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# Can a Faithful Christianity Embrace a Pluralistic Theology of Religions?

**This article is a response to recent discussions concerning pluralism and Christian truth. Rick Simpson critiques the position of prescriptive pluralism finding it intellectually and theologically inadequate. He examines how it might be possible to be faithfully Christian in a plural world.**

## Introduction

In a famous parable a number of blindfolded men entered a room where an elephant stood. Each touched some part of the giant and described what they felt: one a tree trunk, actually a leg, another a rope – the tail – and so on. The story has been used to show that God may be encountered and described in various ways, which all sound different yet actually involve a genuine and non-contradictory purchase on reality. It is the pluralists' parable, *par excellence*.

My contention is that this poor, pawed, philosophically-exploited elephant has been misused, and that pluralist theology is inadequate. I hope to summarise some arguments deployed against pluralism, to make the case that prescriptive pluralism is both intellectually flawed and incompatible with orthodox Christian faith and practice.

Discussions of pluralism frequently employ Alan Race's soteriologically-focused categories of exclusivist, inclusivist and pluralist approaches to the theology of religions. Exclusivism holds that there is no salvation outside the Christian faith; inclusivism allows for the possibility of members of other faiths being included in Christian salvation; pluralism denies the need for any such inclusion, asserting that there is no *one* truth or way of salvation. It thereby demands a radical reorientation of Christian theology, spirituality and mission. Nevertheless, some theologians have called for the crossing of a theological Rubicon into a pluralist paradigm with urgency and confidence, while at a popular level pluralist assumptions and beliefs are encountered increasingly within the church, informing and influencing Anglican debate and practice at many levels, especially in interfaith work. Is this influence warranted?

## The pluralist case

Pluralists maintain that no one religion contains the truth, and no one exclusive way of salvation exists. God, 'the Real', or Mystery, lies beyond all the many representations of divinity in various religions, all of which are valid responses to the divine. No religion may claim exclusive truth, revelation or salvific efficacy, and recognition of this is ethically imperative.

Let us examine three features of this position:

### The underlying unity of religions / essentialism

Given the apparently considerable differences between religions, how can they all be seen as responses to one God, embodying similar salvific paths? Twenty-five years ago John Hick argued that pluralism was necessitated by the Christian conviction that God is love and wills universal salvation. Hence, Christianity had to undergo a 'Copernican revolution', 'a shift from the dogma that Christ is at the centre to the realisation that it is God who is at the centre, and that all the religions of mankind, including our own, serve and revolve around him'.<sup>1</sup> Hick has developed this position, and we note three elements of his argument:

First, all religions are different culturally-conditioned responses to one Reality. Hick employs the Kantian distinction between our experience of something and the thing in itself. All religions represent experience of the Real and response to it from within the different cultural ways of being human. Their apprehension of the Real is a *phenomenal grasp of the noumenal reality beyond*. Each religion represents a mixture of phenomenal experience of the noumenon with culturally-conditioned projections about it.<sup>2</sup>

Second, religions share not only this essence but also *the same aim*. Within all religions,

the transformation of human existence from Self-centredness to Reality-centredness is manifestly taking place... to much the same extent. Thus the great religious traditions are to be regarded as alternative soteriological 'spaces' within which, or 'ways' along which, men and women can find salvation/liberation/fulfilment.<sup>3</sup>

Religions are a mixture of stories, pictures, doctrines and practices, the point of which lies beyond themselves. A religion is 'only valuable as a means to an end – the end that we variously know as salvation, redemption, God-centredness, peace with God, enlightenment, awakening'.<sup>4</sup>

Third, Hick sees the pluralist hypothesis as *inductive*, arrived at by recognising the validity of the religious *experience* of all, a recognition demanded by the manifest 'fruits' of each tradition.

1 *God and the Universe of Faiths*, MacMillan, London 1973, p 131.

2 See Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, MacMillan, London 1989.

3 *Problems of Religious Pluralism*, MacMillan, London 1985, p 36f.

