

Evangelical Review of Theology

EDITOR: DAVID PARKER

Volume 31 · Number 4 · October 2007

Articles and book reviews reflecting global evangelical
theology for the purpose of discerning the obedience of faith

Published by



for
WORLD EVANGELICAL
ALLIANCE
Theological Commission

Following Jesus as Unique Lord and Saviour in a Broken Pluralistic World

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KEYWORDS: *Pluralism, dialogue, conflict, exclusivism, inclusivism, truth, praxis, participation, uniqueness of Christ, salvation, superiority, oppression.*

I Locating Our Discussion

Truth claims lie at the heart of every religion. The uniqueness of each religion is framed primarily in terms of its respective truth claims. In their attempts to construct a Christian theology of religions, leading theologians like John Hick, Paul F. Knitter and J. S. Samartha¹ have called upon Christians

to re-examine traditional Christian truth claims such as Jesus is 'the way, and the truth, and the life' (Jn. 14:6) and 'there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved' (Acts 4:12). They argue that cardinal Christian beliefs such as the incarnation are myths and also that traditional truth claims belong to the first century of Christianity and do not make sense in our present context. They further assert that absolute and exclusivist claims have bred a 'Christian superiority complex that supported and sanctified the western imperialistic exploitation of what today we call the Third World'.² These claims pose a threat to peaceful co-existence between Christians and people of other faiths and thus, Samartha, among oth-

1 Among others, see John Hick and Paul F. Knitter, eds., *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness: toward a pluralistic theology of religions* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1987); Paul F. Knitter, *No Other Name? a critical survey of Christian attitudes toward the world religions* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1985); Samartha, *One Christ, Many Religions: toward a revised Christology* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1991).

2 John Hick, 'The Non-Absoluteness of Christianity', in *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness*, p. 18.

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ers, demand 'a re-examination of all exclusivist claims'.³

On similar grounds John Hick argues for what he calls a 'Copernican revolution in theology' which seeks to move Christian theology from its current Christ-centredness (christocentrism) to God-centredness (theocentrism). In other words, focusing on Christ separates Christians from other believers whilst focusing on God puts Christianity and other faiths, especially the major religious traditions, on an equal footing and concedes them to be more-or-less equally valid and equally true.

Contending that the notion of 'truth' is too big for one faith tradition to claim monopoly over, pluralist theologians argue that any claim to absolute truth precludes inter-religious dialogue.⁴ Echoing this point is an often quoted African proverb: 'Truth is like a baobab tree; one person's arms cannot embrace it'. In this vein, pluralists argue that inclusivism is paternalistic insofar as it concedes that there is some salvific value in other faiths but maintains that the salvation therein is mediated through Christ 'mysteriously' or 'anonymously' to the adherents of these traditions. The way forward, according to John Hick, is pluralism:

A pluralism that is worth agreeing

or disagreeing with in its own right will hold that we have as much reason to think that the other great world religions are true and salvific as to think this of Christianity. The ground for this lies in their fruits in human life. If it seems to us that Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikhism, and Taoism have shown themselves to be contexts as effective as Christianity for human transformation from self-centredness to a new centring in the Ultimate Reality that we call God, then we must affirm not merely the possibility or probability but the actuality of their being true and salvific.⁵

Before responding directly to the issues raised by pluralist theologians, a few points need to be clarified. First, it is important to note that the debate as to the appropriateness or otherwise of absolute religious truth claims is largely if not wholly an internal Christian debate. People of other faiths have hardly taken notice of the debates, let alone joined in them. Indeed if the same methodological approaches adopted by the pluralists in assessing Christian beliefs and biblical affirmations were to be applied to other faiths, they would be strongly resisted by their adherents.

Second, as someone from the majority south, it is noteworthy to me that the debate on religious pluralism is a western Christian debate. Religious plurality has always been an integral part of the African experience and that

3 S. J. Samartha, 'The Cross and the Rainbow: Christ in a Multireligious Culture', in *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness*, p. 69.

4 Paul F. Knitter, 'Five Theses on the Uniqueness of Jesus', in Leonard Swidler and Paul Mojzes, eds., *The Uniqueness of Jesus: A Dialogue with Paul F. Knitter* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1997), p. 7.

