

“InterVarsity Press is doing a very good thing by bringing John Stott’s *The Contemporary Christian* back into print—slightly modernized, helpfully rearranged, and broken into short, reader-friendly books. The result is a boon to a new generation of readers who will greatly benefit, as many have before, from Stott’s thorough grounding in Scripture, unusual help for living the Christian life, and perceptive interaction with the contemporary world.”

Mark Noll, author of *The Rise of Evangelicalism*

“I have long benefited from the work of John Stott because of the way he combines rigorous engagement of the biblical text and careful engagement with the culture of his day. The God’s Word for Today series presents Stott at his very best. This series displays his commitment to biblical authority, his zeal for the mission of the church, and his call to faithful witness in the world. Stott’s reflections here are a must-read for church leaders today.”

Trevin Wax, director of Bibles and reference at LifeWay Christian Resources, author of *This Is Our Time* and *Eschatological Discipleship*

“Imagine being a child overwhelmed by hundreds of jigsaw puzzle pieces—you just can’t put them together! And then imagine a kindly old uncle comes along and helps you put the whole thing together piece by piece. That is what it felt like reading John Stott’s *The Contemporary Christian*. For those of us who feel we can’t get our head around our Bible, let alone our world, he comes along and, with his staggering gifts of clarity and insight, helps us step by step to work out what it means to understand our world through biblical lenses. It’s then a great blessing to have Tim Chester’s questions at the end of each chapter, which help us think through and internalize each step.”

Rico Tice, senior minister for evangelism, All Souls Langham Place, London, coauthor of *Christianity Explored*

“Vintage Stott, with all that that implies. In it, as usual, we find him digesting and deploying a wide range of material with a symmetry matching that of Mozart, a didactic force like that of J. C. Ryle, and a down-to-earth common sense that reminds us of G. K. Chesterton. It is really a pastoral essay, a sermon on paper aimed at changing people . . . an outstandingly good book.”

J. I. Packer, in *Christianity Today*

“In my formative years as a young Christian, I was acutely aware of the fact that I faced many challenges to Christian thinking and behavior. Few writers helped me understand how I should respond to these challenges and think and live as a Christian as much as John Stott did. The challenges of faithfulness to God’s way are more acute and complex today than when I was a young Christian. In these little books you find the essence of Stott’s thinking about the Christian life, and it is refreshing to read again and see how relevant and health giving this material is for today. I’m grateful to InterVarsity Press and to Tim Chester for making Stott’s thinking accessible to a new generation.”

Ajith Fernando, teaching director, Youth for Christ, Sri Lanka

“It is always refreshing, enlightening, and challenging reading from the pen of John Stott. I am totally delighted that one of his most significant works will continue to be available, hopefully for more decades to come. The way Stott strives to be faithful to the Word of God and relevant to his world—secularized Western society—as the locus for the drama of God’s action is exemplary, especially for those of us ordained to the service of the church in our diverse contexts. I highly commend the God’s Word for Today series to all who share the same pursuit—listening intently to God’s Word and God’s world, hearing and obeying God.”

David Zac Niringiye, author of *The Church: God’s Pilgrim People*

“I am delighted that a new generation will now be able to benefit from this rich teaching, which so helped me when it first appeared. As always with John Stott, there is a wonderful blend of faithful exposition of the Bible, rigorous engagement with the world, and challenging applications for our lives.”

Vaughan Roberts, author of *God’s Big Picture*

“Technology has enabled more voices to clamor for our attention than ever before; while at the same time, people’s ability to listen carefully seems to have deteriorated like never before. John Stott’s speaking and writing was renowned for two things in particular. He taught us how to listen attentively to God in order to live faithfully for God, and he too modeled how to listen to the world sensitively in order to communicate God’s purposes intelligibly. He taught us to listen. That is why it is such a thrill to see *The Contemporary Christian* carefully revived in a new format as this series for a new generation of readers. As we read, may we listen well!”

Mark Meynell, director (Europe and Caribbean) of Langham Preaching, Langham Partnership, author of *When Darkness Seems My Closest Friend*

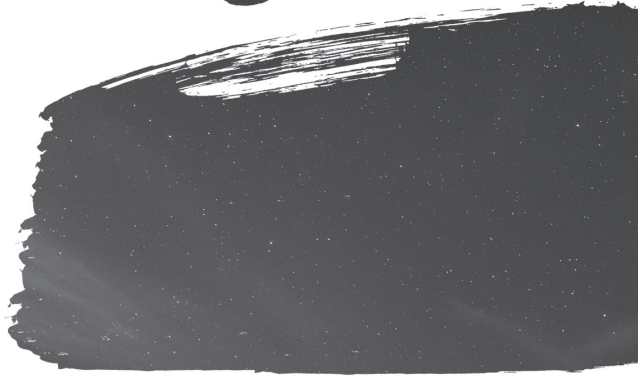
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with
TIM CHESTER

John
Stott



The World
GOD'S WORD FOR TODAY



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ivpress.com
email@ivpress.com

Inter-Varsity Press, England
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London SW1P 4ST, England
ivpbooks.com
ivp@ivpbooks.com

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About the authors

John Stott had a worldwide ministry as a church leader, a Bible expositor and the author of many award-winning books. He was Rector Emeritus of All Souls, Langham Place, London, and Founder-President of the Langham Partnership.

Tim Chester is Pastor of Grace Church, Boroughbridge, North Yorkshire, Chair of Keswick Ministries and the author of more than forty books.

Preface

To be 'contemporary' is to live in the present, and to move with the times without worrying too much about the past or the future.

To be a 'contemporary Christian', however, is to live in a present which is enriched by our knowledge of the past and by our expectation of the future. Our Christian faith demands this. Why? Because the God we trust and worship is 'the Alpha and the Omega . . . who is, and who was, and who is to come, the Almighty',¹ while the Jesus Christ we follow is 'the same yesterday and today and for ever'.²

So this book and series are about how Christians handle time – how we can bring the past, the present and the future together in our thinking and living. Two main challenges face us. The first is the tension between the 'then' (past) and the 'now' (present), and the second the tension between the 'now' (present) and the 'not yet' (future).

The Introduction opens up the first problem. Is it possible for us truly to honour the past and live in the present at the same time? Can we preserve Christianity's historic identity intact without cutting ourselves off from those around us? Can we communicate the gospel in ways that are exciting and modern without distorting or even destroying it? Can we be authentic and fresh at the same time, or do we have to choose?

The Conclusion opens up the second problem: the tension between the 'now' and the 'not yet'. How far can we explore and experience everything that God has said and done through Christ without straying into what has not yet been revealed or given? How can we develop a proper sense of humility about a future yet to unfold without becoming complacent about where we are in the present?

In between these enquiries into the influences of the past and the future comes an exploration about our Christian responsibilities in the present.

Preface

This series is about questions of doctrine and discipleship under the five headings: 'The Gospel', 'The Disciple', 'The Bible', 'The Church' and 'The World' (the book you are holding in your hands), though I make no attempt to be systematic, let alone exhaustive.

In addition to the topic of time, and the relations between past, present and future, there is a second theme running through this series: the need for us to talk less and listen more.

