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Pluralism and the Decade of Evangelism

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Pluralism has become of major importance to the English churches. It is not simply a fact of life; it is a major consideration which must be addressed by all who are concerned with the maintenance of Christian integrity and the responsible proclamation of the gospel in the Decade of Evangelism. The present paper aims to outline the problems, and suggest some approaches by which they may be seen in their proper context. My particular concern is to address the criticism that evangelism is arrogant and imperalist, and totally inappropriate in a pluralist society. While this criticism has the advantage of political correctness, it is intellectually shallow, and, as I hope to show in what follows, is potentially self-destructive. In the course of the discussion, I shall deal with several of the objections to evangelism which are particularly encountered in academic circles, given the importance that these have for university and college Christian chaplains, leaders and evangelists.

The Decade of Evangelism has captured the imagination of Christians throughout the world. My American colleagues often comment on the vision of a church which sets itself the joyful task of sharing the good news of the gospel with such seriousness over a sustained period of time. Naturally, there has been no shortage of criticisms and misrepresentations of the Decade, often from a secular press unable (and perhaps unwilling?) to make the simple, yet vital, distinction between fundamentalist indoctrination and the sharing of convictions. Rightly understood, evangelism is an act of generosity, in which those who have joyfully received share the gift of the gospel with others, in order that they too might rejoice. But what are the implications of sharing the good news of Christ in a pluralist situation?

Commenting on his theme, 'the gospel in a pluralist society', Lesslie Newbigin remarks:

> It has become a commonplace to say that we live in a pluralist society — not merely a society which is in fact plural in the variety of cultures, religions and lifestyles which it embraces, but pluralist in the sense that this plurality is celebrated as things to be approved and cherished.[1]

Newbigin here makes a distinction between pluralism as a fact of life, and pluralism as an ideology — that is, the belief that pluralism is to be encouraged and desired, and that normative claims to truth are to be

1 Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, SPCK, London 1989, p 1.

censured as imperialist and divisive. With the former, there can be no arguing. The Christian proclamation has always taken place in a pluralist world, in competition with rival religious and intellectual convictions. The emergence of the gospel within the matrix of Judaism, the expansion of the gospel in a Hellenistic milieu, the early Christian expansion in pagan Rome, the establishment of the *Mar Thoma* church in southeastern India — all of these are examples of situations in which Christian apologists and theologians, not to mention ordinary Christian believers, have been aware that there are alternatives to Christianity on offer.

It is quite possible that this insight may have been lost to most English Christians of the late nineteenth or early twentieth centuries, trapped in a contented and lazy English parochialism. For such people, pluralism might have meant little more than a variety of forms of Protestantism, while 'different religions' would probably have been understood to refer simply to the age-old tension between Protestantism and Roman Catholicism. Yet immigration from the Indian subcontinent has changed things in England, with Hinduism and Islam becoming foci of identity for ethnic minorities, just as France has been shaken by the new presence of Islam through emigration from its former North African colonies. As a result, western theologians (who still seem to dominate global discussion of such issues) have at long last become aware of and begun to address issues which are routine facts of everyday life for Christians in many parts of the world. Yet often, as we shall see, this belated awakening to the issue of religious pluralism is often formulated and discussed on the basis of a set of western liberal, rather than Christian, assumptions.

The basic fact of pluralism, then, is nothing new. What is new is the western response to this phenomenon: the suggestion that plurality of beliefs is not merely a matter of observable fact, but is theoretically justified — in intellectual and cultural life in general, and in particularly in relation to the religions. Claims by any one group or individual to have any exclusive hold on 'truth' are thus treated as the intellectual equivalent of fascism. Significantly, the first casualty of the pluralist agenda is truth.

The discussion of this issue is often focussed on the specific phenomenon of *religious* pluralism. While this has the merit of simplicity, it overlooks the vital fact that recent trends towards pluralism, especially in North America, are grounded in and nourished by an underlying ideology of pluralism. This ideology, which is usually designated 'postmodernism', is the essential starting point for any discussion of pluralism.

