Who is Jesus Christ

in a world of many faiths?

Report of the Swanwick Christology Conference, September 1999

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Report of a conference on Christology held at
The Hayes Conference Centre, Swanwick, Derbyshire,
6th - 8th September 1999

Foreword

John Austin

The Conference "Who is Jesus Christ in a World of Many Faiths", jointly sponsored by the Ecumenical Churches Commission for Inter Faith Relations and the Church of England's Board of Mission, was in part a response to the importance of inter faith relations in Britain today. The existence of substantial and vibrant communities of faith other than Christian, raises profound questions for those in our churches who encounter people from different faith communities day by day and the Advisers who work with them.

We felt it important that this network was fed by some good theology that would both stimulate and inspire. That the conference achieved this was not only due to the calibre of the speakers, but was in large measure due to the planning group which worked on an idea suggested by the Revd Alan Race, and the hard work of both Canon Christopher Lamb and Canon Michael Ipgrave, on whom Christopher's mantle fell when Christopher took up his parochial responsibilities in 1999. Our two committees owe them both a great debt of gratitude.

We have no doubt that giving our inter faith networks some really good theology is an important contribution to equipping the churches for their engagement with the different faith communities that now are an intrinsic part of multi faith Britain. It is our intention, therefore, to go on doing this from time to time.

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Introduction: Swanwick 1999

Michael Ipgrave

'Who is Jesus Christ for us, Christians engaged in encounter with people of other living faiths today?' To think about that question, nearly 150 people gathered at The Hayes Conference Centre, Swanwick for three days last September, for a conference organised under the joint auspices of the ecumenical Churches' Commission for Inter Faith Relations and the Church of England's Board of Mission, and chaired by The Bishop of Rochester, The Rt Revd Michael Nazir-Ali. Most were people engaged in some way or another with inter faith work as part of their Christian life and ministry; the conference was designed to draw on experience as well as theory. One particularly valuable dimension of the meeting was the presence of about 20 overseas Anglicans – including some from places, like the Sudan, where the inter faith context is much more difficult than here. The rhythm of the conference was modulated by reflective yet challenging worship, prepared by Ruth Harvey and colleagues from the Living Spirituality Network, on the Christologically rich theme of 'the water of life'.

Most importantly, the conference was not just *about* dialogue; it was designed to *model* dialogue in its process. The four speakers first addressed the same questions in pairs, then responded to one another; subsequently, all the speakers together engaged in a four-person dialogue which brought together the perspectives of inter faith practice and academic theology. Participants were involved in this process by identifying in small group discussions the points at which these questions related to their own contexts. A final plenary session gathered insights and pointed to the future by posing the question: 'What needs to happen to move forward the churches' thinking and practice in inter faith relations in the light of the Conference's theme of Christology?'

Swanwick, though in Derbyshire, is not really in the scenic or historic part of that county, so there were few distractions to keep people from focussing on the theme. The hope had been that a real dialogue among Christians of differing viewpoints and backgrounds could be set up, and this really did begin to happen, not only in the designated plenary and small group sessions, but even more so in discussions in the bar afterwards. The experience of having to persuade a group to leave quietly after midnight following a heated discussion of the difference between Christological uniqueness, normativity, and finality shows that this is a topic with real energy in it. As that example perhaps suggests, we came to see that dialogue on these issues was not just about Christians' differing beliefs; it was also about the differing ways they used theological language to express those beliefs.

Four very different speakers, from four very different contexts, and working with four very different methods, made four very different presentations to lead us into this dialogue, and their papers which follow give some idea of the diversity of thinking in the churches today on this subject. The four were: Professor Thomas Thangaraj, originally from Tamil Nadu in South India but now teaching at the Candler School of Theology in Atlanta; Fr Christian Troll,

a German Jesuit teaching at the Pontifical Oriental Institute in Rome; the leading New Testament scholar Professor Jimmy Dunn, of the University of Durham; and Dr Ruth Page, Principal of New College, Edinburgh and a minister of the Church of Scotland. The remarks below may help to locate their papers in the context of the conference's dialogical dynamic.

Thomas Thangaraj began from autobiography. His interest in Christology had led him into dialogue in South India with Hindus of the Saiva Siddhanta tradition: the primary sources of his theology became conversations rather than texts, as he came to realise that it was impossible to be a theologian on his own, or even solely within the bounds of the Christian community. The first question any theologian must ask was: 'Who are my partners in this exploration?' – for him in South India, the primary answer to this question had been: 'Hindus'. This was not simply a matter of method: dialogue (or 'conversation' as he preferred less stiltedly to call it) was also a way in which we come to know more about Christ. Indeed, Professor Thangaraj suggested that to the well-known 'quadrilateral' of scripture, tradition, reason and experience, 'conversation' should be added as a fifth theological source.

