luxury which many societies today cannot afford.

This conception is so practical and reasonable that many governments are in fact making use of it in defending their concrete social policies. Free food, free medication, free compulsory education, cheap housing for the poor are common practices in many countries. In fact, it appeals so strongly to our general intuitive sense of justice that governments do not need any particular apologies for it.

The biblical teachings on justice are also primarily concerned with the least advantaged in the society. The God of Israel is the one 'who executes justice for the oppressed: who gives food to the hungry. The Lord sets the prisoners free; the Lord opens the eyes of the blind. The Lord lifts up those who are bowed down; the Lord loves righteous. The Lord watches over the sojourners, he upholds the widow and the fatherless; but the way of the wicked he brings to ruin' ([Ps. 146:7-10](#)). The parable of the Good Samaritan teaches not only sympathy toward the others but also love toward the abused.⁴ 'The Scriptures do not allow the presupposition of a condition in which groups or individuals are denied the ability to participate fully and equally in the life of the society. For this reason, justice is primarily spoken of by the biblical writers as activity on behalf of the disadvantaged'.⁵

Karl Barth said, '... the human righteousness required by God and established in obedience—the righteousness which according to [Amos 5:24](#) should pour down as a mighty stream—has necessarily the character of a vindication of right in favor of the threatened innocent, the oppressed poor, widows, orphans and aliens. For this reason, in the relations and events in the life of His people, God always takes His stand unconditionally and passionately on this side and on this side alone: against the lofty and on behalf of the lowly; against those who p. 99 already enjoy rights and privilege and on behalf of those who denied and deprived of it'.⁶

The Bible does not present any abstract and general principle of justice. It starts from the plain fact that human society has never been completely just. And it never envisions a

⁴ I will not here go into the controversial question of the relationship between love and justice, but be satisfied with understanding that justice is one fundamental element of love. God's love never contradicts justice, but goes beyond it. Christ's vicarious death is the supreme example of God's love which at the same time satisfies the demand of God's justice. The Lord's summary of the commandments in terms of love ([Mt. 22:34-40](#)) is another proof.

⁵ Mott, *Biblical Ethics and Social Change*, p. 65.

⁶ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, trans. T. H. L. Parker, et. al., vol. 2: *The Doctrine of God*, 1, Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1955, p. 386. Quoted from N. Wolterstorff, *Until Justice and Peace Embrace*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983, p. 73.

man-made utopia which is both completely just and prosperous. Being basically sinful and selfish, the best man can hope for is to reduce the inequalities and sufferings due to human selfishness as much as possible.

The Biblical teachings on justice are not only realistic but also practical. Its way of accomplishing justice is rather simple. The Bible does not recommend the abolition all private properties or the introduction of a graduated taxation system. We are asked simply to find out who are the least advantaged in the society and to uphold them either directly or indirectly. One important way to help them indirectly would be by instituting structural changes so that the justice of basic needs may be met. The justice of basic needs in principle agrees with the Biblical teachings on justice. Thus protecting and upholding the basic rights and needs appeal to everyone's intuitive sense of justice and is also supported by biblical teachings.

ROOT OF INJUSTICES

Injustice is one of the main causes of mankind's sufferings, and this is why injustice should be corrected. As far as our recognition is concerned, anything which gives us pain or makes us suffer either directly or indirectly is evil. Suffering or pain,⁷ one of the primordial experiences of mankind, causes us to recognize negative realities for what they are. If there were no experience of pain, all those realities which we know to be evil would have not been disliked and treated as something to be avoided.

Some of the pains we suffer are caused by nature and cannot be prevented by human efforts. But according to Lewis, perhaps four-fifths of man's sufferings are caused by man.⁸ Lewis is not exaggerating in view of the fact that, for instance, more than 90% of the physically handicapped find the causes of their invalidities in human faults such as accidents, negligence, misuse of drugs, environmental pollutions, etc. It is undeniable that the majority of human sufferings has social origins, and a great many of them stem from social injustices. Injustice produces sufferings in any place and at any time. But it is particularly the case today as society becomes increasingly complex and the lives of individuals depend in growing measure upon the structures of their society.