5 John Hick, 'Five Misgivings', in *The Uniqueness of Jesus*, p. 80.

of other non-western societies. However, as an ideology, pluralism is the creation of western liberal thought, as Tom F. Driver explains: 'It will be the better part of wisdom to acknowledge, even to stress, that the whole discussion about "religious pluralism", as it is represented in this book [*The Myth of Christian Uniqueness*], belongs to Western liberal religious thought at the present time.'⁶ Concerning Christianity's self-understanding, Driver asserts that pluralism is a 'demand laid now upon us Christians, brought upon us by our own history, which has largely been one of "universal colonialism"'.⁷

It is vitally important to locate the discussion on religious pluralism and questions about the uniqueness of Jesus within their proper historical and intellectual contexts. The legacy of post-Constantine Christianity of anathematization, damnation, excommunication and even extermination of dissenters and opponents, as well as slavery, colonialism and the enlightenment in western Europe all combine to provide the historical and intellectual contexts. Added to this legacy is the fact that the phenomenon of religious plurality is fairly new in the west as compared to, say, Africa and Asia.

Similarly, to a very large extent, the religious 'other' in western Europe are immigrants, whereas in Africa and Asia the religious other are blood relations and fully fledged citizens. The historical and contemporary religious and intellectual experiences of the west in general and western Europe in

particular, differ substantially from those of the non-western world. All of these factors combine to make the issue of religious plurality a crucial matter for western Christians in ways that it is not for, say, African and Asian Christians.

II Critique of Pluralist Theology

Many Christian theologians have criticized different aspects of pluralist theology and questioned its assumptions and exposed its internal contradictions.⁸ Examining some of the pluralist claims and assumptions from an African perspective, I would like to address at least two myths of pluralist theology.

The first myth of pluralist theology is the offering of theocentricism as a bridge across the major world religions. As can be seen in the writings of Hick and others, the so-called major world religions cannot even agree on how to address what Christians call God, let alone 'His/Her' (or 'Its') nature. Hick himself is not sure of the appropriate name to use and resorts to such terms as 'Ultimate Divine Reality', 'Ultimate Truth and Perfection', 'Transcendent Being', and sometimes just 'The Real'. As Chris Wright perceptively notes: 'One marked feature of [pluralist] conceptual revolution is that the *theos* who is finally left at the

⁶ Tom F. Driver, 'The Case for Pluralism', in *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness*, p. 206.

⁷ Driver, 'The Case for Pluralism', p. 207.

⁸ Gavin D'Costa, ed., *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered: the myth of a pluralistic theology of religions* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1990); Bruce J. Nicholls, ed., *The Unique Christ in our Pluralist World* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1994).

centre becomes utterly abstract.⁹ So abstract is the pluralist constructed deity that very few, if any, believers of the world religious traditions can recognize their deity. The overwhelming majority of African Christians (and Muslims) will find it hard to sacrifice a personal God (or Allah) for the pluralist abstract deity.

Pluralists argue that locating God at the centre of the religious universe would foster understanding and good relations between people of different religions. This argument is simply groundless speculation. The assumption here is that people of different religions are more likely to find common ground in their understanding of God. But nothing could be further from the truth. As can be seen, pluralists are even struggling to find a name for God that would be acceptable to the different faiths. 'The view we have of God', observes Lamin Sanneh, 'is not unconnected to the path by which we ascend to that view, so that dialogue must be about the path as well as about witness to the truth the path leads to.'¹⁰ But more crucially, among the so-called monotheistic traditions, Judaism, Christianity and Islam, for instance, it is in apparent common ground that our deepest differences are rooted. This is due to the fact that 'the risk of misunderstanding appears less in matters of difference than in matters of similarity' and as G. K. Chesterton put it:

Modern hostility is a base thing, and arises, not out of a generous difference, but out of a sort of bitter and sneering similarity. It is because we are all copying each other that we are all cursing each other.¹¹

If putting God at the centre holds the prospects of understanding and resolving tensions and conflict between people of different religious tradition, how do we explain the internal divisions and even hostilities between members of same religious traditions who share the same understanding of God? In any case, as a leading Muslim scholar responding to Hans Kung put it:

The only religious dialogue worthy in the eyes of God is one which does not sacrifice in the name of any expediency on the human level, be it even worldly peace, that which He has revealed in each religion.¹²

The second myth of pluralism is the suggestion that people of different religions can together pursue and discover 'Truth' in its totality. W. E. Hocking talks about the need for religions to embark upon 'a common search for truth'.¹³ Alan Race on his part states that an essential feature of what he calls 'tolerant pluralism' is that 'knowledge of God is partial in all faiths, including the Christian. Reli-

9 Chris Wright, 'The Unique Christ in the Plurality of Religions' in Nicholls, ed., *The Unique Christ*, p. 33.

10 Lamin Sanneh, *Piety and Power: Muslims and Christians in West Africa* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1996), p. 6.

