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‘mystery-religions’, as they are called for that very reason; the central rites were thought to mediate divine benefits. The mystery-religions were forms of devotion warmer and more personal than the official exercises of city and imperial religion. Because they had a considerable appeal throughout the Roman Empire in the first centuries of our era, contacts with Christianity were inevitable. Superficial similarities between the mystery-rites and the church’s baptism and holy supper made it an easy step to transfer the term *mystērion* to the Christian observances.

Second, an effort was then made to relate this new usage to the teaching of the New Testament. The argument was one of analogy: just as miracles and signs are the visible manifestation of the powerful presence of the *mystery* of the kingdom ([Mk. 4:11](#) par.), just as Jesus’ physical body is the visible demonstration of the *mystery* of the Word made flesh ([1 Tim. 3:16](#)), and just as the church is the bodily manifestation of Christ, expressing the *mystery* of the relationship between Christ and the church ([Eph. 5:32](#)), so also the bread and wine are the visible manifestations of the presence of Christ in the Lord’s Supper—and therefore another ‘mystery’. That link is not made in the New Testament, where *mystērion* almost exclusively refers to divine revelation in some measure hidden in previous ages but now revealed in the coming and teaching of Jesus Christ and his Spirit-anointed disciples.

Third, the Greek word *mystērion* was translated into Latin by the term *sacramentum*, from which our word ‘sacrament’ derives. The Latin *sacramentum* meant ‘a thing set apart as sacred’ and, more specifically, referred to ‘a military oath of obedience as administered by the commander’. In the latter sense, it had been used very early for Christian baptism, as we have seen in Pliny’s quotation, in harmony with the popular simile of the church as the ‘militia of Christ’. As the rendering for *mystērion*, however, ‘sacrament’ took over the connotations of the Greek word, and the idea of ritual efficacy, for salvation and blessings, attached to it. That was reinforced by the association with sacredness. Later generations within the Roman Catholic and Orthodox branches of the church not only elevated the sacraments to a place of prominence in the church’s worship, but increasingly stressed that sacraments are efficacious signs, conveying the grace that they contain, and that grace is communicated by virtue of the rite. [p. 313](#)

Since this view, which may be called sacramentalism, lacks biblical support, it is rejected by most evangelicals. Because of its connotations some of them studiously avoid the use of the word ‘sacrament’ itself; they rather speak of ‘ordinances’, i.e. things which the Lord has ordained. [p. 314](#)

Attesting the Evangel Evangelically: Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism

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I. WHAT IS A CHRISTIAN?

Any account of Christian regard for other religions must depend decisively upon what being Christian is understood to involve. Therefore I begin this theological essay on religious pluralism by asking, What is a Christian?

Responses to this question vary according to whether priority is given to belief, experience or moral commitment. Some, following Schleiermacher, have argued that Christian beliefs are merely secondary and particular expressions of general religious experience. Others, in the tradition of Kant, have held that being a Christian is essentially a matter of being good and doing one's duty. I, however, align myself with those who hold that being a Christian is necessarily and decisively a matter of *belief*, though not sufficiently so. To be a Christian one must believe certain things, albeit in a manner that involves religious experience and entails moral commitment. Moreover, I follow those who deny that Christian belief is simply an historically conditioned expression of some universal religious experience. Certainly, it involves claims about the whole of reality; it makes universal claims. But these universal metaphysical beliefs are governed by particular, historical ones: beliefs about the birth, life, death and resurrection of the man, Jesus.

To be a Christian, I suggest, is to believe that God, who stands at the beginning and at the end of all things, has been from eternity one who would become human, suffer death and rise again from the dead bodily; and this, in order to save creation from the consequences of human sin. To believe this is to believe far more than that Jesus has given us an authoritative representation of God, revealing Him in essentially the same kind of way as any other genuine prophet. Rather it is to believe that in the active person of Jesus God is who he is, and therefore that apart from Jesus God would be essentially different. In [p. 315](#) other words, it is to deny that we can separate the being or nature of God from the history of this particular person; and it is to affirm the basic meaning of the doctrines of the divine Incarnation and of the Second Person of the Trinity.