4 Hick, *The Rainbow of Faiths*, SCM, London 1995, p 116.

Other pluralists take similar positions. Pieris speaks of an underlying universal theology/soteriology, a 'Beyond' constituting the 'basic soteriological datum in many of our religious cultures'.<sup>5</sup> Samartha speaks of one Mystery symbolically represented in different religious affirmations.<sup>6</sup>

### The denial of Christian uniqueness

In this pluralist paradigm, any claim to a unique purchase on religious truth via revelation – the doctrine of the incarnation, for example – must be denied as arrogant presumption. For if God lies beyond the actual beliefs of all religions, and if all religious experience is a valid response to God, then none can make specific claims to knowledge about God. So Samartha: 'The nature of Mystery is such that any claim on the part of one religious community to have exclusive or unique or final knowledge becomes inadmissible.'<sup>7</sup>

This entails a radical re-reading of Christian beliefs about Jesus. For Hick, Knitter, Pannikar, Pieris, Samartha and others the normativity or finality of Jesus is both untenable and undesirable; Jesus may reveal the Christ, but the Christ is more than Jesus, and is salvifically present everywhere. The doctrine of the incarnation and scriptural affirmations about Christ are radically reinterpreted to remove exclusive claims. Paul Knitter, for example, says that NT confessions of Christ's Lordship employ 'dispositional language' that is 'inherently symbolic or metaphoric':

'their truth lies primarily in calling us to discipleship rather than giving us a definitive, philosophical definition of who Jesus was and how he lines up with other religious figures. They are more calls to action than theological definitions; they are examples of performative language eliciting commitment to a way of life rather than philosophical language providing an ontological definition of Jesus' nature'.<sup>8</sup>

This is paralleled by Hick's view that Christian doctrines are *mythologically true*, a myth being

'a story that is not literally true but that has the power to evoke in its hearers a practical response to the myth's referent – a true myth being of course one that evokes an *appropriate* response. The truthfulness of a myth is thus a practical truthfulness, consisting in its capacity to orient us to the Real'.<sup>9</sup>

### The ethical necessity of pluralism

Pluralists argue that the pursuit of peace and justice makes relinquishing exclusive claims ethically imperative. 'Given the ethical imperative of dialogue, previous understandings of the uniqueness of Jesus *must* be reinterpreted'<sup>10</sup>; Hick calls the desire to convert people 'treason against the peace and diversity of the human

5 Quoted, Vinoth Ramachandra, *The Recovery of Mission*, Paternoster, Carlisle 1996, p 48.

6 John Hick and Paul Knitter eds, *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness*, SCM, London 1987, p 76.

7 Hick & Knitter, p 77.

8 In Leonard Swidler, & Paul Mojzes eds, *The Uniqueness of Jesus – A Dialogue with Paul F. Knitter*, Orbis, Maryknoll 1997, p 149.

9 1995, p 51.

10 Knitter in Swidler and Mojzes eds, p 5.

family'.<sup>11</sup> The 'Ethico-Practical Bridge' to pluralism consists of a dual need: first, for all faiths to cease claiming oppressive and unsettling exclusivity; second, for them to unite to promote justice.

Dialogue becomes an ethical necessity, its purpose being is to discover and celebrate common ground, and build a shared praxis; it must be conducted without prior claims to truth. Christian claims about any ontological connection of Jesus with God, 'would scarcely allow any serious discussion with neighbours of other faiths or secular humanists';<sup>12</sup> such claims have no place in dialogue, as they represent an unacceptable rejection of the beliefs and convictions others.

Such, in outline, is the prescriptive pluralist position; I will argue now that it is neither compelling nor able to retain the marks of authentic Christian faith and practice.

### **Can a faithful Christianity embrace prescriptive pluralism?**

My first concern is *what becomes of God* in pluralism. The answer seems to be that in place of the Trinitarian God revealed in Christ, we are left with Mystery, the Ineffable, the Real, about which very little can actually be said. The pluralist demand for this poor exchange relies upon the assertion that all religious experiences and understandings *must* be seen as valid bases for belief, and that truth *must* reflect all perceptions. However, pluralists here *assert* that all religious language has a single and common referent, which has simply not been demonstrated. For while many (though not all) religions speak of deity, that is the *sense* of their beliefs; whether the same deity is logically or ontologically their *referent* is simply not demonstrated, and is crucial.<sup>13</sup>

Critics from across the theological spectrum object that, empirically, different religions simply do not share a common essence of belief, conception of god, or aspiration for salvation/liberation. David Tracy says, 'There are family resemblances among the religions. But as far as I can see, there is no single essence, no one content of enlightenment or revelation, no one way of emancipation or liberation, to be found in all that plurality.'<sup>14</sup>

Why does all religious experience necessarily point to truth? Why must the truth have something to do with what every religion believes? No link between the *is* of religions and the *ought* of what we should believe is proven; this is the naturalistic fallacy writ large. Hick does at times say that not *all* beliefs of all religions point to the Real, that ethical and philosophical discrimination must be used.<sup>15</sup> However, the criteria for such discrimination are not explained, and its exercise contradicts Hick's basic method of treating all religious experience as phenomenal apprehension of the same noumenal reality.

