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Christ and the Mosaic of Pluralisms Challenges to Evangelical Missiology in the 21st Century

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INTRODUCTION

A) Clash of Religious Worlds

In January 1999 England reeled under the shocking news that Glen Hoddle, the coach of the England national football team, had been sacked. This was not for failure on the football field (though that would have been justified enough!) but because of remarks he made about the disabled. Hoddle had a Christian religious experience some years ago which led to him being called a 'born-again Christian'. However, more recently he has embraced a form of New Age spirituality under the influence of a spiritual faith-healer, Eileen Drewery. He expressed the view that the disabled are as they are because of their *karma* from previous lives. It was, indirectly, their own fault.[1] This outraged public sentiment in Britain and produced a fascinating clash of cultural and ethical worldviews. Hoddle's view, of course, comes straight from the Hindu roots of much New Age philosophy (though he did not go on to include women as also 'suffering' the results of their *karma*, perhaps fortunately for him, even though that is also part of the re-incarnational Hindu worldview).

Interestingly the response to Hoddle shows up a contradiction in secular pluralism. On the one hand, a 'politically correct' ideology wants to affirm the validity of Hindu and New Age 'alternative' spiritualities and reject allegedly 'absolutist' and 'arrogant' Christian claims. Yet on the other hand, it is also very 'politically correct' to affirm and defend the disabled (or more 'correctly' the 'differently-abled'). What the Hoddle affair shows up is that in the latter case the 'politically correct' attitude itself is the legacy of a Christian worldview which affirms the value of every unique individual human being and denies the debilitating and imprisoning doctrine of *karma*. This contradiction within popular religious and moral belief was not much noticed however.

Pluralism does not foster clear thinking about the inconsistencies it is happy to live with. One version of popular pluralism says, 'It doesn't matter what you believe so long as you are sincere'. Another version seems to say, 'It does matter what you believe if it means insulting the weak'. But those who so vociferously adopt the latter would probably not like to be told that such a view is itself strongly indebted to the biblical and Christian worldview.

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[1] Hoddle's words, in an interview with *The Times*, were, '. . . You have to come back [sic in another lifetime] to learn and face some of the thing you have done, good and bad. There are too many injustices around. You and I have been physically given two hands and two legs and half-decent brains. Some people have not been born like that for a reason. The karma is working from another lifetime. . . . It is not only people with disabilities. What you sow, you have to reap'.

This example from recent British life illustrates how popular spirituality and opinions about ethical and social issues are profoundly influenced by a great plurality of religious worldviews, some being new forms of pre-Christian paganism, others being very ancient oriental religious fundamentals re-packaged in western forms.

B) The Task

My understanding of the task assigned to me in this paper is two-fold:

i). To survey some of the forms of pluralism that lie behind the pluralities of our world as we enter the new millennium.[2]

ii). To suggest what will be key tasks for evangelical missiology in relation to them. It is not my brief, as I understand it, to propose what new *mission strategies* may be needed in relation to global pluralities, but rather to focus on what will be the issues needing to be addressed by evangelical *theological* reflection that should undergird our mission activity.

I have chosen three examples of pluralism that I see as particularly challenging to evangelical missiology: **hermeneutical, religious and ethical**.[3] Part of the reason for this selection is that these three forms of pluralism directly challenge three of the defining marks of evangelicalism—our concern for the authority of the Bible, for the uniqueness of Jesus Christ, and for transformed living according to biblical ethical standards. These three are also central to an evangelical understanding of mission, which flows from our understanding of the scriptural mandate, proclaims that Jesus Christ alone is Lord and Saviour, and aims to produce transformed human lives and communities.

I fully realize that this is an inadequate selection—there is a plurality of pluralisms! Even pluralism itself is changing. However, it is hoped that participants reading this sketch will helpfully fill out the gaps in my own presentation, and that other paper writers will address issues that I am well aware of but have not felt able to address in the confines of this paper. This would especially include the plurality of contextualized Christologies, and the missiologies that flow from them. I have also chosen not to discuss the inner plurality to be found within evangelical missiology itself (though I refer briefly to it under 'Religious Plurality' below).

C) An Age of Enormous Transition

Finally, by way of introduction, it will be vital that the conference gives full recognition to the transition from modernity to postmodernity that is taking place in a very patchy way around the world, and its implications not only for the practice of Christian mission, but also for the task of missiology. This is not to ignore the fact that in some parts of the world, the transition is still more from pre-modernity into modernity itself. However, it is the case that some forms of pluralism that Christian missiology must address are the product of post-Enlightenment modernity, whereas others are the product of the postmodern reaction to modernity itself. Religious pluralism, for example, actually exhibits a variety of forms that have roots in the intellectual and cultural soil of *both* modernity and

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[2] I will use the term *plurality* to denote the empirical phenomena of social, political, ethnic, religious, etc. variety. *Pluralism* denotes the usually relativistic ideologies that support or respond to those phenomena. Plurality is simply an observable fact of life. Pluralism is a philosophy. I shall try to maintain this distinction.

[3] In the first draft of this paper I had also included ethnic and political pluralism, but I have omitted it now, since some aspects of that phenomenon are discussed in Samuel Escobar's paper, under 'globalization and contextualization'.

postmodernity. Missiological response, as we shall see below, must discern and distinguish these different roots when confronting different brands of religious pluralism.

By *modernity* I am referring to the epoch of western civilization that began with the Renaissance, flourished in the wake of the Enlightenment, and has reached its zenith in 19th and 20th century cultures dominated by the triumphs of science and technology. Its primary characteristic has been the exaltation of autonomous human reason and its application to every realm of life. There are many excellent analyses of its characteristics and history.[4] Among the features of modernity that are particularly relevant to the Christian confrontation with various pluralisms are those listed by Andrew Walker: the rise of the nation state; the establishment of functional rationality; the emergence of structural (epistemological) pluralism; the emergence of cultural pluralism; a worldview dominated by science and the idea of progress; the growth of individualism.[5]

By *postmodernity* I am referring to the shift in western intellectual and popular culture that began in the 1960s and 1970s. It is helpful to distinguish the intellectual and the popular forms of postmodernity, and furthermore, in each case to observe that there are negative and positive aspects to it.[6]

Intellectually, through the work of such as Foucault, Lyotard, Derrida and Baudrillard, the whole Enlightenment project was exposed as having faulty foundations. The negative or 'deconstructing' acids included the observation that so-called 'objective and factual truth' depends on all kinds of assumptions which are themselves relative and questionable. Foucault pointed out that these hidden assumptions also frequently functioned as an inherent ideology of Euro-centric power and hegemony. Language itself is no longer seen as referential (referring to real objects) but symbolic (a system of signs). The postmodern intellectual world is characterized by relativism, with all attempts at finding meaning doomed to being nothing more than arbitrary and changing social constructions.

Not all intellectual postmodern culture is negative in this way, however. There are those who helpfully explore the *relativity* of all our knowing, without accepting utter *relativism*. The position known as *critical realism* accepts that there is an objective real world out there (physically and historically) which we can know, but insists that we need to be constantly critical of our own capacity to know it with any finality or completeness. All our knowing is embedded in culture, history and community, but that does not *invalidate* it. We may never be able to know fully or perfectly, but that does not mean we cannot know anything. So we need to be humble (shedding Enlightenment arrogance), but not despairing.[7]

In another way also, postmodernity returns to perspectives on human life and history which have been and still are held by substantial sections of the human race who have not

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[4] E.g. P. Sampson, V. Samuel and C. Sugden (eds.) *Faith and Modernity* (Oxford: Regnum, 1994); A. Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990); A. Walker, *Telling the Story: Gospel, Mission and Culture* (London: SPCK, 1996).

[5] Walker, Telling the Story, ch. 5

[6] I am dependent in the following section on the helpful outline that explores these distinctions provided by Craig Van Gelder, in an unpublished paper, 'Shaping ministry in a postmodern world: Building bridges with the Gospel to a changed context'.

[7] See S. Best and D. Kellner, *Postmodern Theory: Critical Interrogation* (New York: Guildford Press, 1991), pp. 256–304. A helpful exposition of 'critical realism' in relation to biblical history is provided by the outstanding evangelical New Testament scholar, N.T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (London: SPCK, 1992), pp. 31–46.

yet been engulfed by the Enlightenment assumptions of western-style modernity. I quote here from helpful comments made on the first draft of my paper by Miriam Adeney.

Postmodernism has a number of aspects which may have positive dimensions. For example:

- Subject and object cannot be disconnected.
- Fact and value cannot be disconnected.
- History is not necessarily progressing.
- Cultures are not necessarily ranked.
- Truth is experienced in multiple and incomplete ways, including paradox and ambiguity.
- If there is a metanarrative, it is not based on enlightenment categories.

Postmodernism is not really a problem for much of the world who always have seen the sense of the above six perspectives and so are not disturbed by their rise in the postmodern period. It may well be, therefore, that Christian mission in the 21st century will find that some aspects of the postmodern worldview are more compatible with bringing the gospel to certain cultures than the values of modernity which have unfortunately characterized much western mission.

Turning to the popular side of postmodernity: popular culture manifests the same ambiguity of negative and positive forms of postmodernity. Negatively, there is the brutal nihilism of some forms of art and cinema. Life is meaningless—so what? The failure and emptiness of so much of the promise inherent in the mythology of modernity has led to a great deal of pessimism in western life, as well as a very shallow attitude of 'get what you can from the present: there isn't much future to look forward to'.

But postmodernity has its positive side in popular culture as well. There are the more vibrant forms of playfulness, collage, irony and symbolism of much contemporary culture. Mix and match, switch images, plunder the past and mix it with the present and future, don't look for depth but enjoy the surface, life is a carnival to be enjoyed, not a drama to be understood. Furthermore, postmodernity celebrates diversity of culture, whereas modernity pushes for uniformity and homogenization of human life into secular, scientific and materialistic categories.