Intellectual pluralism

The intellectual foundations of pluralism are associated with the movement known as postmodernism, which is generally taken to be something of a cultural sensibility without absolutes, fixed certainties or foundations, and which takes delight in pluralism and divergence. One aspect of postmodernism which illustrates this trend particularly well, while also indicating its obsession with texts and language, is *deconstruction* — the critical method which virtually declares that the identity and intentions of

the author of a text are an irrelevance to the interpretation of the text, prior to insisting that, in any case, no meaning can be found in it. All interpretations are equally valid, or equally meaningless (depending upon your point of view). As Paul de Man, one of the leading American proponents of this approach, declared, the very idea of 'meaning' smacked of Fascism. This approach, which blossomed in post-Vietnam America, was given intellectual respectability by academics such as de Man, Geoffrey Hartman, Harold Bloom, and J. Hillis Miller.[2]

The inconsistencies of postmodernism

The lunacy of this position only became publicly apparent with the sensational publication of some wartime articles of de Man. On 1 December 1989, the *New York Times* reported the discovery of anti-semitic and pro-Nazi articles, written by de Man for the Belgian Nazi newspaper, *Le Soir*. A scandal resulted. Was de Man's deconstructionalism an attempt to deny his own past? Was de Man himself really a Fascist, trying to escape from his own guilt? And, given the axiomatic status of the 'fallacy of authorial intention' within postmodernism, nobody could argue that de Man had actually meant something different from the impression created by those articles; after all, the author's views were, according to deconstruction, an irrelevance. No attempt could be made to excuse le Man by an appeal to his historical circumstances; for le Man himself had written that 'considerations of the actual and historical existence of writers are a waste of time from a critical viewpoint.' Deconstruction thus seemed to sink into the mire of internal inconsistency.

'Truth' and political correctness

Postmodernism has an endemic aversion to questions of truth, regarding this as the equivalent of intellectual fascism. Political correctness suggests that the idea of 'truth' has strongly authoritarian overtones. As Allan Bloom summarizes this outlook in *The Closing of the American Mind*:

> The danger... is not error but intolerance. Relativism is necessary to openness; and this is the virtue, the only virtue, which all primary education for more than fifty years has dedicated itself to inculcating. Openness — and the relativism that makes it the only plausible stance in the face of various claims to truth and the various ways of life and kinds of human beings — is the great insight of our times. The true believer is the real danger. The study of history and of culture teaches that all the world was mad in the past; men always thought they were right, and that led to wars, persecutions, slavery, xenophobia, racism and chauvinism. The point is not to correct the mistakes and really be right; rather it is not to think that you are right at all.[3]

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2 For an excellent analysis, see David Lehman, *Signs of the Times*, Andre Deutsch, London 1991.

3 Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind*, Simon & Schuster, New York 1987, pp 25f.

Yet we have already noted that pretensions to be 'right' litter the pluralist agenda. John Hick clearly believes that he is correct in his perception of the world's religions, whereas that of the 1960 Congress on World Mission is 'ridiculous' and wrong. But the real challenge of pluralism lies in the position outlined by Bloom — that claims to 'be right' constitute an intolerant intellectual fascism.

But the need to have the truth question on the agenda is relatively easily argued. One method of approach might be the following. To the postmodern suggestion that something can be 'true-for-me' but not 'true', the following reply might be made. Is Fascism as equally true as democratic libertarianism? Consider the person who believes, passionately and sincerely, that it is an excellent thing to burn widows alive on Hindu funeral pyres.[4] Others might argue that it is justifiable to place millions of Jews in gas chambers. But can such beliefs really be allowed to pass unchallenged, as postmodernism seems to allow?

The moral seriousness of such questions often acts as the intellectual equivalent of a battering ram, bringing out the fact that certain views just cannot be allowed to be true. There must be some criteria, some standards of judgement, which allow one to exclude certain viewpoints as unacceptable. Otherwise, postmodernism will be seen to be uncritical and naive, a breeding ground of the political and moral complacency which allowed the rise of the Third Reich back in the 1930s. Even postmodernism has difficulties in allowing that Nazism is a good thing. Yet precisely that danger lies there, as evidenced by the celebrated remark of Jean-Paul Sartre: 'tomorrow, after my death, certain people may decide to establish fascism, and the others may be cowardly or miserable enough to let them get away with it. At that moment, fascism will be the truth of man.'

This is an important point, perhaps the point at which postmodernism is at its most vulnerable. To lend extra weight to it, we may consider the consequences of the ethical views of Michel Foucault, generally regarded as one of the intellectual pillars of postmodern thought.

