

THE WHITLEY LECTURE  
2001-2002

**CONFESSING CHRIST  
IN A PLURAL WORLD**

**Nicholas J. Wood**

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Whitley Publications  
c/o Regent's Park College  
Pusey Street  
Oxford OX1 2LB  
England

## **The Whitley Lecture**

The Whitley Lectureship was first established in 1949, in honour of W.T. Whitley (1861-1947), arguably the first systematic modern Baptist historian. Whitley was a notable scholar and servant of the Church of Christ. He had pastorates in England and Australia. He served the denomination in both countries in many ways, including pursuing historical studies.

Whitley was a key figure in the formation of the Baptist Historical Society (1908). He edited its journal which soon gained an international reputation for the quality of its contents. Altogether he made a particularly remarkable contribution to Baptist life and self-understanding, providing an inspiring model of how a pastor-scholar might enrich the life and faith of others.

The establishment of the Lectureship in his name was intended to be an encouragement to research by Baptist scholars into aspects of Christian life and thought and to enable the results of such research to be published and available to the denomination and beyond.

The Whitley Lectureship's Management Committee is composed of representatives of the Baptist Colleges, the Baptist Union of Great Britain, the Baptist Missionary Society, the Baptist Ministers Fellowship and the Baptist Historical Society.

Through the years the encouragement towards scholarship had taken different forms, from the full support of the writing of lectures for publication by a designated Whitley Lecturer to the making available of smaller grants to those working at particular research interests.

In 1996 the Management Committee of the Whitley Lectureship began a new initiative in keeping with the original purpose. It was agreed to appoint each year a Lecturer to write and deliver a lecture as a contribution to scholarly Baptist thought. Each lecture will be published.

The Management Committee is delighted that the Revd Dr Nicholas Wood is the sixth lecturer in the new series. Nick is Fellow and Tutor in Religion and Culture at Regent's Park College, Oxford, and Director of the Centre for the Study of Christianity and Culture. He teaches the Study of Religion, Theology of Mission and Inter-Faith Relations at Oxford. He

chairs the Joppa Group, the Baptist group for Christian witness in a multi-faith society. His doctoral research was on the same theme as this lecture.

**RICHARD KIDD**

on behalf of the Management Committee

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**Introduction**

I am grateful to the Whitley Trustees for this invitation to share with the wider Baptist family something of the study and reflection I have been undertaking for over twenty years now on the vital question of what it means for us to confess the Lordship of Jesus Christ in our economically, politically, socially and religiously plural world. Christianity has always interpreted the nature of God by the measure of Christ. That is not simply to restrict God to Christ; the doctrine of the Trinity has always underlined that a properly Christian understanding of God refers to a dynamic relationality at the heart of all things, traditionally expressed as the unity in diversity of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Equally Christian theologians, along with the theologians and scholars of most other traditions, have also recognized that the mystery of the reality of God is greater than all human attempts at understanding or formulation. But Christianity at heart affirms that God is Christ-like: the Father is revealed by the Son, in the power of the Spirit. As Michael Ramsey famously paraphrased St Paul: 'God is Christ-like, and in him is no unChristlikeness at all'.<sup>1</sup> This does not mean that since God is revealed definitively in Christ, God is not made known in other ways. Indeed, I shall argue that if Christ is the normative revelation of God as self-giving love, then we should positively expect to find this God at work among all peoples, in all places and at all times.

The Christian vision of 'the Christlike God' has not been understood as merely a culturally and historically bound vision, but one that is universally valid: true for the whole world, for all peoples and for all time. In particular the salvation that is offered by God through the life, death,

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<sup>1</sup> See John V. Taylor, *The Christlike God*, SCM Press, London 1992.

resurrection and exaltation of the Son is believed to have cosmic significance. Through the Christ-event the universe is reconciled to God and the divine purpose in creation and redemption is fulfilled. This is the essence of the Good News with which the Church has been entrusted. This Gospel is not a treasure to be locked away and preserved, but an announcement to be proclaimed throughout the world in which all nations are called to turn to the living God and receive salvation in Christ.

The mission of the Church is thus defined by the mission of the Creating and Redeeming God and all theology is a reflection and interpretation of this all-embracing mission. I will argue that for a Christian theology of religions, this missiological perspective is vital, retaining as it does, Christological criteria within a Trinitarian context. This lecture will discuss the issue of religious pluralism from a Christian missiological point of view and is therefore an avowedly confessional study. This is particularly appropriate for a Baptist contribution to the debate for Baptist people have always been those with a confessional understanding of faith.<sup>2</sup> This reflects a dual commitment to recognize both the Lordship of Christ and the fact that such Lordship can only ever be freely confessed in a free and tolerant society. Behind the various seventeenth-century confessions, which articulated the emerging Baptist community's understanding of faith, lies the ancient Christian baptismal confession, 'Jesus is Lord!' This was never understood simply as personal affirmation (Jesus is *my* Lord) or even as corporate identification (Jesus is *our* Lord) but as a confession of faith in the One whom God has raised to the very highest place in the universe – Jesus is *The* Lord.<sup>3</sup> But this Lordship is never imposed but rather sought through humble service and sacrifice.

In the last thirty years or more there has been an explosion of important theological reflection on this issue, much of it abandoning the

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<sup>2</sup> See the articles by Paul Weller, 'Freedom and Witness in a Multi-Religious Society: A Baptist Perspective', *Baptist Quarterly* Vol. XXXIII April & July 1990, and the Joppa Occasional Paper by Nigel Wright, *Public Truth or Private Option? Gospel and Religious Liberty in a Multi-Faith Society in the Light of the Resurrection*, Joppa Publications 1999.

<sup>3</sup> Cf Philippians 2:5-11.

missiological framework in which, historically, the discussion was conducted, and adopting instead what has become a new orthodoxy of liberal pluralism in which personal commitments are apparently to be set aside. I will argue that the issue of 'other faiths' is actually rooted in encounter: encounter between people of faith. It has often been the missionaries of the Church who have first made tentative suggestions of appropriate responses to the realities which they have experienced. No one today would wish to endorse all the methods or theological assumptions of the missionaries of a generation or two ago. With the benefit of hindsight we can see all too clearly the arrogance, imperialism and racism of some. Such assumptions have led to the discrediting of any missiological approach in some circles. True mission is, however, defined for Christians by the mission of the crucified Christ<sup>4</sup> and it is this perspective I shall try to bring to bear.

### **Part One – Setting the Context**

It had been the wish of William Carey, Baptist pastor, distinguished linguist, botanist and so-called 'father of modern missions', that a world missionary conference should be held at the Cape of Good Hope in 1810.<sup>5</sup> It was too ambitious a notion even for someone of Carey's energy and vision,<sup>6</sup> but a century later it was an idea come of age. The World Missionary Conference of 1910, held in the end in Edinburgh rather than South Africa, is widely recognized as a significant event in modern church history. This is not just because of the breadth of representation from both sending and receiving countries, although the presence for the first time at such a gathering of High-Church Anglicans, together with the Archbishop of Canterbury, should

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<sup>4</sup> John 20:21

<sup>5</sup> In a letter to Andrew Fuller of 15 May 1806 Carey called for a 'general association of all denominations of Christians from the four quarters of the world' to be held every ten years beginning in 1810. See the Preface by E.A. Payne to Carey's *Enquiry*, Didcot BMS (1961) reprinted 1991, p26.