11 Sanneh, *Piety & Power*, p. 7.

12 Seyyed Hossein Nasr, 'Response to Hans Kung's Paper on Christian-Muslim Dialogue', in *The Muslim World*, 77 no. 2 (April 1987), p. 105.

13 W. E. Hocking, *Re-Thinking Missions* (New York: Harper and Row, 1932), p. 327.

gions must acknowledge their need of each other if the *full truth* (my emphasis) about God is to be available to mankind.¹⁴

In the first place, what criteria are believers going to use to determine the bits and pieces of the truth scattered in the various religious traditions? On the basis of the theory of the 'Copernican Revolution', these pieces of truth in the various religions will be the areas of convergence. If this were to happen, is the end result not going to be just one large part of the elephant? The whole idea of desiring to discover and know the totality of everything, including religious phenomena, is part of the postmodernist western delusion. If I may dare speak on behalf of African believers, regardless of religious tradition, there is agreement that religious phenomena are, by their very nature, ultimately inexhaustible. The overwhelming majority of African believers will accept the fact that in matters of religion there are some things that we do not know, cannot know and need not know. I will even go further to suggest that this is the true biblical and Christian position. Paul is very clear on this when he declared: 'For we know in part and we prophesy in part' and again, 'Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known' (1 Cor. 13:9, 12).

The difficulty in accepting that there are some things that are beyond human comprehension is a sign of

western arrogance. The pluralists have fallen into this trap and after failing in their obsession to *discover* the totality of God, they were left with no option but to invent an abstract, nameless deity. The Jewish, Christian and Muslim (and one must add traditional African) teaching about God is that he is inscrutable, inimitable, almighty God (Isa. 55:8-9).

This is what differentiates God from humanity. The day we are able to discover the fullness of God, as in the pluralist elephant or baobab tree, then God ceases to be God. He becomes an idol! As an African therefore, it seems to me that the call by pluralists for all religions to join hands in order to discover the 'full truth about God' is a wild goose chase that sounds repugnant to my religious and spiritual sensibilities and instincts.

Pluralists are right in decrying judgmental Christians who, contrary to 1 Corinthians 10:9-12 which teaches us that we are not yet in possession of the fullness of 'Truth', regard all other religions as false and their members as doomed. However, standing outside and expressing the view that a religion is true and has salvific value is no less arrogant than the view from outside that it is false. It is presumptuous on the part of pluralists, and indeed patronizing, to think that people of other religious traditions need the verdict of outsiders regarding the validity or otherwise of their traditions and their fate in the hereafter. Indeed, many 'thinking' (to borrow Hick's term) followers of other faiths would regard pluralists' views that their religious traditions are true as at best hypocritical, and at worst offensive. It is hypocritical because, if pluralists

14 Alan Race, *Christians and Religious Pluralism: Patterns in the Christian Theology of Religions* (London: SCM Press, 1983), p. 72.

really believe what they are saying, they would join these religions! People who have followed their religious traditions over several generations did and continue to do so because they believe, know and are convinced that their traditions are true and valid. They do not need and have certainly not solicited the views of Hick et al to endorse them.

Related to the validity or otherwise of other religions is the exclusion and inclusion of people of other faiths in the divine scheme of salvation. The main charge pluralists level at evangelical Christians is that it is arrogant to claim one has the whole truth and by that to exclude others from God's plan of salvation. The difficulty with this pluralist charge is that the forthrightness with which they proceed to include people of other faiths into God's plan of salvation is just as arrogant as that with which exclusivists exclude them. Both instances amount to Christians assigning to themselves the role of *visa officia* for heaven—this notwithstanding the pluralist concern on this issue is a valid concern evangelical Christians cannot afford to brush aside. This is particularly so for Christians in Africa and Asia for whom the religious 'other' is not some unknown person in distant lands nor immigrants and refugees from some other countries, but in many cases blood relations and fully-fledged citizens.