I believe we are called to the difficult and even painful task of 'double listening'. We are to listen carefully (although of course with differing degrees of respect) both to the ancient Word and to the modern world, in order to relate the one to the other with a combination of faithfulness and sensitivity.

Each book in this series is an attempt at double listening. It is my firm conviction that, if we can only develop our capacity for double listening, we will avoid the opposite pitfalls of unfaithfulness and irrelevance, and truly be able to speak God's Word to God's world with effectiveness today.

Adapted from the original Preface by John Stott in 1991

A note to the reader

The original book entitled *The Contemporary Christian*, on which this volume and series are based, may not seem ‘contemporary’ to readers more than a quarter of a century later. But both the publisher and John Stott’s Literary Executors are convinced that the issues which John Stott addresses in this book are every bit as relevant today as when they were first written.

The question was how to make this seminal work accessible for new generations of readers. We have sought to do this in the following ways:

- The original work has been divided into a series of several smaller volumes based on the five major sections of the original.
- Words that may not resonate with the twenty-first-century reader have been updated, while great care has been taken to maintain the thought process and style of the author in the original.
- Each chapter is now followed by questions from a current bestselling Christian author to aid reflection and response.

Lovers of the original work have expressed delight that this book is being made available in a way that extends its reach and influence well into a new century. We pray that your life will be enriched as you read, as the lives of many have already been greatly enriched by the original edition.

Series introduction

The Contemporary Christian – the then and the now

The expression ‘the contemporary Christian’ strikes many as a contradiction in terms. Isn’t Christianity an antique relic from the remote past, irrelevant to people in today’s world?

My purpose in this series is to show that there is such a thing as ‘contemporary Christianity’ – not something newfangled, but original, historic, orthodox, biblical Christianity, sensitively related to the modern world.

Christianity: both historical and contemporary

We begin by reaffirming that Christianity is a historical religion. Of course, every religion arose in a particular historical context. Christianity, however, makes an especially strong claim to be historical because it rests not only on a historical *person*, Jesus of Nazareth, but on certain historical *events* which involved him, especially his birth, death and resurrection. There is a common thread here with the Judaism from which Christianity sprang. The Old Testament presents God not only as ‘the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob’, but also as the God of the covenant which he made with Abraham, and then renewed with Isaac and Jacob. Again, he is not only ‘the God of Moses’, but is also seen as the Redeemer responsible for the exodus, who went on to renew the covenant yet again at Mount Sinai.

Christians are forever tethered in heart and mind to these decisive, historical events of the past. We are constantly encouraged in the

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Bible to look back to them with thankfulness. Indeed, God deliberately made provision for his people to recall his saving actions on a regular basis. Supremely, the Lord's Supper or Holy Communion enables us to call the atoning death of Christ regularly to mind, and so bring the past into the present.

But the problem is that Christianity's foundational events took place such a long time ago. I had a conversation with two brothers some years ago – students who told me they had turned away from the faith of their parents. One was now an agnostic, the other an atheist. I asked why. Did they no longer believe in the truth of Christianity? No, their dilemma was not whether Christianity was *true*, but whether it was *relevant*. How could it be? Christianity, they went on, was a primitive, Palestinian religion from long ago. So what on earth did it have to offer them, living in the exciting modern world?

This view of Christianity is widespread. The world has changed dramatically since Jesus' day, and goes on changing with ever more bewildering speed. People reject the gospel, not necessarily because they think it false, but because it no longer resonates with them.

In response to this we need to be clear about the basic Christian conviction that God continues to speak through what he has spoken. His Word is not a prehistoric fossil, but a living message for the contemporary world. Even granted the historical particularities of the Bible and the immense complexities of the modern world, there is still a fundamental correspondence between them. God's Word remains a lamp to our feet and a light for our path.¹

At the same time, our dilemma remains. Can Christianity both retain its authentic identity *and* demonstrate its relevance?

The desire to present Jesus in a way that appeals to our own generation is obviously right. This was the preoccupation of the German pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer while in prison during World War 2: 'What is bothering me incessantly,' he wrote, 'is the question . . . who Christ really is for us today?'² It is a difficult question. In answering

it, the church has tended in every generation to develop images of Christ which deviate from the portrait painted by the New Testament authors.

Attempting to modernize Jesus

Here are some of the church's many attempts to present a contemporary picture of Christ, some of which have been more successful than others in remaining loyal to the original.

I think first of *Jesus the ascetic* who inspired generations of monks and hermits. He was much like John the Baptist, for he too dressed in a camel's hair cloak, wore sandals or went barefoot, and munched locusts with evident relish. But it would be hard to reconcile this portrait with his contemporaries' criticism that he was a party-goer who 'came eating and drinking'.³

Then there was *Jesus the pale Galilean*. The apostate emperor Julian tried to reinstate Rome's pagan gods after Constantine had replaced them with the worship of Christ, and is reported as having said on his deathbed in AD 363, 'You have conquered, O Galilean.' His words were popularized by the nineteenth-century poet Swinburne:

Thou hast conquered, O pale Galilean;
The world has grown grey from thy breath.

This image of Jesus was perpetuated in medieval art and stained glass, with a heavenly halo and a colourless complexion, eyes lifted to the sky and feet never quite touching the ground.

In contrast to the presentations of Jesus as weak, suffering and defeated, there was *Jesus the cosmic Christ*, much loved by the Byzantine church leaders. They depicted him as the King of kings and Lord of lords, the creator and ruler of the universe. Yet, exalted high above all things, glorified and reigning, he seemed aloof from

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the real world, and even from his own humanity, as revealed in the incarnation and the cross.

At the opposite end of the theological spectrum, the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century deists of the Enlightenment constructed in their own image *Jesus the teacher of common sense*,⁴ entirely human and not divine at all. The most dramatic example is the work of Thomas Jefferson, President of the United States from 1801 to 1809. Rejecting the supernatural as incompatible with reason, he produced his own edition of the Gospels, in which all miracles and mysteries were systematically eliminated. What is left is a guide to a merely human moral teacher.

In the twentieth century we were presented with a wide range of options. Two of the best known owe their popularity to musicals. There is *Jesus the clown of Godspell*, who spends his time singing and dancing, and thus captures something of the gaiety of Jesus, but hardly takes his mission seriously. Somewhat similar is *Jesus Christ Superstar*, the disillusioned celebrity who once thought he knew who he was, but in Gethsemane was no longer sure.

The late President of Cuba, Fidel Castro, frequently referred to Jesus as ‘a great revolutionary’, and there have been many attempts to portray him as *Jesus the freedom fighter*, the urban guerrilla, the first-century Che Guevara, with black beard and flashing eyes, whose most characteristic gesture was to overthrow the tables of the moneychangers and to drive them out of the temple with a whip.

These different portraits illustrate the recurring tendency to update Christ in line with current fashions. It began in the apostolic age, with Paul needing to warn of false teachers who were preaching ‘a Jesus other than the Jesus we [apostles] preached’.⁵ Each succeeding generation tends to read back into him its own ideas and hopes, and create him in its own image.

Their motive is right (to paint a contemporary portrait of Jesus), but the result is always distorted (as the portrait is unauthentic). The

challenge before us is to present Jesus to our generation in ways that are both accurate and appealing.