Thangaraj acknowledged, however, that, because the figure of Christ and our relationship with Christ are such intensely personal categories, Christians are generally more reluctant to allow conversation to change their Christology rather than any other area of their theology. Nevertheless, he had found that dialogue does have implications for his Christology – themes which worked out in a book entitled *The Crucified Guru*, where he takes from Saiva Siddhanta the idea of the 'guru' or divine teacher as an effective symbol of the saving presence of the divine, and asks how far this can be applied to the person of Jesus Christ.

Throughout, Thangaraj insisted that his Christology was merely 'functional' – that is to say, it does not imply any philosophical statements about how God is in himself, but just tries to find a way of explaining the significance of who Christ is and what he does for us. For example, he interpreted the idea of Christ's 'uniqueness' as meaning the 'universal accessibility' of his story for all people. But then, of course, in dialogue other stories also become accessible to us – of Siva and Krsna, for example – so Thangaraj was happy to speak of the 'multiple uniqueness' of various symbols of the divine; he was not enthusiastic about language of the 'finality' of Christ, as this seemed to close down the conversation and stray into the realm of metaphysical pronouncements rather than saving truth. Asked if he believed that salvation involved Christ doing anything 'objective' about sin, Thangaraj said that salvation was 'objective' in the sense that God's offer was there before we say yes to it. But then this was a principle also found in the Saiva Siddhanta tradition, so Christianity needed to incorporate the beautiful Hindu way of thinking that 'the names are many but the truth is one'. In short, Christology is 'our talk about Christ, not God's talk about Christ'.

Christian Troll, our second speaker, was like Thomas Thangaraj in that he had immersed himself as a Christian in close encounter and dialogue with people of another faith; but in almost every other respect he was very different. In Fr Troll's case, the other faith with which he was involved was not Hinduism but Islam, which raised a very different set of questions. Most

importantly, his method was very different: whereas Thangaraj began 'from below' in conversations about human experiences of the divine, Troll's starting point was 'from above', in the revelation of divine mercy and purpose to which both Qur'an and Bible bear witness.

Troll explained that this was to be seen in the first place in creation itself. 'God creates man and the universe because He is the Giver of Good' - He is by nature generous. Then, in a pattern of theology heavily influenced by medieval Arabic Christian writers, he went on to argue that this divine generosity reached its fulfilment in the incarnation: 'If God is the Giver *par excellence*, it is necessary that He bestow what is the most precious and valuable in the world. But the best that exists is evidently God.' And so, in Jesus Christ, God Himself comes among us, emptying himself of the privileges of divinity in order to share our human condition. One and the same divine movement unites creation and incarnation.

What is interesting about this line of argument is that it addresses an Islamic way of thinking about God just as surely as Thangaraj's approach takes on board the encounter with Hindu experience. For Troll, Christology was essentially and irreducibly rooted in the way in which God chooses to communicate himself – through his Word, incarnate in Christ – and not merely in the way in which we use human words to describe our experience. Our first two speakers, therefore, interpreted the language of Christology in quite different ways, as was apparent when they came together in dialogue.

On one hand, Troll asked Thangaraj why he was so reluctant to 'say something about God in himself', or to use the traditional language of God's 'sending' – whether sending a prophet to become a model for humanity (as Muslims believe), or sending his Son as the fullness of divinity (as Christians believe). On the other hand, Thangaraj was hesitant about the dangers of idolatry to which such language might lead, and preferred to speak of Christ (or other effective symbols of the divine) as 'emergent' from the reality of the God who is already and always among us. Clearly one of the underlying issues in this discussion was that of the tension between divine immanence and divine transcendence, a tension mediated to our two speakers by the respective non-Christian faiths (Hinduism and Islam) with which they were most closely involved. The relevance of this tension for Christology was in fact taken up in our second pair of presentations.

Where Thomas Thangaraj and Christian Troll were trying to work out a Christology which would make sense for their different experiences of inter faith dialogue, Jimmy Dunn and Ruth Page approached the same question - 'Who is Jesus Christ in a world of many faiths?' - from the opposite direction. That is to say, from the traditional disciplines of Christian learning (Dunn is a New Testament scholar, Page a systematic theologian), they asked about the implications of their research in Christology for inter faith dialogue.