Again, Miriam Adeney in her comments on the earlier draft of this paper warned against regarding plurality as a bad or bewildering thing. She says,

> I like to think of God's glorious multicultural kaleidoscope. I view cultures as treasure chests of symbols for exuberant expression of the image of God. It's true that people (as sinners) create patterns of idolatry and exploitation in every culture. Equally, however, people (in God's image) create patterns of beauty, wisdom, and kindness in every culture.

I fully agree, and would say that postmodernity's celebration of cultural diversity is a lot closer to the Bible's own affirmation of 'every tribe and nation and language', than the homogenizing anti-culture of modernity.

It is important, then, to be aware of the fact that we live in an age of transition—and it is not neat. People and societies do not go to bed one night 'modern' and wake up next day 'postmodern'. There is an inter-layering between modernity, late or hyper-modernity (the globalized, multinational capitalist world—the 'McWorld' phenomenon[8]), and postmodernity. At the same time, of course, large sections of humanity are bound to religious worldviews in which the philosophical issues of modernity and postmodernity

[8] See Tom Sine, *Mustard Seed versus McWorld: Reinventing Christian Life and Mission for a New Millennium* (Crowborough: Monarch, 1999).

are largely irrelevant, or treated with scathing dismissal as evidence of the poverty of 'western religion'. The challenge to missiology is to know which world we are addressing in any given context, which world the church itself is identified with, and what challenges the gospel presents to each of the interwoven worldviews.[9]

1. HERMENEUTICAL PLURALISM

The transition from modernity to postmodernity is producing some fascinating effects in the world of biblical hermeneutics, which have knock-on effects in missiology, since so many missiological issues are essentially hermeneutical in essence. This is especially so for evangelicals because of our commitment to attaining a theology of mission that can be defended as 'biblical'. The problem is, what does it mean to be 'biblical', and who decides when you are, or are not, being 'biblical'?

Enlightenment modernity constrained biblical hermeneutics into the straitjacket of the historical-critical method and a form of 'modern scientific exegesis' that excluded the transcendent from Scripture as sharply as autonomous rationality excluded it from the natural sciences. But, as Brueggemann and others have pointedly made clear, the myth of neutrality, of scientific objectivity, concealed a western hegemony in biblical studies that tended to stifle all other voices or readings.

Postmodernity, with its rejection of all hegemonies and deep suspicion of all claims to 'scientific objectivity', finality and universality, has challenged the critical hermeneutical consensus on Scripture as well, and opened up a world of almost infinite plurality of readings and interpretations. At one level this has had the exhilarating effect of giving a place in the sun to a great variety of contextual readings of the Scripture which are not bound to the historical-critical method. There is value in recognizing the *relativity* of all hermeneutics. A positive benefit of the postmodern shift in biblical studies is that you don't have to submit your interpretation of scripture to a single accrediting agency—the western critical guild of scholarship. On the other hand, the postmodern rejection of any foundation or grounds on which we might affirm a reading of the biblical text to be *right or wrong*, opens up an uncontrolled *relativism*. The plurality of contexts in which the text is read and heard becomes a pluralism of approach that has no limits or controls in relation to the truth of the text. Indeed, such an approach questions whether the very concept of 'the truth of the text' is meaningful. The text can have as many meanings as there are readers and contexts.

I believe 21st century missiology will have to wrestle with a *doctrine of scripture* that moves beyond the way evangelical scholarship has tended to defend the inspiration and authority of the Bible with the concepts and methods of modernity itself, towards a more dynamic understanding of the authority and role of the Bible in a postmodern world. And I think this will be one of the biggest challenges for Christian theology in the 21st century, since there is no mission without the authority of Christ himself, and our access to that authority depends upon the Scriptures. *So, a major missiological task for evangelical theology will be a fresh articulation of the authority of the Bible and its relation to Christ's authorization of our mission*.

Faced with the basic hermeneutical question: 'What does this biblical text mean?' scholars have tended to focus on one of three possible locations for the real source of 'meaning' in texts: 1) the author(s); 2) the text itself; 3) the reader(s). I would like to look

[9] Helpful discussion of these interwoven phenomena is to be found in Craig Van Gelder, 'Mission in the Emerging Postmodern Condition', in George H. Hunsberger and Craig Van Gelder, *The Church Between Gospel and Culture: The Emerging Mission in North America* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), pp. 127–133.

at each of these three focal points. First I will very briefly describe each one and evaluate some key strengths and weaknesses. Then I would like in each case to explore not only how they relate to the contemporary plurality of cultures and religions, but also how cultural and religious plurality was actually a major factor in the *ancient biblical context* in which the text emerged and which it addressed.

A. Author-Centred Focus

This hermeneutical approach, which is common to evangelical as well as more critical interpretation, assumes that the meaning of any biblical text is to be found by going back to **the origins** of the text. **Exegesis** is fundamentally based on recovering the **author's intent**. This then involves the **grammatico-historical method**. By means of textual criticism, lexical and semantic study, words, syntax and grammar, the exegete seeks to answer the question, 'What did this author actually say; and what did the words mean at the time?' A vital step in this process is to 'Set the text in its context', or rather, its **contexts**, which will include canonical, historical, social and cultural contexts. Then, further, all the tools of critical *study, sometimes collectively* described as the historico-critical method, will be employed to explore the origins of the text before us. These include, source criticism, form criticism, redaction criticism etc. The common aim is to get as close as possible to understanding what the original author(s) of the text meant to communicate through its production, collection and preservation.

There are several obvious strengths in such an approach:

- It seems to be the 'common sense' approach. It assumes that meaning starts in the mind of the author; when somebody speaks or writes they intend to communicate some meaning which they wish to be understood. This approach respects the priority of author-intent.
- It tries to take an objective approach, arguing for some core of stable meaning in each text which is in principle recoverable by the exegete.
- It offers some control over the hermeneutical process by setting limits/boundaries to possible meanings. It enables some adjudication of legitimate and illegitimate interpretations. We may agree that a text could have several possible meanings, but also agree that some meanings are impossible. This does not guarantee 'certainty'—there is always room for disagreement among readers. But there is an assumption that we *can* know enough to get a reasonably close approximation to what the author probably meant to say.
- The importance of paying attention to the authors of biblical texts also lies in their character as witnesses (directly or indirectly) to the story of salvation. It is assumed that biblical texts are referential. That is, they actually refer to real events in the real world—events in which God has acted for our salvation. The world of the biblical authors is the world where things happened that constitute the gospel. The biblical text is like a window to that world. Using the Bible among the religions must therefore mean telling the story which makes it Good News, not merely treating it as a quarry of religious ideas and ideals for comparison, admiration or exchange.
- This last point highlights the futility of the question: 'Is there salvation in other religions?' This overlooks the primary nature of salvation in the Bible, namely as something that God has done in and through the story which the Bible relates. Other religions do not save, not because they are inferior as religions in some way, but because religion itself does not save anybody. God does. Other

religions do not tell the story, this story. This is also why we cannot accept the substitution of the scriptures of other religions for the Old Testament.

But there are also some dangers if we focus exclusively on the search for the original author's intent.

- Obsession with *origins* can obscure the *purpose* of the text. The expression 'modern *scientific* criticism' reveals the fact that the rise of the critical approach to the text went hand in hand with Enlightenment-modernity's preference for explaining everything by finding causes at the expense of teleology (i.e. seeking the purpose of something). Science explains by *reducing* phenomena to their smallest parts, and by seeking *causes* of how things have become what they are. It does not ask 'what is this *for?*' Similarly some critical exegesis of the Bible breaks it up into ever smaller sources, and then explores the origins, history, and structure for the smallest possible units of the text, but does not answer the question, 'Yes, but what is this book as a whole actually *saying*? What is this text *for*? What does it *do?*'
- Author-centred focus treats the text as a **window**, through which we can gain access to the authors' own world. However, exclusive attention to that world ('the world behind the text') can obscure the fact that the purpose of a window is also to let the light shine into the room of the observer—i.e. it can overlook (or exclude) the *revelatory* function of the biblical text. It is not there simply to shed light on the world of ancient Israel or the early church, but to be 'a light to *my* path'. In other words, an evangelical approach to the Bible recognizes that 'author-intent' is not confined to the human author, but must also include the intent of the divine Author whose message addresses every human context through these inspired texts.

In what way, then, does an author-centred focus relate to religious plurality? It is vital to remember that the biblical authors did not speak or write in a vacuum: religious plurality was often a factor in their contexts just as much as ours. Their 'intended meaning' was related to their world. We do not just look for a sealed package of 'original meaning' and *then* seek to apply it to our context of mission in the midst of plurality; we need to recognize that what they meant in their context was itself shaped by the missional engagement of God and God's people with the world around them.

Here are a few examples in which religious plurality is clearly part of the context of the author's world, and needs to be taken into account when interpreting the text in question.

- **Ex. 15**, the song of Moses. The polemical affirmation of the kingship of Yahweh is made in the context of power encounter with Pharoah's claim to divinity.
- **Josh. 24:14f**. 'Choose today. . .', whether Mesopotamian gods of the ancestors, or the gods of Egypt or of Canaan. The monotheistic covenantal choice of Yahweh was made in the context of acknowledged religious plurality which was part of the roots and background of the people of Israel.
- **Hosea**, confronted with the syncretism of Baal cults with Yahwism, takes the offensive by using the sexual nature of the former as a source of language and imagery to portray the 'married' relationship of Yahweh and Israel. By presenting the covenant relationship as a marriage, he can then portray Israel's covenant unfaithfulness as adultery and prostitution. But in doing so, he is exploiting the sexual imagery of the very religious corruption he was attacking.

- **Isa. 40–55**. The great affirmations of Yahweh's sovereignty over nations, history and 'the gods' are made against the background of the grand claims of Babylonian gods—especially the astral deities (40:26) and state gods (46:1–2).
- **Gen. 1**. Israel's monotheistic understanding of creation is affirmed against contemporary Ancient Near Eastern mythology, polytheism, astrology, etc.
- **John**. Conflict with elements of Judaism that rejected the messianic claims of Jesus and his early followers.
- **Colossians**. Uniqueness and supremacy of Jesus Christ in midst of surrounding mixture of paganism, early Gnosticism, Jewish rituals and mystery cults.
- **Revelation**. Jesus Lord of history, against background of the sinister threat of emperor worship and the state cult of Rome.