A case study: Michel Foucault

Foucault argues passionately, in a series of highly original and creative works, that the very idea of 'truth' grows out of the interests of the powerful. 'Truth' can support systems of repression, by identifying standards to which people can be forced to conform.[5] Thus what is 'mad' or 'criminal' does not

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4 Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind*, p 26. For an account of the British decision to abolish the practice of *sati* (the preferred transcription of the Sanskrit; the alternative *suttee* is often encountered in the older literature), see Stephen Neill, *A History of Christianity in India*, 1707-1858, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1985, pp 157f. Regulation XVII of the Bengal Code (1829) declared that 'the practice of suttee, or of burning or burying alive the widows of Hindus, is hereby illegal, and punishable by the criminal courts'.

5 The most important writings are his *Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, Vintage Books, New York 1973; *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977*, Pantheon Books, New York 1980; *Histoire de la folie à l'âge classique*, Gallimard, Paris 1972.

depend upon some objective criterion, but upon the standards and interests of those in authority. Each society has its 'general politics of truth', which serves its vested interests. 'Truth' thus serves the interests of society, by perpetuating its ideology, and providing a rational justification for the imprisonment or elimination of those who happen to contradict its general outlook. And philosophy can too easily become an accomplice in this repression, by providing the oppressors with rational arguments to justify their practices. Philosophers have allowed society to believe that it was persecuting its marginal elements on the basis of 'truth' or 'morality' — universal and objective standards of morality, of what is right and wrong — rather than on the basis of its own vested interests.

For such reasons, Foucault believes that the very idea of objective truth or morality must be challenged. This belief has passed into the structure of much of postmodernism. But is it right? Is not the truth that Foucault's criticism actually rests upon a set of quite definite beliefs about what is right and what is wrong? To give an illustration: throughout Foucault's writings, we find a passionate belief that repression is wrong. Foucault himself is committed to an objective moral value — that freedom is to be preferred to repression. It is necessary to point out that Foucault's critique of morality actually presupposes certain moral values. Beneath his critique of conventional ethics lies a hidden set of moral values, and an unacknowledged commitment to them. Foucault's critique of the moral values of society seems to leave him without any moral values of his own — yet his critique of social values rests upon his own intuitively accepted (rather than explicitly acknowledged and theoretically justified) moral values, which he clearly expects his readers to share. Yet why is struggle preferable to submission? Why is freedom to be chosen, rather than repression? These normative questions demand answers, if Foucault's position can be justified — yet Foucault has vigorously rejected an appeal to general normative principles as an integral part of his method. In effect, he makes an appeal to sentimentality, rather than reason, to pathos rather than to principles.[6] That many shared his intuitive dislike of repression ensured he was well received — but the fundamental question remains unanswered. Why is repression wrong? And that same question remains unanswered within postmodernism, which is vulnerable precisely where Foucault is vulnerable.

As Richard Rorty, perhaps the most distinguished American philosopher to develop Foucault's dislike of general principles and normative standards, remarks, a consequence of this approach must be the recognition that

> There is nothing deep down inside us except what we have put there ourselves, no criterion that we have not created in the course of creating a practice, no standard of rationality that is not an appeal to such a criterion, no rigorous argumentation that is not obedience to our own conventions.[7]

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6 Stanley Rosen, *Hermeneutics as Politics*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1987, pp 189-90.

7 Richard Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism*, University of Minneapolis Press, Minneapolis 1982, p xlii.

But if this approach is right, what justification could be given for opposing Nazism? Or Stalinism? Rorty cannot give a justification for the moral or political rejection of totalitarianism, as he himself concedes. If he is right, Rorty admits, then he has to acknowledge

> ...that when the secret police come, when the torturers violate the innocent, there is nothing to be said to them of the form 'There is something within you which you are betraying. Though you embody the practices of a totalitarian society, which will endure forever, there is something beyond those practices which condemns you.'[8]

It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that, for Rorty, the truth of moral values depends simply upon their existence. And it is at this point that many postmodernists feel deeply uneasy. Something seems to be wrong here. And this sense of unease is an important point of entry for the Christian insistence that, in the first place, truth *matters*, and in the second, that it is *accessible*.