<sup>6</sup> See Max Warren, *The Missionary Movement from Britain in Modern History*, SCM London 1965, p146.



not be overlooked. In fact 'Edinburgh 1910' can be seen as a watershed occasion: looking in one direction back to the enormous achievements, for all its many flaws, of the nineteenth-century missionary movement ('the Great Century' as K.S. Latourette characterized it); and in the other looking forward to some of the major concerns of the church in the century ahead.

The Edinburgh Conference met to consider eight reports, four of which dealt with aspects of mission abroad, and four of which concerned the 'Home Base' and the interests of the various missionary societies and boards. Temple Gairdner in his account of the Conference suggests that the most remarkable of these reports was that presented by the Scottish theologian, Professor David S. Cairns on 'The Missionary Message in Relation to the Non-Christian Religions'.<sup>7</sup> The report concludes with an anticipation of the conquest of the five great religions<sup>8</sup> by Christianity, in militaristic imagery typical of an earlier generation of mission thinking and characterized by E.C. Dewick as 'war-attitudes'.<sup>9</sup> In the body of the report, however, another attitude is revealed, typified by the words 'fulfil' and 'fulfilment' which regularly recurred in the two hundred responses from the field in reply to the questions of the Commission chaired by Cairns.

The name most commonly associated with this fulfilment theology of religions is that of another Scot, John Nicol Farquhar, the subject of Eric Sharpe's magisterial study, *Not to Destroy but to Fulfil*.<sup>10</sup> Elsewhere

<sup>7</sup> W.H.T. Gairdner, *'Edinburgh 1910': An Account and Interpretation of the World Missionary Conference*, Oliphant, Anderson & Ferrier, Edinburgh 1910, p134; further references will be to: Gairdner, *'Edinburgh 1910'*.

<sup>8</sup> That is, Animism, Chinese Religion, Japanese Religion, Islam and Hinduism; the subject of successive chapters in the Report.

<sup>9</sup> E.C. Dewick, *The Christian Attitude to Other Religions*, CUP Cambridge 1953.

<sup>10</sup> See note 5 above; the title is of course a reference to the words of Jesus in Matthew 5:17 which read in the King James Version: 'Think not that I have come to destroy the law or the prophets: I am come not to destroy but to fulfil.' Farquhar went on to apply this verse not only to Judaism but also to

Sharpe has commented that more than any other individual it was Farquhar who was responsible for creating decisive changes in Christian thinking about other faiths.<sup>11</sup> In 1903 he became the editor of the journal, *The Inquirer*, and published a series of articles under the heading 'Is Christianity the Only True Religion?' Already he was prepared to admit the 'partial truth' of other religions, although such recognition served to demonstrate the universality of Christianity. In the fourth article of the series, Farquhar concluded that:

... the belief that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, died for our sins on Calvary, produces a religion which satisfies the modern mind, and which also proves to be the fulfilment and goal of all the religions of the world, the crudest as well as the loftiest.<sup>12</sup>

The great Anglican missionary scholar, Max Warren, has suggested that a growing awareness of ancient, and possibly less crude and corrupt, tradition was a contributory factor to the more positive evaluation of the non-Christian religions during the nineteenth century, although it fitted ill with current views about evolution and progress.<sup>13</sup> He even goes so far as to suggest that this is where the roots of dialogue are to be found. This is perhaps to overstate his case, but it does serve to underline an important point, that positive appreciation begins with personal encounter.

It is relatively easy to dismiss an ideology, but *people* require a more adequate *human* response. Arguments are often abstract and while they may compel assent they do not demand a response in the same way as do human beings in all their complexity. This is particularly true for the many sincere men and women caught up in the fervour of the missionary movement out of

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other faiths.

<sup>11</sup>E.J. Sharpe, *Faith meets Faith*, SCM London 1977, p20.

<sup>12</sup>'The Inquirer', V:1 p6.

<sup>13</sup>Max Warren, *Social History and Christian Mission*, SCM London 1967, pp81-2.

deep pastoral and evangelistic concern. It is noticeable that changes of attitude are most apparent among those missionaries and others who had genuine and deep association with people of other faiths. This question of the relationship of Christian faith to other religions is regularly raised during the missionary conferences of the second half of the nineteenth century and it was in an attempt to address the issue that it formed one of the eight Reports for Edinburgh.

The context for the next phase of Christian response to other faiths was very different from that of 1910. The bitter fighting and colossal loss of life in the trenches of the Great War gave the lie to the old Liberal Protestant dream of a newly united humanity based on 'the Fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of Man'. The collapse of European domination and the undermining of the whole notion of 'Christian civilization' raised in a sharp form the question of colonial government for so much of the world's population. The colonies were governed by the European powers that had squandered so much potential and so many resources, financial, material and human; resources often drawn from their various colonies, in a wasteful war. The Western Christian Missions, so closely associated with the colonial expansion of Europe, were hard put to offer the Christian religion as the 'crown' of anything! The experience of the war exposed the shallow thinking which underlay the atmosphere of progress and development, fostered by the evolutionary thought of Darwin and others, and it triggered the neo-orthodox school of theology associated particularly with Karl Barth (1886-1968). The 'missions' application of neo-orthodox theology is most closely linked with the name of the great Dutch missiologist, Hendrik Kraemer (1888-1965), and in recent discussion he is all too readily dismissed as an uncritical follower of Barth, and a narrow 'exclusivist'. The relationship between their thought, and Kraemer's own position, is, in fact, more subtle and complex than is often allowed. I believe that Kraemer's discussion of the crucial question of continuity and discontinuity remains vital for a proper consideration of the relation of Christianity and other religions.

Through his contact with many of the leading ecumenical and missionary figures of his day, Kraemer was asked to prepare a study document for the World Missionary Conference due to be held at

Tambaram, Madras in 1938. The task was to outline the 'fundamental position of the Christian Church as a witness-bearing body in the modern world'.<sup>14</sup> The result was *The Christian Message in a Non-Christian World* in the dialectic method of Barth and Brunner. It gave powerful expression to Kraemer's basic position that in Jesus Christ, God has revealed *the Truth* for the whole of mankind, and that in the event of the incarnation God had acted in a unique and unrepeatable way. Kraemer is clear that the Christian theologian must study religion *theologically*, that is:

... in being a faithful interpreter of God's self-disclosure in Christ and thereby exercising that interpretation of religion which is implied in his primordial, undemonstrable starting-point... We are, in saying this, not invoking the right to prejudice. On the contrary, by full recognition and avowal of one's bias one is comparatively speaking the better armed against the temptations of prejudice and partiality, to which every scholar without exception is constantly exposed.<sup>15</sup>

Kraemer is alive to the possibility that for many people in the world the actual 'discontinuity' of the Christianity which is presented to them is nothing to do with the radical message of the Gospel, but rooted in the European thought and practice in which it is dressed. Missionaries are themselves frequently blind to this, but Kraemer insists that:

... the Gospel can neither be heard nor felt by taking the focal points of the Gospel as they are clearly formulated to European ears and minds, and expressing them in a tolerable fashion in an indigenous language. [The missionaries] did not see that the true appeal of the Gospel may be *heard and responded to only* by starting out from a formulation of

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<sup>14</sup> Kraemer, *The Christian Message in a Non-Christian World*, Edinburgh House Press London, 1938 (2nd Ed. 1947.) pv.