So, it seems to me that we will get a closer understanding—a better understanding—of the author's original meaning when we actually take into account the worlds of religious plurality in which they lived, and therefore *feel* the contrast, *feel* the way in which these words are being emphasized. Our use of the Bible in the world of modern religious pluralism will be greatly helped in its missional sharpness if we give more attention to the religious pluralism that was part of the world of the biblical authors themselves.

B. Text-Centred Focus

This approach believes that meaning is to be found in the text itself, regarded as an **artefact**, that is, a piece of human construction—i.e. like a painting, or piece of music, or sculpture, which can be appreciated for itself, no matter who produced it or why. The text is not so much a window that we *look through* to some world beyond itself, as **a painting** that we *look at*. A painting could even be made to look exactly like a window—giving the illusion of some objective reality outside itself, but still be merely a painting—a work of human artistry. So, as applied to biblical texts, this approach pays little attention to the author and his or her intentions (which we cannot know for certain anyway). The text now has an existence and a meaning of its own, to be appreciated for its own sake as a work of **literary art and craft**.

This approach has developed the use of many helpful tools of **literary** analysis and tends to engage in **close reading** of texts, paying careful attention to all the fine detail of a narrative or poem, in the same way that an art connoisseur will appreciate every brush stroke of a master painter. Literary appreciation of biblical literature will include, for example: *Genre identification*—what kind of literature is this and how is it to be read?

- *Literary conventions*—how do stories, poems, etc. actually work? How do they engage and affect us when we read them?
- *Narrative art*—e.g. setting, plot, characters, suspense, irony, perspective, gapping, patterning, word-play, etc.
- *Poetic art*—e.g. economy of words, imagery, metaphor, parallelism, poetic figures, chiasmus/concentricity, climax, contrast, symbolism, etc.

Literary approaches to the biblical text often bring out all sorts of layers of meaning and significance that have been put in there by the skill and the thought and the art and the craft of the human author to whom God was entrusting the message that was to be conveyed by the medium of literature.

In evaluating this text-focused, literary approach to biblical hermeneutics, we may observe several strengths and values:

- The Bible *is* great literature: it can and should be appreciated at that level. There is no necessary conflict between believing in divine inspiration and appreciating human artistry.
- Literary approaches tend to be more holistic (that is, they tend to treat passages or books as a whole), and yet at the same time pay very close attention to the fine details of the text. This is consonant with an evangelical commitment to verbal inspiration; the choice of words matters.
- It helps us to understand how meaning is carried by the *form* of a text and not just by its *content*. We need to look not only at *what* is written, but also at *how* it has been written.
- Paradoxically also, a text-centred approach respects the author, not so much on the assumption that we can recover the author's intended meaning, but that we can admire the author's artistry.
- Such an approach can go along with the conviction that, strictly speaking (e.g. 2 Tim. 3:16), inspiration is a property of the *texts* of Scripture, not of the authors, or of the pre-canonical sources, etc. Therefore, indirectly, a close literary reading of the biblical texts is a compliment to the divine author as well (on an evangelical understanding).
- It treats the great variety of biblical texts with integrity by genuinely listening to their *plurivocality*—i.e. the internal dialectic of views and perspectives, which often seem in uncomfortable opposition to one another. It resists flattening everything out or squeezing everything into a univocal system. This is a major emphasis in recent postmodern hermeneutics.[10]

But there are also, of course, dangers in a literary approach which focuses exclusively on the text itself without concern for the identity or the world of the author.

Literary study of the text *can* proceed without reference to the historical value of the text. ('Never mind the history, feel the art').

- Literary approaches to the text can sometimes totally **ignore history**. If the fascination with literary art leads us to dismiss the historical question: 'Did it really happen?' then we have problems with the biblical faith which is actually rooted in history. Now we may make allowances for 'narrative liberty'—that is, we may be willing to accept that not every single detail in the way a story has been told mirrors precisely 'what actually happened if you'd been there'. But it is possible for real history to be told as a good story, and for a good story to be grounded in real history. The 'having-happenedness' of the biblical story is very important and should not be lost sight of when we look at the art by which that story was written.
- A purely literary approach can lead to texts being read without reference to their place in the *canon* and therefore in the *story* of Scripture as a whole. One can focus on a text and appreciate its literary qualities and even be moved by it, yet remain untouched by its significance as part of the whole word of God to humanity.

[10] Cf. Especially the later work of Brueggemann, who rightly highlights how the Bible itself has counter-pointing voices and traditions (exodus and exile; covenant and judgement; hymn and lament; etc.), which need to be given their full expression, and not explained, excused or excluded. *Biblical Theological Bulletin* 127 (1997), pp. 4–8; and, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997).

- Unbalanced commitment to unresolved *plurivocality* of the texts (favoured by postmodern interpretation), results in the loss of any real finality or normativity: all we have is a constant oscillation of perspectives. This seems to me an abuse of the plurality of the Bible's texts. It is the opposite danger to the tendency to flatten the whole Bible out into a single monotone message. This is the tendency never to allow the Bible to say anything with finality at all.

Now, what about the religious plurality aspect of *this* focus? It is important to recognize, and I think sometimes evangelical scholarship does *not* adequately recognize, that the biblical texts themselves do use religious language, metaphors and symbolism that are drawn from the plurality of religions that surrounded the authors, yet without sharing the polytheistic worldview that supported such religion.

- **Hosea**, confronted with the syncretism of Baal cults with Yahwism, takes the offensive by using the sexual nature of the former as a source of language and imagery to portray the 'married' relationship of Yahweh and Israel. By presenting the covenant relationship as a marriage, he can then portray Israel's covenant unfaithfulness as adultery and prostitution. But in doing so, he is exploiting the sexual imagery of the very religious corruption he was attacking.
- Some **Psalms** make use of Canaanite mythology (e.g. Ps. 48:1–3 uses the mythological 'city of the great king', which in Baal epics was situated in the far north, to describe the historical city of Yahweh-Jerusalem), and of Canaanite poetic metres (e.g. Ps. 93, which also portrays Yahweh as triumphant over the mighty mythological enemy—the sea).
- **Isaiah 51:9–10** and **Ezekiel 29:1–6** make use of ancient near Eastern dragon/monster mythology to describe Yahweh's judgement on Egypt, both in the exodus and in the defeat by Babylon.
- **Ezekiel 1** uses familiar Ancient Near Eastern religious art and statuary, but transcends it, in portraying the dynamic sovereignty and glory of Yahweh (e.g. four-headed, bull-legged, winged creatures who held up the thrones of gods, or rode on wheeled chariots—well known in Ancient Near Eastern iconography)
- **Paul in Athens**, using Greek poets, yet subverting their religious worldview (Acts 17:24–31).
- **John's Logos**; a familiar term in Greek philosophy, but John has harnessed it to full-scale Christological and incarnational significance (Jn. 1)

Such examples raise the age-old missiological question of whether or how far biblical texts can be preached and taught, making use of contemporary religious concepts and symbols in our day. Can we re-contextualize the biblical text from an ancient to a modern religious milieu, without dissolving the text into syncretism? If the Bible itself could utilize a plurality of pagan words, symbols and myths, etc., to communicate its monotheistic and saving message, why should not the church in mission, and in translation, do the same? But what are the limits and controls? Again, the hermeneutical task is fundamentally a missiological one, and pluralism is the operating context at both ends of the task—the biblical text and the modern world.

It needs to be stressed that biblical texts emphatically reject idolatry in all its forms, throughout a very wide span of historical and cultural contexts: Egyptian, Canaanite, Babylonian, Persian, Greek and Roman idolatry are all condemned in the course of biblical history. In fact, although biblical texts obviously do describe the religious practice of God's own people (i.e. of OT Israel and of the NT church), there is a strong textual tradition that is 'anti-religious'. The Bible undermines the idea that religion itself is the solution to

human problems. More often, (in the prophetic perception), it was the most virulent form of the problem itself. (cf. Isa. 1, Jer. 7, Amos 5, Hosea 6, etc.)

Some biblical texts make remarkable universal claims, in the midst of surrounding religious plurality, in relation to the revelatory and salvific significance of particular key events. E.g. Deut. 4, Ps. 33, Ps. 24, Isa. 40–55, Jn. 1, Phil. 2, Heb. 1, etc. The great claim made for Jesus, for example, in Philippians 2:10–11, was made in its own context, against the worship of Caesar (Caesar is not Lord, Jesus is). But it is made on the basis of quoting a text from Isaiah 45:22–24 which is actually a claim for *Yahweh* in the context of *Babylonian* pluralism, because God says, 'I have sworn that by me every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that in Yahweh alone are righteousness and strength'. So, the Philippians 2 passage is affirming the uniqueness of *Jesus* in the context of *Caesar* worship (religious plurality of the first century) and building it on the foundation of the uniqueness of *Yahweh* in the context of *Babylonian* religious plurality in the sixth century BC. Both texts derive their sharpness and significance from the plurality of the contexts in which, and against which, they were uttered. From a missiological perspective we need to see their monotheistic meaning as sharply defined because of the pluralism that they so vigorously deny.

C. Reader-Centred Focus

Let us move on finally then, to the third main focus—a reader-centred focus. This is a more recent kind of approach in which people are bringing into the foreground the role of the reader (or readers) in active interpretation of the Bible.

