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Contents

Editorial: Christianity and world religions

The Christian and Other Religions: The Biblical Evidence

Christopher J. H. Wright

Christianity and other religions: a review of some recent discussion

Dewi Arwel Hughes

Dialectical ministry: Christian life and mission in the multi-faith situation

Christopher Lamb

Book Reviews

David Wenham, "Editorial: Christianity and World Religions," *Themelios: Volume 9, No. 2, January 1984* (1984): 3–4.

Editorial: Christianity and World Religions

What should be the Christian's attitude to the world's religions? That is the question addressed in the three main articles of this *Themelios*. A hundred years ago most Christians would have subscribed to the view that non-Christian religions are demonic and that their adherents are destined for hell. The Christian's responsibility was seen therefore as bringing the light of the gospel to the heathen and seeking to rescue them from their darkness. Today many Christians see things differently: they believe that there is truth in all religions and that there are different ways to God. The Christian may therefore wish to share his understanding of God with others, and certainly should seek to show God's love in the world through social action and concern; but the Christian has no right or need to seek to convert people from other religions to Christianity.

Various things have led to the rise of this new Christian view of religions: increased international travel and communication, the growth of religious studies (as distinct from Christian theology) as a major academic discipline in the 'Christian' west, the decline of the political power of old colonial countries such as Britain and the rise of non-Christian power-blocks, and the immigration into the west of non-Christian peoples have all helped to break down the old religious insularity of many Christians in the west. We know today much more than we used to about other religions; we are aware of the sophistication of non-Christian religious systems; we are conscious of points of similarity between Christianity and other religions and of the extraordinary religious piety of some non-Christian people—famous people like Mahatma Gandhi and ordinary people, whose faithfulness to their religion puts many Christians to shame. We are also embarrassed by the failings of our so-called Christian culture. All these things mean that it is far more difficult than it was for Christians glibly, even arrogantly, to assert the superiority of Christianity and to dismiss other religions as evil.

But another quite different factor that has contributed to the change in Christian attitudes to other religions has been the weakening within the Christian church of fundamental Christian convictions. Thanks to negative biblical criticism and to the pressures of secular thinking in the west, western Christians over the past century have grown uncertain of their own faith—uncertain about Jesus, uncertain about the Bible, and particularly uncertain about the reality of judgment. Such uncertainty could not but produce a change in Christian attitudes to other religions. There is clearly no possibility of proclaiming the exclusive superiority of Christianity as the truth of God or the way of salvation, given such uncertainty, and it is not surprising that some Christians have been exploring the idea that all religions are differing and equally valid expressions of man's religious quest.

But if we have correctly identified some of the factors that have led to the new 'ecumenical' view of religions, what are we to make of that view? On the one hand, any Christian should welcome the replacement of the old imperialistic and simplistic dismissal of non-Christian religions by a more respectful and sympathetic attitude. It is right that Christians should take seriously the beliefs of their non-Christian neighbours, and there is every reason why Christians, who have often in the past devoted themselves to the study of the non-Christian philosophies of ancient Greece and Rome, should study the non-Christian religions of today's world. It is right that Christians should recognize and respect the truth preserved in other religions and the real good done in the world by non-Christians, and that Christians should be humble about the failings of Christians and of the Christian church. It may indeed be true that non-Christian religious systems are demonic in some senses—we should beware of romanticizing non-Christian religions and of minimizing the darkness that is a feature of much non-Christian religious practice—but we must recognize too that the secular society of the so-called Christian west is often equally dark and demonic, and so (sadly) are some parts of the Christian church.

But, although humility and respect towards people of other faiths should characterize Christians, the notion that Christians can recognize other faiths as valid alternatives to the way of Christ cannot be accepted. Such a view cannot be squared with the teaching and attitudes of Jesus: he quite clearly believed in divine judgment, not least on the religious of his day, and the good news he brought was not that God is tolerant to all, whatever their beliefs or attitudes—would that in any case really be good news?—but rather that God in his love has provided a way out of judgment and into life for those who will receive it. (John 3:16 accurately sums the situation up.) The excitement and also the urgency of Jesus' proclamation arose from his offer of forgiveness and life to those living in the shadow of death: people needed to hear and to believe the good news. The same urgency and excitement characterized the life of the early church: they knew that they had good news to pass on, which the world—the religious and the irreligious—badly needed to hear. The news was not that they had a better religion to offer, but that God had done something through Jesus which was of decisive importance for all men and which all men needed to hear and respond to.

Given the attitude of Jesus and the apostles, it is hard to see how the view that the way to life is broad enough to embrace all religions has a real claim to being Christian. We today may find the notion of God judging the heathen a difficult one, though the 'lostness' of our world is obvious enough. We may believe that there is room for uncertainty about whether any who have not heard the gospel may be saved. We may be sure of the justice and mercy of God. But we must beware of reshaping our doctrine or ethics to what we in the secular twentieth century find acceptable. The response of Jesus and the early church to the 'difficulty' of judgment was not to reject the doctrine, nor to hope that the heathen would somehow be all right, but it was to be urgent in preaching the gospel of salvation.

That should be the response of all Christians who, despite the questionings of the biblical critics and the scepticism of our secular age, believe and know in experience that the good news of Jesus is still the truth of God and the way to life—for individuals and for the world. We should indeed be respectful and humble in our attitude to other religions; but, like the patient who has found the cure to a deadly disease, we should want to pass on the news of the cure to other sufferers. We must not be lulled by our

theological studies or by anything else into comfortable but deadly apathy towards those who are without Christ; we must be unswerving in our commitment to passing on the good news of Christ as the light of the world.¹

Editorial notes

We welcome two new journals that may be of interest to theological students. *The Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology* is produced jointly by the Scottish Evangelical Theological Society and the Scottish Evangelical Research Trust, and is edited by Dr Nigel Cameron. The first issue includes articles by Derek Kidner on 'Retribution and Punishment in the Old Testament', by David Torrance on 'The Word of God in Worship', and by William Still on 'The Pastor'. It costs £2 and may be ordered from Rutherford House, 17 Claremont Park, Edinburgh, Scotland EH6 7PJ. The first issue of the *Journal of the Irish Study Centre* includes articles on 'C. S. Lewis and the Literary Scene' by Harry Blamires, on 'Religion and Politics in Contemporary Ireland' by David Hempton, and on 'The Myth of Darwin's Metaphor' by David Livingstone. It costs £1.50 + postage, and may be ordered from the Irish Christian Study Centre, 9 Stranmillis Rd., Belfast, Northern Ireland BT9 5AF.

¹ *Thrēskeia* in Jas. 1:26f. refers to outward practice, not systems of belief or ritual. The nearest to our modern use of the term is in Acts 26:5 where Paul uses it of his whole background in Judaism.

The Christian and Other Religions: the Biblical Evidence

Christopher J. H. Wright

Dr Wright has written a book on this subject entitled *The Uniqueness of Jesus* in Marshall's *Thinking Clearly* series.

[p.40]

The student of comparative religion who turns to the Bible for guidance meets his first discouragement in the fact that 'religion' is not really a biblical word at all.¹ The Bible is concerned, not with religious systems as such, but with man in his life on earth before God. All that man does, therefore, in every sphere of life, including that which he calls 'religious', is judged in the light of his response to the Creator-Redeemer God who is axiomatic to the whole sweep of Scripture. And this searching scrutiny is directed, as we shall see, as much at the religious behaviour of those who, by God's grace, are known as God's people as at the rest of mankind. We must begin our survey of the material, however, where the Bible itself begins—before that crucial distinction had arisen.

A. THE OLD TESTAMENT

1. Creation and fall

The creation narratives present us with mankind as a whole, represented in and by Adam—the generic name for man—made in the image of God and placed in the midst of the earth, there to live before God. The whole human race, therefore, has the capacity of being addressed by God and of making response to him. Man is the creature who is aware of his accountability to God. At this point there is no question of 'religion' or 'religions', as though they were something separate from man himself. Man responds to God in the totality of life within God's creation.

A man without 'religion' is a contradiction in itself. In his 'religion' man gives account of his relation to God. His religion is reaction upon the (real or pretended) revelation of God. Man is 'incurably religious' because his relation to God belongs to the very essence of man himself. Man is only man as man before God.²

[p.5]

¹ *Thrēskeia* in Jas. 1:26f. refers to outward practice, not systems of belief or ritual. The nearest to our modern use of the term is in Acts 26:5 where Paul uses it of his whole background in Judaism.

² J. Blauw, 'The Biblical view of Man in his Religion', in G. H. Anderson (ed.), *The Theology of the Christian Mission* (London: SCM, 1961), p. 32.

But the same narratives also present us with mankind fallen and living in rebellion against God. So the whole human race also lives in a state of flight from God hiding from the very God on whom we depend and to whom we are inescapably answerable.

This divided nature is a fundamental point in our thinking about man and his religion. As the image of God, man still reflects his Creator, responds to him, recognizes his hand in creation and, along with the rest of the animal creation, looks to the hand of God for the very supports of life itself (Ps. 104:27ff.). God is involved in the whole life of man, for man is human only through his relationship to God. Man, therefore, cannot utterly remove God from himself without ceasing to be human. This fact about man is prior to any specifics of 'religious' belief or practice. Our fellow human being is first, foremost and essentially one in the image of God, and only secondarily a Hindu, Muslim or secular pagan. So, inasmuch as his religion is part of his humanity, whenever we meet one whom we call 'an adherent of another religion', we meet someone who, in his religion as in all else, has some relationship to the Creator God, a relationship within which he is addressable and accountable.

Nevertheless, we have to add at once that his relationship has been corrupted by sin so that in his religion, again as in all else, man lives in a state of rebellion and disobedience. Indeed, if religion is 'man giving account of his relation to God', it will be in the religious dimension of human life that we would expect to find the clearest evidence of the radical fracture of that relationship. If the immediate response of the fallen Adam in us is to hide from the presence of the living God, what more effective way could there be than through religious activity which gives us the illusion of having met and satisfied him? 'Even his religiosity is a subtle escape from the God he is afraid and ashamed to meet.'³ The fallen duplicity of man is that he simultaneously seeks after God his Maker and flees from God his Judge. Man's religions, therefore, simultaneously manifest both these human tendencies. This is what makes a simplistic verdict on other religions—whether blandly positive or wholly negative—so unsatisfactory and, indeed, unbiblical.

Nor should we fail to see in this confusion and ambiguity the fingerprints of Satan himself. The strategy of the serpent was not so much to draw man into conscious, deliberate rebellion against God by implanting totally alien desires, but rather to corrupt and pervert through doubt and disobedience a desire which was legitimate in itself. After all, what is more natural than for man to wish to be like God? Is it not the proper function and ambition of the image of God to be like the one who created him in his own image? The satanic delusion lay in the desire to be as God, 'the temptation of man to bring God and himself to a common denominator'.⁴ This satanic element in man's fallen condition and continuing religious quest is seen very clearly in the religious philosophies of the east and in western Platonism in which no ultimate distinction is retained between the human and the divine, between creation and the Creator. The obliteration of this distinction has enormous implications. It reduces the personhood of God to something inferior to some higher ultimate reality: deity and deities appear in the sullied image of fallen man. And it reduces man's concern for his proper God-given role—namely responsible life as a steward in the environment of this earth. Both arise from man's attempt to realize his own

³ J. R. W. Stott, *Christian Mission in the Modern World* (London: Falcon, 1975), p. 69.

⁴ J. Blauw, *op. cit.*, p. 33.

pretended divinity—the original, characteristically ‘serpentine’ temptations⁵—and both have socially detrimental effects on man’s life: ‘now the humanity of man is endangered (Gn. 4, 6, and 7) because the divinity of God is denied.’⁶

In view of what we have noted about God’s universal involvement with man, as his image, it seems to me an unbiblical exaggeration to assign all non-Christian religious faith and life to the work of the devil. Nevertheless it is equally unbiblical to overlook the realm of the satanic and the demonic in human religions—often most subtly at its strongest in what appears as ‘the best’ in them.

2. The patriarchs

a. *The covenant with Abraham.* The story of God’s redemptive work in history begins in Genesis 12 with the call of Abraham and the covenant with him and his descendants. But the stage and scenery are set in Genesis 10 and 11 in the depiction of the world of nations in their geographical and spiritual scatteredness. These are ‘the nations’ whose idols and rites will later be condemned or mocked, who, as enemies of Israel, will threaten and harass God’s redeemed, and who will repeatedly be placed at the sharp end of God’s words and deeds of judgment. Yet it is precisely for the sake of these nations that Abraham and Israel are chosen. In the covenant with Abraham, Israel is chosen among the nations for the nations, so that ‘all the families of the earth shall be blessed’ (Gn. 12:3).

Here it becomes clear that the whole history of Israel is nothing but the continuation of God’s dealings with the nations, and that therefore the history of Israel is only to be understood from the unsolved problem of the relation of God to the nations.⁷

The election of Israel, therefore, does not imply the rejection of the rest of humanity, but is set in close context with the prospect and promise of blessing for the nations through Israel. This is a vital point to bear in mind when we come to observe the religious exclusivism of later, Mosaic and post-Mosaic Old Testament faith.

b. *Patriarchal religion.* There is a marked difference between the religious faith and practice of the fathers of Israel in Genesis and the developed cult of Israel after

[p.6]

the exodus and Sinai covenant.⁸ The most obvious contrast lies in the use of divine names. The patriarchs worshipped the Mesopotamian and west Semitic high god, El, with several additional

⁵ Cf. P. T. Chandapilla, ‘Whither the Serpent?’ (an unpublished paper on the ‘serpentine’ nature of Hinduism).

⁶ J. Blauw, *loc. cit.*

⁷ J. Blauw, *The Missionary Nature of the Church* (McGraw Hill, 1962), p. 19.