Calling for double listening

The main reason for every betrayal of the authentic Jesus is that we pay too much attention to contemporary trends and too little to God's Word. The thirst for relevance becomes so demanding that we feel we have to give in to it, whatever the cost. We become slaves to the latest fad, prepared to sacrifice truth on the altar of modernity. The quest for relevance degenerates into a lust for popularity. For the opposite extreme to irrelevance is accommodation, a feeble-minded, unprincipled surrender to the spirit of the time.

God's people live in a world which can be actively hostile. We are constantly exposed to the pressure to conform.

Thank God, however, that there have always been those who have stood firm, sometimes alone, and refused to compromise. I think of Jeremiah in the sixth century BC, and Paul in his day ('everyone . . . has deserted me'),⁶ Athanasius in the fourth century and Luther in the sixteenth.

In our own day we too need to resolve to present the biblical gospel in such a way as to speak to modern dilemmas, fears and frustrations, but with equal determination not to compromise it in so doing. Some stumbling-blocks are intrinsic to the original gospel and cannot be eliminated or soft-pedalled in order to make it easier to accept. The gospel contains some features so alien to modern thought that it will always appear foolish, however hard we strive to show that it is 'true and reasonable'.⁷ The cross will always be an assault on human self-righteousness and a challenge to human self-indulgence. Its 'scandal' (stumbling-block) simply cannot be removed. The church speaks most authentically not when it has become indistinguishable from the world around us, but when its distinctive light shines most brightly.

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However keen we are to communicate God's Word to others, we must be faithful to that Word and, if necessary, be prepared to suffer for it. God's word to Ezekiel encourages us: 'Do not be afraid of them . . . You must speak my words to them, whether they listen or fail to listen, for they are rebellious.'⁸ Our calling is to be faithful and relevant, not merely trendy.

How, then, can we develop a Christian mind which is both shaped by the truths of historic, biblical Christianity and also fully immersed in the realities of the contemporary world? We have to begin with a double refusal. We refuse to become either so absorbed in the Word that we *escape* into it and fail to let it confront the world, or so absorbed in the world that we *conform* to it and fail to subject it to the judgment of the Word.

In place of this double refusal, we are called to double listening. We need to listen to the Word of God with expectancy and humility, ready for God perhaps to confront us with a word that may be disturbing and uninvited. And we must also listen to the world around us. The voices we hear may take the form of shrill and strident protest. There will also be the anguished cries of those who are suffering, and the pain, doubt, anger, alienation and even despair of those who are at odds with God. We listen to the Word with humble reverence, anxious to understand it, and resolved to believe and obey what we come to understand. We listen to the world with critical alertness, anxious to understand it too, and resolved not necessarily to believe and obey it, but to sympathize with it and to seek grace to discover how the gospel relates to it.

Everybody finds listening difficult. But are Christians sometimes less good at listening than others? We can learn from the so-called 'comforters' in the Old Testament book of Job. They began well. When they heard about Job's troubles, they came to visit him and, seeing how great his sufferings were, said nothing to him for a whole week. If only they had continued as they began, and kept their mouths shut! Instead, they trotted out their conventional

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view – that every sinner suffers for his or her own sins – in the most insensitive way. They did not really listen to what Job had to say. They merely repeated their own thoughtless and heartless claptrap, until in the end God stepped in and rebuked them for having misrepresented him.

We need to cultivate ‘double listening’, the ability to listen to two voices at the same time – the voice of God through the Bible and the voices of men and women around us. These voices will often contradict one another, but our purpose in listening to them both is to discover how they relate to each other. Double listening is indispensable to Christian discipleship and to Christian mission.

It is only through this discipline of double listening that it is possible to become a ‘contemporary Christian’. We bring ‘historical’ and ‘contemporary’ together as we learn to apply the Word to the world, proclaiming good news which is both true and new.

To put it in a nutshell, we live in the ‘now’ in the light of the ‘then’.

The World

Introduction

In theory, the world is the old and fallen community, while the church is God's new and redeemed society. Some theologians, keen to minimize the difference, go so far as to identify them by applying to all human beings indiscriminately the label 'the people of God'. Others reach the same goal by a different route. They allow the world to dictate to the church what its views and values should be, until the church conforms to the world and the two become virtually indistinguishable. A third group is content for the church and the world to live together in amicable co-existence, with neither invading the other's territory or interfering in the other's affairs.

A fourth possibility, however, is what Jesus and his apostles envisaged. It is that the church has a God-given responsibility to infiltrate the world, listening to its challenges, but also bringing its own challenge by sharing the good news in word and deed. The correct term for this task is 'mission'. 'Mission' is what God sends the church into the world to do. We are going to consider four major aspects of it.

In chapter 1, we look at the uniqueness of Jesus Christ, arguably the most important and the most urgent issue before the worldwide church today. Can we still apply traditional words like 'unique', 'absolute' and 'final' to Jesus? Or must we surrender to the pressures of 'pluralism', which insists that Jesus was only one of a number of religious leaders, and that every religion has its own independent validity? If Jesus was and is unique in his person and work, then we are under obligation to make him known. If he is not, then the chief foundation of the Christian mission has been undermined, and we will have to give up our ambition to win the world for Christ.

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In chapter 2, we will set out the full biblical basis for the Christian mission. This goes beyond the uniqueness of Christ to the nature of God himself. For mission begins in the heart of God. The living God of the biblical revelation is a missionary God. A rapid survey of the whole of Scripture will demonstrate that each of its five sections has an unavoidably missionary emphasis.

In chapter 3, 'Holistic mission', we will see that the church's communication of the gospel cannot only be in words, but must also be in works. In the church's mission, as in Christ's, good news and good deeds go together.¹ In God's purposes, evangelism and social responsibility are married, and they must not be divorced.

In chapter 4, we will return to Christ, since nothing is more important in the Christian mission than a clear and fresh vision of him. Under the title 'The Christology of mission', we will look at the five main events in the saving career of Jesus in order to see that each has a missionary dimension. From them, we will learn the model, costliness, mandate, motivation and urgency of the mission to which we are called.

1

The uniqueness of Jesus Christ

A social worker in Nigeria once visited a young man in one of the back streets of Lagos. Beside his bed he found the Bible, the Book of Common Prayer, the Qur'an, three copies of *Watchtower* (the magazine of the Jehovah's Witnesses), a biography of Karl Marx, a book of yoga exercises and – what the poor fellow evidently needed most – a popular paperback entitled *How to Stop Worrying*.¹

In 1966 the first multi-faith service was held in the church of St Martin-in-the-Fields in London. Hindus, Buddhists, Muslims and Christians took part on equal terms, making four affirmations of a supposedly common faith, giving four readings from their respective sacred scriptures, and pronouncing four blessings. In only one of these blessings was the name of Jesus mentioned for the first and last time. The secular press was enthusiastic, hailing it as 'a significant milestone in religious history'. But the Christian newspapers described it as 'a betrayal of the Christian faith'. It is doubtful if they would write anything similar today, for multi-faith services are held regularly.