And that is why it continues to be important to insist, not just that truth matters, but that Christianity is true. Stanley Hauerwas wrote that 'the only reason for being a Christian... is because Christian convictions are true'.[9] Princeton philosopher Diogenes Allen tells the story of the person who asked him why he should go to church when he had no religious needs. 'Because Christianity's true', was Allen's riposte.[10] Gordon Lewis' book *Testing Christianity's Truth Claims*[11] is important, not simply on account of its documentation of recent developments in apologetics, but because it firmly declares that truth claims are being made, that they are capable of being tested, and that, as a matter of principle, they ought to be tested. And if pluralism is resistant to having its truth claims tested, it can hardly expect to be taken seriously, save by those who — for the culturally-conditioned moment — share its prejudices. It will be a sad day when a claim to be telling the truth is met with the riposte that there is no truth to tell.

Religious pluralism

Alongside the postmodern celebration of pluralism in general we now encounter a new concern for *religious pluralism*. The rise of religious pluralism can be related directly to the collapse of the Enlightenment idea of universal knowledge, rather than any difficulties within Christianity itself. Often, there is a crude attempt to divert attention from the collapse of the Enlightenment vision by implying that religious pluralism represents a new and unanswerable challenge to Christianity itself. The Princeton philosopher Diogenes Allen rightly dismisses this as a spurious claim:

> Many have been driven to relativism by the collapse of the Enlightenment's confidence in the power of reason to provide foundations for our truth-claims and to achieve finality in our search for truth in the

8 Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism*, p xlii.
9 Stanley Hauerwas, *A Community of Character*, University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame 1981, p 1.
10 Diogenes Allen, *Christian Belief in a Postmodern World*, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville 1989, p 1.
11 Gordon R. Lewis, *Testing Christianity's Truth Claims: Approaches to Christian Apologetics*, University Press of America, New York 1990.

various disciplines. Much of the distress concerning pluralism and relativism which is voiced today springs from a crisis in the secular mentality of modern western culture, not from a crisis in Christianity itself.[12]

Yet these relativistic assumptions have become deeply ingrained within secular society, often with the assumption that they are to the detriment of Christian faith.

So, given that there are so many religions in the marketplace, how can Christianity claim to be true? It is important to appreciate that a cultural issue is often linked with this debate: to defend Christianity is to be seen to belittle non-Christian religions, which is unacceptable in a multicultural society. Especially to those of liberal political convictions, the multicultural agenda demands that religions should not be permitted to make truth-claims, to avoid triumphalism or imperialism. Indeed, there seems to be a widespread perception that the rejection of religious pluralism entails intolerance, or unacceptable claims to exclusivity. In effect, the liberal political agenda dictates that all religions should be treated on an equal footing. It is but a small step from this *political* judgement to the *theological* declaration that all religions are the same. But is there any reason for progressing from the entirely laudable and acceptable demand that we should respect religions other than our own, to the more radical demand that we regard them all as the same, or as equally valid manifestations of some eternal dimension of life?

All religions lead to God?

In one of its more extreme forms, this view might be stated as follows: all religions lead to God. But this cannot be taken seriously, when some world religions are avowedly non-theistic (although some western writers, irritated by non-theistic religions, have argued that they really are theistic, despite what their adherents believe — thus neatly forcing all religions into the same mould). A religion can hardly lead to God if it explicitly denies the existence of a god or any gods. We therefore need to restate the question in terms of 'ultimate reality', or 'truth'. Thus refined, this position might be stated as follows: religion is often determined by the circumstances of one's birth; an Indian is likely to be a Hindu; an Arab is likely to be a Moslem. On account of this observation, it is argued, all religions must be equal paths to the truth.

This makes truth a function of birth. If I were to be born into Nazi Germany, I would be likely to be a Nazi — and this makes Nazism *true*? If I had been born in ancient Rome, I would probably have shared its polytheism; if I had been born in modern Arabia, I would be a monotheist. So they are both true? This shockingly naive view of truth would not be taken seriously anywhere else. No other intellectual discipline would accept such a superficial approach to truth. Why accept it here? It seems to rest upon an entirely laudable wish to allow that everyone is right, which ends up

12 Allen, *Christian Belief in a Postmodern World*, p 9.

destroying the notion of truth itself. Consider the two propositions:

A Different people have different religious views;

B Therefore all religious views are equally valid.

Is proposition (B) in any way implied by proposition (A)? For the form of liberalism committed to this approach, mere existence of a religious idea appears to be a guarantor of its truth! No-one seems prepared to fight for the truth-content of defunct religions, such as classical polytheism — perhaps because there is no-one alive committed to them, whose views need to be respected in a multicultural situation?