⁸ On the religion of the patriarchs, see: A. Alt, ‘God of the Fathers’ in *idem, Essays on Old Testament History and Religion* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1966), pp. 3-77; F. M. Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard UP). These and other works are assessed by G. J. Wenham, ‘The Religion of the Patriarchs’, in Millard and

epithets, most notably El Shaddai. They receive commands and promises from him directly (without prophets) and they build altars and offer sacrifices to him (without priests). Their relationship to El is one of obedience and trust and is described as a covenant which included promises of divine protection and provision of land and children (especially Gn. 15, 17).

Now the writer of Genesis clearly identifies El as he is known and responded to by the patriarchs with Yahweh, the personal name of Israel's redeeming, covenant God. However, study of the use of divine names in Genesis shows that the writer makes this identification in a carefully controlled way. Only in the narrative sections does the author use the name Yahweh on its own when referring to God, since he is telling the story from the standpoint of his faith presuppositions. But in the dialogue sections, particularly where God is the speaker, either the old El-title of God is used on its own, or Yahweh is added alongside an El-title.⁹ It appears that while the author wished to indicate that it was indeed Yahweh who addressed the patriarchs, and to whom they responded, he did not wish to violate or suppress the ancient traditions by obscuring the names by which they had in fact worshipped God.

This fits with God's words to Moses in Exodus 6:3 concerning the contrast between the revelation of the name Yahweh now being made to Moses and the patriarchs' knowledge of him as El Shaddai. 'I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob as El Shaddai, but by my name Yahweh I did not make myself known to them.' The most natural interpretation of this text is that the name Yahweh was not known to the patriarchs.¹⁰ The editor of the Pentateuch evidently saw no contradiction between such an assertion and the Genesis viewpoint that Yahweh, God of Israel, was in fact the prime mover of the patriarchal history.

What we have here, then, is a situation where the living God is known, worshipped, believed and obeyed, but under divine titles which were common to the rest of contemporary semitic culture, and some of which at least, according to some scholars, may originally have belonged to separate deities or localizations of El. This raises two questions germane to our enquiry. First, are we then to regard the faith of Israel as syncretistic in its origins and early development, and if so, does this constitute biblical support for a syncretistic stance by the Christian *vis-à-vis* contemporary world faiths? Secondly, can we infer from the Genesis story that men may worship and relate personally to the true, living God, but under the name or names of some 'local' deity and without knowledge of God's saving name and action in Christ?

Wenham (eds.), *Essays on the Patriarchal Narratives* (Leicester: IVP, 1980), pp. 157-188. [Now online at http://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/eptn_6_wenham.html]

⁹ For detailed study of this feature of Genesis, see G. J. Wenham, *op. cit.*

¹⁰ It is possible that the verse means that the meaning of the name Yahweh was not yet revealed, though the patriarchs knew the name itself. This exegesis has been offered by Jewish and Christian scholars, e.g. J. A. Motyer, *The Revelation of the Divine Name* (London: Tyndale, 1959 [Article now online at: http://www.theologicalstudies.org.uk/article_revelation_motyer.html]). Wenham (*op. cit.*, pp. 177ff.), in discussing this and other ways of handling Ex. 6:3, has shown that it is unnecessary to see a contradiction between its natural meaning and the conviction of the writer of Genesis that the God known to the patriarchs as El Shaddai was in fact Yahweh. So that it was indeed Yahweh whom they worshipped ('called on the name of') and obeyed - whether or not they knew and used that specific name.

To answer the first question requires that we first of all define carefully what is meant by 'syncretism'. Syncretism is a conscious or unconscious attempt to combine divergent religious elements (beliefs, rites, vocabulary) in such a way that a new religious mixture evolves which goes beyond the contributing elements. It presupposes that none of the contributing elements can be regarded as final or sufficient in itself. It must be distinguished from the modes by which God has communicated his self-revelation using existing concepts and religious forms, but then transcending and transforming them with a new theology. The latter process is usually called accommodation or assimilation. It is quite different from syncretism inasmuch as it recognizes the reality of unique divine revelation in history, whereas syncretism excludes such a category *a priori*.

To describe early Israel's faith as syncretistic one would have to take the view that religious beliefs associated with a god named Yahweh happened to merge with and eventually displaced beliefs associated with a god, or gods, named El (*etc.*), and that this was a purely human process—simply part of the phenomena of the history of religions. But this could not be represented as the Bible's own view of the matter. The Pentateuchal tradition is better described as a case of accommodation or assimilation. The living God who would later reveal the fullness of his redemptive name, power and purpose, prepared for that fuller revelation by relating to historical individuals and their families in terms of religious rites, symbols and divine titles with which they were already culturally familiar—*i.e.* accommodating his self-revelation to their existing religious framework, but then bursting through that framework with new and richer promises and acts.

So the patriarchal narratives lend no support to the prevalent modern syncretistic approach which asks us to regard all religions as equally valid ways to God. That kind of syncretism, as Visser 't Hooft so trenchantly exposes, is 'essentially a revolt against the uniqueness of revelation in history.'¹¹

[p.7]

To answer the second question we need to note carefully the particularity of God's relationship to the patriarchs. The fact that the living God addressed Abraham and entered into covenant with him in terms of divine names Abraham would already have known, in no way implies that all Abraham's contemporaries who worshipped El in his various manifestations, and with the seamier side of his mythology, thereby knew and worshipped the living God. It does not even imply that Abraham's own religious belief and practice constituted worship of the living God or was acceptable to him before the point where God addressed him and he responded in obedient faith. The relationship between God and Abraham was based on God's initiative in grace and self-revelation, not on the name of the deity Abraham already knew, by itself, nor on the quality or sincerity of Abraham's previous worship (about which we are told nothing anyway). And the purpose of God's self-revelation was not to validate the religion of El and his pantheon, but to

¹¹ W. A. Visser't Hooft, *No Other Name: The Choice between Syncretism and Christian Universalism* (London: SCM, 1963), p. 48. This is one of the best books I have come across for a clear definition and exposure of syncretism and its dangers, in ancient times, in the NT struggle with it, and in its many modern guises.

lead Abraham and his descendants beyond it into a personal relationship with God in preparation for the full experience of redemption and thereby for full knowledge of his true name and character.

So the patriarchal experience certainly allows us to believe that God does address and relate to men in terms of their existing concept of deity (as, *e.g.*, in the case of Cornelius). But we must presume that such initiative is preparatory to bringing them to a knowledge of his historic revelation and redemptive acts (which, in our era, means knowledge of Christ). It does not allow us to assert that worship of other gods is in fact unconscious worship of the true God, nor to escape from the task of bringing knowledge of the saving name of God in Jesus Christ to men of other faiths.

A final point on the patriarchs arises from the brief reference to them in Joshua 24:14f. Joshua, seeking to renew the covenant and having recounted the mighty redemptive acts of Yahweh, challenges the people to get rid of all other gods, and serve Yahweh alone in accordance with the covenant. Among the examples of such 'other gods', Joshua cites not only the gods of Canaan and Egypt, but 'the gods your forefathers worshipped beyond the River'. The inference here is that however God may have initially accommodated his relationship with the patriarchs to their previous worship and concepts of deity, as was necessary in the period historically prior to the exodus, now that their descendants have an unambiguous knowledge of Yahweh in the light of the exodus, Sinai and the conquest, such concepts are inadequate and indeed incompatible with covenant loyalty. This text shows something of the strains in practice arising from Israel's polytheistic environment and pre-history. But the answer was not a tolerant syncretism but a radical rejection of all but the God known through his acts of revelation and redemption up to that point in history. How much more is this the case for us who stand on 'this side' of the completion of both revelation and redemption in Christ?

3. Israel and the gods of the nations

a. '*No other gods*'. There is certainly a change of atmosphere from the 'ecumenical bonhomie' (Wenham) of the patriarchal religion in Genesis to the clarity and unambiguous exclusiveness of the first commandment: 'I am Yahweh ... You shall have no other gods beside me.' From this point on, the faith of Israel was dogmatically mono-Yahwistic, whether or not the monotheistic implications of that faith were as yet consciously understood. Israel was forbidden either to worship other gods or to attempt to worship Yahweh in the way those gods were worshipped (Dt. 12:30f.). The facts of this matter are quite unmistakable and need not be tediously listed in detail. In the law (*e.g.* Dt. 7, 13, etc.), in the prophets (*e.g.* Je. 2), in the narratives (*e.g.* 2 Ki. 17), in the psalms (*e.g.* Ps. 106), even in the Wisdom tradition (*e.g.* Jb. 31:26ff.) the overwhelming message is of the exclusiveness of Israel's faith—Yahweh alone. This is not just a peripheral trait or the by-product of national pride. It is of the essence of that covenant relationship to which alone Israel owed their nationhood and from which they derived their reason for existence.

However, it is precisely as we feel the full force of this particularism and exclusivism of the historical faith of Israel that we need to recall the universal purpose that lies behind it—*theologically and chronologically*. The preservation of a pure worship of the living God in Israel

and of the revelation entrusted to them was not to spite the rest of humanity but was ultimately for their sake. It was not a matter of Israel flaunting their privilege in an attitude of 'Our religion is better than yours'—as if Israel's faith was one among many brands of a commodity, 'human religion'. Rather what was at stake, what was so threatened by Israel compromising with the gods and worship of other nations, was the continuity of the redemptive work of the Creator God of all mankind within the unique historical and social context which he himself had chosen. And that choice of Israel was for reasons finally known only to himself, reasons which certainly did not include any national or religious superiority on Israel's part, as they were bluntly informed (*cf.* Dt. 7:7; 9:5f.).

This is a point which is missed by some who try to soften the sharp edges of Israel's religious exclusivism by a misreading or false comparison of Old Testament texts. Thus, *e.g.*, S. J. Samartha:

Among the Priestly writers there is the tendency to consider other nations from the standpoint of Yahweh's relation to Israel. There is a feeling of exclusiveness, of being the only 'chosen people of God'. The prophets constantly challenge this assumption. Instead of looking at other nations from Mt. Zion, they demand that Israel should look at itself from the standpoint of other nations. Mt. Sinai should look at the river Ganga; and the River Ganga at Mt. Sinai. There is no reason to claim that the religion developed in the desert around Mt. Sinai is superior to the religion developed on the banks of the river Ganga.¹²

He goes on to quote Isaiah 19:24f., which is entirely

[p.8]

eschatological in its reference, and Amos 9:7, which in no way equates the faith of Israel with that of other nations, but challenges Israel that if she abandons her faith and its socio-ethical demands, she will have no other claim to uniqueness among the world of nations with migratory origins.

In any case, as A. F. Glasser pointed out in his reply (in the same volume, p. 42), it is not a question of superiority but of truth. And, we might add, it was not a question of 'a religion being developed' at Mt. Sinai, but of a revelation being received. And along with that revelation, Israel received the mission of being a holy (distinctive) and priestly (representing God) nation (Ex. 19:3-6). In the light of such a responsibility, for Israel to have accepted Canaanite and other religions as equally valid and acceptable alternatives to their own faith would have been no act of tolerance, kindness or maturity. It would have been an utter betrayal of the rest of mankind, for the sake of whose salvation they had been chosen and redeemed.

b. Israel's social structure. One of the great failings of the various syncretistic views of religions (popular and scholarly) is that they treat religions as systems of concepts, 'insights' and beliefs,

¹² S. J. Samartha (an Indian scholar), in his contribution to G. H. Anderson and T. Stransky (eds.), *Christ's Lordship and Religious Pluralism* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1981), pp. 31f.

which can be mixed or swapped, and fail to take into account that religions are part of total world-views and are integrally related in particular to the whole socio-economic and often political structures of life of their adherents. This was as true in the ancient world as it is today. The difference between Israel and the Canaanites and other surrounding societies was not a simple difference over what gods were to be worshipped and how. Israel was distinctive in her total social system from both the Canaanite system she replaced and other contemporary ancient Near Eastern cultures. And that social distinctiveness was an integral part of her religious self-awareness and theological significance. Space forbids full exposition of this point, but it has been worked out in massive sociological detail by N. K. Gottwald,¹³ and I have written elsewhere on this theme of the interpenetration of the social and religious realms in Old Testament Israel.¹⁴

It is a theme which could be illustrated widely from the prophets, but Elijah's encounter with Ahab after the murder of Naboth in I Kings 21 is especially powerful. Jezebel's treatment of Naboth and his family was not just to satisfy Ahab's greed. It was an act of socio-cultural imperialism based on Jezebel's concept of political power (where the monarch could do as he pleased with the land and subjects he virtually owned), and her concept of economic practice (where land was a commercial commodity, not an inalienable family trust). In both respects her cultural background was diametrically opposed to Israel's social system, as Ahab had sullenly accepted. And the Baal cult she fostered was an integral part of the same socio-cultural matrix.

That is why the story of Naboth—a story of social and economic injustice—though it is set in the middle of a saga of religious conflict (Yahweh v. Baal) is not at all out of place or peripheral to such a context. The struggle between Yahweh and Baal for the soul of Israel was not merely 'religious', but thoroughly social; not just a question of who was really the true God (as on Mt. Carmel), but of how Israelites were to live and treat each other.

The religion of Jezebel sanctioned and sanctified a system of politics, economics and social life which was stratified, oppressive and exploitative. Baalism was the ethos of that kind of society, the unjust social outworking of fallen, idolatrous humanity, the native soil and element of a Jezebel. Israel's relationship to Yahweh, in clear and deliberate contrast, demanded and had originally created a social system based on liberty (in the comprehensive deliverance of the exodus), equality (in the economic division of the land) and fraternity (even the king was 'one of your brothers'). Such words sound revolutionary! And indeed Israel was revolutionary, when compared with her contemporaries, both in religious and social life.

To worship Yahweh, to be an Israelite, meant ... to practise a specific way of life in separation from and in overt opposition to time-honoured established ways of life regarded throughout the ancient Near East as inevitable if not totally desirable.¹⁵

¹³ N. K. Gottwald, *The Tribes of Yahweh: A Sociology of the Religion of Liberated Israel, 1250-1050 BCE* (London: SCM, 1980).