I hold that this belief is very important. It is very important because of what it affirms about the reality in which we humans live, move and have our being. It affirms that in spite of recurrent human experiences of gross injustice and dreadful tragedy what is fundamentally and finally real is congenial to personal being such as we know it—that is, personal being in time and space. It declares that historical persons—persons who live in particular places at particular times for a limited duration—are fundamentally and finally at home in the cosmos. To believe that God became flesh and blood is to have reason to believe that at the very beginning and at the very end of all things persons like us are loved. Such a belief, it seems to me, is necessary for the hope that makes it possible for us to suffer injustice and tragedy with a patience that is not apathetic, but even joyful. It constitutes genuinely good news for us humans who, with everything we love, are currently headed for the grave.

To be a Christian, then, is to believe something about the nature of reality that is important for the basic quality of human lives. It is to believe that God so loved the world that He suffered the human condition to the point of death. Moreover, it is to believe this with integrity; that is, in a way that inspires in the believer profound gratitude, hope, humility and repentance, together with the moral commitment to attest what she believes in word and deed. We should note here that from time to time such attestation will assume critical form; either that of the contradiction of whatever statement, attitude or act negates Christian belief, or that of the completion of whatever statement, attitude or act says less than it. The culmination of my argument in this section, then, is that being a

Christian inevitably involves being critical of beliefs and practices which appear to be *un-Christian*.

II. BEARING WITNESS TO THE GOSPEL EVANGELICALLY

The Christian, as I have defined her, is one who holds and bears witness in word and deed, affirmatively and critically, to the belief that God is such that he would and has become man even to the point of death. But how is she to bear this witness? In what manner is she to testify to her belief before those who believe otherwise? I intend now to respond to these questions by drawing out some of the moral **P. 316** implications of the Gospel and its presuppositions. My basic assumption will be that we must bear witness to the Gospel in a manner that is consistent with its content; that is to say, that we must testify to the Evangel *evangelically*.

The first element of the Gospel whose moral content I wish to consider is the dogma of justification by grace, according to which we are saved decisively by the sheer love of God and not on account of our own merit. This dogma holds that the *belief* in salvation by divine grace is itself a necessary part of being saved; and therefore that such a belief is also basically a gift from God. This becomes significant for our discussion through the implication that if I find myself able to bear witness to the incarnate and crucified God, it is not because I am worthy to do so but because God has chosen me in spite of my unworthiness. The dogma of justification by grace forbids me, then, to treat the Gospel as my own property, as something that I have acquired by my own efforts or something that I possess on account of my own qualities. Indeed, it implies that if I do treat it in that way, I betray it. Accordingly, I am forbidden to suppose that those who do not believe in the Gospel fail to do so because they are more perverse, more resistant than I. For if I believe in the Gospel of grace, then I must accept that the only thing that distinguishes me from those who believe otherwise is grace itself. Why I should have been chosen to bear witness to the Gospel rather than you, I have no idea. God's election is a mystery. What I do know, however, is that I was not chosen on account of my superior qualities, religious or moral. The dogma of justification by grace, then, makes the moral claim that I should regard myself in relation to the non-Christian as fellow-sinner, equal in sin. (We may best understand the Epistle to the Romans, 2.1–3.20, by substituting 'Christian' for 'Jew', and 'non-Christian' for 'Greek' and 'Gentile' as we read it).

The second feature of the Gospel to which I turn is the concept of salvation as always both present and future. Insofar as I believe in God in Christ and so trust in love of God, I may rest assured that my salvation is secure. I may rest assured that God has already done all that is necessary for me to be saved, that I am being saved and that my salvation shall be made complete. Nevertheless, until that moment of completion I remain a sinner. I may be *iustus*, but I am still *peccator*. This means that even as one who believes in the incarnate and crucified God, I am still quite capable of neglecting inconvenient truths about God, about myself and about human life. It means that I am still quite capable of abusing and exploiting my religion; of using it to bolster my own sense of moral self-sufficiency by indulging in moral **p. 317** indignation and contempt (no doubt the most pious of fashions) at the expense of others. In other words, I am still quite capable of exploiting my status as a Christian, as one of the (apparently) elect, to advance my own programme of self-justification. As a Christian sinner I am not immune from using the Evangel for quite unevangelical purposes.