These two incidents, the one in Lagos and the other in London, are examples of the spirit of syncretism. Dr Visser 't Hooft, the first General Secretary of the World Council of Churches, defined syncretism as the view 'that there is no unique revelation in history, that there are many different ways to reach the divine reality, that all formulations of religious truth or experience are by their very nature inadequate expressions of that truth, and that it is necessary to harmonize as much as possible all religious ideas and experiences so as to create one universal religion for mankind'.² He was outspoken in his rejection of this outlook. 'It is high time that Christians should

The uniqueness of Jesus Christ

rediscover,' he went on, 'that the very heart of their faith is that Jesus Christ did not come to make a contribution to the religious storehouse of mankind, but that in him God reconciled the world unto himself.'³

Today the main challenge to the traditional understanding of the uniqueness of Christ is not 'syncretism', but 'pluralism', not the attempt to fuse the world's religions into a single, universal faith, but the recognition of the integrity of each in all its distinctive diversity.

The options before us are now usually summarized as 'exclusivism', 'inclusivism' and 'pluralism'.⁴

'Exclusivism' (an unfortunately negative term, which gives the impression of wanting to exclude people from the kingdom of God) is used to denote the historic Christian view that salvation cannot be found in other religions, but only in Jesus Christ.

'Inclusivism' allows that salvation is possible to adherents of other faiths, but says this salvation is due to the secret and often unrecognized work of Christ. At the Vatican II Council, Roman Catholics embraced this view, stating that Christ's saving work holds good 'not only for Christians, but for all men of good will in whose hearts grace works in an unseen way'.⁵

'Pluralism' goes further still. Its advocates rejecting exclusivism as 'presumptuous' and 'arrogant', and inclusivism as 'patronizing' or 'condescending'. Whereas 'plurality' expresses the simple fact that there are many religions, 'pluralism' affirms their independent validity. It renounces every claim that Christianity is 'absolute', 'unique', 'definitive', 'final', 'normative', 'ultimate' or 'universal'. 'Unlimited growth is cancer, and so would be an ever-growing single Christian religion all over the world.'⁶ Instead, Christianity must be viewed as only one religion among many, and Jesus as only one saviour among others. This is the so-called 'deeper and larger ecumenism that embraces the whole of humanity', of which the rainbow remains 'a timeless symbol'.⁷

Arguments for pluralism

What is it about 'pluralism' that many find attractive?

First, there is *a global consciousness*. Threats to the natural environment, fears of a nuclear conflict and the continuing economic injustice between North and South have led to a planetary perspective. The very survival of the human race seems to depend on learning to live together in harmony and to cooperate for the common good. Whatever divides us, therefore, including our religions, is understandably regarded with increasing disfavour.

In response, Christians should indeed be in the forefront of seeking global harmony. By God's creation we are one people in the world. We should be committed to international peace-making, democracy, human rights, community relations, environmental responsibility and the search for a new international economic order. Moreover, people of different races and religions can, should and do cooperate in these kinds of social action. In order to do so, however, it is not necessary to renounce our belief in the uniqueness of Jesus Christ. It would be folly to seek unity at the expense of truth, or reconciliation without Christ the mediator. Besides, Christ unavoidably divides people as well as uniting them. He said he had come not 'to bring peace, but a sword'.⁸ He envisaged that some conflict would continue, as people ranged themselves for or against him.

Second, there is *an appreciation of other religions*. Modern communications (especially television, travel and the internet) have caused the world to shrink. People of strange beliefs and customs, who previously were very remote from us, now live next door. They enter our homes – if not in person then on the screen. This is 'a newly experienced reality for many today'.⁹ The sacred books of other faiths, translated into our languages, are now readily available. And, as we become better acquainted with the world's religions, what Professor John Hick has called their 'immense spiritual riches' have

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'tended to erode the plausibility of the old Christian exclusivism'.¹⁰ Furthermore, some ancient faiths are showing signs of resurgence, just when the perception is that Christianity, declining in the West, 'has not succeeded in breaking the power of the great historical religions'.¹¹

We should welcome today's more thorough knowledge of world faiths, not least through the comparative study of religions in schools. But if we discover 'riches' in other religions, we will also discern more clearly the absolute uniqueness of Jesus Christ, as we will see later. 'To make exclusive claims for our particular tradition,' writes Stanley Samartha, an advocate of pluralism, 'is not the best way to love our neighbours as ourselves.'¹² But in fact, it is the very best and highest way to express neighbour-love, if the gospel is true. For if the gospel is true, then we cannot claim to love our neighbours if we leave them in ignorance of Christ. As for the vitality of other religions, and the comparative failure of Christianity, these things should lead us not to the conclusion that the gospel is untrue, but rather to self-examination, repentance, change, and the adoption of better ways of sharing the good news with others.

Third, there is a *post-colonial modesty*. For four centuries the West dominated the world in political, military, economic and scientific terms, and took for granted its moral and spiritual superiority. Indeed, Christianity's 'attitude to other religions has been shaped by the colonial mentality'.¹³ The end of the Second World War, however, heralded the end of the colonial era. As the West underwent a profound cultural shift 'from a position of clear superiority to one of rough parity', a parallel shift took place in theological consciousness. Professor Langdon Gilkey writes, 'This dramatic situation has forced . . . a new understanding of the interrelationships of religions, a new balance of spiritual power, so to speak, on all.' It has pushed us all out of 'superiority' into 'parity'.¹⁴ To continue, therefore, to claim Christian universality, it is said, is to lapse into the old imperialist mindset.

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It is certainly embarrassing for us in the West to acknowledge that during those centuries of colonial expansion, territorial and spiritual conquest, politics and religion, gun and Bible, the flag and the cross, too often went hand in hand. Representatives of the imperial power developed attitudes of proud superiority towards those they ruled. But 'superiority' is a slippery word. It can describe an air of intolerable conceit, and we need to repent of every vestige of this. But seeking to win followers of other religions to Christ is not in itself a mark of arrogance. Instead, it indicates a profound and humble conviction that the gospel *is* superior to other faiths because it is God's revealed truth.

The attraction of pluralism is more, however, than a concern for global harmony, an appreciation of other religions and a desire for post-colonial modesty. It has even deeper roots, which the twelve contributors to the 1987 book *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness* examined. These scholars describe themselves as having 'crossed a theological Rubicon', not only from exclusivism to inclusivism, but from inclusivism to pluralism,¹⁵ and they tell us about the three 'bridges' which led them to make the crossing.

The first they call the *historico-cultural* bridge, or *relativity*. Since people began applying Einstein's general theory of relativity beyond physics to other spheres (including religion), seemingly nothing has remained absolute. A historical and comparative study of religions, argues Professor Gordon Kaufman, suggests that they are simply 'creations of the human imagination',¹⁶ each from its particular cultural perspective. So Christian theology must give up any claim to absolute or final truth, and understand itself instead as 'a human imaginative response to the necessity to find orientation for life in a particular historical situation'.¹⁷ Professor Tom Driver goes further, declaring that 'even Scripture . . . is the creation of us human beings'.¹⁸

Now of course we also affirm that the Bible is a culturally conditioned book in the sense that each of its authors spoke within his own particular culture. But is this emphasis on the human, historical

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and cultural background of the Bible a complete account of its nature? No. There are good reasons for believing in the dual authorship of Scripture, namely that behind the human authors stood the divine author, who spoke his Word through their words, and that his Word transcends both history and culture. It may be that other religions could be described (whatever their claims may be) as 'products of the human imagination'. But the historic Christian belief is that the gospel is the product of divine revelation, albeit mediated through the minds and mouths of the human authors.