The root of injustice is, of course, man's sins against God. In [Genesis 4](#), we see how sin against God develops into social injustices. Alienated from God, Cain, the prototype of sinners, feels insecure. Driven from the presence of God, Cain complains, 'Today you are driving me from the land, and I will be hidden from your presence; I will be a restless wanderer on the earth, and whoever finds me will kill me' ([Gen. 4:14](#)). Interestingly, what he fears most is not natural disaster or God's punishment but his fellow men (perhaps Abel's relatives). The fact that he and his children built a city (apparently surrounded by walls) and forged weapons out of bronze and iron (v. [22](#)) express their sense of insecurity and reveal the objects of their fear. The fear of Cain is really unfounded. God promised that 'if anyone kills Cain, he will suffer vengeance seven times over' (v. [15](#)), but Cain could not trust the Lord. The real root for man's insecurity is not so much the deficiency of God's protection as his disbelief in God's promise of protection, a typical characteristic of sin (cf. [John 16:9](#)).

Human history consists mainly in man's frantic struggles to safeguard his security by means of his own power and ingenuities. It is also the root cause of all the competitions

⁷ Pain and suffering are not to be sharply distinguished as generally known. Of the two, I think pain is still more primitive than suffering. cf. Bong-Ho Son, 'Phenomenology of Pain,' in *Phenomenology of Life-World and Hermeneutics* (in Korean), Seoul, 1992.

⁸ C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, New York: Macmillan, 1962, p. 89.

and conflicts within and between societies. If the threats to life and happiness which men have to face were only from the forces of nature alone, protection from them would have certain limits. But when the threats are from the power of other men, there is never sufficient defence. We witness one absurd consequence of such competition in the stockpiling of weapons which together are capable of destroying the entire world several times over. The gaining of new power by one person or by a group means new threats to other persons or groups, and reciprocally competitive accumulation of worldly powers inevitably produces situations of injustice for some persons or groups. The strong possess too much, while the weak have too little and starve. Yet neither feels entirely secure and their enjoyment is short-lived.

Group egoism especially has debilitating effects on social justice. The fact that greater power can be secured even for individuals when they are united in a group and the necessity of protecting collective interests over against competing groups strengthen the cohesion of the group. Furthermore, individuals within the group lose moral inhibitions which might exercise a moral restraint on an individual outside the group, thereby strengthening the concessive power of the group.⁹ It is primarily the group egoism expressed either in its naked forces or in terms of social structures which create circumstances for major injustices in almost all societies. Any group, whether of priests, military, higher castes, landowners, capitalists, etc., occupying the position of power, enjoys special privileges and an undeserved share of social goods while refusing outsiders their legitimate rights. Power corrupts, and big powers corrupt more easily than small powers. But the power of a group, not only because it is big but also because it lacks the moral inhibition of individual conscience, tends to corrupt still more easily. And every corruption of power produces some forms of injustice directly or indirectly.

The most powerful and most egoistic among all human groups is the modern state.¹⁰ This ancient leviathan is still very alive and even stronger than it used to be. Originally instituted to preserve order and justice within the boundary of national territory, the state has now turned into a primarily economic interest group and become the major obstacle of international justice. For the economic benefits it brings to its citizens, the cohesive powers of modern states have become greater than those of any other kind of institution in history. Modern states have created a world in which only the rule of the jungle prevails. The degree of suffering a nation unjustly inflicts upon the people of other nations is proportional to its economic strength.

The secularization of culture aggravates the moral situation of modern societies and the multiplication of injustices. Having lost sight of the next world and transcendental values, modern men seek to find the meaning of life and the basis of security solely in things of this world. This necessarily intensifies competitions and conflicts between individuals and groups because the values they seek after are mainly relative and quantitatively limited so that if one possesses much, others necessarily have less. Material possessions and political power have become the supreme values of secular society.