<sup>15</sup> Kraemer, *Religion and the Christian Faith*, London 1956, p52.

spiritual problems as *living* in the indigenous soul, and thus touching *existing* chords.<sup>16</sup>

Yet the spirituality represented by other faith traditions is problematic. As Kraemer summarizes his views, religion is:

A fundamental 'being in error'; a field in which we can trace God's own footsteps; noble aspiration and a tremendous capacity for creative action; and, in the light of Jesus Christ, humiliating aberration: these form the main outline of what I have been trying to say ... they are sufficient index to my views on the whole question ...<sup>17</sup>

Or, rather more succinctly, all religion is ambiguous, and requires some measure or standard by which it can be judged, not so much on the intellectual level as on the existential. Such a criterion is not to be found in Christianity as a religion, for there is no true *religion*. The only 'absolute' for Kraemer is not Christianity, but:

the Revelation of God in Jesus Christ. He has no need of our proofs. He simply reigns from the cross, even were no-one to recognize the fact.<sup>18</sup>

Kraemer was *the* protestant missiologist of the 1940s and 1950s and, with his close links with the World Council of Churches, his views were widely held. For example, WCC General Secretary, W.A. Visser't Hooft, a fellow Dutchman, held a Kraemerian position, reflected in a statement shortly before his retirement in 1966:

... it is the duty of every Christian to proclaim the divine Lordship of Jesus Christ; that this Gospel is to be addressed to

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<sup>16</sup> Kraemer, *From Missionfield to Independent Church*, London 1958, p106.

<sup>17</sup> Kraemer, *Why Christianity*, London 1962, p104.

<sup>18</sup> Kraemer, *Why Christianity*, p116.

every man, whatever his religious or cultural background may be; that it is to be given in its purest form, that is, in accordance with the biblical witness and unmixed with extraneous or cultural elements.<sup>19</sup>

Visser't Hooft's retirement coincided with the beginnings of what Kenneth Cragg has called 'conscious pluralism',<sup>20</sup> that is, a new awareness of the plurality of world-wide religious experience, and a new willingness to take it seriously. Assertion of the uniqueness of the Christian revelation and the supremacy of Christ in this new climate seemed arrogant and intolerant, and views like those of Kraemer and Visser't Hooft were dismissed as such.

The years immediately following the Second World War saw the hope of a united world apparently realized in the formation of the United Nations in 1945 and the creation of the World Council of Churches in 1948. There was also the recognition that scientific development might provide a common culture that would bridge the divide of continent, language and tradition. However, it was not just the fascist era that was at an end, all imperialisms had been undermined by the events of the previous twenty years and so too had movements like Christianity which seemed in the eyes of many to be too closely aligned with the Western colonial powers.

The early 1960s saw a number of books by senior missionary figures such as Max Warren and Stephen Neill and this flurry of activity suggests something of the sharpness of the questions being faced by Christian missions in this period.<sup>21</sup> In his careful re-examination of the issue the Baptist mission historian, Dr Brian Stanley, has noted that from the late Sixties onwards the debate took place within 'an increasingly polarized and

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<sup>19</sup> In an interview given to *Christianity Today* and quoted by J.D. Douglas, *New International Dictionary of the Christian Church*, p1021.

<sup>20</sup> Cragg, *The Christian and Other Religion*, Mowbrays Oxford 1977, p7.

<sup>21</sup> See Warren, *The Missionary Movement from Britain in Modern History*, 1965 and *Social History and Christian Mission*, 1967; Neill, *A History of Christian Missions*, 1964, and *Colonialism and Christian Missions*, 1966.

highly charged ideological context'.<sup>22</sup> It is perhaps not surprising to note that the parallel debate about the relationship of Christianity to other faiths became detached from its earlier missiological context in this period, and transferred to university faculties and departments increasingly labelled 'Religious Studies', rather than 'Theology'. This indicated an appropriate academic independence of any church or religious institution, although many academic staff have remained committed believers of one sort or another.

Within this setting the dominant theory of inter-faith relationships over the past twenty-five years or more has been that usually described as 'pluralism', and the leading advocate of a pluralist theology of religions since the publication of his *God and the Universe of Faiths*<sup>23</sup> has been Professor John Hick of Birmingham. It was in this book that he first advocated what he labelled a 'Copernican Revolution' in the Christian understanding of the relationship between Christianity and other faith systems. This meant an initial movement from a Christocentric view of the 'universe of faiths' to a theocentric model, but he has since developed his theory further to take account of the non-theistic belief systems of Advaita Vedanta and Mahayana Buddhism among others. His theology is built on the twin foundations of a soteriological approach to religion, and an epistemology borrowed and adapted from Kant and Wittgenstein. The soteriological foundation for much of Hick's thinking on this issue is clearly stated in *God and the Universe of Faiths*, where he argues that the Christian understanding of God with its teaching on the universality of divine love must:

exclude the idea that salvation occurs only in one strand of human history, which is limited in time to the last nineteen

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<sup>22</sup> Stanley, *The Bible and the Flag - Protestant Missions and British imperialism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries*, Apollon/IVP Leicester 1990, p19.

<sup>23</sup> Hick, *God and the Universe of Faiths*, Rev. Ed. Fount London 1977; 2nd Ed. MacMillan London, 1993.

centuries and in space virtually to the western hemisphere. If God's love is universal in scope, he cannot thus have restricted his saving encounter with humanity. If God is the God of the whole world, we must presume that the whole religious life of mankind is part of a continuous and universal human relationship to him.<sup>24</sup>

Here we are presented with the old problem of 'the scandal of particularity'. Hick wonders how a God of love who seeks to save all humankind apparently ordains that only a small minority can in fact receive this salvation.<sup>25</sup>

In response to this issue, many Christian thinkers have adopted what has been termed an 'inclusivist' approach rather than followed Hick along the path to pluralism. Recognizing the reality of the divine life in many cultures and religions, Catholic thinkers especially have sought to include such people by means of theories such as 'anonymous Christians' (Rahner) and 'ordinary and extraordinary salvation' (Küng). Hick sees all this in terms of an astronomical analogy. The old (exclusivist) theology is like the Ptolemaic astronomy, struggling to match up to the new awareness of reality. Theories such as those of Rahner and Küng are like the complex epicycles added by ingenious astronomers to retain a geocentric astronomy. In the end the simpler explanation of Copernicus cut through the knots in which the old approach had tied itself. This is what Hick's interpretation of religion seeks to do.

Hick notes that many people in the world experience places, people and situations as 'religious', often articulated as 'living in the presence of the unseen God'.<sup>26</sup> This is to 'experience-as' within situations which are often ambiguous and capable of alternative explanation, and thus we are left with considerable freedom and responsibility in our response to such experience. Even though only one interpretation may be correct, in the sense of

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<sup>24</sup> Hick, *Universe of Faiths*, pp100-1.

<sup>25</sup> Hick, *Universe of Faiths*, pp122f.

<sup>26</sup> Hick, *Problems of Religious Pluralism*, London 1985, p22.



appropriate to actuality, its true character does not force itself upon us, and the vindication of our cognitive choices will only be discovered in the future unfolding of reality. It is this process which Hick labels 'eschatological verification'. He argues strongly for the right of the religious believer to claim that such religious response to experience, whether one's own or that of the saints, is as valid as a naturalistic or non-transcendent interpretation of reality. And religious language must be viewed as an attempt to articulate in some sense 'how things are': it is 'realistic'. Hick goes on to argue:

Thus if in the existing situation of theoretic ambiguity a person experiences life religiously, or participates in a community whose life is based on this mode of experience, he or she is rationally entitled to trust that experience and to proceed to believe and to live on the basis of it.<sup>27</sup>

This applies equally to theistic and non-theistic belief and experience.