¹⁴ C. J. H. Wright, 'The Ethical Relevance of Israel as a Society', *Journal of Christian Social Ethics*, June 1984; and also *idem*, *Living as the People of God: The Relevance of Old Testament Ethics* (Leicester: IVP, 1983).

¹⁵ Gottwald, *op. cit.*, p. 59.

Thus the spiritual and the social struggles were part of each other, for if Israel, who were called to be a manifestation of God's own character and holiness, deserted him for different gods, it would lead to a failure to be distinctive in every other sphere of life.

It is vital that we remember this integration of spiritual and social realities when assessing other religions. We must avoid the idea that religion is something for God's good, as if we ought to choose the right God because he will be piqued if we don't. God's revelation and the response it demands are for man's own good. To choose (in Joshua's terms) the true God is to opt for the truly human as well. Conversely, idolatry and injustice still go together as much today as in ninth-century Samaria. Some of the most deeply ingrained social oppressions in our world are integrally linked to religions which sanction them.

It may be noted that I have used the expression, 'God's revelation and the response it demands', rather than simply 'Israel's religion', or indeed, 'the Christian religion'. For historically these 'religions', considered as human, institutional and social complexes, have both gone through periods of corruption and the betrayal of the truth and ethic entrusted to them, by themselves being implicated in or used to justify oppression, injustice and various forms of idolatry. Hence the need for prophets and reformers who bring the spiritual and social critique of the word of God to the 'religion' of those who are his redeemed people. But the criterion by which we assess other religions is not the 'religion' of Christianity at any point in its all too human history, but

[p.9]

the unique authority of the revealed word of God, to which the Christian submits his own 'religious' understandings, convictions, practices and behaviour.¹⁶

c. Prophetic satire. A prominent feature of the account of the great conflict between Yahweh and Baal on Mt. Carmel is Elijah's mockery of the prophets of Baal for the manifest impotence of their god (1 Ki. 18:27-29). This satire on other gods is found elsewhere in the Old Testament, and two particular passages call for some comment.

1 Kings 18:27ff. Two comments on Elijah's scorn: First of all, it was directed, not at the mass of the people, but at the false prophets. The people were like witnesses to a case who were challenged to make a clear verdict (v. 21). The mockery was on those who had led the people astray from their God and who were in fact responsible for the judgment of drought they were suffering. In this respect it is comparable to Jesus' own sarcasm against the Pharisees and

¹⁶ There is always danger in well-meant attempts to defend Christianity as a 'religion', the danger of slipping unawares into the syncretist's marsh. Visser 't Hooft warns of the damage done by Christians who speak as if Christianity were just one species—even the highest or best species—of the wider genus, 'religion'. But that is not at all the biblical position. 'Christianity understands itself not as one of several religions but as the adequate and definitive revelation of God in history.... Every time Christians use the word religion meaning something wider than Christianity but including Christianity, they contribute to the syncretistic mood of our times.... It is high time that Christians should rediscover that the very heart of their faith is that Jesus Christ did not come to make a contribution to the religious storehouse of mankind, but that in him God reconciled the world unto himself' (Visser 't Hooft, *op. cit.*, pp. 94f.).

religious leaders who were actually keeping people out of the kingdom of God. Secondly, this was not mockery of primitive paganism. These were not unenlightened heathen, but men who had once belonged to God's people but had turned aside and rejected Yahweh, his covenant and its demands. Apart from Jezebel's own imported prophets of Baal and Asherah, the Israelites among Elijah's opponents were apostates from the faith of Yahweh, not the deluded followers of some other religion.

Isaiah 44:9-20. Here it is the idolater himself, not the apostate, who attracts the prophet's satire. This passage is the most sustained satire on idolatry, but it is not unique. It is preceded by earlier comments on the futility and contemptible impotence of man-made idols (*cf.* Is. 40:19f.; 41:7; 21ff., *et al.*). Those earlier passages referred to the great state gods of Babylon and asserted Yahweh's incomparable superiority—an important pastoral/evangelistic point for those the prophet was preparing for release and return from Babylonian captivity. But here the butt is home-made idolatry, which is practically the domestic by-product of eating and heating. Again, two brief comments:

First, the prophet recognizes that such idolaters are to some degree blinded, deluded and misled (*cf.* vv. 9, 18, 20). Idolatry is not just stupidity, but involves a blindness which is partly wilful and culpable and partly the work of some external force or power. There are links here with Paul's teaching in Romans 1:21-25 and 2 Corinthians 4:4.

Second, the criticism sometimes made that the prophet fails to understand the inner dynamic of idol-worship or to distinguish the material idol from the spirit, power or deity it symbolized or localized, is really beside the point for several reasons. What aroused the prophet's scornful wonder was the sight of living man bowing in worship to something other than the one incomparable living God (*cf.* vv. 6-8)—regardless of whether that 'something' was the idol itself or the deity it represented. Furthermore, the prophet was, in fact, well aware of the difference between a material idol and the deity it supposedly figured. For in *Isaiah 46:1f.* he pictures Bel and Nebo, two prominent Babylonian gods, watching their idols being carried away by their worshippers in defeat and disgrace. Such is the impotence of these gods that they cannot save their own idols, let alone save their worshippers!¹⁷ And in any case, the prophet's purpose here and in all these passages was not to describe the psychology of idolatry, but to contrast it devastatingly with the proven reality and power of Yahweh (Paul manages to do both in Rom. 1:18ff.). He was not the neutral chairman of a polite dialogue between the religions of Israel and Babylon, but the proclaimer of the imminent victory of the Lord of the universe and history, beside whom all other claimants to deity were indeed contemptible.

The whole OT (and the NT as well) is filled with descriptions of how Yahweh-Adonai, the covenant God of Israel, is waging war against those forces which try to thwart and subvert his plans for his creation. He battles against those false gods which human beings have fashioned

¹⁷ G. A. Smith commented on the contrast with Yahweh who, in vv. 3f., carries his own people: 'It makes all the difference to a man how he conceives his religion - whether as something he has to carry, or as something that will carry him.' Further on the nature of these other gods, *cf.* R. R. de Ridder, 'God and the Gods: Reviewing the Biblical Roots', *Missiology* 6 (Jan. 1978), pp. 11-28.

from the created world, idolized, and used for their own purpose ... the Baals and the Ashteroth, whose worshippers elevated nature, the tribe, the state and the nation to a divine status. God fights against magic and idolatry which, according to Deuteronomy, bend the line between God and his creation. He contends against every form of social injustice and pulls off every cloak under which it seeks to hide.¹⁸

d. *Eschatological vision*. The goal of this prolonged spiritual and social struggle is that ultimately not only Israel but every nation of mankind will acknowledge that Yahweh, God of Israel, is in reality the only true and living God of all the earth. This is the proximate aim of the two key acts of Yahweh on Israel's behalf which took place on the international stage—*viz.* the exodus (see Ex. 9:14, 16, 29), and the return from exile (see Is. 45:6, 22ff.). But even they only foreshadowed that ultimate era when all nations will turn to Yahweh and appropriate for themselves the saving history of Israel. This is a prominent theme in the 'kingship psalms' (*e.g.* Pss. 96,

[p.10]

97, 98, 99) as well as in the prophets (*e.g.* Is. 2:2-5; 19:19-25; 45:22-25; Am. 9:11f.; Mi. 7:12-20; Zc. 14). Perhaps this is the best context in which to comment on Malachi 1:11—often referred to as a text which seems to support the view that the worship of other religions is pleasing and acceptable to God. But the tense of the verse is not explicit, in the absence of a finite verb in the Hebrew text, and it is perfectly possible (some would say highly probable) that it should be read eschatologically, as in NIV:

My name will be great among the nations, from the rising to the setting of the sun. In every place incense and offerings will be brought to my name, because my name will be great among the nations.¹⁹

Even if it is taken in a present sense, one needs to bear in mind the specific purpose of the context, which is vigorous accusation of Israel for profaning the true worship of Yahweh with diseased and inadequate offerings. This verse would then be a rhetorical, ironic comparison intended rather to shame Israel than soberly to describe paganism. A similar rhetorical technique occurs in Ezk. 16:49-52, where Israel and Judah are compared with Sodom and Gomorrah, who are then said to be righteous, in comparison with Israel's wickedness!

So the Old Testament's eschatological forward vision ties up with its proto-historical promise—God's blessing on mankind as a whole, issuing in the ingathering of other nations into knowledge of and covenant with the living God. But in between those two poles is slung the story of redemption in history and the distinction between the people of God who, by his grace, know and worship him, and 'the nations' who, as yet, do not. As Bavinck puts it, 'from first page to the

¹⁸ J. Verkuyl, *Contemporary Missiology, An Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), p. 95. For further missiological perspective on the prophetic treatment of idolatry, *cf.* J. H. Bavinck, *An Introduction to the Science of Missions* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed PC, 1960), pp. 18, 226.

¹⁹ *Cf.* J. Baldwin: *Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi* (TOTC; London: IVP, 1972), pp. 227-230, for pointers in the text to its eschatological nature, especially the phrase 'from the rising to the setting of the sun', which elsewhere is linked to the eschatological universal reign of God, *e.g.* Pss. 50:1; 113:3; Is. 45:6; 59:19.

last the Bible has the whole world in view', and the separation of Israel from the nations is 'a temporary division, necessary in the divine plan of salvation, but one which would be abolished in God's due time'.²⁰

Now it is important to maintain both the balance and distinction between these two biblical perspectives (the eschatological vision and the present historical situation) and to avoid severing or coalescing them. Thus, on the one hand, we should not absolutize the historical divide between the redeemed and the rest in any way that suggests we can anticipate the eschaton in our judgment of who will or will not be saved. The eternal destiny of any man or nation, of whatever religion, is thankfully not ours to pronounce within our time-bound blinkers. But on the other hand, it is hermeneutically invalid to quote texts with an eschatological universalism as though they already applied in the present—that is, to use Old Testament texts which look forward to all nations ultimately worshipping Yahweh as support for the view that all religions are in present reality the worship of the one divine Being, thereby dissolving the radical biblical distinction between the people of God and the world in this age.

The point where the universal eschatological vision and the particular historical role of Israel in the world are most closely related is in the mission of the Servant of Yahweh, which is the last Old Testament theme to which we now turn.

e. *The mission of the Servant.* It is well known that the identity of the Servant, both in the 'Servant Songs' and in the other references to Israel as 'servant' in Isaiah 40-55 oscillates between the nation of Israel corporately and a mysterious, but quite definitely individual, person. It seems equally clear to me that the mission of the individual Servant is to fulfil the role in which historical, corporate Israel was failing—namely to be that 'light to the nations' and ultimately to bring the knowledge and salvation of Yahweh to the ends of the earth. The Servant's mission thus becomes the link between historical 'present' and the universal 'future'.

K. Stendahl, in a missiological Bible study which is inclined to deflate the view that the mission of the church is to 'Christianize' the rest of mankind,²¹ wishes to regard this mission of Israel/the Servant as confined to witnessing as light—not making 'conversions' to Israel's own faith or God. 'Israel has a universal mission: to be a light for the nations, the Gentiles (Isa. 49-6, *et al.*). But not by making them Jews, but by a faithful witness to the Oneness of God and the moral order...' (p. 16).

But this is to overlook not only the many texts (in psalms and prophets) where the nations are envisaged precisely as coming to Israel/Jerusalem in order to hear and know Yahweh and to obey his law, but also a specific Servant passage in this context which clearly envisages a process of conversion, namely Isaiah 44:1-5. Here Israel is being reassured that they will not wither and die, but grow abundantly (v. 3), both by natural reproduction (v. 4—'biological growth'), and by the addition of proselytes (v. 5—'conversion growth').

²⁰ Bavinck, *op. cit.*, pp. 11, 13.

²¹ In Anderson and Stransky (eds.), *Christ's Lordship and Religious Pluralism*.

One will say, 'I belong to the LORD';
another will call himself by the name of Jacob;
still another will write on his hand, 'The LORD'S',
and will take the name Israel.

Since no native born Israelite would need to do what this verse describes, it can only refer to Gentiles who will become members of Israel by accepting the names of Yahweh and Israel, that is, by appropriating personally Israel's redemptive experience through which the name of Yahweh was known.

This clearly indicates that turning to Israel's God also involved turning to Israel herself. A man could only confess the God of Israel as his lord if he took his place among the people who served this God. Israel's religion never became something purely spiritual, which could be professed without reference to the history of the chosen people or involvement in it.²²

[p.11]

If we relate 'Israel' here to the church, as our biblical theology should, then this point seems to me to be of immense significance both for our ecclesiology and our missiology. Isaiah's theology of the relation of the Gentiles to the redeemed people of God, whether considered historically or eschatologically, evidently contained no category classified 'anonymous Israelites'!

B. THE NEW TESTAMENT

1. The kingdom of God

Jesus came proclaiming the kingdom of God. As is well known, he was not talking about a place or realm, but a state of affairs—the active reign of God among men which was breaking into history in a new way with Jesus' own arrival and which demanded urgent response on man's part. Our understanding of what Jesus meant must start from the fact that he was proclaiming the fulfilment of Jewish hopes springing out of the Old Testament ('The time is fulfilled...'). And in the Old Testament the kingship of God has several layers of meaning. This is not leading up to a full-blown 'two-kingdoms' theory, but simply to be aware that there were different dimensions to the Old Testament concept of God's reign which, while clearly related (since it is the one God, Yahweh, who is king), were nevertheless not identical in themselves or their implications.

God reigns as universal sovereign over the whole earth (*e.g.* 2 Ki. 19:15; Pss. 99, 145, *etc.*). Nothing takes place beyond his providence or outside his control. The affairs of nations in history are under his universal reign—both in general terms (*e.g.* Pr. 21:1) and specifically as they relate to his own people, whether God uses other nations in punishment on Israel (*e.g.* Is. 8:6ff.; 10:5ff.) or for their deliverance (*e.g.* Is. 45). But secondly, God's reign over and among his people Israel is of a different dimension inasmuch as it is a kingship acknowledged in covenant obedience and based on specific historical acts of redemption, through which Yahweh is known as Lord and

²² C. Westerman, *Isaiah 40-66* (London: SCM, 1969), pp. 137f.

sovereign. Then thirdly, there is the eschatological hope of the world-wide extension of this acknowledged reign of God so that eventually 'all nations acknowledge his saving power' (*cf.* Ps. 67).