Fortunately, not every individual and not every group of individuals is always so egoistic and inimical to justice. Men are capable of sympathy and moral indignation in response to violations of justice. Mencius counted sympathy, or the feeling of commiseration (*ts'e yin*), as one of the four basic good qualities with which all men are endowed by nature (beside the feeling of shame and dislike (*hsiu wu*), the feeling of

⁹ Group egoism and the cohesive power of groups have been persuasively analyzed by Reinhold Niebuhr in his *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, London: SCM, 1932.

¹⁰ cf. Bong-Ho Son, 'The Power and Egoism of the Modern State', *Transformation*, vol. 6, No. 3 (July/Sept. 1989): pp. 1-5.

modesty and of yielding (*tz'u jang*), and the sense of right and wrong (*shih fei*).¹¹ The problem is, according to Mencius, that the good qualities are not fully cultivated or are polluted by the senses.¹²

For most people, however, their sympathy or indignation at injustices is not strong enough to compel them to remedial actions, especially when their own pleasures or interests are at stake. Rationality, natural sympathy and moral indignation, although they are the most precious moral resources men have, are not sufficient guardians of social justice.

Even the intuitive sense of justice and rationality, important though they are for social justice, are not entirely free from human selfishness. It is not utterly cynical to interpret them as expressions of the subconscious fear of being unjustly wronged coupled with the principle of reciprocity, which again can be explained in terms of probability calculation.

UNIQUE IN SACRIFICE

What relevance, then, does the uniqueness of Christ have to with these circumstances of social justice? The confession that Christ is our only Saviour is one of the fundamental elements of the Christian faith. Regardless as to whether or not it is palatable to modern men and acceptable to the people of other faiths, it is not to be compromised. If the confession of the uniqueness of Christ contradicts our efforts for social justice, we may have to give up the latter, because otherwise, it would be no longer a 'Christian' effort for social justice.

Simply claiming that 'there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved' beside the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth ([Acts 4:12](#)), at the first hearing, certainly sounds very arrogant and unfair to many people. The fact that Christ is the only incarnate Son of God appointed to die to redeem his people is not something which every human being has agreed upon or which has any direct bearing on social justice. This rather formal understanding of Christ's uniqueness appears to be inimical or, at most, indifferent to social justice. [p. 103](#)

But the biblical teachings concerning Christ are rich with contents which together constitute inalienable aspects of his uniqueness as Saviour. His being and person, his coming in the flesh, his ministry and teachings, his death, resurrection, ascension and his second coming are not to be considered apart from his being unique Saviour and Redeemer. Every aspect of these teachings shares the uniqueness of his whole person and ministry.

Yet the uniqueness which each aspect carries should not be of such a character that it is incomprehensible and thus incapable of being communicated. In the history of Christian theology, negative theology or existentialism has stressed the characteristics of incomprehensibility and incommunicability of God's self-revelations. But biblical teachings do not seem to support each extreme theories. We are commanded to love each other as God loves us. Perhaps God's love is not identical with our love, but it must be sufficiently similar to ours or, at least somewhat analogous to ours so that God's will can be communicable to us.

¹¹ Fung Yu-lan, *A History of Chinese Philosophy*, vol. 1, *The Period of the Philosophers*, trans. D. Boddle, London: Allen & Unwin, 1952, pp. 120-121.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 123.

Paying due remuneration for services rendered is taken for granted as justice in the Bible and justice is also a chief attribute of God ([Ps. 103:6, 146](#)).¹³ It is also what our intuitive sense of justice demands. We understand and believe that the vicarious death of Christ satisfies the demand of God's retributive justice. He died to pay the price of death for all those who have sinned against God. Jesus Christ was crucified not only 'for our sins' ([I Cor. 15:3](#)), but also 'for the sins of the world' ([I Jn. 2:2](#)).¹⁴

However, God's retributive justice is extended to distributive justice through the redemptive ministry of Christ.¹⁵ Jesus made it very clear that his saving ministry is the fulfilment of Isaiah's prophecy that the good news of salvation was particularly directed to the poor and oppressed ([Lk. 4:18-20](#)). He died for all who believe in him, but especially for the poor and oppressed who are wronged in unjust societies. They are mostly victims of, and easily victimized by, social injustices. It is true that his salvation is open to all, but it is presented in such a way that the poor, the prisoners, the blind, the oppressed may easily accept it as theirs, for they can be poor in spirit more easily than those who are rich in the things of the world. Salvation implies being content and there can be no contentment and peace where there is no justice.¹⁶