In tracing some of the trajectories of New Testament Christology, **Jimmy Dunn** reminded us of the context of religious plurality within which the first Christians formulated their faith in Jesus – the Judaism of that period was itself highly diverse, and one of the sticking points in Jewish-Christian dialogue, then and now, was the question, whether acknowledging the divinity of Jesus necessarily compromised authentic monotheism. He pointed out how

important for the earliest Christologies were the ideas of the divine Wisdom and the divine Word. The deity of Christ, as formulated in these terms, was an attempt to spell out the continuity between God and Jesus. To think of the Word as first unspoken and then articulated in speech allowed for this transition to be made rather easily, so that Jesus could be interpreted as emerging to be an expression of the hidden mind of God. It was only later that Christians moved from this Logos-Christology to speak freely of the divinity of Jesus as God the Son – which then required elaborations of Trinitarian doctrine to ensure that the personal distinction of Father and Son did not lead to the idea of two (or more) different gods, so abandoning monotheism.

What is the relevance of all this for dialogue today? Having in mind particularly the Jewish-Christian dialogue in which he has been involved, Dunn reminded us that the initial purpose of incarnational language was to 'express the conviction that Jesus shows us what God is like'; and so the early Christological emphasis was on the incarnation of God, rather than of the Son of God. He suggested that there was a need to get back to this early simplicity, which could be obscured by later developments and definitions.

Both the similarities and the contrasts between Troll and Dunn are fascinating here. They both had in mind dialogue with emphatically monotheistic faiths (Islam and Judaism), and both of them developed their Christology from the point of view of God's initiative – how are we to understand Jesus as the one in whom the gulf of transcendence has been crossed by divine mercy and love? Yet, while Dunn seemed to see this emphasis as leading him back to a simplified view of incarnation as a 'communication of God's Christlikeness', Troll's argument brought him to a traditionally orthodox belief on the fullness of divinity present in the incarnate Son of God. It would be interesting to speculate how much these differences owe to the two men's respective disciplines, how much to their general theological background, and how much to the fact that one has in mind primarily Islam and the other Judaism.

Ruth Page, from the perspective of a systematic theologian, began by pointing to two important emphases in contemporary ecumenical Christian thought, both of which in fact are also prominent in Thomas' Thangaraj's presentation: first, the importance of divine immanence, and second, the idea of the divine enjoyment of diversity and variety.

The stress on immanence, she suggested, had implications for our view of other faiths. When God was primarily seen as distantly transcendent,' it was possible to think of revelation as coming, so to speak, down one beam of light to one place – Israel, say, but not Africa or China'. Such a God had to be 'taken to' these godless places – and this was the motivation of the great European missionary expansion. But if God were thought of as immanent, indwelling creation, then He would be omnipresent – 'there is no place in which God is not to be found'. So, she reminded us, 'missionary after missionary recorded with surprise that God was not so much taken as met where they were going; that they were discovering people whose lives manifested what in Christian terms are the fruits of the Spirit'. This in itself called for a reappraisal of the faiths which were the vehicles through which those lives find meaning.

Equally, Page insisted that our culture, in its shift from modernity to post-modernity, was finding a new appreciation of diversity, and this needed to be reflected both ecumenically and in our attitudes to other faiths: as we come to appreciate the variety of Christianity, so also we come to value the richness of religious plurality in our world. The Christological implications of all this were clear: 'the affirmation of the uniqueness, finality and universality of Christ is a confession of faith within the Christian church', and could not be simply applied as a judgement of other faiths, who have their own diverse ways of access to the God who is in all places.

Troll and Dunn, while sharing a common starting point in talking about the divine initiative, came to rather different Christological conclusions. Conversely, it is interesting to see how close Page came to Thangaraj in her conclusions, but by using a very different method. While he began from conversations with Hindus, she built on certain principles about the nature of God – the primacy of divine immanence and the divine enjoyment of diversity - and argued from that to her Christology. The significance of all these parallels and contrasts in the starting-points, arguments and conclusions of our four speakers surely requires further reflection.

More broadly, the Swanwick Conference was intended to help a continuing process of dialogue among Christians about the issues, in the hope that the churches' thinking and practice in inter faith relations can move forward. Three short papers in this report are offered as resources for that process. Firstly, in a masterly chairman's summing-up, Michael Nazir-Ali draws together some of the key questions arising from the conference. Secondly, Elizabeth Harris suggests some of the practical issues which need to be addressed in doing Christology today in an inter faith context. Finally, I try to identify some of the related questions which were not directly addressed at the conference, yet require further work.