Sincere belief is true

The fatal weakness of this approach usually leads to its being abandoned, and being replaced with a modified version, which could be stated thus: 'any view which is held with sincerity may be regarded as true'. I might thus be a Nazi, a Satanist, or a passionate believer in the flatness of the earth. My sincerity is a guarantee of the truth. On this view, it would follow that if someone sincerely believes that modern Europe would be a better place if six million Jews were to be placed in gas chambers, the sincerity of those convictions allow that view to be accepted as true. The British philosopher of religion John Hick summarizes the contempt with which this view is held: 'to say that whatever is sincerely believed and practised is, by definition, true, would be the end of all critical discrimination, both intellectual and moral.'[13]

It is therefore more than a little ironic that the most significant advocate of the pluralist 'truth-in-all-religions' approach is this same John Hick, who argues that the same basic infinite divine reality lies at the experiential roots of all religions. However, he maintains, they experience and express this reality in different ways. Why? 'Their differing experiences of that reality, interacting over the centuries with the different thought-forms of different cultures, have led to an increasing differentiation and contrasting elaboration.'[14] This approach thus suggests that the various religions must be understood to complement one another. In other words, truth does not lie in an 'either-or' but in a 'both-and' approach. On the basis of Hick's homogenizing approach, no genuine conflicting truth-claims can occur. They are ruled out of order, on a priori grounds. By definition, religions can only complement, not contradict, each other. In practice, Hick appears to contradict himself here, frequently declaring that 'exclusive' approaches to religions are *wrong*. For example, he styles the traditional 'salvation through Christ alone' statements of the 1960 Congress on World Mission as 'ridiculous' — where, by his own criteria, the most stinging criticism that could be directed at them is that they represent a 'difference in perception'. The inherent absurdity of Hick's refusal to take an evaluative position in relation to other religions is totally compromised by his eagerness to adopt such a position in relation to versions of Christianity which threaten his outlook, both on account of their numerical strength and non-inclusive theologies.

13 John Hick, *Truth and Dialogue*, Sheldon Press, London 1974, p 148.

14 John Hick, *God and the Universe of Faiths*, Collins, London 1977, p 146.

When all is said and done, and when all differences in expression arising from cultural and intellectual development are taken into account, Hick must be challenged forcefully concerning his crudely homogenizing approach to the world religions. It is absurd to say that a religion which says that there *is* a God complements a religion which declares, with equal vigour, that there is *not* a God (and both types of religion exist).[15] If the religious believer actually believes *something*, then disagreement is inevitable — and proper. As the distinguished American philosopher Richard Rorty remarked, nobody 'except the occasional cooperative freshman' really believes that 'two incompatible opinions on an important topic are equally good.'[16]

Liberal imperialism and the religions

One of the most serious difficulties which arises here relates to the fact that, on the basis of Hick's model, it is not individual religions which have access to truth; it is the western liberal pluralist, who insists that each religion must be seen in the context of others, before it can be evaluated. As many have pointed out, this means that the western liberal doctrine of religious pluralism is defined as the only valid standpoint for evaluating individual religions. Hick has set at the centre of his system of religions a vague and undefined idea of 'the Eternal One', which seems to be little more than a vague liberal idea of divinity, carefully defined — or, more accurately, deliberately *not* defined, to avoid the damage that precision entails — to include at least something from all of the major world religions Hick feels it is worth including.

To develop this important point, let us consider a well-worn analogy concerning the relation of the religions. Let us allow Lesslie Newbigin to describe it, and make a vitally important observation:

> In the famous story of the blind men and the elephant... the real point of the story is constantly overlooked. The story is told from the point of view of the king and his courtiers, who are not blind but can see that the blind men are unable to grasp the full reality of the elephant and are only able to get hold of part of it. The story is constantly told in order to neutralize the affirmations of the great religions, to suggest that they learn humility and recognize that none of them can have more than one aspect of the truth. But, of course, the real point of the story is exactly the opposite. If the king were also blind, there would be no story. The story is told by the king, and it is the immensely arrogant claim of one who sees the full truth, which all the world's religions are only groping after. It embodies the claim to know the full reality which relativizes all the claims of the religions.[17]

Newbigin brings out with clarity the arrogance of the liberal claim to be able to see all the religions from the standpoint of one who sees the full truth. The liberal pluralist is the king; the unfortunate evangelical is the blind-

15 Hugo Meynell, 'On the Idea of a World Theology', *Modern Theology* 1 (1985), pp 149-63.

16 Rorty, *The Consequences of Pragmatism*, p 166.

17 Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, pp 9f.

folded beggar. Or so the pluralist would have us believe. Perhaps a more responsible — and considerably less arrogant — approach would be to suggest that we are all, pluralists included, blind beggars, to whom God graciously makes himself known.