If I may use my own case as an illustration, if I am asked the question whether Muslims will go to heaven or hell (as I am often asked by theological students), this is not a mere academic or theological question. It is like asking me whether my Muslim uncle who took care of my family and contributed

towards my theological education will go to heaven or hell. My answer to such a question is bound to be less black and white than that of another Christian who knows Muslims mainly as immigrants or people of a different race in a distant land. For us in Africa, theology cannot afford to lose this human face.

Apart from the human face, I am in full agreement with Lesslie Newbigin's caution to Christians that if we look to the Bible to answer the questions on the fate of people of other faiths, 'we shall find ourselves faced either with silence or with contradiction'.¹⁵ If there is anything we can learn from Scripture on this issue, it is the fact that 'salvation belongs to God' (Rev. 7: 10, 19:1); that God 'desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth' (1Tim. 2:4); that 'with God all things are possible' (Mt. 19:26); that there will be surprises on the day of judgment! For those who count themselves 'in' will find out to their shock that they are 'out', and others will be surprised they are counted in (Mt. 25:31-46).

From the parable of the weeds in Matthew 13 we learn that there are counterfeits, including false religions. But we also learn that like the servants in the parable we can mistake good seed for weed and vice versa. Because of that, like the servants in the parable, our duty is to take care, ie, witness to all and leave the judgment to the one and only righteous judge.

¹⁵ Lesslie Newbigin, 'The Christian faith and the world religions', in John Hick and Brian Hebblethwaite, eds., *Christianity and Other Religions: Selected Readings* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2001), p. 109.

The other point is that pluralists argue that Christian absolute truth claims are imperialistic and have given Christians a sense of superiority over followers of other faiths. On this basis they call upon Christians to abandon or revise their truth claims so as to attain parity with followers of other religious traditions. The problem with this view is that it is incipiently condescending. The argument is a tacit acknowledgement that if Christians keep to their truth claims, then they are really on higher ground, in other words, superior to followers of other traditions, hence the need for Christians to condescend to others.

What this argument fails to take seriously is that other religions have their own absolute claims that give their adherents a sense of superiority to Christians and all others. So, to 'thinking' followers of these religions, what the pluralists are seeking to do is attempting to bring them down from their higher ground to a lower level rather than, as the pluralists think, generously offering to ask Christians to climb down to their level, so to speak. In any case, why do pluralists assume that people of other faiths are keen to attain parity with Christians?

III Pluralist Concerns about the Uniqueness of Christ

I want to summarize the concerns of pluralist theologians with regard to the truth claims of Christianity in general and the uniqueness of Christ in particular, into two broad categories. First is the concern for peaceful co-existence between different religious communities. S. J. Samartha is particularly con-

cerned about the need for peaceful co-existence between people of different faiths in the Indian context and sees exclusivist Christian claims as threats to this end. Second is the necessity, in fact imperative, of dialogue between people of different religions which seems to be the main concern of Paul F. Knitter. In all of these, pluralist theologians see the traditional Christian truth claims concerning the uniqueness of Christ as constituting the main stumbling block.

a) Concern for peaceful co-existence

To begin with, we cannot deny that every Christian would agree that peaceful co-existence between people of different faiths is necessary (Mt. 5:9; Rom. 12:18). Following Jesus therefore involves peacemaking not just peacekeeping. This is especially so in a world torn apart by hatred and strife. Pluralists argue absolute truth claims lead adherents into thinking of their tradition as superior to others and themselves as superior to those who believe differently, leading to the danger that 'the absoluteness of the religious heart becomes the absoluteness of the religious mind—and eventually the system'.¹⁶ History teaches us that this was, to a large extent, the experience of Christianity in what were then known as barbarian (western European) hands.