Now the kingdom of God as proclaimed by Jesus relates primarily to the second and third. He was the fulfilment of the second dimension in that his was the final and climactic act of historical redemption, through which the new covenant people are bound to God through him. They acknowledge God as king and live in the obedience of discipleship to Jesus as Lord. He also decisively inaugurated the beginning of the third dimension, both in his redemptive victory with its cosmic efficacy, and in the mission entrusted to the church to 'go into all the world'. As the parables of the growth of the kingdom of God indicate, 'this good news of the kingdom' of God must be preached throughout the whole world before the end comes (Mt. 24:14).

This means that we have to be very careful with the expression commonly heard in missiological and comparative religions debates, that 'the kingdom of God is at work in other religions', for it is a very slippery concept with potentially contradictory inferences drawn from it according to the stance of the speaker or writer.

Is the phrase intended to mean that God is sovereignly at work among all men, regardless of religion, working out his purposes in human history as the Lord of history and nature (*i.e.* first dimension)? If so, this is undoubtedly a biblical truth, but it is hardly what Jesus meant by his proclamation of the kingdom of God. He announced something which took effect in a radical new way with his own arrival, which was certainly not the case as regards God's providential sovereignty, operative in the world since creation. Further, the kingdom of God as taught by Jesus in his parables was something which, from small beginnings in his own ministry, would grow and spread like seed or yeast. Again, God's universal sovereignty can hardly be said to 'grow'. And thirdly, entering or belonging to the kingdom of God is virtually identical, according to Jesus, with faith, obedience and discipleship to Jesus himself. But these are not at all prerequisites for the operation of God's wider rule over the world. God reigns over the history of men and nations with or without their obedience, co-operation, or even conscious knowledge (witness Pharaoh, Nebuchadnezzar, Cyrus, for example). Most pertinently, the Jewish opponents of Jesus, even in their rejection and crucifixion of him, were agents of the sovereign purpose of God, subject in that respect to the first mentioned dimension of his kingship (Acts 2:23). But through their persistence in unbelief they remained outside the kingdom of God as taught, brought and embodied by Jesus himself.

Is the phrase then intended to mean that the kingdom of God is at work redemptively within other religions (second dimension)? This can lead to diametrically opposite conclusions. On the one hand it is clearly true that God works within the hearts and environments of men prior to their coming to the 'obedience of faith' in personal knowledge of Christ. We have already noted how God related to the patriarchs in terms drawn from their existing religio-cultural background. Likewise, many other individuals come into a relationship with God from 'outside'—through acknowledgment of the living God of God's people (*e.g.* Melchizedek, Balaam, Jethro), through experience of his saving healing power (*e.g.* Naaman), or through prayer and response to God's word (*e.g.* Cornelius). But our awareness of such divine presence and activity in the world

beyond the boundaries of the church ought to be an incentive to evangelism—*i.e.* taking the saving knowledge of the name of Jesus to those he is already preparing to receive it.

On the other hand, however, there is a common view that evangelism is rendered unnecessary, even misguided or offensive, by the alleged or discerned presence of the kingdom of God. This is either because God is said to be working redemptively in and through other religions in themselves—something which I find impossible to reconcile with the Bible' on any serious interpretation; or because God is said' to be working redemp-

[p.12]

tively in Christ in other faiths, but in a hidden, unacknowledged, 'anonymous' way (see further under 'Light and logos' below). However, this latter view seems to me incompatible with the New Testament, where the kingdom of God is inseparable from the acknowledged lordship of Christ. To preach Jesus (exclusively) as Messiah and Lord is tantamount to preaching and spreading the kingdom of God (*e.g.* Acts 8:12; 28:23, 31). It is not the lordship of some hidden or mystical Christ-principle (whatever that could mean) which constitutes the presence of the kingdom of God but the lordship of the historical Jesus, who, as Orlando Costas points out so effectively, is dissimilar to all other 'lords' in this world precisely in his historical life, ministry to the poor, suffering, crucifixion and resurrection.²³ Costas also makes the point that, along with the necessity of this acknowledgment of Jesus, other religions could only be said to 'mediate' the kingdom of God in any biblically recognizable way if they advocate and exemplify the values of the kingdom as taught by Jesus in the personal and social realms—*e.g.*, love, justice, freedom, forgiveness, peace, hope, and that radical reversal of this world's standards and values.

But to my mind the most telling contradiction of this view that the presence of the kingdom of God somehow neutralizes the need for evangelism in Jesus' name, is the experience of Jesus himself among his contemporaries. Here were a people privileged with the knowledge of God and his mighty acts and actually awaiting the kingdom of God. Yet when it came among them in very person and in demonstration of its power before their very eyes, many still refused to enter or were very slow to. Here surely is proof that the mere presence of the kingdom of God among a people or in a situation in no way guarantees that all those who witness it can be counted among the redeemed and beyond the need of the explicit evangelistic challenge of faith and obedience towards Jesus Christ.

2. Light and logos

The prologue of John's gospel, along with other passages where the cosmic nature and work of Christ are referred to (such as Col. 1:15ff., Heb. 1:1ff.) is clearly very important in any discussion of the relation between Christ and other faiths.

²³ Orlando E. Costas, in Anderson and Stranksy (eds.), *Christ's Lordship*, pp. 133-156. Cf. also, J. H. Yoder: 'Discerning the Kingdom of God in the Struggles of the World', *International Review of Mission*, Oct. 1979, pp. 366-372.

Light. 'The true light, that gives light to every man, was coming into the world' (Jn. 1:9 NIV). This seems to me the correct rendering of the ambiguous Greek of this verse.²⁴ The context tells us of John the Baptist's role as herald, as the prologue moves forward towards the completed incarnation. At this point Christ, who enlightens all men continuously, is 'on his way', so to speak, into that particular historical span of space and time that he would occupy in the world.

What is this 'enlightening' of all men? It is urged by some that if all men receive light from the cosmic Christ, then all are in some saving relationship to God through him—whether conscious of it or not. This Christ-light is already there in all men. In evangelism, therefore, if it be allowed at all, we do not take Christ to people of other religions, but we meet the Christ already in them.

However, this flies in the face of the immediate context and the rest of the gospel. If the enlightening of all men in v. 9 means that all already have saving knowledge of God then what was the necessity or purpose of the light becoming incarnate? And if all mankind are redemptively enlightened by the 'non-incarnate' Christ, why do some reject the light of the incarnate Christ, preferring darkness, to their own judgment (Jn. 1:10f.; 3:19f.)? Consider again Jesus' contemporaries—'his own'. Here were those who had received more light from Christ than any other religion through the Old Testament revelation. Yet so many of 'his own received him not'. This strongly undermines the idea that it is the 'sincere', the 'devout' or the 'enlightened'- *i.e.* 'the best' in other religions who are evidence of the presence of this enlightening from Christ in any salvific sense. It was precisely this stratum within Judaism which rejected the incarnate light and crucified him, and, in the person of Saul of Tarsus, persecuted his disciples.

This is not by any means intended to devalue what John means, or to deny that all moral goodness has its origin in God. But when this is turned into a redemptive principle it almost inevitably becomes moralistic—salvation for the best—in a way utterly alien to the New Testament. As Lesslie Newbigin puts it:

It is the 'men of good will,' the 'sincere' followers of other religions, the 'observers of the law' who are informed in advance that their seats in heaven are securely booked. This is the exact opposite of the teaching of the New Testament. Here emphasis is always on surprise. It is the sinners who will be welcomed and those who were confident that their place was secure who will find themselves outside. God will shock the righteous by his limitless generosity and by his tremendous severity.²⁵

The enlightening of v. 9 must surely refer to that knowledge of God which is possessed by every man made in the image of God and open to God's general self-revelation. The fact that Christ is said to be the agent of this enlightening does not mean we have to regard it as part of the

²⁴ The alternative is, 'He was the true light who enlightens every man who comes into the world'. But 'coming into the world' seems tautologous as a description of every man (what man doesn't?), but perfectly apt as a description of Christ's incarnation - the prime goal of the prologue.

²⁵ L. Newbigin, *The Open Secret* (London: SPCK/Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), p. 196. *Cf.* also his comments on p. 199.

redemptive work of God in itself.²⁶ For Christ is part of the unity of the Godhead and shares in the totality of the work of the Godhead, including creation, sustaining of life and revelation (*cf.* Jn. 1:3-5).

[p.13]

We should not hesitate to claim that everything good, beautiful and true, in all history and in all the earth, has come from Jesus Christ, even though men are ignorant of its origin. At the same time we must add that this universal light is not saving light.²⁷

It is also worth remembering that John is talking here about the enlightening of men as men, not about the possibility of light within 'other religions' considered as structural systems of belief, practice and culture.

b. *Logos*. From the early Christian apologists to twentieth-century theologians this term has been used to 'find' Christ in the faiths and philosophies of mankind. Justin Martyr²⁸ asserted that while Plato and other Greek philosophers had not known Jesus, they had lived *kata logon*—'in accordance with the logos', and were thereby, in some sense, 'Christians'. The Roman Catholic theologian Karl Rahner likewise presents the idea of the 'incognito Christ' to whom sincere adherents of other faiths in fact respond when they respond to what grace they receive in nature, for to accept grace is to accept Christ—however unwittingly. Such people he therefore calls 'anonymous Christians'—a term which has entered into vigorous missiological debate ever since.²⁹

There are two points at issue here relevant to our survey. First, it is sometimes said that John's use of *logos* represents a deliberate, syncretistic use of Greek philosophical vocabulary and that this is an illustration of early Christianity's alleged inherent syncretism.³⁰ However, Visser 't Hooft, in his careful study of New Testament terminology with precisely this question in mind, comes to the opposite conclusion.³¹ John (and even more obviously, Paul, in Colossians) is resisting the syncretistic tendency by deliberate assimilation of current vocabulary into a thoroughly Christian (OT based and Jesus centred) theology. In this he differed greatly from what the apologists were trying to do. If A = the revealed truth of the gospel and B = the 'target' culture (in this case Greek popular philosophy and religion), it is one thing to say, with John, 'I will use vocabulary from B because it can be used to make A intelligible to people in culture B, but A remains the unique, distinctive and governing truth which will give the vocabulary fresh

²⁶ In a biblical survey like this, we must forego discussion of Barth's approach, the dangers of Christo-monism, etc.

²⁷ J. W. R. Stott, *Christian Mission*, p. 68.

²⁸ Justin Martyr, *Apologia* 1 46.

²⁹ Essays and articles from Rahner span two decades, the sixties and seventies. A helpful summary is by K. Riesenhuber, 'The Anonymous Christian according to Karl Rahner', in Anita Roper, *The Anonymous Christian* (NY: Sheed and Ward, 1966). A comparable approach related specifically to India is R. Panikkar, *The Unknown Christ of Hinduism* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1965).

³⁰ E.g. W. Pannenberg, who traces Christianity's syncretism back to an identical syncretistic energy in the development of OT religion: *cf. Basic Questions in Theology*, vol. 2 (London: SCM), pp. 85ff.

³¹ Visser't Hooft: *No Other Name*, ch. 2.

shades of meaning.' It is quite another to say, 'I will use vocabulary from B because B (or the best in it) is in reality the same as A, such that B people unconsciously believe A anyway.'

Secondly, talk of the *logos* as the 'non-incarnate Christ' easily becomes abstract and divorced from the unique particularity of the incarnation. The historical Jesus becomes 'the Christ-principle', the once-for-all atoning death of Jesus becomes 'the pattern of the cross', *etc.* Such worthy-sounding concepts fit easily into the syncretistic soup and nicely avoid the 'scandal of particularity'. However, it can easily be seen that though this process may use the Johannine *logos* as a tag, it is fundamentally incompatible with John's intention in his Prologue, which is to lead relentlessly up to the climax: 'The *logos* became flesh'. Whatever you may do with the concept of *logos*, you can't syncretize or abstractify the flesh of the man Jesus.

Such abstract concepts, in any case, though often well-intentioned in seeking to establish links with other faiths, are actually useless evangelistically both in theory,³² and in experience. M. M. Thomas, a well known and prolific theologian in India, and advocate of a 'Christ-centred syncretic process'³³ which seeks (not always successfully, in my view) to preserve a unique place for Jesus Christ within an 'accepting' stance towards other faiths and secular cultures and ideologies, makes the telling remark, 'Nevertheless it is not the ontic Christ or the mystic Christ but the historical Jesus who has made the deepest impact on Hinduism.'³⁴

3. Peter and Paul

The book of Acts is the practical missiology of the early church, written by Luke, a converted Gentile physician who would probably have had considerable inside knowledge of the gods and religions of the first-century Graeco-Roman world. It is full of relevant material, but space limits us to three brief topics.

a. '*No other name*'. The speeches of Peter in Acts have a careful structure to them, in which nothing unnecessary or accidental is thrown in. So this assertion of the uniqueness and exclusiveness of the saving name of Jesus, in Acts 4:12, has to be taken seriously as theologically intentional. Akin to Jesus' own exclusive claims as 'the way, the truth and the life' (Jn. 14:6), it stands like a rock in the way of the syncretistic axiom that all paths lead to God. But salvation is to be found in no-one else, in no other name than that of 'Jesus Christ of Nazareth', crucified and risen (v. 10).

J. V. Taylor, in an attempt to show the true biblical inclusiveness of Christianity alongside its uniqueness, strains our credence beyond its limit when he sidesteps the force of this text by relating it solely to its context of the healing of the cripple.

[p.14]

³² Lesslie Newbigin has some very caustic comments on the worth of abstract concepts such as 'Transcendent Being' *etc.*, for engagement in real dialogue with those of other faiths, in *The Open Secret*, ch. 10, especially pp. 185-191.