Yet is not this approach shockingly imperialist? Hick's implication is that it is only the educated western liberal academic who, like the king, can *really* understand all the religions. Their adherents may naively believe that they have access to the truth; in fact, only the western liberal academic has such privileged access, which is denied to those who belong to and practice such religion. Despite not being a Buddhist, Hick is able to tell the Buddhist what he or she really believes (as opposed to what they think they believe). Perhaps one of the most astonishing claims made by liberals in this respect can be found in *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness*, in which a number of contributors — such as Paul Knitter, Langdon Gilkey, Rosemary Radford Ruether and Tom Driver — assert that all the religious traditions can share a common outlook on justice and liberation. This arrogant imposition of political correctness upon the world religions glosses over the patently obvious fact that the world religions have differed — and continue to differ — significantly over social and political matters, as much as over *religious* ideas.

Let us hear one of Rosemary Radford Ruether's Olympian pronouncements on the relation of the religions. She clearly does not intend to enter into dialogue with her opponents when, like Zeus hurling a thunderbolt at those far below him, she delivers her verdict that 'the idea that Christianity, or even the Biblical faiths, have a monopoly on religious truth is an outrageous and absurd religious chauvinism.'[18]

Yet the assumption which underlies the thinking of most of the contributors to *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness* is that a liberal pluralism does, in effect, have a monopoly on religious truth, by allowing religions to be seen in their proper context. It alone provides the vantage point from which the true relation of the religions can be seen. Is this not also an 'outrageous and absurd' imperialism? Ruether effectively treats her own religious position as privileged, detached, objective and correct; whereas that of Christianity (or, at least, those forms of Christianity which she dislikes) is treated with little more than scorn and a sneer.

So why should we accept a liberal interpretative standpoint, which owes little if anything to Christian beliefs, and is only 'objective' in the minds of those who espouse it? *All* vantage points are committed, in some way or another. There is no neutral Archimedean point. We need to expose 'the myth of a pluralistic theology of religions', to quote the subtitle of a significant recent publication in this field.[19]

If a naive pluralism has gained the upper hand in the academic world, it is partly because evangelicals have allowed it to do so, by failing to articulate

18 Rosemary Radford Ruether, 'Feminism and Jewish-Christian Dialogue', in J. Hick and P. Knitter (eds.), *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness*, Orbis, Maryknoll, NY 1987, p 141.

19 Gavin D'Costa (ed.), *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered: The Myth of a Pluralistic Theology of Religions*, Orbis, Maryknoll, NY 1990.

a credible, coherent and convincing and *Christian* interpretation of the place of the world religions,[20] and ensure that this is heard and noticed in the public arena. Earlier, I stressed the importance of developing a framework to make sense of, and evaluate, the place and ideas of other religions. Carl E. Braaten makes this point as follows:

> For Christian theology, the religions cannot establish their meaning in a final way apart from the light that falls on them from the gospel: that is, we know what we know about what God is doing in them in the light of Christ; otherwise, we would not know what sense to make of them. Some definite perspective needs to guide our interpretations and appropriations.[21]

There is an urgent need to develop a Christian theology of religions — a distinctively and authentically Christian approach to this issue, which avoids the imperialism of recent liberal approaches.

Liberalism deletes Christianity's distinctive features

The pluralist agenda has certain important theological consequences. It is a simple matter of fact that traditional Christian theology does not lend itself particularly well to the homogenizing agenda of religious pluralists. The suggestion that all religions are more or less talking about vaguely the same thing finds itself in difficulty in relation to certain essentially Christian ideas — most notably, the doctrines of the incarnation and the Trinity. These distinctive doctrines are embarrassing to those who wish to debunk what they term the 'myth of Christian uniqueness'. We are invited, on the weak and lazy grounds of pragmatism, to abandon those doctrines, in order that the pluralist agenda might be advanced.

In response to this pressure, a number of major Christological and theological developments may be noted.