Hick's clear and repeated advocacy of a 'Copernican revolution' in the theology of religions has won many supporters during the last decade or more of debate, notably Paul Knitter, Alan Race, and Hick's original mentor, Wilfred Cantwell Smith. But others have opposed this sort of move on a number of grounds, one of the earliest being Duncan Forrester. Like the more recent and detailed criticism of Gavin D'Costa, Forrester begins his response by questioning the picture of the so-called 'Ptolemaic' theology which Hick presents. In fact, argues Forrester, the Christian theological tradition in relation to other faiths is much more varied than Hick would have us believe<sup>28</sup>.

Even so conservative an apologist as Michael Green is not prepared to concede that traditional doctrine required *explicit* knowledge of the person and work of Christ as essential to salvation. Rather wherever people rely on 'the Great God' to accept them irrespective of their merits, they are indeed

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<sup>27</sup> Hick, *Interpretation of Religion*, London 1989, p228.

<sup>28</sup> Forrester, 'Professor Hick and the Universe of Faiths', *SJT* 29, 1976 pp65-72.

accepted as children of Abraham, the archetypal believer.<sup>29</sup> However, Green and others who hold what is actually an 'inclusivist' position, still maintain that such salvation is through Jesus Christ. Hick's rejection of this position requires a jump in the argument. This was first noted by Duncan Forrester when he pointed to 'a quiet transition' from the rejection of 'no salvation outside the church', to the setting aside of 'salvation through Christ alone' as if the two can be directly equated. By labelling attempts at a Christocentric theology of religions as 'epicycle', Hick identifies them as identical to ecclesiocentric theologies and therefore moves on to his initial theocentric model without adequate argument.<sup>30</sup>

Hick wants at all costs to avoid the 'scandal of particularity' because for him it contains the assumption that those who do not come into direct relationship with that particular revelation will be outside the sphere of salvation. However, many of his critics not only challenge the validity of that assumption but also argue that revelation *must* take concrete and particular form if it is to reach concrete and particular human beings. Hick, of course recognizes this in his arguments about cultural conditioning, but he then goes on to suggest that all concrete and particular religious expressions of the 'Real' might be valid within their historico-cultural limitations. Anything that turns people from self-centredness to 'reality-centredness' can be viewed in this light.<sup>31</sup>

More traditional Christian theologians, such as Brian Hebblethwaite, have seen no contradiction between a unique incarnation of God in Christ, and God's will for universal salvation:

The particularity of the incarnation - the fact that if God was to come to us in person it would have to be at a particular time and place in history - certainly involves seeing the whole creation and the whole of human history pivoting upon a brief

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<sup>29</sup> Green, *The Truth of God Incarnate*, London 1977, pp118-9.

<sup>30</sup> Forrester, *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 29 1976, p68.

<sup>31</sup> See the discussion in Hick's essay 'On Grading Religions' in *Problems of Religious Pluralism*, Macmillan London, 1985 pp67-87.

slice of space-time in the history of the ancient Middle East.<sup>32</sup>

Although Hick is reluctant to tie revelation too closely to the particulars of creation or history, he does argue from the particular experience of prayer and worship, especially within the mystical strands of the various religious traditions, that there is in fact an underlying unity which supports his position. Here he builds too much on slender grounds and one is often forced to wonder whether he would ever actually admit to the possibility of contradictory truth-claims. He always seems to believe that in the end all such differences are due to history or geography or culture and D'Costa makes a telling point in his comment that Hick 'tends to make truth a function of birth'.<sup>33</sup> Gillis argues that Hick *expects* to find areas of agreement, the process of dialogue is entered with this specific purpose, and when this is so it may be difficult to appreciate a lack of convergence of thought when it is encountered.<sup>34</sup>

In response to his critics Hick has moved further and tried to clarify his position (Gavin D'Costa suggests he is developing his own epicycle!). His redrawn map of the universe of faiths is no longer theocentric but soteriocentric. In other words, he has recognized that his earlier version of the theory was still too dominated by the Judaeo-Christian theistic tradition in which he stands and failed to do sufficient justice to the non-theistic paths to salvation-liberation. D'Costa suggests the label 'transcendental agnosticism' for this new position, in which Hick argues that 'the Real' can be equally validly represented in human cultures by theistic or non-theistic models. The divine is experienced and represented in both personal and impersonal forms according to cultural factors and traditions.

This still leaves a number of areas of difficulty, particularly the question as to how we can know whether there is *any* correspondence between the 'Real' and any particular personae or impersonae of it. At this point surely we reach the stage of total scepticism and may begin to wonder

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<sup>32</sup> Hebblethwaite in Green (Ed), *The Truth of God Incarnate*, p104.

<sup>33</sup> D'Costa, *Theology and Religious Pluralism*, Oxford 1986, p41.

<sup>34</sup> Gillis, *A Question of Final Belief*, London 1989, p163.

whether Feuerbach was correct in his suggestion that all talk of the divine is nothing more than human projection onto a universal screen.<sup>35</sup>

Secondly, is not a soteriological position equally dependent on some form of specific doctrine to give it positive content? Does not the notion of salvation-liberation, however it may be conceived, actually presuppose something about the nature of 'the Real'? Hick may have removed both Christ and the Christian Father from the centre of his map, but we may still detect traces of the One who saves, and Hick must address the question of whom he saves, how he saves and what form/s such salvation might take.<sup>36</sup>

This preliminary discussion has highlighted some of the main issues in the debate during the twentieth century. It has shown just how much the preoccupations of the Western Church and Western culture as a whole have dominated the whole pattern of relationships between Christianity and other faiths, and how the context of the discussion has shifted from an internal debate as to the basis and method of the Christian mission to the secular question as to the relative value of the various religious traditions.

## Part Two – Christology in a Plural World

In Part One of this lecture I briefly outlined the shape of the debate about Christian relationships with people of other faiths against the background of, predominantly European, Protestant thinking since the World Missionary Conference of Edinburgh 1910. I will now focus more particularly on Christology and Inter-Faith Relations. Central to much of the literature briefly reviewed above is a recognition that the place of Jesus Christ is of vital importance in this debate. As John Robinson has written:

The fundamental affirmation of Christianity is that in Jesus is to be seen the clue to the mystery of the Christ - of what the

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<sup>35</sup> Byrne makes the same point in his article, 'John Hick's Philosophy of World Religions', *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 35 1982, pp289-301.

<sup>36</sup> Gillis concurs, *A Question of Final Belief*, p171.

divine process is about and what the meaning of human existence is.<sup>37</sup>

In the encounter with Jesus, Christians claim that we are meeting the holy, the numinous is present and confronts us and challenges us to make an existential choice. It calls us to respond, making an affirmation about what we believe the universe to be about and the place of human life within it. Christians claim to have seen in Jesus not only the meaning of true human existence, but also the key to the way the world is. Such affirmations lie close to the heart of Christian relationships with people of other faiths. Christology is not in the end only about the person and work of Jesus Christ: it is actually an expression of fundamental Christian insights into the nature of God and the world. These insights have usually been expressed in the language of incarnation in an attempt to convey this 'double' dimension in the life and work of Jesus.