The second 'bridge' across the 'theological Rubicon' is labelled *theologico-mystical*, or *mystery*. That is, there is in every religion some sense of the Transcendent or experience of God who, because he is infinite and ineffable, always remains beyond our apprehensions of him. Professor Wilfred Cantwell Smith says all our theologies are only 'conceptual images of God', and 'like other images, each may be less or more worthy of its Subject'. There is, in principle, he goes on, 'no fundamental difference . . . between a doctrine and a statue'. The former is an intellectual image of God, the latter a visual. 'It is wrong for our intellects to absolutize their own handiwork.' For 'both theology and art proffer relative apprehensions of the Absolute'; to absolutize our image of God is idolatry.¹⁹ He goes further: 'For Christians to think that Christianity is true, or final, or salvific, is a form of idolatry. For Christians to imagine that God has constructed Christianity . . . rather than that He/She/It has inspired us to construct it . . . that is idolatry.'²⁰ Or, as Tom Driver sums it up, 'Idolatry is the insistence that there is only one way, one norm, one truth.'²¹

In response, we certainly agree that God is the Transcendent Reality beyond all possible human imagination, apprehension or description. Words cannot capture, let alone contain, him. Because he is infinite, we shall never come to the end of him. Instead, we will spend eternity exploring and worshipping his fathomless being. Nevertheless, to say that he remains a mystery is compatible with affirming that he has revealed himself. Moreover, his Word incarnate

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in Jesus and his Word written in Scripture have a normative position for all Christian believers. It is extraordinary to claim that all Christians of all churches for two millennia, who have believed in the uniqueness of Jesus, are idolaters! If the reference is to 'Christianity' as a human construct, then perhaps to absolutize it could become an idolatry. But to acknowledge the finality and absoluteness of Christ himself is not idolatry, but authentic worship.

Third, there is the *ethico-practical* bridge, or *justice*. Some people argue for pluralism because they believe it will contribute to the pursuit of global justice.²² Borrowing a number of concepts from liberation theology, Professor Paul Knitter writes that 'a preferential option for the poor and the non-person constitutes the necessity and the primary purpose of inter-religious dialogue'. In other words, pluralism is not an end in itself, but a means to the end of liberating the oppressed. Since this is too big a task for any one religion to accomplish, 'a worldwide liberation movement needs a worldwide inter-religious dialogue'.²³ The only possible criterion by which to judge or 'grade' religions must be neither doctrinal nor mystical, but ethical, namely their effectiveness in promoting human well-being.

We must agree that contemporary issues of social justice should be of enormous concern to all Christians, since we acknowledge the dignity of human beings as people made in God's image. We should therefore be ashamed that evangelical Christians have all too often tended to be in the rearguard, instead of in the vanguard, of social reform. We have no quarrel with the proposal to assess religions, including Christianity, according to their social record, since we claim that the gospel is the power of God to transform both individuals and communities. It is because we have both experienced this power in our own lives and seen it at work in human history that we cannot agree with Professor Hick's negative assessment of the Christian social record as 'a complex mixture of valuable and harmful elements', neither better nor worse than those of other religions.²⁴

Summary

Our response to the six reasons why some find pluralism attractive is in each case fundamentally the same. They beg the question of truth. Has God fully and finally revealed himself in Christ and the Bible's testimony to Christ, or not?

- 1 We agree with the search for global harmony, but not at the expense of truth.
- 2 We agree that a greater knowledge of other religions is enriching, but in comparing them we cannot surrender Christ's claim to be the truth.
- 3 We agree that colonial attitudes of superiority were arrogant, but still insist that truth is superior to falsehood.
- 4 We agree that Scripture is culturally conditioned, but affirm that through it God has spoken his Word of truth.
- 5 We agree that the ultimate mystery of God is beyond human apprehension, but affirm that God has truly revealed himself in Christ.
- 6 We agree that it is an essential part of our Christian calling to serve the poor, but we are also called to bear witness to the truth.

According to Professor Rosemary Radford Ruether, 'The idea that Christianity, or even the biblical faiths, have a monopoly on religious truth is an outrageous and absurd religious chauvinism.'²⁵ If by 'monopoly' she means either that other religions possess no truth, or that Christians keep God's revelation to themselves and do not share it, then we could perhaps agree with her strident words. But if by 'monopoly' she is referring to the belief that God has revealed himself fully and finally in Christ, then this is neither outrageous nor absurd, but humble, wise, sober and considered Christian faith.

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It would indeed be arrogant, even 'outrageous', if we were claiming uniqueness or finality for our own fallible opinions and limited experiences. But we are not. As Bishop Lesslie Newbigin put it,

If, in fact, it is true that almighty God, creator and sustainer of all that exists in heaven and on earth, has – at a known time and place in human history – so humbled himself as to become part of our sinful humanity, and to suffer and die a shameful death to take away our sin, and to rise from the dead as the first-fruit of a new creation, if this is a fact, then to affirm it is not arrogance. To remain quiet about it is treason to our fellow human beings. If it is really true, as it is, that 'the Son of God loved me and gave himself up for me', how can I agree that this amazing act of matchless grace should merely become part of a syllabus for the 'comparative study of religions'?²⁶

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It is essential to clarify that Christians claim uniqueness and finality only for Christ and not for Christianity in any of its many institutional or cultural forms. I call three witnesses to endorse this statement, who come respectively from Africa, Asia and Europe.

First, Professor John Mbiti of Kenya has written, 'The uniqueness of Christianity is in Jesus Christ.'²⁷

My Asian witness is Sadhu Sundar Singh, the Indian Christian mystic and evangelist. Brought up in a Sikh home, he converted to Christ as a teenager, and later became a *sadhu*, an itinerant holy man. Visiting a Hindu college one day, he was asked by an agnostic professor of comparative religion what he had found in Christianity that he had not found in his old religion. 'I have Christ,' he replied. 'Yes, I know,' said the professor a little impatiently. 'But what particular principle or doctrine have you found that you did not have before?' 'The particular thing I have found,' he replied, 'is Christ.'²⁸

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My European witness is the widely travelled Anglican scholar, Bishop Stephen Neill, who emphasized the centrality of Christ in the debate with pluralism. He wrote, 'The old saying "Christianity is Christ" is almost exactly true. The historical figure of Jesus of Nazareth is the criterion by which every Christian affirmation has to be judged, and in the light of which it stands or falls.'²⁹ Responding to critics of Christianity, he asked,

Have our interlocutors ever really looked at Jesus Christ and tried to see him as he is? For, if we take the Gospels seriously . . . Jesus is not in the least like anyone else who has ever lived. The things that he says about God are not the same as the sayings of any other religious teacher. The claims that he makes for himself are not the same as those that have been made on behalf of any other religious teacher. His criticisms of human life and society are far more devastating than those that any other man has ever made. The demands he made on his followers are more searching than those put forward by any other religious teacher.³⁰

Our claim, then, is not just that Jesus was one of the great spiritual leaders of the world. It would be hopelessly incongruous to refer to him as 'Jesus the Great' and compare him with Alexander the Great, Charles the Great or Napoleon the Great. Jesus is not 'the Great'; he is the only.³¹ He has no peers, no rivals and no successors.