³³ M. M. Thomas: *Man and the Universe of Faiths* (Madras: CLS, 1975), p. 157.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 79, my italics.

Peter was saying that Jesus of Nazareth is the source of every act of healing and salvation that has ever happened. He knew perfectly well that vast numbers of people had been healed without any knowledge of Jesus, yet he made the astounding claim that Jesus was the hidden author of all healing. He was the totally unique saviour because he was totally universal.³⁵

To this one has to say, first, that if Peter had wanted to say that, or even if Luke had wanted to say it through Peter's lips, he could have said it more clearly. Would anyone have understood his words in that sense? Would that construction of the words have occurred to anyone who did not find the text an embarrassment on other grounds? Secondly, Peter has moved beyond reference to the healing only. In v. 10 he deals with the healing; in v. 12 he talks of salvation—a wider and by no means identical term; in v. 11 he quotes an accepted messianic text whose eschatological thrust showed clearly that he is referring to salvation in its fullest, messianic sense (*cf.* Mt. 21:42; 1 Pet. 2:4-10). At the time of the healing itself Peter had used the opportunity to preach salvation, including repentance, forgiveness and 'refreshment' (3:19f.). So now, before the Council, he uses the healing by Jesus' name as a sign or pointer for salvation, which also is by Jesus' name, and nowhere else.

b. *Cornelius*. It is amazing how the dramatic story of Cornelius in Acts 10 is sometimes 'thrown in' to support the idea that sincere pagans can be in a right and acceptable relationship with God without knowledge of Christ, when the whole point of the story is to show the opposite. The detailed description of Cornelius' piety, generosity and prayers presents him as, in a sense, the best that Gentile paganism could offer. And, as we have noted earlier, God clearly addresses him and has heard his prayers and noticed his good deeds. God relates to him on the level of his current religious experience. But having said all that, he still needed to hear the gospel, needed to know the facts about Jesus, needed to have the opportunity to respond in faith to him. That was the problem God graciously solved, on his own initiative, by means of the angelic visitor and Peter's preparatory vision and subsequent visit. Apart from the divine initiative and Peter's obedience, Cornelius would not have received the specific gifts attendant on knowing Christ: forgiveness of sins (10:43), the Holy Spirit (10:44ff.), salvation (11:14), life, through repentance (11:18).

Were there other 'Corneliuses'? Were they all visited by apostles or evangelists? And if they were not, what was the position before God of such pious God-fearers who never heard of Jesus Christ? We do not know, any more than we can know the position of similar 'good pagans' in our own day. God alone knows the hearts of all men. What we do know clearly from the story is that not Cornelius' piety but only the knowledge of Jesus brought the joy of salvation and life, and that only the way of Peter's obedient witness can bring such knowledge and joy to those as yet without them.

c. '*An unknown God*'? In the very heartland of Greek polytheism, a distressed but courteous Paul confronts the sophisticated, idol-ridden and curious Athenians (Acts 17:16-34). Full exegesis of

³⁵ J. V. Taylor: 'The Theological Basis of Interfaith Dialogue', *International Review of Mission*, Oct. 1979, pp. 373-384.

this key passage is impossible, so, leaving that to study of the commentaries, we shall make just a few observations.

The crucial sentence, after Paul's brilliant bridge-building introduction, is: 'Now what you worship as something unknown I am going to proclaim to you' (v. 23). When we interpret this in the light of Paul's own development of his theme, we see that Paul is not congratulating the Athenians and saying, 'You are really worshipping the true God, though you don't know it'; but he is saying rather, 'Despite your religiosity, you don't know the true God at all, though you could and should do, for knowledge of him is available before your eyes, but you have obscured it with your "very religious" temples and idols.' Taken thus, it fits perfectly with what Paul writes concerning the availability but suppression of the knowledge of God in Romans 1. God is not, in fact, an 'unknown God'; it is the Athenians who are ignorant of him.

There are, however, those who take Paul's meaning in the former sense, and argue that Paul in fact adopts a very positive and accepting attitude here towards Greek culture, by quoting their own poets. They would see the preaching of Jesus and his resurrection then as the fulfilment of that which the Greeks already worshipped in their excessive religiosity. Certainly Paul quotes from both Stoic pantheism and from Epicurean deism, but careful study shows that he does so in a sense quite different from their author's original intent. In fact he refers to these philosophies in such a way as to deny their over-all truth when set alongside a scriptural (*i.e.* OT) world-view. So this is not a generously approving reinterpretation, but a radical, though still polite, correction which leads up to the explicit command to repent in view of the imminent judgment of God. Repentance means turning. Paul is not expecting the Athenians' gratitude that now they know who they are really worshipping as they continue in their idolatry. Rather he wants them to turn away from those idols to the living God.

Assuming that Luke's portrayal of Paul's mind on this matter is consistent, this fits in exactly with Paul's response to the attempted worship of the crowd at Lystra ('We are ... telling you to turn from these worthless things to the living God...' Note again the emphasis on the availability of the knowledge of God: 14:13-18), and also with his testimony in 26:17f. There he gives it as his mission to the Gentiles that he was 'to open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins...'. This is hardly the language of continuity and fulfilment.

CONCLUSION

I have tried to present a cross-section of the biblical material on this subject in such a way as to bring out both the universal, cosmic, inclusive dimension and the in-

[p.15]

escapable particular, historical and exclusive dimension of the biblical revelation. It may be felt that the latter has come over more strongly; if so, it may be because that seems to be the most in danger of being watered down and explained away in current debate. I finish by echoing warmly the words of J. Blauw on this very point.

I know of no more positive statement concerning man than the statement that he is the image and servant of God. I know of no more negative statement than the statement that he refuses to be a servant and wishes to 'be as gods' or to use God (or rather gods) for his own ends. I know of no more exciting message than the message that in Christ the real man and the real relationship with God has been restored. These are the realities in the Biblical view of man, over against which it is only a regression to speak about 'human possibilities'. In my opinion the Bible is not interested in questions like 'continuity or discontinuity'. The great continuity is the continuity of God's love for man, revealed first in Israel and then in Jesus Christ. The great discontinuity is man's permanent striving to have a god rather than to serve God; to claim independence when he is completely dependent. The light which the Bible throws on man in his religion, or religiosity, penetrates deeply into the hiding places of human existence.³⁶

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³⁶ J. Blauw: '*The Biblical view...*', pp. 38f.

Christianity and other religions: a review of some recent discussion

Dewi Arwel Hughes

Dr Hughes is head of the Religious Studies Section in the Polytechnic of Wales. His doctoral thesis was on 'The History and Principles of Comparative Religion in Britain 1850-1950'.

Functioning in a multi-religious context is not something new in Christian experience. This was certainly true of the first period of the church's history during which Christians were in constant contact with the religions of Greece, Rome and Egypt and also with Judaism from which Christianity became increasingly differentiated. During this period also Christian missionaries, primarily of the Nestorian church, penetrated far into the east, but rather little is now known of their fate.¹

The Graeco-Roman religion was very diverse conceptually and ritually. Conceptually ideas ranged from animism through polytheism to the more sophisticated ideas of the great Greek philosophers. Ritual practice ranged from the official emperor-worship to the more esoteric initiation ceremonies of the mystery cults. From the beginning Christians realized that they could not ignore the religion from which they called upon people to turn to Christ and this was especially true of its more cultured and philosophical expression.² The story of the relationship between Greek philosophical thought and Christian thought is complex, but that Christians attempted to relate what seemed to them good in the non-Christian thinking which surrounded them to the essence of their own Christian faith is apparent from the beginning. By the time of the fall of Rome to the barbarian hordes Graeco-Roman thought at its best had been either subdued to the interests of Christian

theology or entirely assimilated into the Christian tradition. Much of the debate about the relationship between Christianity and other religions has in fact to do with the extent and nature of the Graeco-Roman influence on Christian thought in this initial period of the church's expansion.

With the collapse of the Roman Empire from the fourth century on the church was again faced with a hostile non-Christian world. The church responded to this strident and virile polytheism/paganism with a vigorous and successful missionary drive, particularly in northern Europe. However, while northern Europe was being won, a huge area of Christian influence, stretching from the Middle East across North Africa through Spain and into southern France, was falling before the advance of Islam. Some of the lost ground was regained eventually, notably in Spain, but by force of arms rather than by Christian proclamation. In fact almost all missionary expansion throughout the Middle Ages was by means of military might, the church going hand in hand with the sword, as in the case of the mediaeval expansion of Greek Orthodoxy in conjunction with the vast eastern expansion of the Russian Empire. Unfortunately this pattern was also followed when European Christianity eventually broke loose from its isolation in the sixteenth century as a result of the discovery of the New World and commercial expansion.

By the eighteenth century vast new worlds had been opened to western European influence and the church rose to the challenge. In 1800 Christianity was still essentially an European religion but by 1900 it was truly universal. This is not to say that the great missionary effort of the nineteenth century was universally successful; to the contrary, little fruit was seen in many countries after years of hard labour. However, some from all lands did respond, so that by 1900 there was an indigenous church in almost every country in the world. But more often than not this great missionary expansion

¹The Mar-Thoma Church in South India might be an exception. See L. Brown, *The Indian Christians of St Thomas* (Cambridge: CUP, 1982), pp. 43-63. See also W. G. Young, *Patriarch, Shah and Caliph* (Rawalpindi, 1974).

²Acts 18:28; John 1:1. Cf. D. C. Mulder, 'World Missions and Syncretism', *International Reformed Bulletin*, 35, Oct. 1968, pp. 40f.

The theme of this article does not allow for a thorough treatment of this difficult question but we can note certain points which must be firmly grasped in any attempt to deal with it. The question must not be viewed simply from the human side as seems to be the case with Hick. We must remember that the biblical picture is of an eternally gracious and loving Being who is continually inviting a perverse and rebellious mankind to submit to him as their Creator and Lord in virtue of his Son's redemptive work. God's just condemnation of any man will never be based on man's ignorance but on man's rebellion and wickedness. Man will be judged on the basis of what he knows and not on the basis of what he does not know.

We suspect, however, that Hick would not be satisfied with any assurance that evangelicals do not believe that God condemns myriads of ignorant people to hell simply because they are ignorant. He dislikes the very idea of a God of judgment which is so clearly taught in the Bible and it is this rejection of the biblical view of God which leads him to argue that saving knowledge of God is as available through the non-Christian as it is through the Christian religion.

The way in which he comes to this conclusion is clearly outlined in *God Has Many Names*. From an apparently rather superficial examination of parts of the liturgy of various religious communities in Birmingham he concludes that they are all worshipping the same God under different names. This one God is an infinite Being who is also the Creator and Ruler of the world.¹³ To recognize this Hick believes is to be truly loving and tolerant towards the adherents of non-Christian religions since by doing so we recognize that they, like us Christians, are on the way to God. In fact Hick insists that to hold any contrary view is to be unloving towards non-Christian immigrants in our midst.

This idea that it is impossible to be nice to someone with whom you disagree seems very odd coming from someone who has been bred in the Christian tradition. The true Christian is someone who loves those who disagree with him and who even hate him. Again, is it being loving to a Muslim to tell him that he really worships the same God as the Christian? I doubt whether a devout Muslim would think so.

Again, how tolerant is Hick's view in the last analysis? He claims to be completely undogmatic in rejecting the Christian view that religious truth can be adequately expressed in words, but he comes to what seems like a very clear dogma in his view of the one God whom all worship under different names. Hick's God must also be a personal being with a personal will since he is considered to be both Creator and Ruler of the world. If this is the case then many devoutly religious people, such as the Vedantist Hindu or the Theravada Buddhist must be considered mistaken. In contradiction of many ancient and noble traditions Hick proclaims an emaciated version of the liberal Protestant creed of nineteenth century idealistic philosophers, the fatherhood of God

and the brotherhood of man.¹⁴ It seems as though he sits in an elevated position, proclaiming that we who are committed within our various religious traditions are toiling away towards the summit where he sits, though we are told that we need not abandon our varying paths, even though there is a higher synthetic truth. It is only the Hindu who can rejoice in this approach (and he is not renowned for his tolerance of non-Indian religions).

The striking conclusion that we reach is that the sort of position Hick espouses does an injustice to many devout religious believers and is, therefore, far from tolerant. It is far more loving towards a Muslim, say, to allow him to freely worship and propagate his faith, while offering him the gospel of Jesus Christ than to say to him that his creed and the Christian's are ultimately the same. To allow freedom, while possessing the power of restraint, is an expression of the love of Christ.

One implication of Hick's theology, which he sees very clearly, is that it necessitates a drastic revision of christological thought. The dogma that the same God is worshipped in all the religions calls for a drastic revision of the Christian idea of God. If exclusivism is abandoned then an exalted view of Jesus Christ as the unique incarnation of God must also be abandoned. Again we find ourselves back with the old liberal dogma of the nineteenth century that Jesus was only a simple moral teacher whose God-consciousness made such an impact upon his followers that influenced by Greek thought-forms they eventually made him into God incarnate. Hick finds his support in the so-called radical wing of New Testament criticism, that is, the wing which questions almost entirely the historical content of the New Testament. It is not my place to deal with this issue but simply to note the importance of the defence of the historic witness to Jesus in the New Testament and the original character of traditional Christology. Not that, however, the divinity of Jesus is dependent on New Testament scholarship. Mercifully, the reality of the living and divine Saviour cannot be caged by sinful man.

To me Hick resembles that highly unsatisfactory tradition in liberal Protestantism so prevalent in the last century which, having rejected exclusivism, took a cursory glance at a few sophisticated and literary religious traditions, found a few similarities here and there and, hey presto, proclaimed that all religions are essentially the same! This sort of thinking was very consistent with the imperialistic arrogance of nineteenth century western scholarship, but it is surprising to find such thinking still alive today.¹⁵

¹⁴Hick's position is very close to that of F. Max Müller (1823-1900), one of the 'fathers' of comparative religion in the nineteenth century. He was a prolific author but a good example of his type of thinking can be seen in his *Theosophy or Psychological Religion* (London, 1893).