If so far we have looked under 'author-centred' at the text as a **window** (through which you have access to the other world—the world of the ancient author), and then, second, under a text-centred approach, we looked at the text as a **painting** (that is, as a product of human art and skill which needs to be appreciated and understood for its own sake), here we are thinking more of **the text as a mirror**. What can be seen in a mirror depends on who is standing in front of it. The 'contents' of the mirror, in a sense, reflects who is looking into it or what objects are before it. And so, on this view, the *meaning* in the text is not something, as it were, fixed and final in the text—some sort of objective reality. The meaning of the text actually only arises, only happens, in the act of reading. It is when the reader *reads* that the text *means*, just as it is only when you look in a mirror that the mirror reflects you. So, meaning is the interaction then between text and reader.

Now this approach also reflects the shift from a modernity paradigm of exegesis to **a post-modernity paradigm**. Under modernity the reader, rather like the scientist, was simply the neutral observer of a fixed reality which was external to himself or herself. An objective 'real meaning', like 'the real world', was assumed to exist, and the task of the interpreter, like the scientist, was merely to uncover it. The more post-modern view is to say, 'Well, actually, even in science the subjective observer is part of the reality under observation and, indeed, may change it in the act of observing it'. And so the myth of the 'objective neutral observer' has been somewhat demoted in newer forms of science and is similarly also being lost in hermeneutics.

The *reader* as subject also is a significant part in the whole process. There is no independent, final, fixed meaning. And of course the readers of the biblical text must include not just ourselves, but the **original readers** to whom it was first addressed, the **later biblical readers** who collected these texts and edited them into books, and built the books into collections, and built the collections into a canon, the whole long chain of **Jewish and Christian readers** down through the centuries since the Bible reached its final form, and finally **modern readers** in multiple global contexts around our world today.

So, a reader-centred focus urges us to take all these 'readers' seriously. We need to recognize that the meaning of the texts does relate to and cannot ignore, *who* is doing the reading and *what* they bring to their reading from their own cultural background, presuppositions, assumptions and so on (nobody reads just as a blank sheet—you always read with something else in your mind), and *where* they are reading, that is, what is their position, both geographically (where they live), their culture, their position within the culture (whether at the top or the bottom of it), their social, economic, political interests, and so on. All of those aspects of the readers' contexts will affect the way in which the meaning is articulated and applied. There is no such thing as 'contextless, presuppositionless' exegesis or interpretation.

How do we evaluate this reader-centred approach? As before, there are positive things to be said, first of all.

- There is no doubt, I think, that focusing on the reader has facilitated fresh ways of discovering the relevance of the text in many modern contexts. The reality of **'contextualised theology'** has now become taken for granted, provided we recognize that we are *all* interpreting contextually, because all of us interpret in a particular context! Western biblical interpretation has no right to assume that all its insights are 'the standard', while those from other continents are 'contextualized'. The West is also a context—and not necessarily a better or a worse context for understanding and interpreting the text of the Scriptures than anywhere else on the planet.
- Recognizing this has led somewhat to **the demise of western hegemony** over exegesis and hermeneutics. We recognize the relativity of all hermeneutics, that we all need one another and that, in fact, for westerners to hear the Bible interpreted and understood and preached by African, Latin, or Asian brothers and sisters in Christ, and *vice versa*, and then to see perspectives that others are bringing, is often a very enriching thing.
- Attention to the context of the reader(s) has unleashed **the power of the biblical text** into contexts of human need, conflict or injustice e.g. in liberationist, feminist, and other 'advocacy' hermeneutics. We may not always agree with where such readers want to take us, but we cannot deny the validity of reading the text in and into such contexts and issues. Meaning *is* affected by who you are and what agenda you have. As Anthony Billington once put it, 'If you are a feminist, pacifist, vegetarian, the text may show up different meanings as *you* read it, than if you are a male-chauvinist, war-mongering, carnivore'.

There are, of course, dangers in an unbalanced emphasis on the role of the reader in determining the meaning of the biblical text.

- A reader-centred approach can degenerate into pure subjectivism if it is not carefully watched. It reverses the priority of author intent as the determinant factor in a text's meaning. In fact, in some cases, reader response theory goes so far as virtually eliminating the author altogether—'It doesn't really matter who said this or what they meant by saying it; what matters is what it means to me. That's all that really counts.' So the reader is prioritised over the author and the *authority*, therefore, lies not with the author or with the text but with the reader, the reader's self—and that, again, is very reflective of a postmodern kind of world view. One has to say that it is not far removed either from some popular forms of evangelical Bible reading, which arrogantly exclude any

tradition of scholarly study of the text and are content only to ask, 'What does this text mean for me?'

- This also means, of course, that you lose any sense of objective or external controls. If there is *no* assumption of some fixed or stable core of meaning in the text itself deriving ultimately from the author's intention, then pluralism rules: there is no such thing as a 'right' or a 'wrong' reading, a 'legitimate' or 'illegitimate' reading—some may be better than others but it is difficult to know who has the right to say so.

How then is the interpretation of the Bible affected by the religious plurality of contemporary readers? How do the multiple cultural and religious contexts of people reading the Bible today affect how they understand its meaning? This of course is a question as old as the Bible itself. The Hebrew Scriptures were translated into Greek, long before the New Testament was written, so that culturally and contextually Greek speaking people could read them. A few examples will suffice here, since doubtless the groups in the conference will be aware of many similar situations where the reading of the Scriptures is affected by the cultural and religious pre-understandings of the readers.

- **The Islamic world** The obvious difficulties in the Bible for Muslims: God as Father; Jesus as Son of God; the story of the Conquest, and the treatment of Ishmael. More subtle difficulties: the biblical record of the 'sins of the prophets' e.g., Abraham's lies, Moses' murder, David's adultery. Things which Jews and Christians accept as encouraging evidence of their humanity like ours, for Muslims are further proof that Christians have tampered with the Bible. Positive aspects: the Arab/Islamic appreciation of stories. (Note here the work of Kenneth Baillie.) Hence the power of parables and the helpfulness of parabolic method to circumvent certain theological objections and blindspots.
- **The Hindu world** Some biblical language and imagery very open to misunderstanding within the Hindu worldview including the following: 'born again', avatar/incarnation, 'abide in me'. The apostles could freely use pagan words that had different connotations in the Greek world, in order to re-shape and use them for Christian purposes. E.g. *theos*, *kyrios*, *logos*, *soter*, *mysterion*, etc. But there is the danger of liberal Indian theologies that syncretise biblical categories into the Hindu worldview and then dissolve the vital distinctions.
- **African Independent Churches** Because of reading the whole Bible 'flat', ie. of equal authority, with no regard for historical development in the canon, some African Independent Churches have picked out some very odd and exotic aspects, e.g. of Old Testament ritual, and then not only continued them, but exalted them as 'biblical'. Sometimes, as an indirect result of translation policies, young churches have had only the New Testament for almost a generation before the Old Testament is available. The Old Testament, coming later, is viewed as *superior* (like *secondary* education), so some Old Testament practices are privileged. Furthermore, the long delay in translating the Old Testament means that sometimes the underlying traditional religion worldview has not been challenged or replaced by a fully biblical one encompassing creation, fall, the history of salvation from Israel through Jesus, and the eschatological hope of new creation.

Scripture and Plurality

The thrust of my argument in this section is that evangelical missiology will have to take as a major task in the next century a fresh articulation of our doctrine of Scripture. In

doing so we shall have to take more account of the plurality (cultural and religious) that is to be found at every level of the hermeneutical process—in the world of the author, in the language, idiom and imagery of the text, and in the contexts of the readers.

2. RELIGIOUS PLURALISM

A) Features and Roots

It is not the facts, statistics and challenges of the plurality of religions which are the issue here. Obviously it is a task for *practical mission strategy* to address the multiplicity of specific religious contexts in which ambassadors for the Christian gospel must witness. What the *missiologist* must address is the challenge of the philosophy of pluralism which presents itself as a powerful and dominant response to that religious plurality. Pluralism, briefly defined, is the view that

> salvation/enlightenment/liberation is said to be a reality in all major religious traditions and no single religion can be considered somehow normative or superior to all others. All religions are in their own way complex historically and culturally conditioned human responses to the one divine reality.[11]

Or, elsewhere,

> the belief that there is not one, but a number of spheres of saving contact between God and man. God's revealing and redeeming activity has elicited response in a number of culturally conditioned ways throughout history. Each response is partial, incomplete, unique; but they are related to each other in that they represent different culturally focused perceptions of the one ultimate divine reality.[12]

Religious pluralism of the variety that has emerged from the cradle of modernity is primarily an *epistemological* pluralism. That is, it has to do with the question of how we can (or cannot) *know* the truth-value of religious claims. It is based on a key feature of the Enlightenment transformation of western thinking, namely the cleavage or gulf that was inserted into human knowing in the wake of Descartes and Kant in particular. The whole sphere of western life and culture was divided into two hemispheres—public and private. The public world is the world of so-called objective facts, which are discovered by empirical enquiry and by the application of reason by a detached, neutral observer. The private world is the world of subjective beliefs, personal morality, family values, religion, etc.

In this structural dichotomy, one can only really 'know' what is in the public hemisphere, because knowledge has to be based on 'scientific' proof. Only that which can be empirically proved can be taken as true and therefore can be known. Everything else is a matter of opinion, or faith, but cannot be a matter of truth and knowledge. Any appeal to authoritative divine revelation was ruled out as a source of truth and knowledge. Therefore religion, since it could not be 'proved' empirically and rationally, was removed from the arena of public truth and relegated to the zone of private belief.

Western culture thus embraced a dualism. On the one hand, there was a kind of secular monism—a commitment to the sole objective truth of all things scientific and rational. In that 'hemisphere', intolerance ruled: you don't argue with the objective facts of science.

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[11] H.A. Netland, *Dissonant Voices: Religious Pluralism and the Question of Truth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans; Leicester: Apollos, 1991), p. 26.

[12] A. Race, *Christians and Religious Pluralism* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1982), p. 78.