John Hick catalogues what he describes as the 'destructive effects of

¹⁶ Paul F. Knitter, 'Can Our "One and Only" Also Be a "One Among Many"?', in Swidler and Mojzes, eds., *The Uniqueness of Jesus*, p. 153.

the assumption of Christian superiority' in the crusades, slavery, colonialism and the holocaust.¹⁷ Hick himself does not link directly these evil acts to the claims concerning the uniqueness of Jesus *per se* but rather to a Christian sense of superiority. To derive a sense of superiority from the uniqueness of Jesus, as happened with western European Christianity, can only be a misreading of the New Testament witness. Indeed, the early church which made the claims about Jesus suffered humiliation and untold persecution for their beliefs.

If there is anything we can learn from the witness of the early church on the uniqueness of Jesus, it is that of *confident vulnerability* rather than superiority. When the early Christians declared, for instance, that 'there is no other name', they were fully aware of the consequences of such declaration. Indeed they were warned not to teach in the name of Jesus at all, yet they did and faced the consequences. This is what I mean by confident vulnerability.

This confident vulnerability remained the experience of non-western Christianity, whether as the Eastern Orthodox Church under communism or various Christian traditions under Islamic rule down the centuries. Though there are certainly cases to the contrary, it remains the experience of most Christians in the majority south today. In many of these parts of the world, Christians are persecuted for their faith in the lordship of Jesus Christ. To these Christians professing the uniqueness of Jesus puts them in a

vulnerable rather than a superior position.

Samartha, who makes an impassioned plea for abandoning claims to the uniqueness of Jesus for the sake of peaceful inter-religious relations in the Indian context, does not explain how these claims have made contemporary Indian Christians a threat to the peace and unity of the country. On the contrary, Indian Christians have been targets of persecution at the hands of adherents of traditions which Samartha commends as pluralistic and tolerant.

b) Necessity of dialogue

Pluralists argue that dialogue between religions is an essential prerequisite to inter-religious harmony. They further argue that unless and until Christians abandon or revise their claims of uniqueness, especially the uniqueness of Christ, there can be no authentic dialogue.¹⁸ The assumption here is that people of other religions come to dialogue with no truth claims of their own and therefore feel 'unequal' before their Christian partners. But we all know that Muslims, for instance, come to dialogue with a lot of confidence in their own absolute truth claims and make no apologies whatsoever for them. By insisting on abandoning truth claims as a condition for dialogue, what pluralists are asking Christians to do amounts to telling someone to cut off their roots in order to branch out to others.

17 John Hick, 'The Non-Absoluteness of Christianity', pp. 18ff.

18 Paul F. Knitter, *One Earth Many Religions: multifaith dialogue and global responsibility* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1995), p. 30.

Muslims are Muslims because they believe Muhammad is the final Prophet of God sent to humankind and Christians are Christians because they believe Jesus is the Son of God who came as Saviour of the world. Religious truth claims are therefore not mere dogmatic statements but constitute the basis of the identity of the believers. Christian (or Islamic) truth claims were formulated as responses to the question, 'Who are you'? Paul Knitter notes that 'by announcing [Jesus] as the one and only saviour, the early Christians cut out for themselves an identity different from that of all their opponents or competitors'.¹⁹ Knitter is right on the issue of identity but wrong in suggesting that it was an identity the early church 'cut out for themselves'. Worst still is Knitter's suggestion that 'New Testament Christology tells us more about the social situation of the early church than about the ontological nature of Jesus'.²⁰

I would go further to argue, first, that the early church was not just carving out their own identity but carving out an identity for the church or the Christian faith as a whole. It is the uniqueness of Jesus that has attracted billions of Christians down the centuries to adopt the Christian faith as it moved out from its early Judaic environs to the Hellenistic, to the Barbarian and now to Africa, Asia and Latin America. In other words, Christian identity finds its meaning and purpose in the uniqueness of Jesus. Secondly, to suggest that New Testament Chris-

tological language says more about the social condition of the early church than the ontological nature of Jesus raises the question: did Knitter and his pluralist colleagues arrive at their conclusions on the ontological nature of Jesus by conducting a DNA test on him?

The early church was made up of strict monotheists, who knew the parents of Jesus, lived with him and saw him hungry, weep, get angry, crucified and buried. These were the same people who turned around and made the claims about this same Jesus as the Son of God, Lord, only Saviour etc. and many died for these claims. If Christians are asked not to take the claims of the early church seriously and literally, why should we take the assertions of Knitter and others, two thousand years later, seriously? Knitter describes the Christological language of the early church as 'survival language'. But that is completely ignoring the circumstances under which the affirmations about Jesus were made. For instance, when Peter declared that 'there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved', it was not in a Sunday school class. It was before a hostile audience of religious elite! This cannot therefore be caricatured as 'survival language', it is suicidal language!