¹⁵An article expressing similar surprise at Hick's naivety was recently published in *Religious Studies*, 19, Nov. 1983, pp. 75ff. by P. Griffiths and Delma Lewis entitled 'On Grading Religions, Seeking Truth, and Being Nice to People - a Reply to Professor Hick'. Commenting on Hick's view of religion which they describe as 'the inclusivist non-judgmental' they state on p. 76: '... it may seem surprising, given the overwhelming weight of evidence against such a view, that anyone who thinks more than twice about religion and religions could actually hold it'.

¹³John Hick, *op. cit.*, p. 45.

However, there are others such as Ninian Smart or Wilfred Cantwell Smith who, while sharing Hick's abandonment of exclusivism, offer more carefully thought-out alternative views. Despite our somewhat fierce criticism of Hick, it is still possible to appreciate the dilemma facing those who share his position. They are men who place a very high value on religion and who believe that it is absolutely essential to man's future well-being. They also believe that the foundation of reality is to be found beyond the boundaries of material realities; *i.e.*, they believe in a transcendent being which is the source and end of authentic human existence. But then they also believe that no concrete or historical religion can claim to possess exclusive knowledge of this transcendent even though they do contain authentic intuitions of it. This type of scholar is then faced with the inevitable task of trying to describe the authentic intuitions of the transcendent within individual religious traditions with the ultimate aim of constructing a synthesis of the various intuitions which will comprehend the true essence of religion as such.

Hick, in a way which is very reminiscent of the nineteenth century founders of comparative religion, plunges into a morass without hesitation; Ninian Smart is much more cautious. Even so in his *Beyond Ideology, Religion and the Future of Western Civilization* he does attempt a comprehensive theory of religion which he describes as 'transcendental pluralism'.¹⁶ It is a theory according to Smart which recognizes the reality of 'the Beyond' and yet respects the different experiences of it. It is worth noting that it is a presupposition that the same 'Beyond' is experienced in the various religious traditions. The obvious problem which arises for such a theory is the fact that religions apparently contradict one another in their definitions of 'the Beyond'. How can one say that what religion A says about the transcendent reality and what a religion B says about it are both true if they contradict one another? Smart bravely faces this problem at its most glaringly obvious in seeking to find some complementarity between the Christian and Buddhist view of the Beyond. On the surface the problem seems unsurmountable since Christianity is founded on the assertion of personality while Buddhism is founded on the denial of personality. To watch Smart's convoluted attempts to find a reconciliation between these two contradictory approaches to religion is very instructive: it shows very clearly that 'comparative religion' has become so problematical by now that it is in danger of dying the death of a thousand and one qualifications! But what of Smart's conclusion? One conclusion, which is also a presupposition, is that doctrines are relatively unimportant. It is the effect that the doctrine has on the believer that is of primary importance and not the doctrine itself.¹⁷ Therefore, if the Christian idea of God and the Buddhist idea of

¹⁶Ninian Smart, *op. cit.*, p. 14. Cf. p. 28: 'All religions are true but the most true is that which recognizes . . . this truth. If Christ is divine, so also is Krishna and so in the last resort are all human beings.'

¹⁷*Ibid.*, p. 185. The root of this pragmatic approach is probably William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (London, 1902).

Emptiness (*Sunyata*) have the same effect then they can be said to be complementary witnesses to one transcendent reality. However, if the effects of a concept are to be seen in religious experience and moral behaviour then it is patently obvious that the Christian and Buddhist concepts of ultimate reality do not have the same effects. An even more pertinent criticism is the fact that it is only through the concept that its effects can be described. The religious experience of a Buddhist monk, *e.g.*, can only be appreciated by means of his concept of the Beyond. Smart himself seems to realize this because, having argued for the primacy of the effects, he goes on to try to prove the complementarity of Buddhist and Christian concepts. If he had been really convinced of his conclusion silence would have been the only path open to him! What we find him doing, rather, is trying to fit Christian concepts into a Buddhist framework. For example, the term 'blank' is used when describing the Christian doctrine of the essential incomprehensibility of God, so that the Christian doctrine can be brought closer to the Buddhist idea of the 'void'. He attempts to bring the Christian idea of self-denial within the ambit of the Buddhist idea of not-self (*anatta*).¹⁸

This train of thought culminates in what is now probably a rather outmoded Anglo-Catholic view of the eucharist. According to this view the central truth of the Christian revelation is the incarnation, which is interpreted in terms of the deity divesting or emptying himself of his divine attributes in becoming man. The climax of this process of self-emptying was the suffering of the cross, and thus the eucharist, as the means by which Christ's suffering is made efficacious to men, has the idea of self-emptying at its heart. On the basis of such reasoning Smart's final conclusion is that it is 'ludicrous for Christians to try to convert good Buddhists' because the two religions are merely 'different ways of going towards the Beyond'.¹⁹

It is very questionable, however, whether Smart has proved his case, since he was forced seriously to misrepresent Christian belief in order to bring it anywhere near to Buddhist belief. From the most superficial study of the Christian religion as a historical and contemporary phenomenon it is nonsense to suggest that there is a 'form of emptiness' at its heart. In fact the term which should be used to describe the Christian idea of the Beyond is the opposite of emptiness, fullness (*plēroma*). Christianity is intensely *full*. And is it not true that at the heart of Christianity we have the historical person of Jesus Christ? He is the heart, head and soul of the Christian faith and his self-emptying is not viewed in

¹⁸An earlier attempt at this has been made by Lynn de Silva in *The Problem of the Self in Buddhism and Christianity* (London, 1979). In trying to prove that the Buddhist concept of *anatta* is very close to the Christian idea of self-denial he engages in a very radical reappraisal of biblical anthropology. While agreeing that Christian thought on this issue has been heavily influenced by the Greek idea of immortality, I cannot agree that there is an ontological denial of the self in the Bible while such a denial is of the essence of the Buddhist idea of *anatta*. If de Silva had concentrated more on the theology of the Bible rather than on its anthropology he would not have confused the ontological idea of *anatta* with the ethical idea of self-denial.

¹⁹Smart, *op. cit.*, p. 205.

terms of the negating of his personality but in terms of the presenting of his person in all its fullness to be sacrificed for the good of others. Smart, like Hick, may attempt to melt Jesus away in the mists of a new transcendental idealism, but in doing so the essence of Christianity is left behind and the new synthetic religion becomes merely a figment of a few scholars' imaginations with no link to historical reality whatsoever. And then there is the eucharist. Smart argues that the essential meaning of the eucharist is the incarnational-moral idea followed by some Anglo-Catholic idealists (*i.e.* God giving up divinity, and 'becoming'). But why should this somewhat esoteric idea of the eucharist be regarded as the essential idea? Should not a scholar who is attempting to compare Christianity and Buddhism honestly describe what Christians have generally believed on a particular issue? On the question of the eucharist the overwhelming conviction of Christians throughout the ages has been that the sacrament is in some sense linked with the idea of sacrifice, the shedding of blood to make atonement for man's sin, so that men and God might be reconciled. The incarnationalist idea of the sacrament as a symbol of God divesting himself of his transcendence in becoming united with man is at the most only a supplementary view.

It seems difficult to avoid the conclusion that the inclusivist view of religion is untenable because all those who attempt a synthesis seem to fall foul of their own presuppositions. They insist upon tolerance for all but always end up by grossly misrepresenting what religious believers actually believe. That some persist despite seeing this problem is amazing. Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *e.g.*, believes that 'a theology of comparative religion' will emerge in the future and seems to suggest that it might come along the path of mysticism but he refuses to make any concrete suggestions as to what its content might be.²⁰ Meantime we must be content with being good Christians, good Hindus, *etc.* Another inevitable consequence of attempting a synthesis is the creation of a new religion. What we have here is another example of the 'ecumenical syndrome', *i.e.* if you attempt to unite two denominations you actually end up with three! What is Hick's idea that adherents of various religions worship the same God or Smart's transcendental pluralism? Their low view of Christ means that their views are not Christian in the historical sense of that term at least. Their views come near to neo-Vedanta in Hinduism in some respects but they would not want to be called Hindus because to be identified with one religious tradition would defeat the purpose of the whole exercise. They must, therefore, represent a new entity, a new religion. So in the last analysis they are but exasperating a situation of division and diversity which they set out to transcend. But then what of their religion? It is extremely abstract, vague, philosophical and academic and seems to bear very little relation to the realities of religious life. Religious history does not lay out much hope for its survival.

²⁰W. Cantwell Smith, *op. cit.*, pp. 181, 194.

One point which the criticism of Hick and Smart highlights is the fact that any attempt to define the essential content of various religions is in itself a religious exercise. No assessment of various religions can be made but from the vantage-point of some prior religious commitment. And, of course, at the root of all such thinking is not only some specific view of the transcendent but also a specific view as to the way in which that transcendent communicates with man. Some doctrine of revelation is thus implicit in every theory of religion.

Within the Christian tradition the subjective theory became dominant, particularly among Protestants at the beginning of this century, and it is this theory that made possible the views of Hick and Smart. This view holds that the transcendent makes itself known to men in such a way as to make it impossible for that revelation to be truthfully expressed in words. According to this view God cannot speak: it is only man who can speak. Revelation itself is essentially non-verbal. Man having experienced it then seeks to express it in words and in so doing reduces it to the conditions of his nature which is sinful and subject to the limitations of time and space. True knowledge of the transcendent is, therefore, essentially a subjective matter and religious doctrines or theologies are but an unworthy attempt at expressing the impossible.²¹ That the attempt to verbalize the revelation is inevitable is recognized but every attempt is ultimately a failure. Granted, the application of this view to various apparently contradictory doctrines makes possible an unity at the subjective level, but of course, the idea that unity can be achieved at the subjective level is itself an unworthy verbalization!

It is not at all surprising that those who espoused this liberal Protestant view of revelation and who were also students of comparative religion often believed that the essence of religion was to be found in some form of mysticism.²² What is more interesting, maybe, is that many who shared this subjective view of revelation still believed that Christianity was the supreme religion. Theoretically this view reduced all religions to the same level. Since man as man is essentially religious, *i.e.* open to contact with the divine, then attempts at verbalizing religious experience are inevitable everywhere. Therefore the theologian cannot possibly ignore the world's non-Christian religious traditions but he must assess their basic principles and practices in turn and then compare them with one another.

It was as a result of this exercise that many liberal Protestant students of comparative religion came to what they believed to be the objective and scientific conclusion that Christianity is at the apex of man's religious development. What these scholars have almost universally failed to understand, however, is that having

²¹This view of revelation was first used as a basis for a theory of religion in Britain by F. D. Maurice in *The Religions of the World and their Relations to Christianity* (2 1848, pp. 8-9).

²²W. Cantwell Smith still looks to the mystics as a door of hope for a synthetic view of religion: 'Moreover, as a matter of sober fact, in the past it is primarily the mystics who have produced religious statements that can at all legitimately be called a theology of religions' (*op. cit.*, p. 126).

accepted a subjective idea of revelation their ideas about the essence of Christianity or the essence of any other religion and finally about the essence of religion as such are inevitably going to be subjective. With painful regularity the essence of religion turns out to be what we know the scholar himself believed. This was true of older scholars such as F. Max Müller in the nineteenth century or E. O. James in this century and it is also true of John Hick and Ninian Smart. A is true religion *a* and B is true religion *b* simply because an individual scholar feels that it is true. There is no objective authority for these scholars' dogma other than their own feelings on the matter in the final analysis.

It should be obvious by now that there is at least one position which avoids the scholarly tyranny of the liberal Protestant view of religion and that is the traditional Christian conviction that God can speak and that he has spoken. This very reasonable belief that the God who made men able to communicate with one another in words can also communicate with men in words which are true does at least provide an objective criterion by which man's diverse religious life and experience can be understood. Here I do not judge the revelation but the revelation judges me. Every thought, word and deed can be brought to the bar of God's will as revealed in the Bible – and this not only includes the non-Christians but the Christians also. In this sense Christianity as one of the great religions of the world cannot be regarded as the absolute religion since it too is subject to, and often in need of, the judgment of God's Word revealed in the

Bible.²³ It is only by means of a divine and objective criterion of truth that one can distinguish ultimately between truth and error within Christianity itself as well as between Christianity and other religions and also within non-Christian religions themselves. Modern scholars such as Cantwell Smith²⁴ are right to emphasize the complexity of each individual religious tradition. *E.g.*, it is ridiculous to talk in terms of comparing Christianity and Hinduism since neither of them is a monolithic structure but they are in fact a cluster of different religions within themselves. It is difficult to see much similarity between a devout Roman Catholic going on his knees for miles to the shrine of Fatima in Portugal and the morning worship of Evangelical Brethren! The object of belief and the type of devotion are poles apart. There is probably much more similarity between the Fatima pilgrimage and the Perikrama of Vrindaban²⁵ than with the worship of the Brethren. Such comparisons just highlight the point that without some objective reference there would be no hope whatsoever of making any sense at all of the glorious chaos of the world of religions.

²³This is some way similar to Karl Barth's position. Cf. J. Hick and B. Hebblethwaite (eds.), *Christianity and Other Religions* (London, 1980), pp. 32ff. for a brief outline of his position by Barth himself. However, we suspect that Barth does not escape from subjectivism because of the gulf that he opens between the Word and the biblical witness to him.

²⁴W. Cantwell Smith, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

²⁵Klaus Klostermeier, *Hindu and Christian in Vrindaban* (London, 1969), pp. 14ff.

Dialectical ministry: Christian life and mission in the multi-faith situation

Christopher Lamb

The author worked for many years in Pakistan. He now lives in Britain and co-ordinates the 'Other Faiths Theological Project' of two British missionary societies (BCMS and CMS).¹ In this article he addresses particularly the British scene, but much of what he writes will be relevant to other situations.