On the other hand there developed religious pluralism—the refusal to accept that any single set of religious beliefs could be proven to be solely true. Since religious beliefs cannot be known or proved by the exercise of reason alone, we have to allow for a variety of opinions. It is important to understand that this is an epistemological form of pluralism. It does not assert that there is no such thing as truth at all (that is the more postmodern brand of *ontological* pluralism). Rather it limits the boundaries of what can be known to be true to the realm of materialistic science and applied rationality. Then, by excluding all religious belief from any valid claim to knowable truth, it argues that the only valid stance in relation to conflicting religious beliefs is to allow the possibility of some truth in all of them, and to exercise a tolerant pluralism.

Along with this epistemological pluralism, goes that other fruit of modernity, a consumerist, supermarket approach to everything at the popular level. In a supermarket, you don't look for the breakfast cereal that is 'right' or 'true'. You just choose what you like. The same goes for religion and morality and all the values that go with them. Since they fall into the hemisphere in which objective knowledge is said to be impossible in principle, you just choose what suits you best.

B) Missiological Response

The missiological task in relation to the kind of pluralism that stems from *modernity* roots has to be to attack those roots themselves. That is, we must carry forward the critique of Enlightenment modernity assumptions that have made pluralism the dominant philosophy of western culture, both intellectually and in popular plausibility. Easily the most pioneering voice in this task has been that of Lesslie Newbigin. Along with other participants in the *Gospel and Culture* movement in Britain, he has exposed the fallacies and false trails of modernity's epistemological dichotomy and arrogance.[13]

Newbigin has shown that the task for the church in western societies, where religion has been privatized and marginalized by the dominance of scientism and materialism, is to re-affirm the gospel as 'public truth'. By that he means that Christians must assert their claim that the biblical story of God's redemptive engagement with the world he created is the universal story, that it can be known and affirmed as truth, and that it constitutes a valid starting point for other truth-seeking and knowing. We must reject the narrow, shallow reductionism that tells us we can only 'know' what we can discover with our senses and demonstrate with our rationality. We must get the claims of Christian truth back into the public hemisphere from which modernity banished them.

Furthermore, we must point out more aggressively that even scientific knowing also starts out from some enormous faith commitments. As Newbigin says, all knowing starts from believing something—in the world of science as much as religion. The Enlightenment dichotomies of objective-subjective, public-private, knowledge-faith are built on very shaky foundations.

Ironically, in confronting the falsehoods of modernity, Christian missiology now has an ally in the postmodern critique that has arisen from the contradictions of late modernity itself. *Postmodernity* attacks the presuppositions of modernity, just as many Christians do (though many evangelical Christians, including many mission strategists, still operate within paradigms profoundly shaped by modernity). However, while postmodernity certainly helps us to dispense with the arrogant claim that scientific truth

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[13] Among the most significant writings of Newbigin are: *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (London: SPCK, 1989); *Truth to Tell: The Gospel as Public Truth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991); *The Open Secret: An Introduction to the Theology of Mission*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans; London: SPCK, 1995). Another key work from the *Gospel and Culture Movement* is Andrew Walker, *Telling the Story*.

is the only truth worth knowing or capable of being known at all, it throws up what is probably an even more serious challenge to the Christian worldview. That is, the assertion that there is no ultimate or universal truth to be known about anything at all—science included.

When this postmodern mindset comes to deal with religions, it moves beyond the epistemologically based religious pluralism we have just considered ('we cannot *know* which religion gives us the real truth, so we must allow for something true in all of them, and seek the truth in dialogue together'), to a more *ontological* religious pluralism ('there is no universal truth, in religion or anywhere else; what matters is not what may or may not be universally true, but what is locally or temporarily true for *you*; religion is little different from therapy for the self—if there is such a thing').

It seems to me that evangelical missiology will have to continue to tackle both kinds of religious pluralism—modernity based epistemological pluralism, and postmodern ontological pluralism—well into the next century, since both forms will co-exist during the era of cultural transition we have entered.

C) What's Wrong with Pluralism?

Superficially, pluralism can seem plausible and attractive.[14] After all, it still talks about God and is willing to keep Christ in the picture somewhere, so what more do you need? You are allowed to keep Christ as the focus of your own religion, so long as you make room for the other 'planets' in the religious solar system. Isn't that fair enough? It also seems to relieve us of all that worry about what will happen to those who never hear the gospel of Christ. They have their own religion which puts them in touch with God, so that's all right then too. And most of all, it fits so perfectly with the 'supermarket mentality' that characterizes the modern and postmodern western mind.

However, underneath all these attractive features pluralism has some major implications that set it totally at odds with biblical Christianity and make it actually a particularly dangerous philosophy for Christians to toy with. My dominant criticisms are directed at what it does to our understanding of God, Jesus, and the worship of Christians themselves.[15]

i) Pluralism Reduces God to Abstractions

John Hick is one of the leading pluralist theologians. He has argued for what he calls 'pluralist theocentrism'—that is, we should no longer put Christ or the church at the centre of the religious universe, but only God. 'God' is like the sun at the centre of the solar system, and Christianity along with all the other religions are like the orbiting planets, all attracted by the gravity of the sun, but each in its own unique orbit. However, one marked feature of this 'Copernican revolution', as Hick called it, is that the *theos* ('god') who is finally left at the centre becomes utterly abstract. Clearly 'he' cannot be identified or

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[14] The following section is substantially an extract from my book, *Thinking Clearly about the Uniqueness of Jesus* (Crowborough: Monarch, 1997). In it I seek to define and critique the three major Christian responses to the reality of religious plurality—exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism, and to provide further biblical reflection on the uniqueness of Christ in that context.

[15] I am confining myself here to some fundamental theological issues raised by pluralism. There are many other aspects in which it is open to profound criticism and which are tackled by other scholars. Cf. L. Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (London: SPCK, 1989); H. Netland, *Dissonant Voices* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991); J.A. Kirk, *Loosing the Chains* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1992); D.A. Carson, *The Gagging of God: Christianity Confronts Pluralism* (Downers Grove: IVP, Leicester: Apollos), 1996.

named in terms of any particular deity known within the different world faiths, for they are all only partial responses to this mysterious being.

In fact Hick is quite insistent on this. Names like Jahweh, Jesus, Vishnu, Allah, Brahman, etc., are simply human cultural constructs by means of which people within a particular religious community give expression to their experience of the divine. Whatever those believers may think or claim, the names of their gods are not to be identified with the actual divine reality. (It is important to realize that what pluralism does to Christianity it also does to all religions; none of them has access to the ultimate truth about God as God really is). Those names or concepts found in the various religions are like humanly constructed 'masks'[16] by which the divine reality is thought to be encountered by devotees of those religions. But none of them is ultimately true in the way their worshippers claim.

Thus, for example, Hick says about the Jewish view of God: 'The concrete figure of Jahweh is thus not identical with the ultimate divine reality as it is in itself but is an authentic face or mask or *persona* of the Transcendent in relation to one particular human community.' He then goes on to say that this is how he regards the ultimate names of deity in other religions, 'For precisely the same has to be said of the heavenly Father of Christianity, of the Allah of Islam, of Vishnu, of Shiva, and so on.'[17]

So one finds that the 'sun at the centre' is given other 'names' which are in fact not names at all but abstract 'undefinitions'. 'Ultimate Divine Reality' is Hick's favourite. Then you will often read of 'Transcendent Being', or even simply, 'The Real'. And if you ask what this 'Being' is like, you will be told that you cannot know. It is beyond description or knowing as it is in itself. But all the religions have some partial view of it through the 'lens' of their culturally particular religion.

By using this kind of language you can also avoid having to decide whether this divine being is personal or impersonal. This is very convenient, since that is precisely the point of conflict between, say, Hinduism and Christianity, and even within different schools of Hinduism. But the language of the pluralists certainly tends towards an *impersonal* view of deity. There is little of the living warmth of the biblical language of the personal characteristics of God.

Most ordinary people find the abstract concepts of philosophers rather difficult to understand, and even more difficult to believe in for their salvation. As Newbigin has put it so strongly, why should we have to believe that an impersonal, undefinable abstraction has any better claim to be the centre of the religious universe than a known person who stands revealed in recorded history? Why should such an abstract philosophical concept

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[16] Hick uses the term *personae* for this, which originally in Latin referred to the mask that ancient actors wore. Thus, what the worshippers of a particular deity 'see' as they contemplate their particular god is not the divine reality as it really is in itself (the actor), but only the 'mask' as a kind of interface between the hidden divine reality (the actor) and the worshipper (the spectator). This assumes, of course, that although the different religions have manifestly different and grossly contrasting 'masks', it is the same actor behind all of them. Then he goes on to suggest using *impersonae* for the non-personal understandings of the ultimate, as found, for example, in philosophical advaita Hinduism and Buddhism.

[17] J. Hick, 'A Religious Understanding of Religion', in D. Cohn-Sherbok (ed.), *Many Mansions: Interfaith and Religious Intolerance* (London: Bellew, 1992), pp. 122–136 (quotation from pp. 130–131). A fuller explanation of Hick's thinking in this area will be found in his more recent substantial statement of his religious philosophy, *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent* (London: Macmillan, 1989) especially Part Four, pp. 233–296.

be regarded as a more reliable starting point for discovering the truth and finding salvation than commitment to a personal God in Christ?[18]

ii) Pluralism diminishes Jesus

God or Christ at the centre?

The pluralists want us to be theocentric (God-centred) but to give up being Christocentric (no longer to have Christ at the centre). The trouble is that it seems impossible to do that and stay within the framework of New Testament faith. There are some scholars, however, who try to drive a wedge between the fact that Jesus preached the kingdom of *God* (i.e a theocentric proclamation), and the fact that the church preached *Jesus* (thus shifting the focus to a Christocentric proclamation which then became the church's dominant position). However this will not do. Certainly Jesus preached the kingdom of God—a very theocentric thing to do. But the kingdom of God, *as preached by Jesus*, centred on himself—who he was and what he had come to do. In fact it was precisely because he so persistently put himself at the centre of his teaching about God and about God's kingdom that Jesus aroused such hostility.