The classical Christologies, in responding to this encounter with the divine in Christ have worked 'from above', that is they began with what was known, or rather believed, about God and tried to relate that to the human situation as then understood. Most modern writers now reject the possibility of starting 'from above' in order to decide how the divine became human; rather it is a question of starting 'from below' to see how this particular human being may be spoken of as divine. Contemporary people regard this world as real in a sense which Hellenistic thought did not allow, and therefore traditional Christologies always have a docetic feel about them in the modern age. For the early Fathers, Christ was human if he had what they believed to be the constituents of other human beings. In modern thought it is not enough to 'possess' the correct components, one must also be the product of the processes of the world and its nexus of relationships. Without this Christ may be *like* us, but not one *of* us - 'a genuine man can only come out of the process and not into it'.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> J.A.T Robinson, *The Human Face of God*, SCM London 1973, p10.

<sup>38</sup> Robinson, *Human Face*, p37.

Such discussion brings us to the heart of the Christological issue, recognizing the tension that Christianity both affirms the identity and continuity of Jesus with the rest of humanity, but at the same time affirms difference and discontinuity. Stephen Sykes remarks that 'Christology cannot function at all unless some statements are made which indicate a *special* activity of God in Christ',<sup>39</sup> but such activity cannot remove Christ from the human realm, for if it did the human condition would remain unchanged. Therefore:

The humanity of Christ, however conceived, contains elements of continuity with all other human beings. But I can see no a priori reason for supposing that the humanity of Christ may not itself contain genuine elements of novelty; and it these novel elements which provide us with the factual reasons for embarking upon Christology at all.<sup>40</sup>

In other words, whatever we may say about the common humanity of Jesus, it is his distinctiveness which leads us to talk of his divinity. The danger of such a position is that it may lead to some form of Antiochene division in which the various sayings and events of Jesus' life are attributed to his humanity, where we identify with them, or to his divinity where we see them as novel, leading to a 'triple-decker' model of God, Christ and Jesus, descending from divinity to humanity.

Among others, Maurice Wiles and John Hick suggest that the problem lies in a confusion of language when we attempt to speak of incarnation of the divine in human life. Language about 'pre-existence', for example, does not give expression to an hypothesis about the ontological relationship of the divine and human in Jesus Christ, but is a poetic image designed to evoke the response of faith. In other words we are dealing with the language of myth. Wiles argues:

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<sup>39</sup> S.W. Sykes, 'The theology of the humanity of Christ' in Sykes & Clayton (ed), *Christ, Faith and History*, CUP 1972 pp59f.

<sup>40</sup> Sykes, *The theology of the humanity of Christ*, p65.

There are many things to be said which give grounds for seeing the life and death of Jesus as part of the human story which is of unique significance in relation to seeing the human story as a whole, as a true story of divine redemption at work. To ask for some further ontological justification of that vision would be to succumb to the category mistake of confusing the human historical story with the divine mythological story.<sup>41</sup>

But there must be *some* connection between the human history and the divine myth for the story of Jesus to possess this 'unique significance'. As Robinson notes, 'that of which the interpretation is the interpretation must have sufficient validity in the man-language series if the God-talk is to be credible'.<sup>42</sup> This connection between 'man-language' and 'God-talk' is linked to the experience of redemption. In John Knox's words: 'The uniqueness of Jesus was the absoluteness of what God did in him'.<sup>43</sup> It is not, as some theories of atonement would have it, that God is so moved by the death of Jesus that he is persuaded to avert his wrath, but that God is personally involved in this death as an expression of his limitless love for his creation.

John Hick affirms this, not in the traditional language of 'substance', but in terms of Jesus' and God's common *agapé*. Jesus was conscious that 'in this *agapé* he was at one with God himself, so that in his actions God's *agapé* was enacting itself.'<sup>44</sup> Thus, for Hick, Christological language is essentially functional, and as such more truly reflects the Hebraic thought forms of the first Christian communities. Similarly Robinson suggests that Christ *does* what God *does* and therefore he *was* 'God for us'.<sup>45</sup> In such views, Jesus shares with the rest of humanity a continuity of being;

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<sup>41</sup> Wiles, 'Does christology rest on a mistake?', in Sykes & Clayton (ed) *Christ, Faith and History*, p11.

<sup>42</sup> Robinson, *Human Face*, p119.

<sup>43</sup> J. Knox, *The Death of Christ*, Collins, London 1959 p125.

<sup>44</sup> J. Hick, *God and the Universe of Faiths*, p163.

<sup>45</sup> Robinson, *Human Face*, p179.

ontologically he is human. But he shares with God a continuity of event: functionally he is divine.

Such a scheme commends itself for a number of reasons. It takes seriously contemporary understandings of what it means to be human, yet at the same time takes seriously the biblical witness that in the events of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, people were confronted with the activity of God himself. If the concept of divine immanence is given its due weight, through the processes of the world the life of Jesus emerges as the fulfilment of the divine purpose and initiative: less incarnation from without, more irruption from within, equally compatible with the notion that the 'Word became flesh'. This is particularly reflected in the Johannine tradition with its emphasis on unity of will and purpose between the Father and the Son, which C.F.D. Moule characterizes, in somewhat Rahnerian language, as 'perfection of response'. He suggests that here lies the resolution of the paradox of Jesus' continuity and discontinuity. In him we see:

a perfection such that the result is seen and experienced as a new and creative event, rather than merely a better example than anything that had gone before.<sup>46</sup>

But does a functional view take sufficiently seriously the link between person and work, being and function? Is it not the case that what a person *does* reveals what they *are*, in their very being? John Macquarrie makes the point:

The question is really whether a human being can be reduced to a collection of roles or functions, or whether there is not also a person who is the centre and subject of these roles or functions.<sup>47</sup>

Moreover, is a merely functional view adequate to the Christian affirmation that what happens in 'the Christ event' is not simply something

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<sup>46</sup> Moule, 'The manhood of Jesus in the New Testament', in Sykes and Clayton (ed), *Christ, Faith and History*, p110.

<sup>47</sup> Macquarrie, *Jesus Christ in Modern Thought*, SCM London 1990, p7.



new in human experience, but also in the experience of God himself? As H.D. Lewis expresses it, God 'had the experiences of Jesus, in fully human form, had them and yet without ceasing to be God, infinite in wisdom and majesty'.<sup>48</sup> In the end, the manner of Jesus' living (and his dying and rising) forces us to ask questions about his being:

... because Jesus is constrained by the coming rule of God and talks about it in his parables, while at the same time his life is itself a striking parable of it, we cannot avoid the question: 'who is he?'<sup>49</sup>

Wolfhart Pannenberg and Karl Rahner both recognize that Christology must start 'from below', but this does not for them restrict the theological enterprise to functional statements only. Pannenberg argues for the 'revelational presence' of God in Christ, recognizing that revelation, properly understood, is never simply propositional, but is indeed self-disclosure. The Revealer and what is revealed are identical, the medium is not alien to God and therefore: 'Jesus belongs to the definition of God, thus to his divinity, to his essence'.<sup>50</sup> Rahner comments that 'the "function" of Jesus reveals his "essence"'.<sup>51</sup> Likewise Edward Schillebeeckx:

... if there is a unique universality in Jesus, it must lie in Jesus' actual being-as-man, not behind or above it. The form of God's revelation is the man Jesus. Thus God's-being-God will be disclosed in Jesus being-as-man.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> H.D. Lewis, *Jesus in the Faith of Christians*, Macmillan London 1981, p73.

<sup>49</sup> E. Schillebeeckx, *A Schillebeeckx Reader*, T & T Clark Edinburgh 1986, p143.

<sup>50</sup> Pannenberg, *Jesus - God and Man*, London 1968, p130.

<sup>51</sup> Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, London 1978, p251.

<sup>52</sup> Schillebeeckx, *Jesus*, London 1979, p597.