Methodologically, many pluralists seem to first describe God according to a predetermined philosophical account of what God must be (and not be) *if* God is reflected in all religions; they then allow only beliefs consistent with such a view.

11 1995, p 118.

12 Hick, in Hick and Knitter, ed, 1987, p 80.

13 The distinction was argued by Frege; see Ramachandra, pp 14f.

14 David Tracy, *Plurality and Ambiguity*, Harper and Row, San Francisco 1987, p 90.

15 See 1995, pp 44f.

As John Sanders says, 'A particular understanding of ultimate reality and how we should live are used to filter the biblical message in order to determine what may be said'.<sup>16</sup> This procedural, *a priori* removal of revelation from the enquiry about God is an excision which Christians must dispute.

It is ironic to see *what becomes of religions* in pluralist theology. A grave problem for a pluralist theology of religions is that it can be affirmed 'only by radically reinterpreting the central beliefs of certain religions to mean something very different from what most adherents of those religions have believed historically and continue to believe today'.<sup>17</sup>

Pluralism is arguably not a theology of religions at all, but a phenomenology of religions which disallows their own approaches to and claims to truth, and upon which *alternative* theological proposals (which do claim veracity) are then constructed. The irony of 'accepting' all religions as pointing to one truth, only (and thereby) to ignore what they actually believe is noteworthy. In the very process of claiming that all religions say the same thing (thereby claiming to understand those beliefs better than the religions' own adherents), pluralism fundamentally distorts them all. To subsume the actual beliefs of different faiths to a predetermined conception and homogenise them into an Esperanto religion is neither coherent nor respectful to any, and is a curious way to recognise plurality. Paradoxically, pluralism cannot recognise, appreciate or tolerate genuine plurality, but actually annihilates it. I will argue below that orthodox Christianity can recognise, appreciate and tolerate the differences between religions, while making its own judgements about the truthfulness of their claims.

*What becomes of revelation and reason* in the pluralist paradigm? Pluralists say God is pure mystery, the Ineffable, about which the only certainty is that we can know nothing certain; how do they *know*? To return to the elephant and blindfolds, many have argued that the parable can only be told from the standpoint of the detached and sighted king, who alone can see what all the limited, restricted individuals are touching. Pluralist theologians claim this vantage point: they alone know enough about God to know that we can know very little, except that all religions speak of him. Really? *How* is that known? Having dispensed with revelation, this privileged knowledge cannot have been disclosed. And what basis is there for what pluralism *does* affirm, for example, that God is universal love (the original centre of Hick's Copernican revolution)? Pluralists fail to account for all they claim to know about the Unknowable.

While any claim by religions to genuine knowledge of God is excluded as an arrogant exclusion of others' valid beliefs, pluralists do claim (exclusive) veracity for their philosophy, without a blush for their own lack of epistemological humility. Newbigin called this 'the immensely arrogant claim of one who sees the full truth, which all the world's religions are groping after'.<sup>18</sup> While a claim to have received revealed truth is not inherently or necessarily arrogant, a claim to know truly what religion knows weakly *without* revelation is open to the accusation of arrogance, and to doubt.

16 Swidler and Mojzes eds, p 122.  
17 Ramachandra, p 17f.

18 *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, SPCK, London 1989, p 10.

The fundamental issue here is that of revelation. Leonard Swidler writes: 'I personally find the transcendent most effulgently expressed, revealed in Jesus – and that is why I am a Christian', yet 'it is not logically possible for me, or anyone else, to claim that Jesus is the unsurpassable expression of transcendence and divinity'.<sup>19</sup> Swidler's theology involves a strictly *personal* recognition of some preconceived notion of transcendence. Christian faith, however, accepts what is given in Christ, and *because of the nature of what is given*, allows that revelation to define transcendence; this understanding then precludes the possibility of another normative revelation. The issue turns on both the claim to revelation and the logic of what is revealed.