So how did the early Christians think of him? They gave him many names and titles. Often he is plain 'Jesus' or 'Christ', or when his human name and messianic title are combined, 'Jesus (the) Christ'. Often again 'the Lord' is added, whether 'the Lord Jesus' or 'the Lord Christ' or 'the Lord Jesus Christ'. But when his title is spelled out in full, he is 'our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ'. It comes, for example, at the conclusion of 2 Peter: 'But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.'³²

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Within this designation three distinct affirmations are implied, namely that Jesus is Lord, Jesus is Saviour and Jesus is ours. All three declare him to be unique.

Jesus is Lord

'Lord Jesus' was the earliest of all Christian creeds. It is a witness to the incarnation, since it is an affirmation of the oneness of the human Jesus and the divine Lord. The word *kyrios* was used with a wide variety of meanings. On the one hand, it could be used simply as a courtesy title (like 'Sir') or to designate the owner of property. On the other hand, it was used throughout the classical Greek period to refer to the gods as a way of acknowledging their authority over nature and history. It then came to be used of human rulers, especially the emperor. It was also the regular paraphrase for Yahweh, the Old Testament covenant name for God, by the scholars who put the Hebrew Bible into Greek. The fact that it came to be used in the New Testament of the risen Christ,³³ with the implication that his followers were his slaves committed to worship and obey him, is a clear indication that they acknowledged his deity. It is all the more remarkable that his first Jewish disciples used this term, because they were as fiercely monotheistic as any Muslim is today. They recited the *Shema* daily, confessing that 'the LORD our God, the LORD is one'.³⁴ Yet, in spite of this, they boldly called Jesus 'Lord', and worshipped him as God.

There is nothing like this in any other religion. The Jews still reject the deity of Jesus, of course. So do Muslims. Misunderstanding the incarnation in grossly physical terms, Muhammad wrote in the Qur'an, 'Allah forbid that he himself should beget a son'.³⁵

Early or classical Buddhism had no god and no worship. Divine status and honour were not accorded to the Buddha until around 500 years after his death. So we cannot accept the parallel Professor Hick makes when he writes, 'Buddhology and Christology developed in

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comparable ways.³⁶ He claims each ‘came to be thought of’ as an incarnation as a result of the religious devotion of his followers. The comparison is inept, however, for Jesus’ own contemporaries called him ‘Lord’, while half a millennium passed before the Buddha was worshipped as God.

Hinduism, it is true, claims a number of *avatars* or divine ‘descents’ in which the god Vishnu is said to have appeared in Rama, Krishna and others. In the Bhagavad Gita Krishna tells Arjuna that he frequently takes human form: ‘I have been born many times . . . Although I am unborn, everlasting, and I am the Lord of all, I come to my realm of nature and through my wondrous power I am born.’³⁷ Perhaps even more striking was the claim of Ramakrishna, the nineteenth-century Hindu reformer, who spoke of himself as ‘the same soul that had been born before as Rama, as Krishna, as Jesus, or as Buddha, born again as Ramakrishna’.³⁸

But ‘incarnation’ is not an apt or accurate rendering of the Sanskrit word *avatar*. Linking them conceals the two fundamental differences between the Hindu and the Christian claims. First, there is the question of *historicity*. Vishnu’s *avatars* belong to Hindu mythology. It is of no importance to Hindus whether the *avatars* actually happened or not. Christianity, however, is essentially a historical religion, based on the claim that the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ was an event of history that took place in Palestine when Augustus was emperor of Rome. If its historicity could be disproved, Christianity would be destroyed.

The second difference lies in the *plurality* of the *avatars*. Krishna spoke of his multiple, even ‘frequent’, rebirths. But ‘incarnation’ and ‘reincarnation’ are two fundamentally different concepts. The *avatars* were temporary manifestations or embodiments of Vishnu in human beings. But none involved the actual assumption of humanity by divinity, or is in any way central to Hinduism. The Christian claim, by contrast, is that in Jesus of Nazareth God took human nature to himself once and for all and for ever. We claim that God’s incarnation

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in Jesus was decisive, permanent and unrepeatable, the turning point of human history and the beginning of the new age. Reigning at God's right hand today is precisely 'the man Christ Jesus', still human as well as divine, although now his humanity has been glorified. Having assumed our nature, he has never discarded it, and he never will.

So the first aspect of the uniqueness of Jesus is that he is Lord. He is God's eternal, personal 'Word' or 'Son' who became a human being. As a result, 'In Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form.'³⁹ He is the sovereign ruler of the universe and of the church. It is true that he exercises his rule through humble love, for the Lord became the servant and washed his disciples' feet. Yet our rightful place is on our faces at *his* feet.

Jesus is Saviour

The second affirmation contained in the title of Jesus is that he is Saviour: the divine Lord is the divine Saviour. And, although the vocabulary of salvation is distasteful to many people today, we cannot possibly give it up. For Christianity is in essence a rescue religion. It announces good news of salvation. As the churches have recited for centuries in the Nicene Creed, 'for us and for our salvation he came down from heaven'.

Now 'salvation' is a comprehensive word, embracing all God's redeeming purposes for his alienated creatures. Salvation is freedom, with corresponding negative and positive aspects:

- It is freedom from the just judgment of God on our sins, from our guilt and our guilty conscience, into a new relationship with him in which we become his reconciled, forgiven children, and we know him as our Father.
- It is freedom from the bitter bondage of meaninglessness into a new sense of purpose in God's new society of love, in which the last are first, the poor are rich and the meek are heirs.

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- It is freedom from the dark prison of our own self-centredness into a new life of self-fulfilment through self-forgetful service.
- And one day it will include freedom from the futility of pain, decay, death and dissolution into a new world of immortality, beauty and unimaginable joy.

All this – and more! – is ‘salvation’.

It was to secure these great blessings that Jesus Christ came into the world, died on the cross and rose again. It was he who took the initiative, not us: ‘The Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.’⁴⁰ He likened himself to a shepherd who left the rest of his sheep to go after the one that was lost. Far from abandoning it in the hope that it might bleat and stumble its way home, he risked his own life to search it out.⁴¹ In fact, ‘the Good Shepherd’ laid down his life for his sheep.⁴² Deliberately and voluntarily, Jesus went to the cross to identify himself with us. God in Christ took our place, bore our sins, assumed our guilt, paid our penalty, died our death, in order that we might be forgiven and recreated. And then he was raised from death in a supernatural event, to reverse the human verdict against him, and to vindicate his divine-human person and saving work.