1. Jesus' dialectical ministry

At the age of twelve Jesus was found by his anxious parents 'sitting in the temple surrounded by the teachers, listening to them and putting questions' (Lk. 2:46). I long to know what those questions were. Perhaps some day a scholar will give his mind to it, for as the next verse says 'all who heard him were amazed at his intelligence and the answers he gave'. We can be sure that the

¹His brief quarterly paper, *Co-ordinate*, on ministry in a multi-faith situation, may be ordered on payment of £1 per annum from: the Rev. C. Lamb, BCMS/CMS Other Faiths Theological Project, 44 Weoley Park Road, Selly Oak, Birmingham B29 6RB (England).

adolescent Jesus genuinely wanted to know what the intellectual leaders of his people thought, and that he gained much from them. Luke's summary of the whole episode is that 'as Jesus grew up he advanced in wisdom and in favour with God and men' (2:52). It was a landmark in his spiritual and intellectual development.

It was also a sign of his openness to people, and his willingness to engage with them in deep thought – as much as a twelve-year-old can manage. This was the promise of a *dialectical ministry*, a ministry of question, answer and counter-question, which marked all Jesus' meeting with religious and political leaders.

Commentators have noted that the Greek word for 'asking them questions' in Luke 2:46 is *eperōtōnta*, which is also the standard word for the investigative questions put to Jesus by the Pharisees and Sadducees in order to trap him into some indiscretion which could be used against him. One scholar wonders 'whether Luke 2:46 denotes, not so much the questioning curiosity of the

boy, but rather His successful disputing'.² I think not. The questions of Jesus are more probably to be seen as in direct descent from the long line of prophetic questions in the Old Testament. God's questioning of his people in the Old Testament starts at the beginning of Genesis – 'Where are you?' (Gn. 3:9). After the sin which separated the man and the woman from God, his first words are a question. And then another question: 'Who told you that you were naked?' (v. 11). And then a third and a fourth, before the sentence of exclusion from the garden of God is passed.

The link between these Old Testament questions and Jesus' dialectical ministry may at first sight seem remote. But I want to suggest that throughout the Bible God deals with the sinful, poor, blind and naked human race at least as much by means of the question as by the command. The command, though a good gift of God, has failed to maintain the unity of God and humanity and brings condemnation – 'Through that commandment sin found its opportunity . . .' (Rom. 7:8). But God does not leave us condemned by our sin; his purpose is to redeem. And he keeps his relationship with us open through the question. Think of the poignancy of the question 'Where are you?' Is God asking for information? Is he establishing his case against humanity? I think he is looking for a response. The friendship up to now natural and unbroken has known a rift, a silence – something has come between them, a dark shadow chilled the atmosphere and stilled the human tongue. Does not 'Where are you?' mean 'Think where you are – in the garden of God, created by his hand and fashioned by his loveliness into his image'? For the first time man is afraid of God, because he has been beguiled by a question, the question of the serpent: 'Is it true that God has forbidden you . . .' Tricked, floored, deceived by a question, he must now be redeemed by a question – question after question, like a rock climber inching his way up the cliff down which he has fallen. So the questioning goes on all through the Scriptures, as God continually takes the initiative to bridge the gulf between himself and humanity, to secure a glad response which drives out doubt and unbelief.

God says, for example, to Cain: 'Where is your brother Abel? What have you done?' (Gn. 4:9,10); to Abraham: 'Why did Sarah laugh and say, "Shall I indeed bear a child when I am old?" Is anything impossible for the Lord?' (Gn. 18:13,14); to Moses: 'Who is it that gives man speech?' (Ex. 4:11); to David: 'Are you the man to build me a house to dwell in?' (2 Sa. 7:5); to Samuel: 'What shall I give you? tell me' (1 Ki. 3:5); to Elijah (twice): 'Why are you here, Elijah?' (1 Ki. 19:9,13); to Job: 'Who is this whose ignorant words cloud my design in darkness?' (Jb. 38:2).

In Job and the prophets the questions of God become a torrent: 'Where were you when I laid the earth's foundations?' (Jb. 38:4); 'What more could have been done for my vineyard that I did not do in it? Why, when I looked for it to yield grapes, did it yield wild grapes?' (Is.

5:4); 'Whom shall I send? Who will go for me?' (Is. 6:8); 'Will the pot contend with the potter, or the earthenware with the hand that shapes it?' (Is. 45:9); 'Did you think my arm too short to redeem, did you think I had no power to save?' (Is. 50:2); 'What is it that you see, Jeremiah?' (Je. 1:11,13); 'How can I give you up, Ephraim, how surrender you, Israel?' (Ho. 11:8); 'Should I not be sorry for the great city of Nineveh?' (Jon. 4:11).

In the last book of the Hebrew Scriptures the questions fly back and forth in a continuous dialogue: 'You have wearied the Lord with your talk. You ask, "How have we wearied him?" By saying that all evildoers are good in the eyes of the Lord, that he is pleased with them, or by asking, "Where is the God of justice?" Look, I am sending my messenger who will clear a path before me. Suddenly the Lord whom you seek will come to his temple. . . . Who can endure the day of his coming? Who can stand firm when he appears?' (Mal. 2:17-3:2).

This last passage brings us back to our starting-point – *i.e.* to Jesus and the New Testament, since Jesus fulfils the prophecy of Malachi, not, I suggest, just by coming physically to the temple and cleansing it – interestingly, none of the New Testament writers suggests directly that the cleansing of the temple is the fulfilment of the Malachi prophecy – but by himself superceding the temple and bringing into being in himself and in his followers God's new temple (*cf.* Jn. 2:21).

In any case the sudden presence of the Lord's anointed in the physical temple dedicated to the Lord produces a crop of questions, put both to Jesus and by him (Mt. 21:14-22:46). God's long questioning of his people comes to its climax with the critical question: 'What is your opinion about the Messiah? Whose son is he?' (Mt. 22:42). Or in the familiar version; 'What think ye of Christ?' This is of course the pivotal question for conversion. It is *the* evangelical question, and I find it most significant that it is asked in the temple, the very heart and focus of institutional Jewish faith, and asked of the leading representatives of the most enlightened and forward-looking and dedicated religious movement of its time. If anyone knew the right answer these men should. From them came the rabbinic fathers of Talmudic times and virtually all the inspiration which recreated Jewry and Jewish scholarship after the cataclysm which befell the temple in AD 70. When the Sadducees, the priestly class, went down with their temple, the Zealots were eliminated and the Herodians assimilated into Roman society; when the Essenes disappeared into the desert, it was the Pharisees who took charge of the Jewish future. Jesus knew what he was doing when he asked *them* 'What think ye of Christ?'

The question itself was an invitation to consider whether there was not a greater mystery in the expected Messiah than the traditional teaching had so far allowed. Traditional teaching identified the Messiah as the descendant of David, the one who would restore the age of greatness to God's people (*cf.* Acts 1:6). Like so many religious visions, it was essentially backward-looking.

²G. Kittel (ed.), *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans), p. 687.

The golden age, the source of salvation, lay in the past. What was needed was so to purify the common life of the nation that God would bring back again those great days. Even now there is wide currency for a Talmudic view that if the Jews would only keep the sabbath properly for two consecutive weeks, they would bring about the Messianic redemption.³ It seems to me that Jesus was suggesting that this was too narrow a vision. 'It is too slight a task for you, as my servant, to restore the tribes of Jacob, to bring back the descendants of Israel; I will make you a light to the nations, to be my salvation to earth's farthest bounds' (Is. 49:6). God's plan was much further-reaching than they had yet realized, and explored far more deeply than they had bargained for the inner recesses of the human soul. God not only reaches with his salvation to earth's farthest bounds, but also 'searches our inmost being' (Rom. 8:27). What Jesus was really asking the Pharisees was whether they had grasped the scale of God's redemption, whether the image of David and the short-lived temporal glory of Israel was an adequate evocation of what God was about to do.

2. The church's ministry today

I have spend some time in the preceding section discussing the dialectical ministry of Jesus, begun and ended in the temple with the religious leaders of Jewry, because here we find both authority and instruction for our own ministry to people of other faiths. We could, of course, have looked at other parts of Jesus' ministry and found the same pattern of dialectical ministry, and we could have gone on to look at the missionary methods of Paul and the early church (e.g. Acts 18:4). But sufficient has been said to enable us to draw certain conclusions for ourselves. The first lesson to be learned is one of *engagement*. Jesus did not fire off evangelistic salvoes at other people of religion from a distance; he did not write pamphlets and instruct his disciples in the techniques of church growth. These things may have become necessary subsequently, but the first thing was and is actually to meet and engage with people of other faiths. Far too many people are content to secure their evangelical orthodoxy by *talking* about ministry and witness to people of other faiths without being in any way involved in it. In Britain at least, very few Christians are actually in touch with those of other faiths, and many Asians, especially those who live in the inner city areas, have never met a practising Christian believer. Naturally they are very critical of the faith which has produced a society they have been taught to think of as 'Christian', yet which seems to them callous, unjust and careless of the things of God and the kind of behaviour – especially between the sexes – which he requires. Muslims especially are inclined to want to withdraw from such a society, and to bring up their children in the purity and moral and spiritual coherence of traditional Islamic values. Hence in Britain the desire for Muslim schools. There is a real parallel between such people and the *Pharisees*, those who 'separated' themselves from the

'people of the land' in the first century, the better to obey God. Jesus of course had devastating criticisms to make of the Pharisees, but here we have to remember two things. First, Jesus bothered to attack the Pharisaic movement precisely because it was widely respected and, as I have already suggested, deeply significant for the future of Judaism. The Pharisees were people of obvious integrity, and it is because they represented the best in contemporary religion that they merited Jesus' attention, and he theirs. Secondly, however, there was no ethnic or cultural barrier between them. Both sides were members of the Jewish race and people, and in a very important sense Jesus criticized them as one of them, as a devout and deeply committed layman concerned for the spiritual health of the nation.

Our contemporary situation is different, at least in the west, where the great majority of people of other faiths are also ethnically and culturally distinct from the great majority of Christians. They are not only distinct: they are frequently the object of discrimination in education, employment and immigration policies. The immediate need in many contemporary situations is for a Christian *ministry of welcome*, which makes it clear that people of other faiths are regarded by Christians as human beings with the same feelings and needs as everyone else, and as people who have every right to be where they are. Such a Christian ministry of personal welcome, consistent reassurance in the face of racial harassment, and practical help in linguistic and bureaucratic difficulties, is I believe actually pre-supposed by the way that Jesus treated disadvantaged people of all kinds, and by the particular dialectical ministry which I have outlined in his relations with religious leaders. It is sometimes alarming to listen to Christian views about mission and evangelism to those of other faiths and to realize that the speakers have little or no interest in Muslims or Hindus or Sikhs as people, or indeed as religious believers, except in so far as their beliefs can be made to yield angles of approach for Christian propaganda. I use the derogatory word 'propaganda' because of the essentially inhuman attitude which such views betray. There is indeed much unacknowledged racism in western Christian utterances about Islam, Hinduism and other faiths, especially when, as with Islam, a political threat can also be perceived. It sometimes appears the western European Christians have learnt nothing from the long and tragic story of their relations with the Jewish people. With terrible speed the Jew came to be regarded by a Gentile-dominated church not as a person but as a theological stereotype, then an enemy of the gospel, then a figure of sinister intent. Finally the church realized too late that it had helped to create the psychological conditions for Hitler's Final Solution. Christians in West Germany are acutely aware of the legacy of the past as they note the pressures on Turkish people now resident in that country.

However there is no need to allow the tragic past or the sometimes ominous present to paralyse us when it comes to sharing our faith with those of other confessional backgrounds. Nor should there be any contradiction between the ministry of welcome and the

³ Alan Unterman, *Jews. Their Religious Beliefs and Practices* (London: RKP, 1981), p. 170.

ministry of witness. If Jesus came that people might have life, and have it in all its fullness (Jn. 10:10), it is surely a Christian vocation to help people in their struggle against adverse and dehumanizing conditions. If we regard people of every faith and culture as our neighbours, those of us in the dominant community who are Christians have surely a responsibility to see that everyone has a neighbourhood in which they can be themselves. How will this work out in practice? The following 'Do's and don'ts' were designed primarily for Christian ministers and leaders of congregations in British cities where there are substantial communities of Jews, Muslims, Hindus or Sikhs, and they have found wide acceptance. But many of them will have relevance to other situations and places.

3. Do's and don'ts

To be positive first:

1. Do take every opportunity to get to know people of other faiths in your own locality, on the assumption that the church's ministry is there for everyone, whether or not they acknowledge God in Christ. Getting to know people of other faiths can be easy or difficult depending on local history and atmosphere, but people often live in water-tight compartments and it may take a special effort from those who are called the 'host community' to break down the barriers, and make others feel at home too. So if you are the minister of a local church

2. Do make contact with whatever 'opposite number' you can discover, whether rabbi, imam or priest. In this way there can be community to community relationships which may profoundly affect all the subsequent relationships between Christians and people of other faiths in the neighbourhood. Very often those of other faiths are extremely glad to welcome a Christian leader because they know that he represents the traditional faith of the country and his recognition of them is important. Consequently you as leader may well be received with particular courtesy and interest, and here is an opportunity to

3. Create a positive relationship based on what you have in common, allowing the real differences to take second place for the moment. This is a natural, human thing to do, and there is nothing dishonest or hypocritical in it. Moreover it is a western habit to get down to basics straight away. Asian custom cherishes a certain formality in which it is impolite to be direct early in the acquaintance. You may be very concerned for evangelism, but you will be wise to lay the foundations of common ground and a common language. Differences will inevitably emerge, but they can be handled much more creatively after the right preliminaries.

4. Be open and straightforward about your hopes in meeting, which may be very limited because of time and other priorities. Sometimes great difficulties arise when expectations are raised and not fulfilled, and some future Christian group may be the loser if you establish a poor reputation for us. Don't suggest you have more support from your congregation in this venture than you have.

Not all Christians are eager to meet those of other faiths – some feel very threatened. If those of other faiths do not find you completely open they will begin to suspect they are pawns in some strategy and then will be nervous and resentful of your approaches.