Swidler demonstrates that pluralism is the descendant of the post-Kantian shift in theological method often referred to as 'the turn to the subject', in which theology turns from investigating revelation to analysing human religious experience and perception. Once the shift has been made from investigating historically-based truth-claims to analysing the experience of a believing individual or community, it becomes impossible to justify or falsify their belief, or even to bring it into critical dialogue with others' conflicting beliefs – as pluralists indeed demand.

Pluralism is also a descendant of the post-Enlightenment 'flight from history', the demand that all truth must be necessarily true and rationally discernible independent of historical events or persons. If Lessing's 'ugly great ditch' between necessary truths of reason and contingent historical events stands, no historical revelation could be normative, and Christ can only be expressive of that which is eternally true anyway. This is essentially Hegelian idealism, the affinity of which to pluralism, with its antipathy to historical revelation, is clear.<sup>20</sup> However, 'The claim that ultimate religious truths must be either self-authenticating or necessarily true is neither self-authenticating nor necessarily true',<sup>21</sup> and Christianity does hold that God has revealed himself and acted decisively in Jesus. The pluralists' rejection of such revelation as arrogance is irrelevant: they need instead to offer compelling theological arguments against the possibility of God so acting in history, not a demand that he must be sufficiently politically-correct in his inner Being not to.

If God has acted in Christ, then the community that witnesses to this is not irrational to believe it; rather, it has a rationality shaped by the Christ event. They may be right or wrong – we are dealing with a truth-claim – but for Christian faith, the meaning is given in this *historical* reality, or is not received at all. Pluralism offers an incompatible alternative: the separation of an ahistorical meaning, a kernel of eternal and universal religious truth, from the discardable husk of a story about the cross and resurrection. Discussing revelation has then led us to our next question:

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19 Swidler and Mojzes eds, p 186.

20 D. F. Strauss, in his *Life of Jesus* (1835-6), having stripped all elements of the miraculous, including the resurrection, from the gospels, concluded, 'The dogmatic significance of the life of Christ remains inviolable'. Understanding Christ as

illustrative of universal truth mirrors the Hindu view of the *avatara*, the historicity of which is irrelevant: 'The essential thing is truth or significance and the historical fact is nothing more than the image of it' (Radhakrishnan, quoted by Ramachandra, p 242).

21 Ramachandra, p128.

*What then becomes of Christ and of scripture in pluralist hands? The Mystery of Salvation*, argued that salvation is bound to Jesus and the cross. 'The assurance of... forgiveness is possible only because of the length to which God has gone, in Christ, in order to reconcile the world to himself. It is not mere wishful thinking that God is love and will forgive. Since that is so, there is no way that the cross can be bypassed, in order to include people of other faiths'.<sup>22</sup> Yet pluralists cannot allow that Jesus Christ is unsurpassable or his achievement definitive; they deny that there is no salvation or saving knowledge of God without Jesus. Pluralism necessarily entails the denial of the incarnation, and the reinterpretation of NT Christology.

Karl-Josef Kuschel's responds to Knitter's version of this reinterpretation by saying that it is precisely the witness, unreasonable demand and stumbling block of the whole NT, that Jesus is the definitive revelation and mediator which pluralists deny. Kuschel argues that the consistent teaching of the NT is that Jesus Christ is mediator of creation, pre-existent Son of God and redeemer.<sup>23</sup>

'Christians do not claim to have the first and sole revelation, but they do claim to have *the eschatologically final (definitive and unsurpassable) revelation*. All prophets and revelations after Christ are subject to this factual criterion. This is vexing and problematic for inter-religious dialogue. But does diluting or ignoring this Christological claim of the NT really further this dialogue? ... I did not fabricate this claim – I simply encounter it whether I like it or not'.<sup>24</sup>

While Pannikar writes, 'Christ will never be totally known on earth, as that would amount to seeing the Father whom nobody on earth could see',<sup>25</sup> that *is* the New Testament's claim (Matt. 11:27; John 14:7-11). Knitter labels exclusive claims about Christ as idolatry;<sup>26</sup> if so, the whole New Testament is idolatrous. Sanders says: 'In Jesus we meet God himself coming to us and revealing himself to us.... The New Testament writers, according to Knitter, are idolatrous, but those who literally worship idols are not idolatrous so long as they admit that their idols are surpassable. A curious situation indeed.'<sup>27</sup>

