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EDITOR: BRUCE J. NICHOLLS

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

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

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

The Authentic Jesus

John Stott

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

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

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

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

LEGAL TOLERANCE

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

SOCIAL TOLERANCE

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

INTELLECTUAL TOLERANCE

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

IDOLS OF THE MODERN MIND

Attacks on the uniqueness of Christ

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

THE UNIQUENESS OF CHRIST

In no other name is there salvation

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

Incarnation

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

Other religions

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

Christian response

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

ATONEMENT

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

Unique to Christianity

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

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

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

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

The merit of another

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

Resurrection

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

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

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

No comparable claims

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

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

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

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

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

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

EVANGELISM AND INTEGRITY

Faith sharing in diverse culture

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

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

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

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

1. Don't confuse Christ with culture

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

2. Beware a crusading spirit

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

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

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

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

3. More than words

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

4. And also dialogue

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

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

5. The author of all beauty

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

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

6. Eternity in their hearts

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Rev. Dr. John Stott is Rector Emeritus of All Souls, Langham Place, London, England and President of Christians Impact. [p. 93](#)

Uniqueness of Christ and Social Justice

Bong-Ho Son

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