What are the implications of my experience of inter faith dialogue for the understanding of Christology?

Thomas Thangaraj

I would like to begin with a few autobiographical notes. It is important that I begin this way because the topic I am asked to address deals primarily with '*my experience* of inter faith dialogue'. I am one of those Christians in India who grew up in totally Christian settings and had very little, if not no, meaningful and intentional contact with people of other religious traditions such as Hindus and Muslims. This may be surprising to some because 82% of India's population is Hindu, 10% Muslim, and only 2.6% is Christian. The villages in the area of my hometown were Christian settlements that came into existence because my ancestors rejected popular Hinduism of that part of India, and embraced Christianity 200 years ago. While there was not much of an interaction between Christians and Hindus, one can safely say that there was always an internal dialogue that was going on in the lives of the converts between their Hindu past and their Christian present. It was manifest in the way they organised the Christian rituals, in the kind of music that they employed in their parishes, and in the manner they related to Hindus and Muslims who lived not too far from them. Apart from such an internal dialogue, Christians in my village had very little interaction with Hindus and Muslims. I was brought up in such a Christian milieu.

Although I was brought up in such a protected environment in which I had contact only with people belonging to a particular form of Protestant Christianity, yet I came to encounter people of other religions as I moved out of my native village to other towns and cities in India. Within these broadened experiences, there were experiences of dialogue with people of other religious traditions. They may be described as instances of spontaneous interaction, which are referred to as 'dialogue of life' in one of the Vatican documents on inter faith dialogue.[1] It was when I entered theological education that I came to know of and engage in intentional and organised inter faith dialogues. As a theology teacher, I was involved with three groups of dialogue partners in Madurai, India. The first was called 'The Religious Friends Circle', organised by the Tamilnadu Theological Seminary, Madurai, India. It was composed of approximately 10 Christians, 10 Muslims, and 10 Hindus who met monthly for dialogue and prayer. I was a member also of a second group made up of 5 Hindus and 5 Christians who had an academic and intellectual interest in Saivite-Christian dialogue. We met occasionally in one another's homes. The third group was organised by the local chapter of the World Conference on Religion and Peace (WCRP). The members belonged to varied religious traditions, such as Hinduism, Islam, Buddhism and others, and most of the members had a special appreciation of admiration for Mahatma Gandhi's teachings on religious tolerance and non-violent struggle against injustice. We

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1 James A Scherer and Stephen B Evans, ed, *New Directions in Mission and Evangelization, Vol I* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1992), p 187.

met every Friday on the lawn of Gandhi Museum in Madurai to pray together for world peace.

There were additional experiences of dialogue when I began to teach a course titled 'Christian Encounter with Hinduism', at Candler School of Theology, Emory University in Atlanta, USA. I invited Hindu people to visit my class and encouraged my students to engage in dialogue with them inside the classroom and outside. Dialogue flourished among the students as a result of our visits to the Hindu temples in Atlanta as well. Emory University organised three conferences on world religions in which people belonging to various religious traditions had an opportunity to engage in conversation. I had the privilege of participating in these conversations as well. These involvements have provided me with a rich variety of experiences – intellectual and spiritual – and have influenced my thinking and writing to the extent that I cannot think theologically without a direct reference to the backdrop of these experiences.

While I am asked to speak on the implications of inter faith dialogue for Christology, it is necessary that I mention at the outset that it was Christology that brought me into a deeper interest and involvement in inter faith dialogue during recent years. From the days of my early theological training, I was greatly concerned with the problem of docetism in many Christians' views of Jesus the Christ. In India, it was easier for people to affirm the divinity of Christ than the humanity of Christ. So, as a student in the Master of Theology programme at United Theological College, Bangalore, I studied in depth the idea of the sinlessness of Jesus. I found Norman Hook's idea of Spirit Christology extremely difficult and cumbersome to use in the Tamil language. At that moment the concept of Guru in Saiva Siddhanta (a system of philosophical theology formulated by those who name God as Siva) offered me a way to talk about the humanity and divinity of Christ. So began my journey of intense and intentional dialogue with Hindus, especially those belonging to the Saivite tradition. Therefore, in addressing the question before us, I acknowledge a 'two way traffic' or mutual influence between inter faith dialogue and Christology in my own theological journey.

Let me now turn to the implications of all these experiences for Christology. I detect two types of implications, namely, *methodological implications* and *thematic implications*. Though I have organised the implications under these two headings, both the methodological and the thematic overlap at several places.