This too is unique. We see his uniqueness not only in his incarnation, but also in his atoning death and historical resurrection. The whole concept of a gracious God, who refused either to condone our sins or to visit them upon us, who instead took the initiative to rescue us, who gave himself to the shame and pain of death on the cross, and who broke the power of death in his resurrection, has no parallel in other faiths. ‘If any other religion has anything in the least like the doctrines of incarnation and atonement,’ wrote Bishop Stephen Neill, ‘I have yet to find it.’⁴³ But it cannot be found. Emil Brunner was right to refer to ‘the self-confident optimism of all non-Christian religion’, teaching various forms of self-salvation, whereas in the gospel the whole emphasis is on the gracious

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‘self-movement’ of God towards sinners, and on self-despair as ‘the ante-chamber of faith’.⁴⁴

Buddhism sees the human predicament in suffering rather than sin, and in the ‘desire’ which it sees as the root of suffering. Deliverance comes only through the abolition of desire by self-effort. There is no God and no Saviour. ‘Strive without ceasing’ were the Buddha’s last words to his disciples before he died.

Philosophical Hinduism locates our problem in *maya*, usually understood as the ‘illusion’ of our space-time experience. Popular Hinduism, on the other hand, teaches the inflexible doctrine of *karma*, retribution through reincarnation. Each person must eat the fruit of his own wrongdoings, in future lives if not in this one. From this endless cycle (*samsara*) of rebirths or reincarnations there is no escape by forgiveness. Escape comes only by that final release called nirvana, involving the extinction of individual being and absorption into impersonal divine reality (Brahman).

Judaism continues, of course, to teach the possibility of forgiveness to the penitent, which the Old Testament promised, but denies both that Jesus is the Messiah and that his sin-bearing death is the only ground on which God can forgive. That painstaking and honest Jewish scholar, C. G. Montefiore, saw the ‘greatness and originality’ of Jesus in his new attitude to sinners. Instead of avoiding them, he actively sought them out. The rabbis had said that God receives sinners who return to him, but they had not spoken of a divine love which makes the first move to seek and to save them: ‘This direct search for, and appeal to, the sinner are new and moving notes of high import and significance. The good shepherd who searches for the lost sheep, and reclaims it and rejoices over it, is a new figure.’⁴⁵

Islam clearly proclaims the mercy of God. Each of the 114 *suras* (chapters) of the Qur’an is introduced by the words, ‘In the Name of Allah, the Compassionate, the Merciful’. But it includes no costly historical display of his mercy. And when we probe further, we find that Allah is merciful to the meritorious, to those who pray, give alms

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and fast in Ramadan. There is no message for sinners who deserve judgment, except that they will receive the judgment they deserve. 'Moreover, that which we ask the Muslim to look for in Jesus is in itself a cause of grave offence to Muslim pride. We suggest – we cannot do otherwise – that he find a Saviour. The Muslim affirms that he has no need of any such thing.'⁴⁶

There can be no doubt that the chief difference between Christianity and the world's religions, and the chief stumbling-block which they find in it, is the cross. It humbles all pride and dashes all hopes of self-salvation. It also speaks of the uncalculating generosity of the love of God in providing this way of salvation. It was here that Toyohiko Kagawa, the Japanese Christian leader, found Christianity's uniqueness:

I am grateful for Shinto, for Buddhism, and for Confucianism. I owe much to these faiths . . . Yet these three faiths utterly failed to minister to my heart's deepest needs. I was a pilgrim journeying upon a long road that had no turning. I was weary. I was footsore. I wandered through a dark and dismal world where tragedies were thick . . . Buddhism teaches great compassion . . . but since the beginning of time, who has declared, 'this is my blood of the covenant which is poured out for many unto remission of sins'?⁴⁷

Jesus is ours

Jesus Christ's full title is not 'the Lord and Saviour' but '*our* Lord and Saviour'. We must not miss this personal possessive adjective. It is a small word, but highly significant. It indicates that there is a third affirmation hidden in his title, namely *Jesus is ours*.

Already in the Old Testament the possessive adjective 'my' regularly expressed the personal relationship which God's covenant people enjoyed with him, especially when they addressed him in

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prayer. For example, the psalmists write, 'LORD, my Rock and my Redeemer', 'The LORD is my shepherd', 'The LORD is my light and my salvation . . . the stronghold of my life', 'Truly he is my rock and my salvation; he is my fortress' and 'You, God, are my God, earnestly I seek you.'⁴⁸

In the New Testament what is claimed is a comparable personal relationship with Jesus Christ. Both Paul and Peter give us notable examples. Here is Paul: 'I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.'⁴⁹ As for Peter, he claims this intimate relationship not for himself alone, but for his readers too: 'Though you have not seen him [i.e. Christ], you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy.'⁵⁰

Here are claims that Christ is our contemporary. The Jesus who was born into our world, and who lived and died in first-century Palestine, also rose from the dead, is now alive for ever, and is available and accessible to his people. Jesus Christ is not to be relegated, like other religious leaders, to history and the history books. He is not dead and gone, finished or fossilized. He is alive and active. He calls us to follow him, and he offers himself to us as our indwelling and transforming Saviour.

The New Testament often explains that this availability to us is through the Holy Spirit, who is his Spirit.⁵¹ Paul prays that 'he [i.e. the Father] may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith'.⁵² Indeed, the Christian faith is essentially trinitarian. We come to the Father through the Son by the Spirit,⁵³ and the Father comes to us through the Son by the Spirit.⁵⁴

Once again this is unique. There is nothing comparable to it in the other religions. The Buddhist does not claim to know the Buddha, nor the Confucianist Confucius, nor the Muslim Muhammad, nor the Marxist Karl Marx. Each reveres the founder of his religion or ideology as a teacher of the past. To Christians too

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Jesus is a teacher, but, even more, he is our living Lord and Saviour. Phrases claiming this 'recur on page after page of the New Testament, and make clear that it is this intimate and personal relationship of trust, devotion and communion, which is the very heart of the Christian faith'.⁵⁵

Archbishop Coggan drew attention to this when referring to the 164 occurrences of Paul's favourite formula, 'in Christ':

It is a strange phrase. We can scarcely find a parallel use to it in ordinary life. If, let us say, an intimate friend of Churchill who had spent many years with him and then had given a decade to the writing of his life were talking to us about that great man, he might sum up his relationship to him in a wide variety of ways. He might say that he feared him, or admired him, or revered him, or even loved him. But he never would say, 'I am a man in Churchill'. It would never occur to him to use such a phrase. But Paul was, above everything else, 'a man in Christ'.⁵⁶

Although it is right to emphasize in this way the believer's personal, individual relationship to Christ, indicated by the singular possessive 'my', yet his full title actually includes the *plural* possessive 'our'. For God is calling out a *people* for himself, and the focus of his people's unity is Jesus Christ. It is he who comes and stands among us when we meet to worship. 'I am with you,' he says, even when only two or three gather in his name.⁵⁷ And he repeats his promise to us when we go out to make disciples of the nations: 'I am with you always, to the very end of the age'.⁵⁸

Here, then, are three major aspects of the uniqueness of Jesus Christ. He is Lord. He is Saviour. He is ours. For he is 'our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ'. Historically speaking, these are allusions to his birth, death and resurrection. Theologically speaking, they refer to the incarnation, the atonement and the risen Lord's gift of the Spirit.