Christ suffered and died not for his own salvation or reward but for the salvation of sinners. And he did this as a victim of social injustice, identifying himself not only with sinners but particularly with other victims of social injustices. He went through a legal process which totally violated retributive justice, the sinless one being sentenced to the most cruel death men had ever contrived. He humbled himself in order to lift the lowly: 'But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are' ([I Cor. 1:27-28](#)). This aspect of his redemptive ministry is an essential constituent of his uniqueness. The uniqueness of Christ does not imply privilege but rather sacrifice, and in this respect, his uniqueness is unique. And uniqueness in sacrifice is not offensive to man's intuitive sense of justice but rather can be auxiliary to social justice.

CHRISTIAN EFFORTS FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE

A theoretical argument on an ethical subject is meaningless unless it is practically useful. We have stated that the doctrine of the uniqueness of Christ is not only relevant but also auxiliary to establishment of social justice. But how can it be concretely made relevant to and contribute to social justice, while it is not accepted by all those who are involved in social justice?

We believe, of course, that God is able to work mysteriously so that social justice is directly affected by the sacrificial death of Christ. 'The Judge of all of the earth' ([Gen. 18:25](#)) is right, and the final Judgment of the righteous Lord must be just. But as far as we know, the present world is still full of injustices, and we see little clear indication that there is a progressive development toward greater justice. It seems, rather, that the

¹³ Mott, *Biblical Ethics and Social Change*, p. 60.

¹⁴ cf. K. G. Howkins, 'Christianity, Truth and Dialogue' in *Jesus Christ, the Only Way*, ed. P. Sookhdeo, Exeter: Paternoster, 1978, p. 45.

¹⁵ Mott calls God's retribution as justice, while distributive justice as righteousness. Love is involved in extending retributive justice to distributive righteousness (Mott, *Biblical Ethics and Social Change*, p. 62). But God's justice is not confined to wrathful judgment, and love includes righteousness and justice.

¹⁶ Wolterstorff, *Until Justice and Peace Embrace*, p. 71.

uniqueness of Christ is related to social justice only through the mediation of Christians, who confess their unique Saviour on the one hand and are chosen and commanded to work for justice in societies p.105 on the other hand. The uniqueness of Christ as personal Saviour is confessed by the church in faith, but the uniqueness of Christ as the final Judge of the world 'ought' to be realized by his followers through their labours for social justice. 'People are God's channels of justice, as well as of proclamation'.¹⁷

As a medium of blessing, however, Christians are to be agents of justice rather than its beneficiaries. As members of society, they can also benefit when society becomes just, but they stand primarily on the side of the benefactor, i.e. of Christ, rather than on the side of the beneficiaries.

If justice is a blessing to a society, Christians who work for justice are the medium of the blessing: 'All people on earth will be blessed through you' ([Gen. 12:3](#); [18:18](#)). Believers are 'a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God' ([1 Pet. 2:9](#)) called to be the salt and the light of the world, and to make the uniqueness of Christ concretely discernible by upholding the disadvantaged in society.

Christ died for the sake of sinners, thereby satisfying the retributive justice of God. But he died also to lift up the oppressed so that distributive justice for them may be satisfied. Those who are willing to sacrifice themselves for Christ, therefore, sacrifice also for the oppressed in society. Christians cannot participate in Christ's work to satisfy God's retributive justice, but they can and should be the agents to satisfy his distributive justice in society. Redemption is to liberate sinners from the bondage of sin. So Christian efforts for social justice are human endeavours to liberate those who suffer under unequal and unjust social structures, which are a prominent consequence of the selfishness and insecurity of sinful men. Followers of Christ can contribute to social justice, at the least, by withdrawing themselves partly from the struggles of all against all for survival and for greater power. Those who are committed to the unique Christ and are assured of eternal security may, in principle, relinquish some of their legitimate rights and pleasures for the sake of social justice more easily than anybody else could.