1. Methodological implications

First, dialogue begins to emerge as a way of thinking when one engages in inter faith dialogue for a long and sustained amount of time. As a result, one begins to do one's theology, and in our case, Christology, with the methodology of dialogue and conversation. The experience of dialogue pushes us to adopt 'conversation' or 'dialogue' as the method of doing theology.[1] Yet it is also clear that the very nature of theology itself demands that we envision dialogue as a theological method. As Gordon Kaufman writes:

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[1] I am using the terms 'conversation' and 'dialogue' as interchangeable and as synonyms.

> Since theology is principally concerned with what is ultimately mystery – mystery about which no one can be an *authority*, with true or certain answers to the major questions – I suggest that the proper model for conceiving it is not the lecture (monologue); nor is it the text (for example, a book); it is, rather, *conversation*. We are all in this mystery together; and we need to question one another, criticise one another, make suggestions to one another, help one another ... It is imperative that theological conversation be kept open to and inclusive of all human voices.[1]

This conversation is 'free-flowing, open and unfettered'. He further writes:

> In conversation every voice knows that it is not complete in itself, that its contribution is in response to, and therefore depends upon, the voice(s) that came before, and that other voices coming after will develop further, modify, criticise, qualify what has just been said.[2]

This leads us on to questions such as, What is the nature of this conversation? What is this conversation about? Can conversation be a method for something so specific as Christology, even if one accepts conversation as a method for theology? Who are our conversation partners? In the history of Christian thought there have been two distinct responses to these questions. One response is that which considers the Christological task as an intra-Christian conversation. This is a conversation that is carried on within the Church, in sharpening the Church's language about God and Christ. Karl Barth ably represents such a view. For example, in the opening pages of *Church Dogmatics*, Barth argues that it is a heresy to think 'that the Church and faith are to be understood as links to a greater nexus of being'.[3] Here, Barth is basically arguing against borrowing from other disciplines such as science and philosophy. Particularly, he is speaking against a certain *a priori* ontology that is unquestionably accepted as a starting point for the theological enterprise. If 'being' is interpreted in terms of relationships, Barth's position is untenable for those of us who have been involved in inter faith dialogue. We *do* belong to a wider nexus of being. Of course, Barth and I do not mean the same thing when we use the word 'being'. I am using it to signify relationships. Because we are part of a wider nexus of relationships, we cannot and should not do Christology all by ourselves. Free flowing conversation demands that we see ourselves as 'one participant in a larger developing yet open-ended pattern of many voices, each having its own integrity, none being reducible to any of the others; and it presupposes a willingness to be but one voice in this developing texture of words and ideas, with no desire to control the entire movement'.[4]

The second response is that which maintains that the conversation partners cannot be limited to intra-ecclesiastical realities alone. Other religious traditions and their adherents are also our partners in the conversation. For example, Schleiermacher seems to recognise this in his *Christian Faith*. Therein, the Christian faith is one of the participants in a wider conversation. As such, he begins with the question of human religiosity as such and then progresses to examine the Christian faith. We are, in a sense, adopting

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1 Gordon Kaufman, *In Face of Mystery: A Constructive Theology* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard, 1993), p64.

2 *Ibid.*, p66.

3 *Karl Barth*, Church Dogmatics, Vol I, 1 (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1975), p36.

4 Kaufman, *op cit*, p66.

Schleiermacher's way of doing theology. Yet we differ from him significantly in our estimation of other religions. He ranked religions according to their stages and kinds. Those of us who have been involved in inter faith dialogue are well aware that such a neat hierarchy of religion cannot be maintained in the presence of other religious traditions.

There is yet another issue that must be addressed before we move from the question of Christological method. What is the role and place of Christology within the larger theological enterprise? It is often rightly pointed out that Christian theology gains its 'Christian' character through the central and normative place it gives to Christology. Therefore, it is maintained that Christology should be the starting point for Christian theology. I differ with this contention. Even though in faith and practice we begin with Christ, Christ cannot be the starting point for our participation in and promotion of inter faith dialogue. Often dialogue begins with who we are and what we are after. While Christology informs our understanding of who we are and what we are after, the Christological question as such is almost the last, though most important, question to be addressed in dialogue. If we seriously take this factor into account, we must look for starting points other than Christ-talk for out theological thinking. Ruth Page, in her book *The Incarnation of Freedom and Love*, writes: 'God is as much a presupposition for Christological thought as anything concerning Jesus. More specifically, belief about the nature of God in relation to the world is presupposed'.[1] That is the reason why Page places the imaginative construal of God before her discussion of the imaginative construal of Jesus in the book. We should begin our dialogues with our understandings of God, humanity and the world, and from there move on to talk about Christ.