It is surely one of the most constant refrains of the prophetic tradition of Judaism—a tradition whose mantle Jesus himself assumed—that those chosen to bear witness to the gracious God are well able and frequently inclined to betray Him, sometimes at the very

point where they imagine that they are being most faithful. (We may think here of some of the Pharisees). Even a religion whose credal formulae are perfectly true p. susceptible to becoming a vehicle of opposition to God. And given the universal persistence of sinfulness among human beings, this susceptibility is likely to become a reality. It is in this sense, I suggest, that we may agree with Karl Barth's mischievously shocking statement that all religion, Christianity included, is *unbelief*.¹

My main argument so far has been that the Christian cannot regard herself as morally superior to the non-Christian precisely because salvation is by grace. Now I want to propose that the Christian must regard herself not only as fellow sinner, equal with the non-Christian in moral inadequacy, but also as fellow creature, equal in mutual responsibility and need. From the conduct of Christ, the doctrine of God as a trinitarian community, the notion of humanity as made in the image of God, and the Pauline concept of the Church, the Christian has good reason to believe that the human creature has been created to be in a relationship of reciprocity with her fellows. Therefore, she who believes in a God who is acting to restore fallen humankind to true humanity is bound to commit herself to a relationship of giving and receiving with her fellow creatures, regardless of whether or not they believe as she does.

In the course of my main argument I asserted that even those who assent to the Gospel are capable of using their religion to further their own self-justification, thereby betraying what they believe. Here I propose that if we combine this with the Christian claim that God is Lord of the whole world, then it becomes conceivable that this God might use the adherents of 'other religions' to criticize and correct believers in the 'true religion' who abuse it.

It is along such lines that I am inclined to interpret Malachi 1.11: 'For from the rising of the sun to its setting my name is great among the p. 318 nations, and in every place incense is offered to my name, and a pure offering; for my name is great among the nations, says the Lord of hosts.' (RSV. Cp. NIV). This declaration both follows and precedes passages where the prophet rails against the faithlessness of God's Chosen People, and it clearly serves to provide a contrast to corrupt Jewish religion. Joyce Baldwin holds that this verse should be understood eschatologically, noting that to interpret it otherwise would make Malachi the only biblical writer to sanction pagan sacrifice.² But would it not be equally possible to read it as hyperbole in the same vein as Amos' deflation of Israel's privileged status before God to that of any other nation, and his demotion of the Exodus to rank of an ordinary ethnic migration: "'Are you not like the Ethiopians to me, O people of Israel?' says the Lord. 'Did I not bring up Israel from the land of Egypt, and the Philistines from Caphtor and the Syrians from Kit? ...'" (Amos 9.7)?

It is also reasonable to interpret the story of Jesus' encounter with the centurion (Mt. 8.5-13; Lk. 7.1-10) along similar lines. Although Luke's version implies a considerable measure of sympathy for the Jews on the part of him whom Jesus' remarked, 'I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith,' it is not at all certain that he belonged to those Gentiles who participated in synagogue services without actually becoming proselytes. In other words, the centurion here was not necessarily one who, *phoboumenos ton theon*, was

¹ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 1/2 (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1956), S.17.2.

² Joyce G. Baldwin, *Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi*, The Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (London: Tyndale Press, 1972), p. 228.

an informal member of the Chosen People—as Cornelius probably was (Acts 10.2).³ In which case, Jesus was speaking of a pagan.

However, even if these passages were to be interpreted in a fashion less complimentary to ‘other religions’, we would still have to acknowledge the extent to which both Judaism and Christianity have developed by borrowing ideas and practices from beyond their own circles. The borrowing, of course, has not been uncritical; and what has been borrowed has been significantly changed in the process. Nevertheless, our predecessors in the faith have persistently found valuable things in religiously foreign places. And it seems self-evident to me that there are ideas, insights and practices that Christians today would do well to learn from other religious sources, in order to p. 319 become better *Christians*. Might we not, for example, have something to learn from the thoroughness with which orthodox Jews and Muslims manage to sanctify ordinary, secular life by interrupting it regularly with sacred moments of prayer and worship?

I have been arguing here that the combination of two Christian beliefs—that God in Christ is Lord of the whole world and that Christians are still sinners and therefore capable of abusing their religion—makes it conceivable that God might choose non-Christians to teach Christians a thing or two. I shall now proceed to argue further that it is probable that there are some non-Christians who know the true God—that is, God in Christ—albeit in an opaque fashion.

I take it for granted that God intends the salvation of all, and that he is fair. From this we may infer that all persons must be given the opportunity to receive salvation in Christ, even when they have not been confronted with the Gospel evangelically—the implication being, of course, that many are confronted with the Gospel in a manner that lacks integrity and which thus robs it of credibility. Further, unless we are prepared to suppose that such people have not been met by the Gospel in an evangelical manner because they did not deserve to be—a supposition that the dogma of justification by grace precludes—then we must believe that saving grace has reached them by some other route.⁴ In this connexion it is pertinent to remember that Abraham answered the call of God *as a pagan* (Gen. 11.31–12.4a), and that he received the blessing of Melchizedek, who was a Canaanite priest (Gen. 14.17–24). We should also remember that Jesus was not a Christian.