There was nothing at all scandalous about simply being theocentric in Jewish society! God was at the centre of everybody's religious 'universe' in one way or another. But for a man to claim that scriptures concerning the future work of God were fulfilled in himself, that he had power to forgive sins, that he was Lord over the Sabbath, that he was the Son of Man to whom eternal dominion would be given, and many other such claims was simply blasphemy—and was indeed reckoned to be blasphemous by his contemporaries. That was why they crucified him—not for being theocentric, but for putting himself in that centre where they knew only God should be. Blasphemous it certainly was—unless of course it was true.

In the same way, the first Christians, who were Jews and therefore strict monotheists, already lived in a thoroughly theocentric universe. They were shaped to the core by the central affirmation of Jewish faith, 'Hear O Israel, the LORD your God is one LORD and you shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength' (Deut. 6:5–6). But with considerable struggle and often at great personal cost, they deliberately put their contemporary, the man Jesus of Nazareth, right at the centre of that majestic Old Testament faith. They did so every time they made the crucial affirmation 'Jesus is Lord'.

That did not mean they had given up or diluted their theocentrism. On the contrary, their faith in God at the centre of the religious universe was as strong as ever. But now it was filled out, redefined, and proclaimed in the light of their encounter with God in the person and action of Jesus, the Christ. So Paul could write what is virtually an expansion of the great Jewish creed to include Jesus Christ alongside the Creator God: For us there is only one God, the Father, from whom all things came and for whom we live; and there is only one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things came and through whom we live (1 Cor. 8:6).

The New Testament writings are a constant reflection of the struggle by which the God-centred faith of the Old Testament was seen to be Christ-centred in reality. This was not a perversion, nor an exaggeration born out of human hero-worship. It was the calm conviction that Jesus of Nazareth, in the light of his life, death and resurrection, was indeed the centre and key to the whole redemptive work of God, past, present and future. He was

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[18] See, L. Newbigin, *The Open Secret: An Introduction to the Theology of Mission* (revised edition; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans and London: SPCK, 1995), pp. 165–167.

at the centre of their theocentric religious universe because he was Immanuel, no less than *God with us*.

A Relativized Jesus?

Following from the above point, it seems to me that the pluralist view cannot be reconciled with authentic Christianity, because to relativize Jesus Christ is to deny him. By 'relativizing Jesus' I mean regarding him as only one among many great religious figures through whom we can know about God and find salvation. It means regarding him as one of the orbiting planets of world religions, not as the one and only absolute source of life and light as, for example, John 1 presents him.

However, if the New Testament is taken even as a reasonably reliable source, then it is unquestionable that Jesus made some astounding and absolute claims for himself. It is equally clear that his immediate followers in the early Christian church made similar claims concerning him, both explicitly in their preaching, and implicitly in their worship and prayer through his name. So since biblical and historical Christianity makes such affirmations about Jesus, it follows that whatever kind of 'Christianity' is put into orbit around the 'sun of ultimate divine reality', it is not the 'Christianity' of Christ and his apostles.

Jesus Only for Christians?

Now pluralists will reply that Jesus still remains central *for Christians* and that nothing need change that. As such, they say, Jesus is the distinctive Christian gift to the inter-religious dialogue. But, we are told, we should come to the dialogue table only when we have renounced those absolute claims to the uniqueness or finality of Christ. For those claims are regarded by pluralists as arrogant and intolerant and therefore out of place in genuine dialogue. Jesus may be decisive and authoritative for those who have chosen to follow him (Christians), but he need not be imposed on others as unique or universal.

Thus Race says, 'Jesus is "decisive", not because he is the focus of all the light everywhere revealed in the world, but for the vision he has brought in one cultural setting. . . . Jesus would still remain central for the Christian faith.'[19] In other words, the great New Testament affirmation 'Jesus is Lord' is reduced to meaning, 'Jesus is Lord for us because we have chosen to regard him as such; his Lordship is relative to our acceptance of him'. It no longer means, 'Jesus is objectively and absolutely the universal Lord to whom alone we submit and to whom ultimately all creatures in heaven and earth will bow.'

A Deluded Jesus or a Deluded Church?

But even supposing we were to go along with the pluralist at this point and accept that Jesus is unique only in the sense that he is relatively special for Christians but not the supreme Lord of all, we then have to ask what kind of 'gift to inter-faith dialogue' this relativized Jesus actually is. If Jesus Christ was not God incarnate, if he was not the final revelation of God and the completion of God's saving work for humanity, if he is not the risen and reigning Lord, then we are faced with two possibilities.

On the one hand, Jesus himself was mistaken in the claims he made concerning himself, in which case he was either sadly deluded or an arrogant boaster. Certainly, if his enormous claims were actually false, he would not be a worthy religious figure whom we could bring to the dialogue table with any confidence. We would need to apologize, not evangelize.

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[19] Race: *Pluralism*, p. 136

On the other hand, the church from its earliest period (including the generation of Jesus' own contemporaries who were the first witnesses to him) has grossly misunderstood him, inflated his claims, and exaggerated his importance. The pluralist requires us to accept that the church throughout its history (until its rescue by late twentieth century pluralist enlightenment) has propagated, lived by, and based all its hope upon, a massive self-deluded untruth. A deluded Jesus or a deluded church, or both. This seems to be the unavoidable implication of the pluralists' insistence on relativizing Jesus.

The dismal results of this view are quickly clear. A.G. Hunter, for example, argues that Jesus was in fact not more than human, but was elevated to divine status only by the church and installed in the trinity only at the Council of Chalcedon. Somehow Hunter simply *knows* that it was 'psychologically and religiously impossible for Jesus [to have claimed divinity] and it is historically false to say that he did'.[20] When you can be so confidently and dogmatically negative about the 'historical' Jesus, you have to be equally negative and uncertain about what value he has for faith: 'What emerges', Hunter concludes, 'is that though we are agreed that Jesus is at the heart of our faith as Christians, it is hard to find any clear consensus as to the precise delineation of his importance.'[21]

If such paralyzed agnosticism is all we are left with, is it worth contributing to religious dialogue at all? Is that what representatives of other world faiths want to hear from us? If, as pluralists say, we have to relativize Jesus before we can come to the dialogue, then we had better not come at all. All we have to bring with any integrity would be a repentant confession that we belong to a worldwide faith which throughout the whole of its history has had an illusion and a falsehood at its fundamental heart and core.

III) Pluralism Renders Christian Worship Idolatrous

Religious pluralists say that Jesus cannot stand at the centre of the religious universe. He cannot be equated or identified with the God (however described) at the centre. We must not look at Jesus 'from above', so to speak, as God incarnate, but rather see him as essentially one of us (which he was of course) and do our 'Christology from below'.

There are many shades of opinion among scholars who prefer this approach, but in the end what it means is that, whatever else Jesus may have been, he was ultimately not more than human. Certainly he was not God incarnate in any ontological sense. He may have been a vehicle or agent of God's activity for revelation and salvation, but only as a man. That is, he may have been one of those exceptionally special human beings through whom the rest of us can come to a deeper and clearer understanding of God, but the language about him being 'of God, with God or from God' is simply the understandable exaggeration that gives voice to faith and adoration and gratitude.

Many who take this view would agree that Jesus was unique in some sense: for example, in the depth of his own relationship with God and the extent to which he mediated God to others including ourselves. But they would see this as a uniqueness of degree, not of essence. God may have been very specially present and active through Jesus of Nazareth, but Jesus was not (and therefore is not) God. He cannot stand at the centre of the religious universe but, even in his uniqueness as defined, he must go into orbit around the centre along with other great religious figures who all have their own unique features also.

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[20] A.G. Hunter: *Christianity and Other Faiths in Britain* (London: SCM, 1985), p. 55.

[21] Idem. p. 76.

The more I reflect on this view, the more surprised I am at how reluctant its advocates seem to be to draw the ultimate conclusion from it, which seems quite inescapable And that is, that Christianity is, and always has been, the worst form of idolatry ever practised on earth.[22] The most serious charge which Jews and Muslims[23] have levelled against Christians all through the centuries would actually be true: we have elevated a human being to the place of God and have worshipped him there. For that is what we do, and have been doing ever since the book of Acts.

We ascribe to Jesus honour and glory that belongs only to God; we call on his name in prayer as God; we call him Lord and refuse to acknowledge any other; we claim that through Jesus and Jesus alone God has acted to save humanity and there is no other way; we apply to him the most solemn scriptures that Israel used concerning Yahweh; we sing to him songs of worship and praise that were originally sung to Yahweh, and have made up bookfuls of our own. All this we have done for two thousand years but with no justification at all, if the pluralists are right. For, no matter how remarkable he was, no matter what God did in and through him, if Jesus was not more than a man, then the whole Christian faith and all the generations of Christian worship have been a monstrous idolatry.

The Uniqueness of Christ

So we arrive at the end of the pluralists' road. At best, 'Christ' becomes so universal as to be of no real value except as a symbol. At worst, he is exposed as an idol for those who worship him, and as dispensable by those who don't.