Second, our experiences of inter faith dialogue clearly point out to us that dialogue is not only a method; it is a source as well. Theologians over the years have defined the sources of theology as Scripture, Tradition, Experience and Reason (to use John Wesley's quadrilateral). If we use John Macquarrie's listing, it will be experience, revelation, scripture, tradition, culture and reason.[2] One may have different views on what is to be included as a source for theology. For example, Tillich, while considering Bible, Church history, and history of religion and culture as sources for theology, would not agree to the use of experience as a 'source'. The Tillichian view would treat experience as the medium through which the Christian tradition is appropriated and understood.[3] The above listing of the variety of understandings with regard to the sources for theology points to the possibility of our discovering ever new sources for Christian theology today.

Dialogue as a source brings new knowledge and opens our minds into newer ways of thinking and knowing. To quote Gadamer, 'To reach an understanding with one's partner in dialogue is not merely a matter of total self-expression and successful assertion of one's point of view, but a

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1 Ruth Page, *The Incarnation of Freedom and Love* (London: SCM, 1991), p46.

2 John Macquarrie, *Principles of Christian Theology* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1966), pp4-17.

3 Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology, Vol I* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), pp40-46.

transformation into a communion, in which we do not remain what we were'.[1] Elsewhere, he writes: 'conversation has spirit of its own' and thus 'reveals something which henceforth exists'.[2] Something novel appears in the midst of conversation. Conversation, as a serious engagement with the other, leads one to fresh and novel knowledge.

2. Thematic implications

There are several themes that emerge out of our experience of inter faith dialogue, and those themes challenge a Christologian toward a reconstruction of the Christological tradition. Some of the themes that I raise here are somewhat peculiar to Hindu-Christian dialogue. Yet they have a bearing on other bi-lateral and multi-lateral dialogues.

First, the language of incarnation comes under serious scrutiny in the context of Hindu-Christian dialogue. The kind of questioning that comes up in inter faith dialogue is different from both James Dunn's discussion of incarnation and John Hick's *The Myth of God Incarnate*. Dunn's discussion is primarily aimed at discovering the roots of the concept of incarnation in the Christian tradition. He shows that there is not easy continuity between earlier Jewish and Greek traditions and the Christian tradition with respect to the idea of incarnation. John Hick, on the other hand, is concerned with the nature of the concept of incarnation. For him the question is whether it is myth, fact, or metaphor?

In Hindu-Christian dialogue, however, different sets of questions are raised. The first is the Saivites' philosophical difficulty with the idea of incarnation. It should be noted that Saivites are quite open to the language of incarnation when it is viewed in mythological terms, because the mythologies concerning Siva are rampant with stories of Siva and his consort Parvati taking on incarnations. However, for the Saivites, it is philosophical and theological non-sense to talk of God's taking on flesh. If God is God, then God's taking on human or other form is absolutely ruled out because it goes against the very nature of God. Therefore, they reject the idea of incarnation, and in its place propose the idea of guru as a way to talk about the salvific activity of God. My own work has been in the area of exploring the concept of guru in the Saivite tradition to construct a Christology that envisions Christ as guru.[3] Whether we agree with the argument concerning the philosophical implausibility of the idea of incarnation or not, we need to note that incarnational language is not intelligible to the Saivite.[4]

While the Saivites have serious difficulty with incarnational language, such a language is not unfamiliar to the Vaishnavites. The Vaishnavites understand the concept of incarnation in relation to their idea of *avatar*. *Avatar* literally means 'descent' and therefore has more to do with the idea of God's presence in the world in some bodily form, but not necessarily human form. In

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1 Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (New York: Crossroad, 1982), p341.

2 *Ibid.*, p345.

3 M Thomas Thangaraj, *The Crucified Guru: An Experiment in Cross-Cultural Christology* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994)

4 One can notice that Muslims have a somewhat similar difficulty with the idea of incarnation. The concept of incarnation, for Muslims, is a denial of the transcendence of God, and thus it is sheer idolatry.

that sense, the consecrated image of God in the temple is an *avatar* of God as well. The major difficulty that the Vaishnavites have with the Christian view of incarnation is the 'one and only' language that is used for God's incarnation in Jesus the Christ. Here the limiting of the incarnation to the 'one and only' is a serious theological difficulty for the Vaishnavites. It is simply incredible to a Vaishnavite that God chooses to limit Godself to one and only one incarnation. The most often quoted text from the Bhagavad Gita says: 'For whenever the law of righteousness withers away and lawlessness arises, then do I generate myself [on earth]. For the protection of the good, for the destruction of evil-doers, for the setting up of the law of righteousness I come into being age after age'.[1]

So Hindu-Christian dialogue puts me right in the midst of people who take the 'myth' of God incarnate quite seriously. John Hick has nothing to worry about. The language of incarnation is mythological language and it simply signifies God's continuing interest and involvement in human affairs. Moreover, Hindus take metaphor as one of the epistemological sources with utmost seriousness, and therefore have no problem in dealing with the metaphorical character of incarnational language.