For both Pannenberg and Rahner this is made explicit in the events of the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus (Schillebeeckx finds all this rather more ambiguous<sup>53</sup>). In the cross, Jesus declares his ultimate allegiance to his mission and to the God who calls him to it, and in the resurrection God declares his allegiance to the mission and work of Jesus. The resurrection is the vindication of the whole of Jesus' work and activity and 'the light which falls back on the pre-Easter Jesus from the resurrection involves his person as a whole'.<sup>54</sup> Rahner points out a further aspect of the Easter tradition in that:

according to the New Testament the experience of the resurrection contributed to the *content* of the interpretation of the essence of the person and work of Jesus, and was not merely the divine confirmation of a knowledge already clearly expressed by Jesus before the resurrection.<sup>55</sup>

Pannenberg puts it similarly when he comments that Jesus 'was not only unrecognizable before Easter, but he would not have been who he was without the Easter event'.<sup>56</sup> He does acknowledge that the Christian tradition also links the revelation of Jesus' identity with God to other key events such as the transfiguration, the baptism and his birth, but all of these Pannenberg attributes to what he terms the 'retroactive significance' of the resurrection which perspective reveals that Jesus was previously one with God, and indeed if he reveals the divine essence, must carry some notion of 'pre-existence'.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> For Macquarrie this is his weak point, cf *Jesus Christ in Modern Thought*, pp310-311.

<sup>54</sup> Pannenberg, *Jesus - God and Man*, p141.

<sup>55</sup> Rahner, *Foundations*, p279.

<sup>56</sup> Pannenberg, *Jesus - God and Man*, p137; cf Schillebeeckx, *Jesus* p510: 'He is not appointed, not *constituted*, "Son of God" at the resurrection, but not until then did it appear.'

<sup>57</sup> Pannenberg, *Jesus - God and Man*, p150,

Such an approach has important implications for our understanding of the whole notion of revelation, and for Christian relationships with people of other faiths. Schillebeeckx comments:

In one way or another God's transcendent, creative activity will come to expression in our world; otherwise there would be no ground, no occasion even, for justifying our talk of God's action in our history.<sup>58</sup>

Christology therefore shapes our understanding, not simply of the person and work of Jesus but of human nature and the nature of the world as a whole:

Only if there is *in all human beings* a possibility for transcendence and a capacity for God, can there be such a possibility and capacity in the man Jesus; and only if God makes himself present and known in and through creation generally can there be a particular point at which he is present and known in a signal way.<sup>59</sup>

This echoes the sort of Christology advocated by Kenneth Cragg where he talks of the process of prophecy, and indeed all revelation, as 'incarnational' in character. If God's self-disclosure is not 'relatively present everywhere',<sup>60</sup> then it would not be the sort of world in which God's absolute revelation in Christ could take place. The significance of this ultimate self-disclosure is that it reveals 'new and glorious criteria' by which we may understand the true nature of God. On the basis of God's definitive self-disclosure in Christ we may positively expect to encounter this God in all people, all places and all times.

This sort of Christology argues that two things are revealed in the

<sup>58</sup> Schillebeeckx, *Jesus*, p627.

<sup>59</sup> Macquarrie, *Jesus Christ in Modern Thought*, p381.

<sup>60</sup> Cragg, 'Islam and Incarnation', in *Truth and Dialogue* (ed Hick), London 1974, p134.

incarnation: the true nature of God and the true nature of humanity. God is a God who can express himself in the humanity of Jesus of Nazareth, *and* humanity is so constituted as to allow such divine self-expression. The *imago dei* is thus given a new lease of life through such a Christological approach. If we then ask the question, 'what makes *this* revelation absolute and others relative?', Pannenberg, Rahner, Newbigin and Cragg all point us to the resurrection.

### **Part Three – Christ, Mission and a Plural World**

In sum, the implications of all this are that for Christian theology the question of truth has only one measure and that is Jesus Christ. It is not possible to remove the figure of Christ from the centre of our theological universe, whether we attempt to replace him with the 'Christian Father God' or whether we select the more neutral 'soteriocentric' approach. I suggest that one of the problems in this whole debate is that we simply have not been Christological enough. The Christian starting-point, the *a priori* if you like, is a Christlike God. But Christians throughout history have struggled to come to terms with the redefinition of our human concepts of God that the Christ event brings. We continue to attempt explanations of how this man Jesus can also conform to our preconceptions of God. To start 'from below' means that God has demonstrated in Jesus Christ who and how he is, destroying many of those preconceptions in the process. To have seen Jesus is, as the fourth evangelist correctly perceived, to have seen the Father; it is to have encountered God as God truly is, albeit within the confines of the incarnation. The man Jesus in his life, death, resurrection and exaltation, is the fundamental Christian definition of God. But the Christ event does not reveal a God who is otherwise absent from his world, rather it identifies the God who is ever-present.

As John Robinson pointed out in one of his lesser-known books,<sup>61</sup> to give up the centrality of Christ is to give up the only thing that Christianity has to offer. Christianity is Christ or it is nothing. But, as he goes on, to say

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<sup>61</sup> J.A.T Robinson, *Truth is Two-Eyed*, SCM London 1979.

that God is best *defined* by Christ is not to say that God is *confined* to Christ; indeed the whole point of the doctrine of the Trinity is to attempt to explain how the God who is revealed definitively in Christ is also the eternal Creator and the ever-present Spirit. Hence my belief that the way forward for Christian theology in the realm of inter-faith relations is to retain its Christological criterion within a Trinitarian context.

This re-affirmation of the so-called ‘scandal of particularity’ need not imply an ‘exclusivist’ soteriology. One of the confusions in the debate has been that ‘exclusivism’ has been used in two related but quite distinct ways: first, in making ‘exclusive’ claims for Christ, which I am arguing an adequately *Christian* theology must do; and secondly, in drawing conclusions about the ‘exclusion’ of certain groups from salvation, which I suggest we need not do and, if we take Christology sufficiently seriously, we should not do.

A properly Christological account is of the One who, in Barth’s splendid extension of the parable of the loving father, ‘journeys into the far country’ in search of a lost humanity.<sup>62</sup> This brings us to the heart of a missiological approach, the *Missio Dei*, the mission of the Christlike God. The measure of God’s love and commitment is nothing less than Calvary itself. The Cross not only reveals that there are no lengths to which God will not go in order to redeem a lost creation, but actualizes that salvation in time and history. Here is sufficient ground for the affirmation of the universal salvific will of God. One route from this axiom may lead to universalism, that is ultimate salvation for every creature, which begs the important question which needs more discussion than space here allows of what we really understand salvation to be. We must, however, take seriously the scriptural witness to God’s redemptive purpose as cosmic in scope.<sup>63</sup> How cosmic is a salvation from which the majority of the humanity God created to be partners in creation is to be excluded? But we need not go this far if we remain convinced, like Newbigin, for example, of the terrible possibility that

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<sup>62</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, Volume 4.1 pp157ff.

<sup>63</sup> Most famously in Romans 8:19-22, also found e.g. in Ephesians 1:10; Colossians 1:20 etc.

some will choose to remain apart from God.