We noted above Knitter's response to NT Christology of re-reading of biblical narrative and creed as 'dispositional language'. However, the NT's authors clearly knew the difference – and the relation – between writing to elicit commitment and writing to enunciate doctrine. They did not need to disguise exhortation as theology, and indeed often wrote theologically, then ethically, with a connective 'therefore'. In Acts 3:19ff; Rom. 5:1ff; 6:12ff.; 12:1ff.; 1 Cor. 15:58; Eph. 3:13; Phil. 2:1-18; Col. 2:6 – 4:6; 2 Tim. 4:1ff.; Heb. 12:1ff. exhortation is tied firmly to and arises from theology, but the two are neither confused nor collapsed into one another. These authors knew how to write; Knitter seems not to know how to *read*<sup>28</sup> them, if reading properly involves an attempt to understand authorial intention.

22 Doctrine Commission of the Church of England, London, CHP, 1995, p 167.

23 See Kuschel in Swidler and Mojzes eds, p 90.

24 Kuschel, p 89.

25 Quoted, Ramachandra, p 80.

26 Swidler and Mojzes eds, pp 3-16.

27 Swidler and Mojzes, p 123.

28 Knitter's responds, reasserting that these texts are *now* to be understood to be about discipleship, yielding an underlying universal, pluralist message in the New Testament (Swidler and Mojzes, pp 146-150); the intention of their authors, he opines, was only to oppose Jesus to religions actively opposed to Jesus. No evidence is offered for these bizarre claims.

Finally, Knitter, Pannikar and others use the Johannine promise of the Spirit leading the disciples into all truth to argue that Jesus therefore cannot be God's unsurpassable revelation. However, the manoeuvre of declaring the Johannine Holy Spirit the pluralism-friendly person of God, at work in other religions apart from Jesus Christ, is flawed. For in John, *Jesus* is the giver and the gift of the Spirit, who works by 'taking what is mine and making it known to you' (John 15:26; 16:27ff).

Jesus cannot be accommodated to pluralist theology, for he is *constitutive* not *expressive* of God's salvation. That God locates God's self for us in time and space in Jesus, and in him restores creation: this is the story, and it entails claims about Jesus.<sup>29</sup> This does not mean that God is at work or can be encountered nowhere else; it does mean that in Jesus God works in a unique and decisive way. This is the Christian claim; excise it, and its 'meaning' is a Cheshire Cat's smile, without substance, lingering but briefly.

This reading of the NT obviously arises from a conviction that scriptural authority requires that doctrine depends upon what the text affirms. Pluralism seems instead to employ a highly selective hermeneutic, lauding those passages which seem capable of insertion into a prior pluralist framework, and re-imagining the meaning of those which cannot. Such a hermeneutic is clearly incompatible with an acceptably Christian – and Anglican – use of scripture (see for example the 1998 Lambeth Resolutions, particularly III.1 on '*Called to be faithful in a plural world*').

With Christ and the scriptures accommodated to pluralist philosophy, we have to ask *what becomes of faith, mission and ethics* in the pluralist paradigm?

*Ethics:* We noted that pluralists speak of both an ethical *demand* for unity and of shared liberative action as a *ground* for unity. However, what criteria remain for discerning the moral life? Gavin D'Costa asks how one can speak of the kingdom, love, and justice without specifying their meaning according to a particular vision or narrative: 'The path of praxis cannot avoid the dialectical relation to and importance of doctrine' (D'Costa).<sup>30</sup> Knitter declares liberative action the distinctive contribution of Jesus to world religion,<sup>31</sup> and Swidler says 'Surely all Christians can agree that developing and practising such an ethic on a global level is the essence of what Jesus was and is about',<sup>32</sup> but this is a pure voluntarism.

Once *experience* is deemed the ground for religious 'validity', who is to say what is right? Mystery cannot provide ethical criteria. Hick says 'a true myth' is 'of course one that evokes an *appropriate* response', but appropriate to what, if God is unknowable? Whether a certain form of life is an appropriate response to transcendence depends on the nature of the transcendent God, and different stories about God give us different sets of values. In orthodox Christianity, claims about the good are rooted in claims about reality: ethics and ontology are inseparable, our vision of the good given in Christ. Ramachandra writes:

29 Knitter says, very significantly, 'I need to integrate the Jesus story within the larger universe story' (p 168). The point, however, is that *we* need to be integrated into the Jesus story, which itself *is* the truly universal story.