One comes to learn soon that the words 'history' and 'myth' mean different things to different dialogue partners. While one understands 'history' in linear terms, another may view it in a cyclical fashion. For some 'myth' may signify pure fiction, while others see it as a genuine way of expressing truth. In one sense, the present day Jesus seminar has no relevance to a Hindu. The understanding of history in cosmic and cyclical terms may compel a Hindu to say, 'Who cares?' Did not Mahatma Gandhi say that even if someone were to come and prove that the man Jesus never existed he would not be upset because the Sermon on the Mount would still be true? As one can see, dialogue calls for reconstructing our idea of incarnation.

The second question in inter faith dialogue involves a certain form of historical consciousness that comes alive during dialogue. We come to see how each of the partners is saved by his or her own peculiar histories. Such an experience brings a happy and healthy acknowledgement of relativity, that is, the fact that our religious beliefs and conduct, including our Christologies, are shaped and influenced by historical forces. As Ruth Page rightly points out, relativity is different from relativism, which implies an open-ended approach to claims regarding truth and value. This means, then, that we need to find a language that acknowledges this relativity and speaks of Christ in authentic terms. I would consider that this would compel us to go for a much more pragmatic or functional Christology than a metaphysical one. Macquarrie's most recent plea for a metaphysical Christ does not appeal to those who are involved in dialogue. The historicity that I am referring to here calls for a Christology that acknowledges forthrightly the role of human agency in portraying Christ, and thus refrains from a hurried movement into metaphysical language. For example, the guru-language that I have developed in *The Crucified Guru* calls for serious attention to be paid to the role of the disciple in emergence of the guru as the guru.

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1 R C Zaehner, *The Bhagavad-Gita with a Commentary Based on the Original Sources* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1969), p58.

A third issue is that inter faith dialogue heightens our awareness of difference, even though it may begin with the celebration of commonality. This means that the unique and scandalous character of Christology comes to be highlighted. Uniqueness is rediscovered during the process of dialogue. I am limiting the word 'unique' to 'peculiar' or 'distinctive'. In that sense the distinctiveness of Christ shines forth as dialogue proceeds. For example, the members of the Saivite Christian study group met at Suri's (one of the member's) home on a Good Friday several years ago to discuss the question of suffering. Suri opened the dialogue by saying. 'There is nothing called suffering; it is only absence of pleasure.' The dialogue that day was one of bringing out the unique features of Christology – one of them being the concern with suffering, both the reality of suffering and the need to address it with determination. My experiences of dialogue over the years have made me aware over time of the distinct character of the Christy event. While I see Christ as one of the saviour figures in the multi-religious setting, I am fully convinced about the distinctiveness of Christ. There is an apologetic or missional dimension of Christology that cannot be bypassed at such moments of recognition of distinctiveness. Dialogue calls us to own the peculiar character of the Christ event. At such moments dialogue and conversation rise to the level of mutual witness. To say that dialogue is itself a witness is neither superficial nor exaggerated. It has profound meaning and import.

A fourth consideration is that while I affirm the uniqueness (distinctiveness) of Christ, two other things follow. On the one hand, I feel compelled to declare Christ as universal (meaning significant to all) precisely on the grounds of his uniqueness. On the other hand, I find it extremely difficult to hold on to the idea of the finality of Christ as we have formulated in our tradition thus far. We can no longer hold on to earlier formulations of the finality and completeness of Christ. The experience of God that is available to one during inter faith dialogue makes such a claim of finality theologically unviable. One comes to experience God as more than Christ, perhaps truly in the Trinitarian framework. We need to own that the Christologies that we construct are indeed our Christologies and not God's. Moreover, it is precisely the picture of God that emerges in our Christology that relativises our Christologies. Christ – as one who pointed to God rather than calling himself God – clearly demonstrates that all our Christologies are in the end our Christologies and cannot exhaust the nature of God. There are difficulties that our history raises for us as well. An exclusive and final understanding of Christ has led to negative consequences with regard to our relationship with people of other religions. Furthermore, the history of people of other religious traditions bears ample witness to God's salvific dealings with them too. Thus the claim that Christ is the one and only way to God can no longer be maintained in the fashion in which we have done so far. Theologians all over the world are called to work hard at reformulating that claim. This also means that one cannot do a responsible Christology without a clear and thought-through theology of religions.