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To return to our opening question, is it possible for the contemporary Christian to confess the Lordship of Jesus Christ in our religiously plural world? In the light of our discussion we have seen that this is a question which attracts a variety of responses, but we are attempting to rediscover what might be entailed in a missiological approach. Many have suggested, like Stanley Samartha, that the whole notion of mission is inappropriate in a post-colonial world: that mission, with all its imperialist overtones, is no longer an option. The best that can be expected is mutual understanding and tolerance brought about through creative reflection and sensitive dialogue. The veteran missiologist, Gerald H. Anderson, has recently noted that:

while there may be more consciousness of religious pluralism today, the churches in the West are not prepared to deal with it missiologically.<sup>64</sup>

While sensitivity and dialogue are essential to the process of inter-faith encounter, to abandon the whole notion of mission is for Christianity, as indeed for some other faith communities, to deny the essential character of the faith. Christian mission is rooted in the mission of the Triune God. David Bosch, in his magisterial analysis of the history and theology of Christian mission, has drawn attention to the emerging consensus from Catholic, Conciliar, Evangelical and Orthodox circles alike, that the Church is missionary in its very nature.<sup>65</sup> Bosch argues that the Church does not therefore possess mission: mission does not originate with the Church for mission begins with God; and the Church is not the purpose of mission for

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<sup>64</sup> G.H. Anderson, 'Theology of Religions and Missiology' in *The Good News of the Kingdom*, (ed) Van Engen, Gilliland & Pierson, New York 1993, p201.

<sup>65</sup> D.J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, Orbis Maryknoll N.Y., 1991, pp372-3.

its goal is his Kingdom. Rather the Church is the 'sacrament, sign and instrument'<sup>66</sup> of God's continuing mission in the world.

Nevertheless, authentic Christian mission will share the characteristics of that divine mission. It will be incarnational and sacrificial. The missionary Church will bear the hallmark of the crucified and risen Christ whose commission she holds.<sup>67</sup> Our relationship with people of other faiths requires the same sort of vulnerable engagement, the same grappling with the ambiguous realities of human history, culture and religious development, as we read in the gospel story. Whether the *language* of mission is still too laden with colonial associations, as Samartha and others suggest, must be seriously considered, but the *concept* lies at the heart of Christian faith.

The often neglected Johannine version of the 'Great Commission' talks of the followers of Christ being sent into the world 'as the Father sent' the Son (John 20:21). To be 'sent' by Christ as he was 'sent' by the Father means first of all engagement with the particularities and contingencies of human life, for the Fourth Gospel here presupposes all that has gone before in the first nineteen chapters of the Gospel, and which may be summarized in its fundamental affirmation, 'The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth'.<sup>68</sup> For Christian theologies of religion there can be no escaping the 'scandal of particularity', since the divine love constantly reaches out to humanity within the reality of the human situation. The Godhead is unafraid of the 'flesh', regardless of our own inability to come to terms with it!

To take human particularity seriously will mean a proper engagement with human history, culture and religion. Christian mission which is true to its divine nature will take on these realities through the processes of incarnation and inculturation. A missiological perspective will therefore require thorough and detailed wrestling with the history and development of religion, not simply through academic studies of texts and temples,

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<sup>66</sup> Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, pp374ff.

<sup>67</sup> See J.R.W Stott, *Christian Mission in the Modern World*, Kingsway, London 1975.

<sup>68</sup> John 1:14.

architecture and artefacts, but through engagement with *people* of faith, through immersion in culture and language and climate and geography. This is where true encounter and dialogue take place.

Like the Judaism that gave it birth, Christianity is an historical religion, and not simply in the sense in which all religions are historical, that is, as the products of the social and cultural life of particular people in a particular place and a particular time. Christianity is an historical religion in the sense that certain historical events are given particular value and weight. For Christian theology in these events, or rather in *the Christ event*, is to be found the clue to the meaning of all history. This, of course, builds on the Jewish tradition that history has purpose and meaning and that history is the sphere of the divine outworking of such purpose, but with the added points that in *this* event God is involved in a unique way - 'the Word became flesh' - thus transforming the human situation, and at the same time touching the very being of God, in a way hitherto not experienced. This engagement is understood to have universal implications and is therefore of a different order to that of the old covenant, as the opening verses of the Letter to the Hebrews suggest.<sup>69</sup>

In the Johannine model, such engagement is the pattern for all Christian mission. The risen Christ commissions his disciples, 'as the Father sent me, so I send you', embracing all that is implied by 'the Word becoming flesh', since the risen Lord is identified still by the marks of crucifixion. In missiological terms it is therefore an incarnational model, often referred to as *inculturation* or *contextualization*.<sup>70</sup> Culture is not monolithic. There have been, and continue to be, many frameworks by which human beings attempt to give shape to their experience and express the values by which they live and die. Within the major cultures of world

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<sup>69</sup> Hebrews 1:1-3.

<sup>70</sup> Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, views the former as one example of the latter (the other being liberation theology), whereas Luzbetak, *The Church and Cultures*, Orbis Maryknoll N.Y. 1988, uses them synonymously, as does Nazir-Ali in *From Everywhere to Everywhere*, who also adopts the term 'identification'.



history are numerous subcultures and cross-currents intersecting in many ways. One of the key issues for incarnational models of mission, with their emphasis on the importance of such 'local cultures', is how any of these various expressions are to remain true to the Christian faith. Michael Nazir-Ali has posed this question in terms of the relationship between the universality and the translatability of the gospel:

In order to be universal, the Gospel must be translatable. This translation, this rendering of the Gospel into the idiom of a particular culture, however, cannot be at the expense of the very universality it was supposed to promote.<sup>71</sup>

The mission of the Church will be touched by this experience, shaped by historical and cultural movements, just as Jesus himself was shaped by the history, culture and religion of his day. Such an engagement with historical process will also require ongoing reflection on the history of Christian mission and an honest recognition of the imperialisms by which true mission has been betrayed. But repenting of our history is not enough, there must also be an equally open facing-up to the realities of the economic, cultural and military powers with which 'Christian civilization' is still all too readily associated in the minds of people from the 'two-thirds world', including the new imperialism of western pluralistic theology. The Risen Christ of the Johannine Commission is the Christ identified still by the marks of crucifixion, (the 'Jesus of the Scars' of Edward Shillito's moving poem<sup>72</sup>). The recognition of particularity and contingency, which this method requires, drives the Church to confess its provisional nature, for its

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<sup>71</sup> Nazir-Ali, *From Everywhere to Everywhere*, London 1991, p34.

<sup>72</sup> Published at the end of World War I, and cited by William Temple in his *Readings in St John's Gospel*, Combined Volume, MacMillan 1968, p366. It concludes:

The other gods were strong, but Thou wast weak;  
They rode, but Thou didst stumble to a throne;  
But to our wounds only God's wounds can speak,  
And not a god has wounds, but Thou alone.

mission and the *Missio Dei* are not identical. The mission of the Church points beyond itself, not simply to the Christ-event but also to the future reign of God of which Christ is the definitive symbol and sign. The Church, says Bosch, serves the mission of God by

holding up the God-child in a ceaseless celebration of the Epiphany. In its mission, the church witnesses to the fullness of the promise of God's reign and participates in the on-going struggle between that reign and the powers of darkness and evil.<sup>73</sup>

One might argue that what is held up to the world is, in fact, the Cross and Resurrection. In the Passion the destiny of the 'God-child' is attained and the purpose of God in creation and redemption fulfilled. The scope of the mission of the church is the whole world, for that is the scope of the divine mission, but it is not a world from which God is absent: he is already actively at work through his Spirit and through all the processes of history. The Church does not move into a spiritual void.<sup>74</sup> As we affirmed in the Christological discussion above, the Christ-event does not reveal a God who is otherwise absent, but identifies the God who is ever-present. This highlights the character of the Christian confession as *witness*, it speaks of what it knows, yet points beyond itself to the reality of God-in-Christ. But there can be no final divorce between Christianity as a religion and the Christ to whom it claims to witness. The character of the Church must bear some recognizable relation to the Christ whom it confesses.