The discussion above has been limited to the internal Christian debate about the plurality of religions, and has not even begun to focus on the challenges presented by the great world religions themselves to Christian mission and missiology. Each of them would need a separate paper since the contexts they represent are unique. Obviously Christian missiological response to each of the great faiths will remain a major challenge in the

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[22] Some pluralists are indeed prepared to say that the worship of Christ is actually idolatry, though they carefully re-define idolatry in a positive light, and tend to be very dismissive of how the Bible talks of it. Wilfred Cantwell Smith, for example, in a carefully argued re-assessment of what, on a pluralist understanding, actually constitutes idolatry, says that it should be used negatively only when describing religious positions which regard themselves as ultimate and then negate the value of others. On such grounds, 'For Christians to think that Christianity is true, final, or salvific, is a form of idolatry' if by that they mean to deny that God has also inspired Islam, Hinduism, etc.' He goes on to ask whether 'the figure of Christ served as . . . an idol through the centuries for Christians?' and essentially answers that it has, but there is nothing wrong with that since the best meaning of idols in all religions is something earthly or material in itself which becomes the channel of transcendence. See W. Cantwell Smith, 'Idolatry in Comparative Perspective', in John Hick and Paul F. Knitter (eds.), *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness*, pp. 53–68; and cf. also the comments of Tom F. Driver, in the same volume, 'I think it necessary to say that the idolization of Christ—let us call it "christodolatry"—is not only possible but in fact frequent. Indeed I would go further and say that there is even such a thing as an idolatrous devotion to God' (pp. 214–215). I prefer still to maintain a biblical understanding of the category of idolatry as meaning the action of giving ultimate and divine status to anything or anyone that is not in reality the living God—meaning the God as revealed in the Bible, not the characterless abstract 'Transcendent' of the pluralist hypothesis. On this understanding, the worship of anything or anyone other than God as revealed in Christ is idolatry, but the worship of Christ himself as not merely the one through whom we can 'see' God, but ontologically God-in-humanity, is assuredly *not*.

[23] Muslims are well aware of the implications of the pluralist developments in Christian theology. A friend from Singapore has told me that *The Myth of God Incarnate* is required reading for Muslim missionaries. I was told by Indian Christian missionaries in India that even in remote rural villages Muslims can counter the Christian gospel with the riposte that even bishops in the Church of England now believe what Muslims have always believed—that Jesus was not really God and did not really rise again.

coming century. But evangelical missiology will have to continue to confront that brand of Christian pluralism which undermines the uniqueness of Christ and subverts the challenge of the gospel from within.

3. ETHICAL PLURALISM

A) Features and Roots

We live in a world of ethical plurality and confusion. Even in the west it seems a long way, historically and culturally, from the apparent 'self-evident truths' of the American Declaration of Independence, which included basic statements about human equality, and proclaimed ideals of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. Universal statements of ethical rights and duties, such as the various United Nations declarations on human rights command less respect, in spite of continued lip service and the moralizing of western politicians.

On the one hand such universal declarations are challenged by countries and cultures whose moral views come from a radically different religious worldview from the broadly Christianized context out of which the UN Declaration of Human rights, for example, arose. Islamic states have protested at being judged by moral standards which they see as not founded in the principles of Islam. Especially since the very nations which 'preach' them at Islamic countries are guilty of manifest hypocrisy in their own moral failures.

Similarly, in India, militant Hinduism sees no ethical hindrance to its exclusion of lower caste and non-caste Indians from social participation or political rights; the caste system, allied to the religious philosophy of karma and re-incarnation provides plenty of ethical justification for the *status quo*. This philosophy which turns up in the west as somewhat outlandish, but malice-free, views on the lips of Glen Hoddle, is the religious worldview that undergirds the oppression currently resurgent in the largest democracy on earth.

On the other hand, universal moral declarations are under challenge in the cultures which produced them in the first place—within the west itself. In the postmodern, post-imperial climate, any claim regarding universally valid morality is rejected as cloaked imperialism. To say that something is an absolute human right or duty is simply to impose our cultural values on others. If there is no transcendent authority behind morality, then we have no right to choose one set of values that appeal to us and insist that the rest of the world abide by them.

This is a problem faced not just by Christians. Some western secular companies with a concern for business ethics are conscious of the following dilemma (which I read in a secular business magazine on an international flight): when you are operating in a non-western country where accepted practices clash with your own ethical standards (e.g. as regards human rights violations in working conditions, etc.), do you adopt the view, 'When in Rome do as the Romans do', and call it 'cultural sensitivity and respect for others' (in which case you will have a struggle with your own integrity and conscience), or do you make a fuss and insist on certain ethical standards as a precondition of doing business at all (in which case you may be accused of neo-colonial imposition of western cultural values, or even worse, of missionary arrogance and intolerance!).

Again, the roots of ethical pluralism can be traced both to modernity and to the postmodern reaction. We recall that that Enlightenment modernity introduced structural dualism—the division of life into public and private hemispheres. This had the effect of consigning ethics as well as religion to the hemisphere of privatized belief, as distinct from public knowledge. Even if some moral absolute did exist (as Kant continued to assert with his 'categorical imperative'), it could not be *known* by the only mechanism capable of

knowing anything—autonomous *reason*. It could only be *recognized and responded to* through the *will*.

But what if human wills differ? Morality becomes merely a fragile matter of social consensus, for as long as it lasts. And if the consensus of will breaks down, then morality will be determined, for good or ill, by the most powerful will, or the more sinister 'will to power' that Nietsche envisaged. Since 'God is dead', then there is no transcendent, revealed and authoritative basis for ethics. In such a climate, ethics fragments into private value preferences, or succumbs to the tyranny of 'might is right'.

Part of modernity's attractiveness, however, was its optimism. The myth of inevitable progress that would follow on scientific advance led generations to believe that somehow things were getting better and better. Human beings could eventually achieve sufficient ethical consensus to engineer a future that would be both good and happy. The trouble was that autonomous reason seemed capable of generating widely conflicting ethical visions, depending, it seems, on what scientific approach one regarded as primary, or to be more precise, what particular scientific reductionism governed one's view of the fundamental essence of humanity. What is the essential nature of human life?

Different life sciences and social sciences came up with different answers—all of them partially true, but inadequate as full explanations of what it is to be human. These answers then became the basis for similarly inadequate ethical theories. Thus, biology produced a version of ethics based on evolution. This itself bifurcated into a positive form which enthused about our ability to control our own evolution as a human species for good, and a more cynical form which asserted that if survival of the fittest is the game, then be among the fittest and if possible engineer the genetic or genocidal non-survival of the least fit. Biology also produced the behaviourist ethic of the human zoo: ethics is nothing more than socialized and rationalized animal instincts.

Psychology reduced ethics to health or sickness of the mind and replaced repentance with therapy. Sociology reduced ethics to a function of social interaction; Marxism, to economic determinism, and so on. Such ethical reductionisms stem from modernity's insistence on analysing and describing *human* life by means of the same kind of allegedly neutral scientific tools as were applied to the rest of the *material* universe. They then tried to come up with some account of the 'laws' governing human behaviour that would be as universal as the laws of physics, chemistry or biology which appeared to govern the universe.

The postmodern reaction has been to reject the idea of any absolute and final explanation of human reality, of any universal moral framework that can be epistemologically grounded in some objective or scientific 'truth'. Not only is there no transcendent authority to provide ethical universals (a denial common to modernity and postmodernity), neither is there any universal truth to be found in modernity's pursuit of scientific objectivity—in the human and social sciences any more than in the physical sciences. Modernity rejected transcendent authority but tried to preserve some universal moral criteria. Postmodernity rejects both transcendent authority *and* the possibility or even desirability of universal moral grounds. So no ethical stance can be deemed final and universal on the basis of any allegedly scientific description of the human being. Historical and cultural relativism pervades human ethics as much as human religion.

As we noticed in the earlier discussion of postmodernity, there is a negative and a positive aspect of this feature of ethics in a postmodern context. On the one hand, there is a cynical nihilism at the more intellectual end of the postmodern cultural spectrum: if no culture has the 'right' answer to ethical questions, then why bother wrestling with the questions at all? All that counts in the end is the will to power. It seems sometimes that ethics, not just power, comes out of the barrel of a gun. Or, if we are too refined to impose

our will by might, there is always manipulation by propaganda, persuasion and image-massaging. Never mind the ethics, watch the spin.

On the other hand, there is the more cheerful celebration of plurality that comes at the popular end of postmodern culture: let's not only respect, but enjoy, the wide divergences of values that are to be found in today's multicultural society. Western 'soap operas' often tackle ethical issues in their story lines. The most popular British 'soap', Eastenders, in recent years has included racism, homosexuality, AIDS prejudice, adultery, incest, wife-battery, alcoholism, child abduction and murder. But the dominant impression in responding to many of these situations, especially the sexual ones, is a non-judgemental individualism ('you just do what is right for you; nobody can tell you otherwise'). The trouble is that 'multiculturalism', as espoused, for example, in Australia and Canada, generates an ethic of political correctness which can be oppressive in its hidden absolutisms. It also has no means of dealing with (or even actually recognizing) the kind of paradoxical clash of values illustrated by the Hoddle case above. As another British commentator has said, 'We're all ethical pluralists now . . . until we meet a paedophile.'

B) Missiological Response

The Christian missiological response to ethical pluralism needs to start from the same place as for religious pluralism—namely identifying and attacking the roots. We must follow the same agenda of critiquing Enlightenment modernity's relegation of ethics to the hemisphere of privatized belief as Newbigin has so effectively done for religion. This has two effects. First of all, we must firmly challenge the epistemological arrogance that claims to outlaw all ethical matters from the realm of genuine knowledge, on the grounds that only scientific 'facts' can be regarded as objectively true. This 'reality filter' needs to be exposed as the deception it really is. Secondly, those ethical stances that are based on the variety of scientific reductionisms in relation to human life also need to be challenged—whether biological evolutionism or behaviourism, psychology, sociology, economics or more recently, geneticism as preached by Richard Dawkins. Whenever we are told that human ethics is 'nothing but . . .', we should be on the alert and expose the poverty of all attempts to reduce human life to partial and materialistic explanations.

In fact, I would urge that evangelical mission theology must address afresh the question of our doctrine of humanity. At the heart of so much of the fragmentation in human societies today lies the loss of human identity, or the struggle (often violent) for identity to be recognized or recovered. Where is it to be found? Modernity located human identity in the autonomous rational self. Postmodernity dethrones reason, and goes on to decentre and dissolve the self. What is there left that is distinctly human, or are we left with only the kaleidoscopic relativities of cultures and histories? Culture and history enrich human life and identity, but on Christian understanding they do not constitute or exclusively define it.

I believe that 21st century evangelical missiology must address the question of *what it means to be human*, and seek to give a genuinely biblical answer. As we observed in the section on religious pluralism, the 20th century battle over Christology and soteriology will doubtless continue. But if God became incarnate in Jesus in order to save humanity, what was it that he became in becoming truly human, and what is it that is saved through his death and resurrection?