It is true this approach to promoting justice is not sufficient, but it is, nevertheless, by no means easy to put into practice in this secularized p. 106 world where the gods of mammon and pleasure reign. The effects of the self renunciation of believers are not to be underestimated either. Fewer competitors mean diminished competition and if one possesses less, others will get more. A simple life style and temperance in acquisition of worldly goods contribute, among other things, to the promotion of social justice. In those societies where Christians are minorities and enjoy no sizable social influence, this may be their best and only way to contribute to improving the state of social justice.

It is important for Christians to realize that they, as citizens of a state, participate inevitably in the national interest. This should be a burden to the conscience of Christians in relatively rich nations because they are most likely enjoying undeserved benefits which their nations have gained by exploiting people of poor countries. The undeserved prosperity of individuals in rich countries may mean undeserved poverty of individuals in poor countries. To be consistently Christian, one should be able to give up much of the unjust benefits one enjoys beyond the average, and those who are living reasonably well in today's world community should realize that others are being victimized for their benefit. To live simply is, therefore, not a benevolent gesture but one way of reducing one's debt to others who are unjustly victimized. Further, Christians in stronger nations should be ready to fight nationalism, which today is motivated predominantly by economic interests.

¹⁷ Mott, *Biblical Ethics and Social Change*, p. 112.

This negative approach, however, may not be uniquely Christian. In fact ascetic religions may do better. Yet temperate living of Christians is unique in the sense that their relinquishment, like that of their Lord, is not primarily for the purification of their own souls as a part of earning salvation, but a loving sacrifice for the sake of others. It is this element of self-sacrifice purely for the sake of others which should characterize all Christian efforts for social justice in distinction from other approaches, including socialist ones.

Personal sacrifices should, therefore, accompany all Christian undertakings for social justice. No attempt to improve social justice will be both genuinely Christian and truly effective unless those who are involved are not ready to renounce their worldly pleasures and possessions.

Believers, however, cannot be satisfied with this negative approach alone, especially where they are a social majority or in influential positions in terms of social, political or economic power. Unless special measures are taken, the surpluses Christians have created by their sacrifices may not be given to the least advantaged but may be appropriated by the strong of the society, and consequently widen the [p. 107](#) gap between the rich and poor still further. In many cases, the simple good will and sacrifices of Christians are effectively exploited by those in power and worsen rather than improve the status of justice. To leave all the consequences to God's wise hands and to be satisfied with acting out of good motives,—a common attitude found among evangelical Christians all over the world—very often works counter effectively. We are called not only to do good to others, but also to act responsively so that evil may not be furthered strengthened by our good intentions. To obey the commandment of love and to work for justice, we must mobilize not only our will but also our entire faculties and abilities including our trained reason and experiences. To be satisfied with acting out of good motives and not to take full responsibility for the consequences is a sign not of true faith in God but of laziness, as exemplified in the parable of talents by the man who returned only one talent to the master.

Christians are servants of God, but in regard to others in society they are also stewards in charge of distributing God's bounty to all people fairly at the proper time ([Lk. 12:42](#)). To provide for everyone what is most needed is the task of wise stewards of God. For a few to enjoy luxuries, while others are destitute of basic necessities for survival and human dignity constitutes abuse of God's property. To be faithfully economical with God's treasure, one has to have some basic knowledge of and influence on structures by which selfish human beings manage society.

Experiences throughout history and analyses of social scientists have clearly shown that human evils manifest themselves not only in actions of individual persons but also through social structures. Christians, therefore, are not necessarily forbidden *a priori* from changing them. There is no reason why changing social structures should be the monopoly of socialists.

In changing social structures, however, political means are neither the only nor the most desirable way for Christians, even though they need not be excluded in principle. The surest way is to educate individuals to respect the basic rights of all people, particularly of the weakest members of society. Christians can organize social movements to raise, first, the consciousness of fellow Christians on issues of justice and together with them conscientize the rest of the people by teaching and practising.