First, the idea of the incarnation is rejected, often dismissively, as a myth.[22] Thus John Hick and his collaborators reject the incarnation on various logical and common-sense counts — yet fail to deal with the question of why Christians should have developed this doctrine in the first place.[23] There is an underlying agenda to this dismissal of the incarnation, and a central part of that agenda is the elimination of the sheer *distinctiveness* of Christianity. A sharp distinction is thus drawn between the historical person of Jesus Christ, and the principles which he is alleged to represent. Paul Knitter is but one of a small galaxy of pluralist writers concerned to drive a wedge between the 'Jesus-event' (unique to Christianity) and the

20 Happily, there are promising developments on offer. See, for example, Paul Varo Martinson, *A Theology of World Religions*, Augsburg, Minneapolis 1987; Diogenes Allen, *Christian Belief in a Postmodern World*, Westminster/John Knox, Louisville, KY, 1989), pp 185-96; Carl E. Braaten, *No Other Gospel! Christianity among the World's Religions*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis 1992, pp 83-102.

21 Braaten, *No Other Gospel!*, p 71.

22 Perhaps most notably in J. Hick, ed., *The Myth of God Incarnate*, SCM, London 1977.

23 See Alister E. McGrath, 'Resurrection and Incarnation: The Foundations of the Christian Faith', in A. Walker, ed., *Different Gospels*, Hodder & Stoughton, London 1988, pp 79-96.

'Christ-principle' (accessible to all religious traditions, and expressed in their own distinctive, but equally valid, ways).

It is fair, and indeed necessary, to inquire concerning the pressure for such developments, for a hidden pluralist agenda appears to govern the outcome of this Christological assault — a point made in a highly perceptive critique of Hick's incarnational views from the pen of Wolfhart Pannenberg: 'Hick's proposal of religious pluralism as an option of authentically Christian theology hinges on the condition of a prior demolition of the traditional doctrine of the incarnation.' Hick, Pannenberg notes, assumes that this demolition has already taken place, and chides him for his excessive selectivity — not to mention his lack of familiarity with recent German theology! — in drawing such a conclusion.[24]

It is significant that the pluralist agenda forces its advocates to adopt heretical views of Christ in order to meet its needs. In an effort to fit Jesus into the mould of the 'great religious teachers of humanity' category, the Ebionite heresy has been revived, and made politically correct. Jesus is one of the religious options available by the great human teachers of religion.

Second, the idea that God is in some manner made known through Christ has been dismissed. Captivated by the image of a 'Copernican Revolution' (probably one of the most overworked and misleading phrases in recent writings in this field), pluralists demand that Christians move away from a discussion of Christ to a discussion of God — yet fail to recognize that the 'God of the Christians' (Tertullian) might be rather different from other divinities, and that the doctrine of the Trinity spells out the nature of that distinction. The loose and vague talk about 'God' or 'Reality' found in much pluralist writing is not a result of theological sloppiness or confusion. It is a considered response to the recognition that for Christians to talk about the Trinity is to speak about a specific God (not just 'deity' in general), who has chosen to make himself known in and through Jesus Christ. It is a deliberate rejection of authentically and distinctive Christian insights into God, in order to suggest that Christianity, to rework a phrase of John Toland, is simply the republication of the religion of nature.

Yet human religious history shows that natural human ideas of the number, nature and character of the gods are notoriously vague and muddled. The Christian emphasis is upon the need to worship, not gods in general (Israel's strictures against Canaanite religion being especially important here), but a God who has chosen to make himself known. As Robert Jenson has persuasively argued, the doctrine of the Trinity is an attempt to spell out the identity of this God, and to avoid confusion with rival claimants to this title.[25] The doctrine of the Trinity defines and defends the distinctiveness — no, more than that: the *uniqueness* — of the 'God of the Christians'. The New Testament gives a further twist to this development through its language about 'the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ', locating the identity of God in the actions and passion of Jesus Christ. To put it bluntly:

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24 Wolfhart Pannenberg, 'Religious Pluralism and Conflicting Truth Claims', in G. D'Costa, ed., *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered*, Orbis, Maryknoll, NY 1990, p 100.

25 Robert Jenson, *The Triune Identity*, Fortress Press, Philadelphia 1982, pp 1-20.

God is Christologically disclosed.