Having said all that, there remains the question as to what is the real agenda behind the calls to dialogue. For instance, pluralists commend dialogue as the solution to inter-religious conflicts without providing empirical evidence as to how and why this is the case. As Jürgen Moltmann rightly points out, we know of 'the amicable

19 Knitter, *No Other Name?*, p. 184.

20 Knitter, *No Other Name?*, p. 184.

coexistence of different religious communities without war, without conflict, without disputations and without dialogue'.²¹ The point is that dialogue, as is proposed by pluralists, is not necessarily the solution to inter-religious conflicts. No wonder the overwhelming majority of people of other faiths, especially Muslims from the non-western world, have shown little interest in the interfaith dialogue enterprise, viewing it with suspicion as yet another western missionary ploy aimed at undermining their religion.²² As a result, interfaith dialogue has remained 'the fringe activity of a small minority that is itself on the fringes of its own religious tradition'.²³

IV Following Jesus in a Broken World

To say Jesus is unique Lord and Saviour is more than a dogmatic statement for Christians to profess by mere intellectual or mental assent. As Kwame Bediako observes, when the credentials and validity of our Christian affirmations are tested in non-Christian as well as Christian contexts, 'the true meaning of Jesus Christ becomes

apparent and validated'.²⁴ In this vein, the question of our witness to this biblical affirmation becomes crucial.

The starting point in our witness to the unique Jesus has to be that this is truth not just to be believed but truth 'to be participated in'. This means that affirming Jesus as unique Lord is not just truth for assertion but rather an invitation to recognition and participation. The disciples who made the claims about Jesus' lordship—whether we are talking about Peter at the transfiguration, the doubting and cynical Thomas (Jn. 20:28), the apostle John (Jn. 1:1-14), Paul (Col. 2:9)—came to these points not by reading scripture or repetition of a creed. These affirmations came out of their encounter and 'participation' with the person and in the works of Jesus. Christian theology in general and Protestant theology in particular has tended over the years to present Jesus as a set of ideas to be rationally argued and proven, clouding and sometimes losing sight of his figure as a person, his ministry and relationship with ordinary people.

To follow Jesus, then, as 'the way the truth and the life' in a broken world, we need to appreciate that there are three dimensions to truth: the propositional and cognitive dimension of truth; truth as praxis; and truth as a person or life. What makes Jesus unique is that in declaring 'I am the way, the truth and the life', he was laying claim to the fact that he combined

21 Jürgen Moltmann, 'Is "Pluralistic Theology" Useful for the Dialogue of World Religions', in G. D'Costa, *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered*, pp. 150-51.

22 See Ekkehard Rudolph, 'The debate on Muslim-Christian dialogue as reflected in Muslim periodicals in Arabic (1970-1991)', in Jacques Waardenburg, ed., *Muslim Perceptions of Other Religions: a historical survey* (New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 297-304.

23 Sanneh, *Piety and Power*, p. 6.

24 Kwame Bediako, 'Christianity, Islam and the Kingdom of God—Rethinking their Relationship from an African Perspective', in *Journal of African Christian Thought*, 17 no. 2 (Dec. 2004), p. 6.

all the three dimensions of truth in himself. All others can only speak about or point to the truth. Crucial as the propositional and cognitive dimensions of truth are, focusing on these alone can lead to what Paul calls 'foolish and stupid arguments', intolerance and judgmentalism.

Jesus himself appears to have placed more emphasis on truth as praxis, 'the way', and person, 'the life'. Thus he could tell John's disciples: 'Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, the poor have good news preached to them' (Lk. 7:22); and 'Not every one who says to me, "Lord, Lord", shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven' (Mt. 7:21). In other words, dogma, indeed orthodoxy (propositional truth), does not save. Jesus as a dogma does not save. It is Jesus as a person (truth as way and life) who saves!