The second feature which will be clear in a church 'sent as the Father sent me' will be a serious engagement with humanity. This will, of course, reckon honestly with human spirituality in all its multi-faceted manifestations, but will not be beguiled into believing that it is only with the spiritual realm that the Kingdom of God is concerned. If the 'enfleshment' of the Logos is anything to go by, and we are arguing that for the Christian it

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<sup>73</sup> Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, p391.

<sup>74</sup> Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, p485.

is the crucial thing, then human needs and expressions of physicality, emotion and intellect are just as significant as what Western thought tends to isolate, and elevate, as the 'spiritual' - as though this could be identified and experienced apart from our physical, emotional and intellectual being.

A missiological approach to inter-faith relations will be concerned for a proper contextualization of the issues, not simply in terms of history and culture, but in a humanity accepted and understood in all its social, physical and relational depths. Nothing which truly belongs to humanity is ever finally alien to the missionary God of the Incarnation and the Passion. Even evil, sin and death are met and overcome in the cross and resurrection of Christ. In the ancient doctrine of the Church 'that which is not assumed is not redeemed'; the Gospel affirmation that the Word became 'flesh' is the assertion that in Christ all human reality has indeed been assumed, transformed and fulfilled. Here is another pointer for the Church in its engagement with the life of the world: that it is in the whole range of human experience that we should expect to find evidence of the self-giving, self-revealing God. Within the ordinariness of everyday life, in the processes of history, in the rich variety of culture and in the ambiguous complexities of the religions, the Spirit of God may be discerned. The crucial question is: by what criteria is the presence of God to be identified and discovered?

Therefore the third feature of a missiological approach to inter-faith relations will be the centrality of Christology. Christians are those who claim that God has chosen to define himself in Christ as the one in whom is found that absolute and unconditional love which is both the origin and goal of the universe. This love is revealed in its starkest form in the Cross of Christ, but it is characteristic of his whole life and ministry, and normative for the understanding of the divine nature *in toto*, even given the acceptance that the God who so *defines* himself, is not *confined* to the life, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus.

The significance of the resurrection in this pattern can scarcely be over-estimated, since it is the event by which the appropriateness of such Christian affirmations are justified. I agree with Newbigin in his understanding of the resurrection of Christ as the basis of the Christian position, the *a priori* act of faith behind which it is impossible to go. The resurrection is at once the divine 'yes' to all that Christ has said, done and

achieved, and the place at which human faith, response and obedience are awakened. To borrow Hick's terminology, the resurrection is the place of 'eschatological verification', where the ultimate nature of reality is proleptically revealed. There is no inherent reason why this should not happen in the middle of time,<sup>75</sup> rather than at the end.

The Church, however, must make this confession with due humility, an attitude which Bosch describes as 'authentically Christian',<sup>76</sup> for Christianity is a religion of grace and finds its centre in the cross. We might also add that, in the light of history, the Church has much to be humble about! As I have argued elsewhere, such 'authentic witness',<sup>77</sup> must be characterized not simply by humility of language, but find expression in matters of life and lifestyle, a 'dialogue of life' and not simply of words, in the manner of Jesus himself, who was 'recognized as Lord and Messiah through his own willingness to suffer and to die, and not by an irresistible imposition of himself on other people'.<sup>78</sup> Such an approach is not to abandon the missionary imperative, but to rediscover the true nature of mission. As Newbigin has indicated, the Church must be missionary but cannot any longer be provincial, in the sense of a solely or predominantly European movement. It must shed its culturally-bound provinciality whilst retaining the particularity which is its essence.

## Conclusion

The 'enfleshment' of the Logos as Jesus of Nazareth led in the end to the cross, and herein lies the root of the discontinuity in Christian tradition. The cross of Christ stands over against all comfortable notions of continuity. But

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<sup>75</sup> As Hans Conzelmann described Luke's presentation of the Gospel: *Die Mitte Der Zeit*, Tübingen 1953, ET *The Theology of St Luke*, London 1960.

<sup>76</sup> Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, p485.

<sup>77</sup> The fourth 'Principle of Dialogue' enunciated by the Council of Churches for Britain and Ireland, see *In Good Faith*, CCBI 1992.

<sup>78</sup> N.J. Wood (Ed), *A Baptist Perspective on Inter-Faith Dialogue*, Joppa Publications, Alcester 1992, p14.

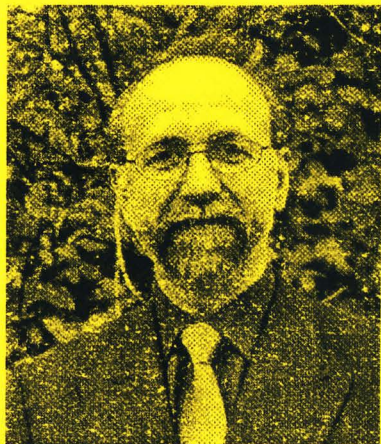
it should not be assumed that the discomfort and challenge of such a 'cruciform missiology' will be felt only by the recipients of the Christian proclamation; the first requirement is that it is deeply marked within the Christian self-consciousness. Simon Barrington-Ward, bishop of the multi-cultural and multi-religious city of Coventry, has expressed it well:

The Christian task now is to let the Cross of Christ through the action of the Spirit be planted deep within the consciousness of all faiths. But the only way to do this is to plant the Cross again in the heart of the consciousness of Christians themselves. We need a more far-reaching repentance and a self-criticism, a deeper humility, a costlier readiness for long-term loving. We need to learn what it means to take up the Cross and follow, to be 'crucified with Christ' as we are 'plunged into the life' of worlds in crisis. To such a witness (martyria) these worlds are open.<sup>79</sup>

Only in such a way, I suggest, can the contemporary Christian confess and give authentic witness to the Lordship of Jesus in our religiously plural world.

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<sup>79</sup> S. Barrington-Ward, 'Christian Faith in a Pluralist Age', in *The Weight of Glory* (ed D. Hardy & P. Sedgwick), T & T Clark, Edinburgh, 1991, p263.



The Revd Nicholas J. Wood BA (Manchester), MA (London), D.Phil (Oxford), PGCE (Warwick) graduated in Theology and Religious Studies from Manchester University and the School of Oriental and African Studies, London. After teacher training in Coventry he taught RE and Sociology in Croydon and Beckenham before training for the Baptist Ministry at Regent's Park College, Oxford. He went on to complete his doctoral research on the theme of the present lecture. He was minister of South Oxford Baptist Church and then jointly minister of Eynsham Baptist Church and Director of MTh Studies at Regent's Park College. Since summer 2000 he has been Fellow and Tutor in Religion and Culture at Regent's Park College and Director of the Centre for the Study of Christianity and Culture. He is Chair of the Joppa Group, the Baptist group for Christian witness in a multi-faith society, and contributed to and edited the Joppa publication 'A Baptist Perspective on Inter-Faith Dialogue' (1992). He contributed a chapter to the current Regent's Study Guide 'Faith in the Centre' (ed P.S. Fiddes, 2001). He has represented the Baptist Union of Great Britain on the Churches' Commission for Inter-Faith Relations and teaches the Study of Religion, Theology of Mission and Inter-Faith relations for Regent's Park College, Oxford University, Oxford Brookes University, and Oxford Centre for Youth Ministry.