30 D'Costa, ed, *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered*, New York, Orbis, 1990, p xii.

31 Swidler and Mojzes eds, pp 3-16.

32 Swidler and Mojzes, p 189.

We all clamour for justice and a new humanity but the problem is that we are torn apart by rival conceptions of what these terms mean.... There are incompatible visions in our world of what it means to be truly human, just as there are incompatible assessments of the person of Jesus. The Christian claims that the two questions are inextricably woven together, for it is in Jesus that the new humanity is made visible.<sup>33</sup>

Pluralism dismisses the very narrative that reveals the truly liberative form of life given in Jesus.

*Devotion and Discipleship:* If the vague notion of 'the Real' cannot yield a theological ethic, what becomes of religious devotion, and discipleship? Many pluralists advocate that the church continue to use its hymns, creeds and scriptures as poetic language which is not making truth-claims, but encourages love. (We may keep our religion – just with an empty creed.) This is psychologically bizarre, and trivializes belief and devotion. It is impossible (incoherent, actually) to encourage attachment to a God who is nothing like the beliefs people hold about him (and is indeed undefinable). Christian faithfulness concerns the church being the bride of Christ, language scripture uses consciously, consistently and deliberately; pluralism tells Christians their fiancé is not the man they thought they knew.

I have argued that the revelation in Christ mediated by scripture is a reasonable ground for faith. Put another way, 'Jesus loves me this I know, for the Bible tells me so' can indicate a perfectly responsible theology. It can also sustain faith and commitment. That cannot be said for, 'Something loves me, this I posit, because beyond diverse apprehensions of infinite Being I personally discern a benign noumenal reality'. Pluralist Christian spirituality is a thin gruel indeed.

*Mission:* 'One's theology of mission is always closely dependent on one's theology of salvation' wrote David Bosch,<sup>34</sup> and as Jesus Christ is inessential to pluralist soteriology, he is ultimately irrelevant to pluralism's definition of mission as liberative praxis. Hick says, 'The older project... of converting the world to Christianity is from a pluralist point of view a complete mistake'.<sup>35</sup> Yet even the carefully-balanced *Mystery of Salvation* concluded, 'Because... ultimate salvation is found in Christ, mission remains the central task of the Christian church... Hence we naturally pray that God will bring all people, including those of other faiths, to explicit faith in Christ'.<sup>36</sup> This cannot be omitted from a faithful theology of mission.

This umbilical cord between revelation and Christian faith and action was reaffirmed in Resolution II.1 of Lambeth:

This Conference: (a) believing that all our mission springs from the action and self-revelation of God in Jesus Christ, and that without this foundation we can give no form or content to our proclamation and can expect no transforming effect from it;

(b) resolves to:... (ii) accept the imperative character of our call to mission and evangelism as grounded in the very nature of the God who is revealed to us.

33 Ramachandra, pp 68f.

34 *Transforming Mission*, Orbis, New York 1991, p 393.

35 1995, p 117.

36 Doctrine Commission, p 184.

Finally, *what becomes of dialogue* in the pluralist paradigm? Pluralists state that genuine dialogue is impossible if Christians retain beliefs about Christ's finality. However, dialogue is by definition a conversation between people who do not hold the same views, and is possible only in so far as they represent these beliefs to one another honestly and respectfully. 'True dialogue presupposes *commitment*. It does not imply sacrificing one's own position – it would then be superfluous. An 'unprejudiced' approach is not merely impossible but would actually subvert dialogue'.<sup>37</sup> *Contra* the pluralist argument, then, genuine dialogue demands that we do *not* try to settle all the questions ahead by the assertion of a universal religious truth to which all religions point. Pluralism destroys genuine dialogue.

Certainly, Christian participation in dialogue must be pursued in a manner shaped by Christ, which precludes arrogance or aggression; Christians should only speak – and listen – with respect for others and with humility. Christ-centred mission and dialogue witnesses not to our rightness, but to the righteousness of *God*, revealed in Christ, for it is not Christianity as a religion nor our current understanding of Christ which is unsurpassable, but Christ, who has not left himself without witness in and is active within his world.