Much light can be thrown on this perplexing business by taking a moment to think about what we mean when we talk about ‘a religion’. I suspect that we usually assume a religion to be a kind of fixed and quite discrete system of beliefs and practices to which some people subscribe and others do not. In fact, however, a religion is neither fixed nor discrete. Rather it is constantly developing in relation to other religions (*inter alia*), sometimes defining itself over and against them, sometimes adopting and modifying some of their features. Further, a religion is seldom a single system, but rather a collection of species that share a common historical origin and some common beliefs and practices, but which differ from each other in their interpretations of the common heritage—in the ways that they arrange the common p. 320 elements and in the relative weight that they ascribe to each of them. Further still, the adherents of a species of a particular religious tradition cannot be presumed to believe and practice exactly the same things in exactly the same way. There is often a considerable discrepancy between the public stance of a religion and the stances taken by its members. Even if it were true that all Roman

³ R. T. France, *The Gospel According to St. Matthew*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, New Series (Leicester: IVP, 1985), pp. 153–54; Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to St. Luke*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Leicester: IVP, 1974), pp. 135–37.

⁴ Karl Rahner, ‘Christianity and the Non-Christian Religions,’ *Theological Investigations*, V: *Later Writings* (London: Darton, Longman & Tdd, 1966), pp. 122–3.

Catholics did subscribe to official doctrine about the Virgin Mary at least passively, it would still be true that in the lives of many Roman Catholics that doctrine plays no effective role whatsoever. Therefore it is simply not enough to ask whether someone is a Christian or a Muslim or a Hindu. We need to know what kind of Muslim he is, what particular convictions and practices he holds dear and what he stands to lose, and why. Otherwise we risk committing an act of religious racism, treating the other person simply as a member of a religious class and denying him the respect due to a unique individual.⁵

So, for example, if you would estimate where I stand in matters of belief and practice, you would need to know far more about me than the fact that I am a Christian. You would need to ask, What kind of Christian? To which I would answer, Protestant. Well, what kind of Protestant? Anglican. But what kind of Anglican? Evangelical. Now you think that you know me. But in the end generic labels are simply not enough, for there are none that fit me (or you) perfectly. In the end you must deal with me as a particular person. And when you do, you will discover that with regard to my understanding of salvation I am quite Protestant, but with regard to spiritual discipline I have Catholic tendencies. You might also discover that my understanding of the authority of Scripture is too liberal for your tastes (though others, of course, would find it too conservative). And you will certainly discover that I do not hold all that I believe with equal enthusiasm, and that at certain points I simply live more or less comfortably with internal contradictions. In other words my religion is a unique constellation of beliefs and practices; and in order to have some idea of where I stand, you would have to take the trouble to get to know me quite closely. Therefore, to discover that A is a Christian and B is a Jew is not actually to have discovered very much. For if I were to make the effort to get to know A and B more closely, I might be surprised (as, indeed, I have been) to find myself much more at home with a Jew p. 321 who believes that God is able and inclined to involve himself in the concrete and personal details of history, than with a Christian who believes that God only operates in the world by means of general, impersonal laws.

To estimate, therefore, where a person stands before God, we cannot simply classify him. We have to respect him as an individual with a unique history, and so with a unique set of interpretations of a particular religion. To fail to give this kind of respect, I have suggested, is to ignore the complicated nature of religious commitment. It is also to offend love.

My main contention in this section has been that the Christian has ample reason to regard the non-Christian as her fellow, treating him as her moral equal, listening to him carefully and persistently, and ready to hear God's voice even through his lips. And I have sought to argue this on the basis of Christian belief in salvation by grace, in the persistent sinfulness of the Chosen People, in the morally normative interdependence of human creatures and in the universal sovereignty and salvific will of God in Christ, as well as of the complex nature of religious commitment and the requirements of love.