Following Jesus as unique Lord in a broken world calls for participation, embodying and bearing the *fullness* of truth. Indeed, in a broken world, truth as praxis and a person (or life) becomes even more critical. In our African context plagued by conflicts, corruption and the scourge of HIV/AIDS, the saying that 'people do not care how much you know (or who you are) until they know how much you care' is vital. It is only after people see or hear about what a person has done that they take interest in wanting to know who that person is. The unique identity of Jesus goes hand in hand with his earthly ministry. Reflecting on Colossians 2:15ff Kwame Bediako

notes: 'Biblical teaching clearly shows that Jesus is who he is (ie, Saviour) because of what he has done and can do (ie, save), and also that he was able to do what he did on the Cross because of who he is (God the Son)'.²⁵

Indeed the person of Jesus is real today and draws people to himself as he did with his disciples who followed him, loved him and only slowly came to an awareness of his mysterious identity. It is this living Christ that Christians should testify to rather than engaging in fruitless debates about his identity or his ontological nature. Church history reveals that theoretical discussions and debates often detract us from the core essentials of mission. In talking about Jesus as being the Son of God, Christian apologists and polemicists, past and present, have always sought to draw comparisons between Jesus who is divine and Muhammad who is a mere mortal. These comparisons which seek to demonstrate the superiority of Jesus sometimes seem, in my opinion, to be missing the point. If there is anything we can learn from the miracles performed by Jesus, it is the fact that he never performed a single miracle to prove his supernatural powers. He performed them to meet specific needs.

The incarnation is unique and miraculous because it is the humbling and self-emptying of God more than anything else (Philp. 2:5-10). Paul is advising Christians to have the mind of humility because the one on whose behalf we make the claims of superior-

²⁵ Kwame Bediako, *Jesus in African Culture: a Ghanaian Perspective* (Accra: Asempa Publishers, 1990), p. 10.

ity 'did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped'. On the contrary he laid aside his crown of glory and took upon himself the cross that he might carry out his mission of reconciling humankind to God. If Jesus took the status of a servant upon himself so as to reconcile the world to God, is it unthinkable that he (Jesus) could take on the status of a prophet to bring Muslims to the saving knowledge of God or become an ancestor in order to reconcile the world of African primal religious believers to God? This is only a question and that is the furthest I would go. Some may find this question scandalous, but we need to be careful in forbidding things to Christ. It was not long after Peter declared Jesus to be the Son of the Living God that Jesus turned to him and rebuked him: 'Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me; for you are not on the side of God, but of men' (Mt. 16:23). In Peter's mind, it was unthinkable for Christ to suffer death, but that was his mind, and the mind of people, not the mind of God!

What makes the Christian God (revealed in Christ) unique is not the fact that he is Almighty, Supreme, King of kings and Lord of lords. All other religions with a concept of a Supreme Being believe all these about their god. The uniqueness of the Christian God lies in the fact that he is prepared and willing to descend from his throne, lay aside his crown, dirty his hands, walk in the slums and wash the feet of his disciples! It is significant to note that when Jesus asked that crucial question: 'Who do people say I am?' and got the answer that 'some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the

prophets', he did not say, 'these are wrong!' Is it perhaps due to the fact that he is all of these and yet at the same time none of these?

When Peter declared that 'You are the Christ, the Son of the living God', Jesus did not say, 'Well done, Peter!' Rather he said, 'Flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven' (Mt. 16:16, 17). In other words, it takes the Father, not our arguments, to reveal the true identity of the Son to the world.

Finally, in talking about following Jesus as unique Lord and Saviour in a broken world, Christians should bear in mind how the Lord Jesus himself chose to be remembered. 'And he took bread, and when he had given thanks he broke it and gave it to them, saying, "This is my body which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me"' (Lk. 22:19). It is significant that, of all which he accomplished during his time on earth, Jesus chose the brokenness of his body, his crucifixion and death for his own memorial, rather than his miracles or exaltation. The lust for power and dominance is one of the principal causes of the brokenness of our world. That Jesus chose to lay these aside and even to allow his own body to be broken in order to heal a broken world is what makes him unique. By his example, Jesus is teaching us that it takes a cross to fix a broken world, not a crown!

It is precisely because he is Lord of lords and has the Name above all names that he can lay aside his power and superiority and even his life only to take them up again. And this is what Christians are called to witness to and exemplify in following Jesus as unique Lord and Saviour in a broken world.