A proper Christian confidence and humility commend Newbiggin's approach of a 'committed pluralism', in which we express ourselves clearly about Christian beliefs from the perspective of faith *and* are ready to listen to others articulating their understanding. Such an approach respects the other, yet does not require a surrender of Christian conviction or witness; it is open to the possibility of correction and illumination, and may lead to surprise, challenge, and repentance. In contrast, the repeated pluralist demand that Christian convictions are laid down *a priori* undermines both Christian identity and dialogue itself.

## Conclusion

I have argued that prescriptive pluralism is inconsistent with a faithful Christianity, and share the Doctrine Commission's view that 'salvation is defined by having Jesus Christ as its source and goal', which means 'to recognise the life, death and resurrection of Jesus as 'constitutive' of salvation as well as revelatory'.<sup>38</sup> Pluralism relinquishes the particularity of salvation and revelation in Christ, and so loses an authentically Christian view of God, Christ, salvation, revelation, scripture, and mission, and thereby cannot retain Christian criteria for spirituality, mission and moral vision.

In asserting its meta-theory of religions, pluralism in fact subverts all religions, becoming an independent religious proposal which operates towards other religions with aggressive inclusivity in practice and aggressive exclusivity with respect to truth. Whereas all religions are not 'true' – except mythologically – the meta-religious theory of pluralism is advanced as true. Where Rahner once turned some into anonymous Christians, all are now deemed anonymous pluralists.

37 Bosch, p 484. Note also: 'We delude ourselves if we believe that we can be respectful to other faiths only if we disparage our own' (p 485); 'When

everything is equally valid nothing really matters any longer... The question of truth has been completely trivialised and life itself robbed of its ultimate seriousness' (p 486).

38 Doctrine Commission, p 184.

However, orthodox Christianity is not susceptible to the pluralist critique of arrogance and idolatry: it does not claim an exhaustive knowledge of God,<sup>39</sup> acknowledges mystery, and is open to encountering God outside the church. Nevertheless, it belongs to the logic of Christian faith that God has revealed himself, yielding a knowledge which is limited but nevertheless sufficient and trustworthy, to be held in humble confidence. Christians have not arrived, they are on the way; yet Christ is *the* Way, and is not to be surrendered.

This is rational, for reason is a tool which functions only within a historical tradition: rational Christian belief is shaped by God's decisive action in history. It certainly cannot be falsified simply according to the canons of a supposedly ahistorical or inter-religious reason, posing as objectivity, that declares the particular incapable of bearing universal truth.

So if prescriptive pluralism is intellectually flawed and manifestly incompatible with Christian faith and practice, why be so concerned about it? Simply because it continues to exercise great influence within the Church of England. Why do inter-faith discussions seem rarely to reflect the view of the Doctrine Commission that Christian mission necessarily includes the call to conversion? Why, while the church celebrates Christmas and Easter, do many of its representatives refuse to bring these festivals' rehearsed truths of incarnation and resurrection as constitutive, revelatory and salvific events into the inter-faith work of the church? Perhaps the pluralists' church – in which we sing the hymns and say the creeds but *mean* something else – is here. If pluralism is so intellectually and theologically inadequate, why does it seem<sup>40</sup> to be so influential among many of the agencies and individuals to whom the church delegates the handling of inter-faith work, such an important area of its thought and practice? It would be instructive in many dioceses to have an open debate about their inter-faith policy and practice (which is usually conducted as part of the work of their board of *mission*).

I have argued that Christianity needs neither to pretend to an unavailable and unnecessary certainty, nor accept the attenuation of Christian truth into mere religious values or 'mythological truths'. Rather, in a plural world – in many respects like the NT world – we should express Christian truth-claims clearly, in humble confidence, agnostic about that which we do not know. I have argued that prescriptive pluralism is not an option for our theology of religions, and must be challenged in the church. For Christians hold what we have been given: that God is not a chained elephant waiting to be discovered by blind, fumbling creatures, but rather the lion who is also the lamb, and has already come to find us.

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39 Cragg wrote of real but not exhaustive knowledge: 'We must always reserve infinitude from ever being "in the grasp of our reach", but unless we are playing games or indulging in futility, what will always transcend about transcendence will not conceal or deny what faith properly holds. Knowledge will be knowledge even though truly of that which passes knowledge.' (Swidler and Mojzes eds, p 63).

40 I stress 'seem': this is an impression, albeit a fairly common one. Some research into the working theology of inter-faith advisors, officers and departments in the Church of England would be a fascinating and valuable project, which I regret not personally having had the time and resources to undertake for this paper.