In some grave circumstances of injustice, concerted actions may be necessary in order to put some moral and political pressure on official or civilian organizations to be fair and just in their actions. This cannot be done without costs and risks on the part of Christians.

As p. 108 exemplified in the well-known case of Kitty Genovese,¹⁸ average citizens try as much as possible to avoid meddling with affairs of others unless they directly interfere with their own interests. Few in modern societies are really concerned with social injustices unless they themselves are directly hurt by them. It is in this situation that Christians should take the trouble to initiate movements to change the structures or values which cause the injustices. Unless one believes in an impersonal law of historical development and waits for an automatic self-correction of social evils, somebody should start corrective actions, and Christians are responsible to do it in order to protect the rights of the oppressed.

But it is only in extreme situations that Christians can appeal to violence for social changes. Unless they are absolutely certain that there is no other door open beside violence and that the sufferings in the present structures clearly exceed possible damages produced by the violence, they should avoid it. We have also learned valuable lessons from the failure of Communist experiments in Eastern Europe. Violent revolutions have not paid off so far. Yet, there can be occasions where the use of violence is the only possibility open even to Christians and sometimes it is not only permissible but also responsible. Men can be exceedingly evil when their greed is masked by social structures which insure their collective interests.

Last but not least, evangelism and mission ministries are among the most important agents for improving social justice.¹⁹ If the Kingdom of God is the only state of complete justice, recruiting one more person to it means ensuring justice to one more person. More concretely, more justice ought to be found in Christian communities than in society at large, and the growth of Christian communities implies more justice for more people. But above all, evangelism and mission ministries increase the number of the agents working for social justice. Christians are God's channels of justice, and greater justice is expected in society when more channels come into operation.

In reality, however, the numerical increase of believers has not necessarily secured greater justice in a society. More often than not, p. 109 Christians have turned oppressors rather than liberators of the oppressed. Evangelism and missions which are really meaningful for promoting social justice, therefore, have to be coupled with sound Biblical nurture. The new converts should grow to become mature followers of Christ willing to give up their possessions and pleasures for the sake of their disadvantaged neighbors. Evangelism, missions and nurture are the essential elements of the church's ministry. When the church grows as its Head wills, it will form a unique community where justice reigns within and which creates an invaluable condition for social justice. The church faithful to its Master, therefore, is God's uniquely chosen people, through whom all the people around them will be blessed.

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¹⁸ At 3 a.m. a young woman named Kitty Genovese was brutally assaulted in front of the Kew Garden housing complex. Thirty eight of the residents of Kew Gardens heard her crying out in terror, and they came to their windows to look. Not only did no one come to her aid, but no one even notified the police. For half an hour the scene continued, and finally the assaulter succeeded in killing Kitty Genovese. Yet the police had not been notified. See Gregory Mellema, *Individuals, Groups, and Shared Responsibility*, New York: Peter Lang, 1988, p. 57.

¹⁹ cf. Mott, *Biblical Ethics and Social Change*, p. 109ff.

Journal and Book Information

Journals

Churchman

A quarterly journal of Anglican theology published by the Church Society, 186 Kennington Park Road, London SE11 4BT, England. Subscription rates for 1993 £19.00 (Subscription agencies £17.00, theological students (UK) £17.00). Address: Dean Wallace House, 16 Rosslyn Road, Watford, Herts WD1 7EY.

Mission Bulletin

The Reformed Ecumenical Synod, 1677 Gentian Drive SE, Grand Rapids, Michigan, USA 49508.

Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology

Published twice a year by Rutherford House, 17 Claremont Park, Edinburgh EH6 7PJ, UK. Price L9.50, students L5, overseas rates on application.

Books

The Authentic Jesus by John Stott (Marshall Pickering, 1992, 90pp., £2.99.

Jesus in African Culture by Kwame Bediako (Asempa Publishers, Christian Council of Ghana, Box 919, Accra) 49pp.

Corrigendum

We apologise for the mistake in the name George C. Oosthuizen in his article 'Southern African Independent Churches Respond to Demonic Powers' in issue [16:4](#). It should have read Gerhardus C. Oosthuizen.

Editor