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Indeed, because in no other person but the historical Jesus of Nazareth has God become human, lived on earth, died for our sins, conquered death, been exalted to heaven and sent the Holy Spirit, therefore there is no other Saviour. For there is no other person who possesses these qualifications, on the basis of which he alone is competent to save.

It is not enough, therefore, to declare that Jesus is unique in the sense that every human being is unique, as indeed every snowflake is unique, and every blade of grass. Nor can we follow Professor Paul Knitter's claim that the 'one and only' language of the New Testament is 'much like the language a husband would use of his wife . . . "you are the most beautiful woman in the world . . . you are the only woman for me"'.⁵⁹ It is poetry, hyperbole, but not literal truth, he claims. Later, Professor Knitter argues that it is 'action language', whose *primary* purpose was neither to define doctrine nor to exclude others, but rather to urge action for Christ in 'total commitment to his vision and way'.⁶⁰

But no. This appeal to different uses of language, although ingenious, is surely special pleading. A careful study of the 'one and only' texts in their context shows they are not purely poetic expressions of faith and love, meant to be taken with a pinch of salt. On the contrary, they are solemn affirmations of truth, which have eternal consequences for our salvation. Moreover, all of them, implicitly if not explicitly, draw their negative conclusion ('no other') from their positive statement (he alone). Thus, it is because only Christ knows the Father that only he can make him known,⁶¹ and it is because he is 'the way and the truth and the life' that nobody can come to the Father except through him.⁶² Similarly, it is because the name of Jesus Christ, whom God has raised from the dead, is mighty to save, that there is no other saving name.⁶³ So too (even in the thoroughgoing syncretism of the Greco-Roman world) 'there is but one God, the Father . . . and there is but one Lord, Jesus Christ'.⁶⁴ There is one high priest who offered one sacrifice (of himself) as a sin

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offering once for all.⁶⁵ As a result of his death as a ransom for all, 'there is one God and one mediator between God and mankind, the man Christ Jesus'.⁶⁶

Only one way, only one name, only one God, only one Lord, only one mediator. The claim is exclusive, and the implication inescapable. What is genuinely unique has universal significance and must be universally made known, whereas, to quote Visser 't Hooft again, 'There is no universality if there is no unique event.'⁶⁷ Thus uniqueness and universality belong together. It is because God has super-exalted Jesus, and given him the unique name of 'Lord', towering above every other name, that every knee must bow to him. It is because Jesus Christ is the only Saviour that we are required to proclaim him everywhere. The 'inclusivism' of the mission is precisely due to the 'exclusivism' of the mediator. Universal authority over the nations has been given to him. This is why he commissions us to go and disciple the nations.⁶⁸

Two questions

Is there a total discontinuity between Christianity and other religions, so that all truth is contained in it and no truth in them? No. Christians certainly do believe that God has revealed himself in Jesus Christ, as witnessed to in Scripture, in a unique and final way. As a result, in this life God has nothing more to reveal than he has revealed (although of course we have much more to learn). But we are not suggesting that outside the church we consider God inactive and truth absent. Not at all. God sustains all his creatures, and therefore 'is not far from any one of them'. By creation they are his 'offspring', who 'live and move and have [their] being' in him.⁶⁹ Also Jesus Christ, as the *logos* of God and the light of mankind,⁷⁰ is himself ceaselessly active in the world. Because he is described as 'the true light that gives light to everyone',⁷¹ all beauty, truth and goodness, wherever they are found among human beings, derive from him,

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whether people know it or not. This is an aspect of God's so-called 'common grace', his love shown to all humanity. It is not, however, his 'saving grace', which he extends to those who humbly cry to him for mercy.

Is there no hope of salvation then for those who belong to other religions, and who may never even have heard of Jesus? Our response to this poignant question needs to combine confidence and agnosticism, what we know (because Scripture plainly teaches it) and what we do not know (because Scripture is either unclear or silent about it).

What we know from Scripture is that there is no possibility of self-salvation. For all human beings, on account of God's general revelation, have some knowledge of God and of goodness; all have failed to live up to their knowledge; and all are therefore guilty before God, and are in the state of 'perishing' (unless God intervenes). This is the argument of Romans 1 – 3. Nobody can achieve salvation by his or her religion, sincerity or philanthropy. Those who claim to be Christians cannot, and nor can anyone else. Cornelius the centurion is not an exception to this rule, as has sometimes been suggested. His story teaches that salvation is available to Gentiles as well as to Jews on the same terms. It does not teach that he attained it by his own righteousness, piety or generosity. On the contrary, he needed to hear and respond to the gospel to receive salvation, life, cleansing and the Holy Spirit.⁷² So self-salvation is impossible. We also know that Jesus Christ is the only Saviour (because he alone has the necessary qualifications, as we have seen), and that salvation is by God's grace alone, on the basis of Christ's cross alone, by faith alone.

What we do not know, however, is exactly how much knowledge and understanding of the gospel people need before they can cry to God for mercy and be saved. In the Old Testament, people were certainly justified by grace through faith, even though they had little knowledge of Christ. Perhaps there are others today in a somewhat similar position. They know they are sinful and guilty before God, and that they cannot do anything to win his favour, so in self-despair

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they call upon the God they dimly perceive to save them. If God does save such, as many evangelical Christians tentatively believe, their salvation is still only by grace, only through Christ, only by faith.

Something else we know is that the final number of God's redeemed people will be actually countless,⁷³ in final fulfilment of God's promise to Abraham that his posterity (spiritual as well as physical) will be 'as numerous as the stars in the sky and as the sand on the seashore'.⁷⁴ In the same vein we seem to be assured by Paul that many more people will be saved than lost, because Christ's work in causing salvation will be more successful than Adam's in causing ruin, and because God's grace in bringing life will overflow 'much more' than Adam's trespass in bringing death.⁷⁵

Although we have solid biblical grounds for cherishing this expectation, we are not told how God will achieve it. But, while we remain agnostic about this, our duty is clear. We are commissioned to preach the gospel and make disciples. It is hard for people to call on one they have not believed in, or to believe in one of whom they have not heard, or to hear if no-one preaches to them.⁷⁶ It is much easier for people to believe once they have heard the good news of Christ crucified. It is when they learn from the cross about God's mercy to sinners that they cry, 'God be merciful to *me*, a sinner!' As Paul put it, 'faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ.'⁷⁷

So then, to deny the uniqueness of Christ is to cut the nerve of mission and make it superfluous. To affirm his uniqueness, on the other hand, is to acknowledge the urgency of making him universally known.

Reflection questions from Tim Chester

- 1 What is your experience of encountering other religions?
How has this shaped the attitudes of your unbelieving friends?
How has it shaped your attitudes?

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- 2 Can we learn from the teaching of other religions?
- 3 How would you respond to a friend who said, 'To claim Christ is the only way to God is ridiculous and arrogant'?
- 4 What makes Christianity different from every other religion?
- 5 How should we evangelize members of other religions?
- 6 Despite the fact that Stott resolutely rejects 'pluralism', he identifies what makes it attractive so he can engage with it at a deeper level. Apply this approach to another position you reject. Why do its proponents find it attractive? How might this help you engage with them more effectively?