Returning to ethical pluralism, postmodernity will certainly help us to challenge the dominance of scientific reductionism, but unfortunately it also presents an even more dangerous kind of relativism at the ontological level. How should we respond to the postmodern assertion that there are simply *no foundations* for any common human morality? Must we accept that uncontrolled ethical variety is inevitable because of the

plurality of cultures and perspectives and that there is no possibility of any 'standing ground' outside all cultures from which anyone can have the right to adjudicate ethically between them?

A very interesting attempt to address this problem from within the religious pluralist camp has come from Paul Knitter.[24] Recognizing the strength of the 'anti-foundationalist' case, as expressed in the last paragraph, Knitter asks if there is any way that the different religions can overcome the impasse of utter relativism, any way in which they can find some 'common ground' (even though the term is out of favour). He believes it is important to do so because of the dangers of succumbing too easily to postmodern relativism. He pin-points two dangers: first, full-blown relativism gives you no grounds to criticize even your own culture, let alone others, and produces an 'ethical toothlessness brought about by the lack of any basis on which to validly and coherently resist what appears to be intolerable in other cultural-linguistic systems'. Secondly, it offers no basis for moral resistance to naked power:

> In arguing that we must simply rejoice in plurality without ever allowing the possibility that some truth claims may prove to have intrinsic or universal validity, postmoderns allow the warning of Michael Foucault to become reality: the verdict on differing truth claims will be decided not on any mutually reached judgments (since they are impossible) but on the basis of who has the economic or military power . . . The criteria will be determined . . . by those who have the dollars or the guns.[25]

Knitter's answer to the dilemma is to suggest that rather than looking in vain for common *ground* at the start of the dialogue, the different religions should get stuck into making a common *response* to human problems. Then, hopefully, in the process and praxis of making that response, some patches of common ground may emerge between them. He then identifies what he regards as the two most urgent problems facing the world: *human poverty*—'the millions who because they are deprived of such basic needs as food, drinking water, shelter and medical care are prevented from living a human life'; and *ecological damage*—'the victimized planet earth which, as its life-giving and sustaining gifts of air, water, and soil are devastated and drained, becomes the domain of ever more human victims'. He goes on, 'I am suggesting that the reality of suffering due to oppression and victimization—both human and ecological—calls for a common response that can become a common ground for crosscultural and interreligious understanding.'[26]

Knitter seems almost embarrassed by the glimpse of an ethical universal lurking in such a proposal. So he backs off it somewhat: 'One must be careful of speaking of an ethical imperative to confront such issues, since morality is so culture-bound. And yet, it does seem evident that today followers of almost all the religious paths—from eastern to western to so-called primal spiritualities—are recognizing that their own spiritual traditions require them to respond to the reality of human and planetary oppression.' But do they? It is seriously questionable, I would argue, whether most religions would take the same view of human and planetary suffering as Knitter does, and even more questionable that 'within all religious traditions there seems to be a "soteriocentric core" of concern for human well-being *in this world*'.[27]

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[24] Paul Knitter, 'Common Ground or Common Response? Seeking Foundations for Interreligious Discourse', *Studies in Interreligious Dialogue* 2 (1992), pp. 111–122.

[25] Knitter, op. cit., p. 114.

[26] Knitter, op. cit., p. 118.

[27] Knitter, op cit., p 119 (italics added).

So the weakness of Knitter's proposal is that it wants to find common ground while simultaneously denying that any ground can be, or has been, provided by a transcendent or trans-cultural source—such as the biblical revelation. Yet the issues he chooses to see as primary, and the response he sees as needing to be made to them, are actually only ethical issues and responses within certain worldviews (such as Christianity). Even identifying the issues to which we call for a response requires standing on *some* ground.

Missiologically, however, in my view, we can turn Knitter's weakness into a strength. We can certainly agree with his identification of two major evils in today's world—poverty and ecological destruction. And we can certainly also challenge and invite the wider non-Christian human community to address them. However, in doing so, we ought to make prominently clear the *Christian* 'ground' on which we do so. That means telling the story which in the Christian worldview both *explains* the problems in terms of humanity's rebellion against God and consequent fracture of all relationships including that with the planet itself, and also *proclaims* the redemptive action that God himself initiated in the history of Israel and the saving work of Christ. Indeed we can go further than a liberationist response because the full biblical story illuminates wider aspects and deeper roots of the problems than the presenting symptoms themselves. At the Rio de Janeiro Earth Summit it was said that the intense 'green' concern for ecological action was 'an ethic in search of a religion'. Yet the Christian voice was muted, leaving the 'religion' to be provided by the New Age movement.

Human and planetary oppression are major examples, but they are only part of the total spectrum of ethical issues that societies will face in the new millennium. The missiological challenge to our ethics must be:

- that we seek to show how a *biblically* grounded ethic is valid in theory and works in practice;
- that we also tell the story which that ethic is grounded in and without which it is empty moralism;
- that we ensure that the telling of that story preserves the central focus of Jesus Christ.

We need, in other words, a *missiologically framed and motivated ethical engagement with the world*. Such is the plea of Andrew Walker as he urges Christians to remember and re-tell the story of the biblical gospel, which modernity has marginalized by its epistemological arrogance and which postmodernity threatens to swamp by the way it relativizes and equalizes all narratives.

> Christian activism is not a question of creating a programme for government: it is about standing up in the public square to be counted. Do the public know what the Christian story has to say about moral behaviour? Have we taken the time to tell the story often enough so that people can see that from it flow economic and social consequences? Lesslie Newbigin appears to be right about Christian witness. It is because we have grown timid, lost faith in the gospel, or even forgotten it, that we do not rush forward for our voices to be heard amidst the clamour of competing interests. We must avoid the vain temptation to build another Christendom; but equally we must not shirk our duty to stir the conscience of our nations for as long as they last.[28]

Practical Challenge

[28] A. Walker, *Telling the Story*, p. 170

Finally, the missiological challenge of ethical pluralism is, of course, practical. If we proclaim that the Christian ethical vision is distinctive and that it is grounded in the true story of God, the universe, human history and salvation through Christ—are we able to demonstrate that it is so? The church, as Newbigin again so effectively argued, must be the 'plausibility structure' for the gospel and the ethic that flows from it.

CONCLUDING CHALLENGES

What are the major issues for our missiological reflection and work? Here are some suggested questions arising out of each of the main sections above.

Hermeneutical Pluralism

1. How can a missiologically framed re-shaping of the evangelical doctrine of Scripture better equip us to discern, articulate and apply the authority of the Bible in the cultural plurality of the 21st century, and especially in a world increasingly affected by postmodernity?
2. How can we make room for the multiplicity of readers' contexts in the global hermeneutical community, and especially climb down off the pedestal of western dominance, *without:*

    - surrendering to subjectivism, relativism and the loss of any commitment to a stable core meaning in biblical texts?
    - substituting the authority of readers' contexts for the authority of the biblical text itself?

Religious Pluralism

3. Are there ways in which evangelical Christians can harness the energy of postmodernity in its critique of Enlightenment modernity's arrogance—*without* submitting to the ontological relativism that comes with postmodernity?
4. Are there positive and gospel friendly categories/symbols/perspectives within postmodern consciousness that can be harnessed in order to re-conceptualize and communicate the uniqueness of Jesus in the midst of religious plurality and in polemical engagement with religious pluralism?

Ethical Pluralism

5. What will a missiological approach to ethics look like? How can we demonstrate (intellectually and existentially) that the Christian ethic is actually 'best' because it most closely relates to the 'way things are', according to the biblical story and revelation?
6. Is it our Christian task in the 21st century with its postmodern perspectives to work out fresh ways to enshrine and advocate our understanding of biblical ethics, rather than simply repeating the classical formulations of western universal declarations?
7. What is a more biblical understanding of *humanity*, which can go beyond the reductionisms of modernity, but avoid the narcissism of postmodernity? What theological understanding of human/ethnic identity can provide a missiology that then generates appropriate missional responses to the fragmentation, anger, and despair that seems likely to afflict increasing numbers of human communities in the next century?

And Finally . . .

8. In training people adequately for mission in the 21st century, we shall be handling young adults who are themselves culturally and probably intellectually shaped by *postmodernity*, yet whose education and worldview has largely been shaped by the paradigms of *modernity*, and whose future ministry may well be in cultures that are as yet effectively *pre-modern*. How can we prepare them adequately to understand the cultural identity crisis they themselves are living through, as well as the one they are heading into? 21st century missionaries will need to be the Christian and cultural equivalent of Olympic triple-jumpers.

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Spiritual Warfare and Worldview

Paul G. Hiebert

Keywords: Theology, spiritual warfare, power encounter, culture, context, missiology, complementarity, supernatural, dualism, worldview;

In recent years, there has been a renewed interest in the gospel as power in the lives of people, and in spiritual warfare between God and Satan (Anderson 1990, Arnold 1997, Kraft 1992, Moreau 1997, Powilson 1995, Wagner 1991, to name a few). This comes as an important corrective to the earlier emphasis in many western churches on the gospel as merely truth, and on evil as primarily human weakness. Both truth and power are central themes in the gospel and should be in the lives of God's people. But much literature on spiritual warfare has been written by missionaries who are forced to question their western denial of this-worldly spirit realities through encounters with witchcraft, spiritism, and demon possession, and who base their studies in experience, and look for biblical texts to justify their views. These studies generally lack solid, comprehensive theological reflection on the subject.

The second is by biblical scholars who seek to formulate a theological framework for understanding spiritual warfare, but who lack a deep understanding of the bewildering array of beliefs in spirit realities found in religions around the world. Consequently, it is hard to apply their findings in the specific contexts in which ministry occurs. We need a way to build bridges between the biblical teaching and the particularity of different cultures. We hold that Scripture is divine revelation and the source of definitive