5. Do take every opportunity to discover the needs of people of other faiths in your community, and whether there is any way in which local Christian people can contribute to them. Any request for the use of one of your church buildings should be very seriously considered, especially if they are able to assure you that the use of it would be social rather than religious. There may be conscientious reasons for refusing the request and if so these should be sympathetically and carefully explained. Other needs may include the learning of English language skills (to which British churches contribute many volunteer teachers), help with form-filling and the mysteries of British bureaucracy, and other details of the law and customs of this country. Again do not promise more than you can fulfil but make it clear that the church is there to be the servant of the wider community, of which people of other faiths are unmistakably a part.

6. During any incident of racial attack or blatant discrimination make it instantly clear that the church and you as a minister of it totally oppose such things. Be quick to offer reassurance that the British churches have constantly spoken out against racism and that you yourself are committed to fighting it. It is difficult for us to imagine what it is like to be victims of racist attacks and we should never underestimate how vulnerable black and Asian people feel. Equally do not underestimate the extent to which white people in Britain (often without realizing it) contribute in subtle ways to making the ethnic minority groups feel devalued and unwanted.

7. This means that you will need to preach and teach consistently on race relations and on other faiths, aiming at the elimination of fear – fear of alien faces and alien ways – and at the growth of authentic knowledge, knowledge both of the other faith(s) represented in your area, and of the gospel as they might be prepared to hear it. Be prepared for opposition from your congregation on this one, but gently insist there is nothing to fear and much to learn. It may be that you can encourage some members of the congregation to make a special study of another faith, meeting regularly with members of that community.

8. Pray for the opportunity of giving your Christian witness in a sensitive and appropriate way, and try to be as clear and straightforward as possible when that moment comes. Among Sikhs and Hindus in particular you may be asked to speak publicly on the spur of the moment, and it is wise to have some appropriate thoughts ready which are free from Christian jargon and which fit the occasion. Personal testimony is often much more effective than the proclamation of Christian doctrine, since few people will take offence at an account of your own experience sincerely presented. The simple reading of a passage of Scripture may sometimes be the right thing. Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims have little

experience of British people as people of prayer and devotion, and it is good to let them see that some of us are.

9. Be sure to inform the other faith communities of any major Christian events in the locality – for example the induction of a new minister – where it may be right to invite representatives of local other faith communities just as other representatives of the wider local community are invited. Any programme of visitation by the church should also be notified if it includes, as it should, the visiting of people of other faiths. Prior warning of this sort may prevent misunderstanding and opposition, e.g. from the local mosque.

10. Do take advice from the many people with experience and expertise in these fields. All the main denominations now have their committees examining these issues, and some their publications. The British Council of Churches has produced documents, e.g. about the use of church buildings, and has a full-time secretary available for consultation. At local level RE teachers are in many cases now engaged in teaching world faiths and can offer both detailed knowledge and some relevant experience. At the same time they, and others particularly involved in this kind of ministry, need the support and encouragement of the clergy and the backing of prayer in what can be a lonely and sometimes puzzling vocation. For up to now British theologians have not given the whole subject the attention and personal involvement it needs.

The 'don'ts' are of course mainly the converse of the 'do's', but some of these may not be so obvious:

1. Don't make prior judgments about the faith of those you go to meet. When you really get to know them you may be very surprised that what they actually believe is not what the textbooks say they are supposed to believe. Resist the temptation to correct them about their own faith, even if you appear to know (for example) the Qur'an better than they do! Among many Jews and Hindus you will find that belief is much less important than observing the right custom or law. That doesn't mean they are legalistic: simply that they attach more importance to doing than to thinking.

2. Don't go in with all evangelical guns blazing on the conviction that unless you make a statement for Christ in the first few minutes you are in some way letting him down. That kind of aggressive evangelism is often offensive or simply bewildering. True evangelism is usually a long and costly process. At the same time Asians are far readier to talk about spiritual things than most white British. Don't give them the wrong impression by being reluctant to do so too. And don't be trapped into fruitless arguments, especially with Muslims.

3. Don't imagine that the words you use will necessarily be understood in the sense you intend. The people you go to may speak English only as a second or third language and therefore miss many of the nuances of your speech. They are likely to find it difficult to translate what they want to say adequately into English. Even

with Asians brought up and educated entirely in this country we need always to be alert to the possibility that what we are saying has not been so much rejected as incorrectly understood, or conversely that we appear to be in agreement when we are really saying quite different things. 'Son of God' to a Muslim implies physical paternity: 'everlasting life' to a Hindu means rebirth into endless lives: 'mission' to a Jew means the attempt to destroy his community.

4. Don't expect the same patterns of social engagement. Many Asians never use a diary and are genuinely delighted when people simply drop in. They are devoutly disinclined to mortgage an uncertain future to meetings arranged weeks ahead. Muslims invariably use the safeguarding term *insh'Allah* (if God will) when making any future engagements. This freer attitude to time means that we should

5. Never attempt to rush through a visit to a mosque or temple in a few odd minutes. If you don't have time to drink a cup of tea with them it may be better not to go, or to keep in touch for the time being by telephone. Hospitality is of enormous importance in eastern traditions and people may feel really let down if you refuse it. Far from creating problems for the host, hospitality is seen as a religious duty in which the guest is honoured and the host acquires a sense of nobility through his ability to confer that honour.

6. Don't expect the same sense of humour. This can be important where religious issues are concerned. Jews characteristically make jokes about themselves and God and all sorts of religious matters. If you try the same kind of jokes with Muslims they will be scandalized. Other people's humour is perhaps the most difficult thing of all to appreciate – usually it seems crude, childish or bewildering. Since the English often pride themselves on their sense of humour this can be an area of great misunderstanding, requiring not a little humility.

7. Don't, of course, by the way you talk or behave imply disrespect for the customs, furnishings or beliefs of the people you have gone to. This means being prepared to remove your shoes in temple and mosque, and cover your head in the synagogue and Sikh gurdwara (where you must also remove your shoes). Women in the mosque should dress in what Muslims consider a modest fashion, which usually means no short skirts or bare arms. The key guideline seems to be respect for the reverence or discipline of others. So we don't serve a Jew or Muslim pork, or a Sikh or Hindu beef because we respect them. Similarly we stand in respectful silence before the Sikh scriptures or a Hindu image because we respect our hosts. It would be wrong to pay a reverence to the image itself which as Christians we in no way feel.

8. Don't expect the same attitudes to relations between the sexes, especially where Muslims are concerned. Muslim women do not generally shake hands with men. Usually they keep in the background (though they can be extremely powerful in the family), and this may create difficulties for a woman Christian minister going to the mosque. The attitudes of Muslim men should not be understood as conveying male superiority

so much as an unease and unfamiliarity in meeting women outside the family circle. A Christian woman who is both self-assured and sensitive can break through this barrier. A man should never visit an Asian woman in her home when her menfolk are absent.

9. Don't pretend to have more knowledge than you do, or expect those of other faiths to be expert theologians in their own field. Either way people may become defensive and the spontaneity and humanity of meeting is lost. The issues of religion involve profound convictions and people very easily feel threatened especially if they are a small minority in an alien land trying to converse in an alien tongue.

10. Don't too quickly class people who appear to have drifted from their family faith as 'nominal' or 'only cultural' Muslims/Hindus/Sikhs, *etc.*, even if that is their self-description. The bonds of community life, though weakening in the west, are much more powerful than in the rest of British society, and revival movements often bring about a return to the ancestral faith, particularly when people feel rejected by the rest of society. Great care needs to be taken when a marriage is planned between a committed Christian and someone of an Asian background.

4. Dialogue and commitment

Readers will notice that the word 'dialogue' has not yet been used in its technical sense in this paper. What I have been commending, however, is called 'dialogue' by some Christians, or at least a 'dialogical' style of relating to people of other faiths. An open, natural approach which does not pretend there are no disagreements but refuses to put disagreement in the forefront of the relationship – an approach which is person-centred not just doctrine-centred, an approach which is eager to learn *how* as well as *what* the other thinks, so that the 'language' of the other may be learned and Christ shared through it – this is the kind of dialogue which Christian missionaries have practised for generations, and which now much wider circles in the church must learn to practise too. There are of course other misunderstandings of dialogue which emphasize the risk of being convinced by the other's point of view, or which require from the outset that any attempt at persuasion of the other must be abandoned. Neither interpretation seems to me very realistic. One position places too much importance on the intellectual expression of the faith, the other too little. If you enter dialogue with someone of another faith consciously determined to follow wherever the argument seems to lead, so that you are willing to become, *e.g.*, a Muslim at the end of it, the implication is surely that faith is all in your head, that no sense of belonging or identity is involved, but that the question can be settled entirely by argument. I trust my faith goes deeper than that. If Christ is all in all to me, and I have been incorporated into him by baptism, I am simply not free to hand over my life to anyone else, however powerful his argument.

In practice not many people adopt this line. Far more common is the resolute refusal to engage in persuasion at all. This is justified by some version of the idea that there

are many truths, and some have grasped one and some another. In a common refinement of this thesis I hear people say that there are many aspects of the one truth, but the underlying reality is the same. It is of course true that God is far greater than the sum of all our apprehensions of him, but that is a truth better acknowledged in prayer than in discussion. When we speak we use words, and if words are to have any meaning at all they must carry roughly the same value for all those who use them. It is simply meaningless to talk about things being 'true for me' but not 'true for you'. What is true for me must be at least potentially true for you, or else it is not even true for me. It is an illusion, a solipsist dream. No religious faith can admit that much subjectivity, least of all one which has incarnation at its heart.

This is not to deny much common ground between the religions of the world, only to insist that there are irreconcilable differences between them, and that anyone who is convinced that he has hold of the truth is bound to want to share that truth with others. I hope I have said enough to show how important is the manner and the timing of that attempt to share. But even in the contemporary world there are many Christians who do not have the opportunity yet to meet with those of other faiths. Their encounter with the issue is principally through their general education at school and through the media. Such exposure will raise theological issues implicitly but not solve them. Children at school will be given perhaps a more or less accurate account of what Muslims believe and how they practise their faith, and the world-wide significance of Islam, but it is likely that no-one will set that faith side-by-side with Christian faith to ask how Christians should view it, what spiritual truth may be credited to it, and how it may be thought to feature in God's design for the world. The pupil is usually left to answer such questions for himself, and in the absence of any more careful guidance he is likely to conclude that faith is principally a matter of taste or conditioning. Since it is only a minority in the western world who appear to take such things seriously he may be forgiven for assuming that it is anyway a matter of indifference.

This is unquestionably an omission in his personal life, but it can have more public consequences. The Iranian revolution caught most western governments by surprise, for few people in the west supposed that religious motivation could achieve so much. The positive aspects of that movement have been overlaid by the tragic developments common to so many revolutionary events. 'The Revolution eats its own children.' But it should not be forgotten that in 1978-79 an extremely repressive government with strong western backing was overturned by people fighting literally with their bare hands against tanks and well-trained soldiers. The people were primarily sustained by the belief that God would honour the justice of their cause. Few in the west supposed that religion could be so significant in people's lives, for their own experience and understanding locates religious belief firmly in the private sector. It is a personal, domestic matter of little public consequence. It can therefore be viewed with the detachment thought

proper to scholarly inquiry, or ignored altogether, according to taste.

It would take many more pages to explain how this peculiarly western, and oddly unrealistic attitude to religion came about. An explanation may lie in the moral exhaustion of western Europe after the religious wars of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Whatever the reason the characteristic attitude of western governments towards religious issues is now one of studied neutrality, and this is of course reflected in educational circles wherever religious issues are dealt with in publicly-financed schools and colleges. In Britain the teacher of the religious education class in a government school cannot afford to appear to be 'proselytising' for his or her faith. He must present Christianity and other world religions 'in neutrality', as though he had made no prior judgments of his own about them. This is difficult enough to do in teaching literature (to take a parallel case), but surely it is infinitely more difficult to do when one's whole orientation of life is at stake. The only honest procedure (at least in secondary schools and beyond) seems to be for the teacher to make clear his or her own commitment, or lack of commitment, at the outset, and allow his pupils to make their own judgments about any bias in the material he presents to them. What seems quite wrong is to assume that objectivity precludes personal commitment. To act as though personal commitment in religion were somehow detrimental to objective teaching about religion is to sanctify indifference (usually disguised as 'toleration'), and make religious studies ultimately meaningless. The attempt to study religion as a merely human activity (the 'phenomenological' approach), while it has produced a wealth of interesting material, is ultimately untrue to the nature

of religion, for it fails to deal with the conviction at the heart of it. As Kenneth Cragg once wrote: 'A living religion calls for study on the part of those whose religion is alive.' He warned western scholars of Islam against taking refuge 'in the illusion, or the comfort, of a study that calls for no action, incurs no debts and involves no responsibilities other than logic and verification'.⁴ The warning might be pinned up on the door of all university departments of theology, together with the famous verse of the Urdu poet Ghālib:

The secret that is hidden in the breast is not a sermon;
You cannot utter it in the pulpit, but on the gallows.⁵

5. Conclusion

I began with Jesus in the temple, listening to the learned men of faith and asking them questions. The task of the student of theology is still to listen and to ask questions, while sitting in the temples of human conviction and commitment. If the questions we ask are deep enough, and relevant enough, they will eventually focus on the fundamental question: 'What think ye of Christ?' Because of the unsurpassed loveliness of Jesus, and even because of the often unlovely lives of his people, many of other faiths throughout the world are beginning to answer that question. The answers are not yet all that we would hope for,⁶ any more than our own discipleship properly matches our profession of Christ, but our vocation in a multi-faith world is to go on trying to focus the question.

⁴*The Muslim World*, vol. 42 (1952), p. 217.

⁵Annemarie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* (Chapel Hill, N. Carolina, 1975), p. 76.

⁶See my *Jesus Through Other Eyes. Christology in Multi-Faith Context* (Oxford: Latimer House, 1982).