This point is important, given the obvious confusion within the pages of *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness* concerning the nature and identity of the god(s) or goddess(es) of the pluralists. Pluralism, it seems to be, possesses a certain tendency to self-destruction, in that there is, if I could put it like this, 'a plurality of pluralisms'. For example, a vigorously polemical defence of 'pluralism' (a word used frequently throughout its pages) may be found in *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness*. According to the authors of this volume, Christianity has to be seen in a 'pluralistic context as one of the great world faiths, one of the streams of religious life through which human beings can be savingly related to that ultimate Reality Christians know as the heavenly Father'. Yet having agreed that Christianity does not provide absolute or superior knowledge of God, the pluralist contributors to this volume proceed to display such divergence over the nature of god that it becomes far from clear that they are talking about the same thing.

But there is a more important point here. Pluralism is fatally vulnerable to the charge that it reaches an accommodation between Christianity and other religious traditions by wilfully discarding every distinctive Christian doctrine traditionally regarded as identity-giving and identity-preserving (to say nothing of the reductionist liberties taken with the other religious traditions). The 'Christianity' which is declared to be homogenous with all other 'higher religions' would not be recognizable as such to most of its adherents. It would be a theologically, Christologically and soteriologically reduced version of the real thing. It is thus not Christianity which is being related to other world faiths: it is little more than a parody and caricature of this living faith, grounded in the presuppositions and agendas of western liberalism rather than in the self-revelation of God, which is being related to theologically-reduced and -homogenized versions of other living religions.[26] Dialogue turns out to involve the sacrifice of integrity. The identity of Christianity is inextricably linked with the uniqueness of Christ.

Dialogue with integrity

It is perfectly possible for the Christian to engage in dialogue with non-Christians, whether of a religious persuasion or not, without in any way being committed to the intellectually shallow and paternalist view that 'we're all saying the same thing'.[27] As Paul Griffiths and Delmas Lewis put it in an aptly entitled article, 'it is both logically and practically possible for us, as Christians, to respect and revere worthy representatives of other traditions while still believing — on rational grounds — that some aspects of their world-view are simply mistaken'.[28] Contrary to Hick's homogenizing approach, John V. Taylor remarked that dialogue is 'a sustained conver-

26 See John Milbank, 'The End of Dialogue', in G. D'Costa, ed., *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered: The Myth of a Pluralistic Theology of Religions*, Orbis, Maryknoll, NY 1990, pp 174-91, especially pp 176f. Milbank's critique of the shallow assumption that 'religion' constitutes a well-defined genus should be noted (p 176).

27 See Arnulf Camps, *Partners in Dialogue*, Orbis, Maryknoll, NY 1983, p 30.

28 Paul Griffiths and Delmas Lewis, 'On Grading Religions, Seeking Truth, and Being Nice to People: A Reply to Professor Hick', *Religious Studies 19* (1983), p 78.

sation between parties who are not saying the same thing and who recognize and respect the differences, the contradictions, and the mutual exclusions between their various ways of thinking'.[29]

Dialogue thus implies respect, not agreement, between parties — and, at best, a willingness to take the profound risk that the other person may be right, and that recognition of this fact may lead to the changing of positions. And that belief lies at the heart of responsible Christian evangelism — that the inner truth of Christianity has a power to convert. Evangelism is in no way inconsistent with respect for others. Some liberal critics accuse Christians of imperialism through their desire to evangelize; yet, as I have stressed in this article, those critics are equally imperialist in their assumption that *they* have privileged access to truth, which allows them to dismiss evangelism as an arrogant and unnecessary irrelevance.

This paper has explored some possible approaches to the challenge posed to modern Christianity by the rise of pluralism. As will be clear, I have only had time to identify some approaches, mapping out briefly what deserves to be discussed at far greater length. But my basic contention is clear: pluralism is inherently self-destructive, and owes its appeal more to the rhetoric of political correctness than to its intellectual credentials. It corresponds to the spirit of our age, and is thus appropriate to the committed liberal outlook of so much of modern academia, which has, by a process of osmosis, found its way into the churches. But I end with a comment by William Inge, a former Dean of St Paul's Cathedral, who remarked: 'He who marries the spirit of the age today will be a widower tomorrow'. Tomorrow is not that far away; and responsible Christian theology, which I believe to be represented in the readership of this journal, must speak today for that tomorrow.

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29 John V. Taylor, 'The Theological Basis of Interfaith Dialogue', in J. Hick and B. Hebblethwaite, eds, *Christianity and Other Religions*, Fortress Press, Philadelphia 1981, p 212.