I do not believe that my argument in any way obscures the fact that there are important differences between the Christian and her non-Christian fellow or that these differences should be acknowledged. The Christian, as I have defined her, believes in the incarnate and crucified God and is called to bear witness to that belief. Accordingly, she is bound to contradict whatever gainsays it and add to whatever says less than it. Love may enjoin dialogue; but precisely to the extent that it enjoins genuine dialogue, it also enjoins candour. John Taylor makes this point well: 'dialogue ... means a sustained conversation

⁵ Raymond Pannikar makes a similar point about the subtlety of religious commitment. See 'The Unknown Christ of Hinduism,' in John Hick & Brian Hebblethwaite, eds., *Christianity and Other Religions* (Glasgow: Collins, 1980), pp. 127-28.

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'.⁶ Nevertheless, although we have not sought to deny that important differences lie between the Christian and the non-Christian, we have certainly implied that the immediately apparent differences are not always the decisive ones, and that apparent differences may sometimes mask profound agreements.

III. RELIGIOUS PLURALISM IN THE PUBLIC PLACE

Close to the heart of the programme of political liberalism is the **P. 322** determination to keep public institutions free from control by any single religion. The origin of this determination lies in the revulsion felt by many at the blood that was shed in the name of the Protestant or Catholic God during the century or so of intermittent 'religious' warfare which plagued Europe from the mid-16th to the mid-17th century. But even today liberal eyes still tend to see the features of a fanatic lurking just beneath the surface of every pious face. Therefore the liberal political programme is designed to provide a political constitution which is capable of commanding the assent of everyone, *regardless of religious commitment*. Under such a constitution a religion enjoys freedom of self-expression provided that it does not infringe the rights of those who do not adhere to it—by attempting, for example, to govern public institutions without their consent.

The United States is, perhaps, the most liberal of all modern states, insofar as its religious and political institutions have been formally separated from the very beginning. The British state is much less liberal (in this sense) on account of its constitutional connexion with Protestant Christianity. It is quite possible, of course, for there to be a considerable measure of freedom for religious expression in a state whose institutions bear public witness to a particular religion. But if such public testimony is not made with extreme sensitivity and charity, the adherents of other religions are bound to be alarmed, fearing that the power of the state is being marshalled against their religious beliefs and practices. When, on the other hand, institutional witness to a particular religion is made carefully and with due respect, then in a secularist age it is quite conceivable that members of other religions might actually prefer the public affirmation of one particular religion to the expulsion of all religion onto the private margins of society.

It seems obvious to me that the conversion of the heart and mind to what is true and good cannot be effected by the application of external pressure; it cannot be coerced. Moreover, it seems to me that it is intrinsic to its nature that love should respect the freedom of the beloved to go his own way, even when that way appears to be a highway to hell. If these things are so, then it follows that the Christian is obliged to repudiate the use of all forms of external force, including the use of public institutions, to coerce conversion. In a religiously pluralist society, the Christian religion can only justify *to itself* its retention of a position of public privilege if it operates such an arrangement respectfully, fairly and generously with regard to other religious communities.

Accordingly, the Christian teacher in a public (i.e. state) school is bound by her vision of God as loving and by the corresponding moral claim made upon her own behaviour not to use her public office to **p. 323** apply 'undue pressure' to the children placed in her charge with regard to their religious orientation. What does this self-denying ordinance entail? It entails seeking to be at least scrupulously fair, and preferably generous, in her treatment of non-Christian religions. It entails freely admiring what is good in them and freely conceding what Christianity as a cultural institution might learn from them. It

⁶ John V. Taylor, 'The Theological Basis of Interfaith Dialogue,' in *ibid.*, p. 212.

entails recognising a distinction between Christian faith and Western Christian culture, and making it abundantly clear that she is not in the business of defending her own cultural turf for its own sake. It entails demonstrating that she is committed to affirm whatever seems by the light of the Word of God in Scripture to be good and true, regardless of its provenance and even if it requires the jettisoning or the revision of cherished 'Christian' beliefs. It does *not* entail that she must abandon or suspend her convictions, though she will have to distinguish between those convictions that are basic to Christian identity and those that are not. Nor does it entail that she must suppress criticism of other religions; only that she must first earn the right to criticize by proving herself to be fair and generous, and as capable of receiving criticism as of delivering it.

I have just argued that the Christian teacher as a public servant is restricted in the ways she may bear witness to the Gospel by the moral claims *of that Gospel itself*. Finally and very briefly I shall consider whether her duty to attest the Gospel could ever permit the Christian teacher to encourage a child to mature in a non-Christian religion. From what has been said above it should be quite clear that I do not believe that the Christian teacher can encourage a child to endorse *everything* that the religion of his parents might require of him. She cannot suspend her own convictions and their critical implications. Nevertheless, as we have proposed, adherents to a particular religion are often highly selective in their appropriation of it, and in the end everyone travels a unique religious path. Therefore it seems to me that the route which leads to God in Christ need not always, especially in its initial stages, involve the public abandonment of the religion of one's birth for Christianity. Rather, it might well involve growing within a non-Christian religion but in a peculiar direction, like Abraham in his paganism and Jesus in his Judaism.⁷ In which case, p. 324 Christian witness in a multi-faith classroom could faithfully take the form of helping a pupil to find ways of moving toward God in Christ *through* the beliefs and practices of a non-Christian religion.

IV. CONCLUSION

In this essay I have sought to find a way of moving between two poles. On the one hand lie the facts that the Christian is called to confess some quite definite beliefs about the nature of God, of human being and existence, and of salvation; and that the making of such a confession is bound to involve the criticism of contrary beliefs. On the other hand there are the facts that the manner and means by which a Christian confession may be made are subject to restriction by the moral implications of the content of that confession; and that these moral restrictions become tighter in the case of public service.

As I close, let me bring out into the open a tacit assumption of great significance that lies behind my choice of route through the territory bounded by these two poles: namely, that silence itself may be a most cogent form of Christian confession. Of course, there is a silence that is born of fear—the fear of ridicule or criticism or ostracism. But if silence can be faithless, it can also be faithful. For there is the silence that is born both of a love which knows that it cannot speak without betraying trust and abusing power, and of a faith that the Holy Spirit may speak directly where human creatures should not. Therefore to choose this kind of silence is not at all to reject the call to bear witness to the Gospel, and

⁷ Pannikar may be arguing in a similar vein when he recommends that the Christian incarnate himself in the non-Christian religion in order to redeem its core; that is, in order to find a way to Christ *through* it, transforming it from within ('The Unknown Christ,' *ibid.*, pp. 132f., 138–40). Kenneth Cragg seems to suggest the same kind of approach when, appealing to the Incarnation, he speaks of 'referencing' the Gospel in terms of the mental universe of other faiths (*The Christ and the Faiths* [London: SPCK, 1986], p. 343).

so to betray one's Christian identity. Quite to the contrary, (it is to answer the call to bear that witness with integrity,) in manner as well as word: it is to attest the Evangel evangelically.

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One Baptism or Two? Reflections on the History of Christian Baptism

David F. Wright

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I have no doubt that some of my audience have undergone two baptisms—two water baptisms, that is. They may not now regard their first one as a baptism, but such a nicety need not detain us at this stage. (After all, it was certainly baptism in the mind of all those involved at the time who were capable of judging, and would be so reckoned by the great consensus of Christian people down the centuries.)

I am also confident that many of my listeners can immediately think of churches which they instinctively regard as outstanding when measured by recognized yardsticks, but most of whose baptisms are not in their view Christian baptisms. These congregations' main form of baptism is not that of my presumed hearers, and so much the worse for that, since the latter's is alone true Christian baptism.

One baptism or two? Is the state of affairs I have conjured up a matter of great concern to evangelical Christians today? It is my conviction that it should be, and if this lecture achieves anything, I hope it will at least provoke some to reflect afresh on 'the waters that divide', as Donald Bridge and David Phypers entitle their helpful introduction to 'the baptism debate'.¹ For this split among us is a blatant affront to a cherished axiom of the Reformation—the perspicuity of the scriptures. How can they be so clear to the reading of faith if they speak to us in such contradictory terms on baptism? I doubt if any other disagreement poses so sharp a challenge to this pristine protestant conviction. It is high irony that this principle should have been so powerfully articulated in the very context in which this gulf first opened up. Medieval anticipations of the sixteenth-century breach between magisterial and Anabaptist Reformers were of negligible significance.

It is also surprising that the ecumenical movement, which has occupied so many of the energies of the churches in the twentieth century, should have been so slow to grasp this particular nettle. It is only in the last ten years or so that it has featured high on the agenda of the Faith and Order arm of the World Council of Churches. Its earlier, [p. 326](#) long-lasting preoccupation with the interrelated issues of ministry and eucharist has contributed, I suggest, to an ecumenical undervaluing of baptism, which finds a parallel in evangelical Christianity. Both main traditions have for too long given inadequate recognition to the

¹ Leicester, 1977.