Finally, my experiences of inter faith dialogue have raised my consciousness regarding the importance of the soteriological dimension of Christology. Christology is not simply talking about who Christ was and is; it is equally about what Christ has done and continues to do in the lives of people today.

To put it in other words, Christology cannot escape the question of transformation – personal, societal and ecological.[1] Concerns for justice in our socio-political and economic relations are very much a part of inter faith dialogue. Therefore, these issues likewise become central concerns in the construction of Christology as well. I would not deny that I have always enjoyed the 'elitist' dialogues. At the same time, however, I know that a dialogue that does not concern itself with day-to-day questions of the people, especially those who are oppressed and marginalised, is worth nothing. If this uneasiness about dialogue is carried over to my Christology, I would have to contend with questions of orthopraxis rather than orthodoxy in my Christological task. One's Christology would be judged on the basis of what it has offered for the personal, societal and ecological well-being of the people of this world.

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1 I have discussed the idea of transformation in more detail in *The Common Task: A Theology of Christian Mission* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1999), pp89-92.

Who is Christ for me – in the Context of Encountering Muslims and Studying Islam?

Christian Troll

1. My encounter with Muslims and with Islam

You have asked me to speak about emphases and peculiar features of my Christian vision (which as such implies a distinct vision of the mystery of Christ), after years of living in various Christian-Muslim settings and constellations, in- and outside Europe, years spent largely in meeting Muslims and in listening to the voices of Islam past and present, in the spirit of critical study and dialogue. Muslims and Islam have indeed become an important and integral dimension of my life and thought.

In fact, the study of aspects of Islamic culture(s) and religion for me always has been part of the living encounter with Muslims. In this encounter Islam has constantly challenged and put into question my Christian beliefs and practices, my Christian faith. I had to make ever anew the effort to answer the question: "But you, who do you say I am" (Mt 16,15)? Obviously, this question concerns the totality of the faith vision peculiar to us Christians. The answer given to it determines the conception we have of God, of His relationship with the human person, created in His image and of relations between individuals and communities in culturally and religiously plural settings.

2. The basic religious act and the core meaning of Islam

In the beginning of my encounter with Muslim believers, and hence with the Qur'an, I became interested in the latter's portrayal of Jesus and his mother - my first public talk to a Christian audience in fact dealt with Mary in the Qur'an. However, very soon I realised that it is not the figure of the prophet `Isa, nor that of Moses, for that matter, but rather that of Abraham, who – of course after 'the seal of the prophets', Muhammad - occupies a central place in the Qur'an and even more so in the practice of the Muslim faith. The faith and unconditional obedience of Abraham represent the pure monotheism which Muhammad felt called to restore once and for all. The whole ritual of the *hajj* would seem to be as it were a 'sacramental' re-living of Abraham's faith and obedience just as the *`îd al-kabîr*, the 'Great Feast', the 'Feast of Sacrifice', re-enacts Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son in obedience to God's mysterious Will. Thus the pilgrim throughout the *hajj* continuously utters the *talbyah*, the prayer of readiness to do the Will of the Lord: *labbayka Allahumma labbayka:* What is Thy Command? I am here, O God! And, again and again the pilgrims add:

> O God, shower Thy Blessings upon Muhammad,
> And the family of Muhammad,
> As Thou didst shower Thy Mercy upon Ibrahim,
> And the family of Ibrahim;
> Thou art Praised, Glorious!
> O God, beatify Muhammad,
> And the family of Muhammad,
> As Thou hast beatified Ibrahim,

And the Family of Ibrahim;
Thou art Praised, Glorious!

Let me begin this talk, therefore, with putting before us the central part of the rite of the Pilgrimage, the *wuqûf*, together with a small number of selected prayers as the pilgrims recite them at that point of the Hajj. As far as I can see, nothing makes more palpable and expresses more precisely and concisely the core of Islam than the *wuqûf*, the rite of the 'standing in front of' Allah of all pilgrims in the Valley of `Arafat by high noon on the ninth day of the Dhû-al-Hijjah. It would seem to be here that we touch the pulse and listen to the heartbeat of Islam. It is the reality of Muslim faith and practice superbly expressed in that rite, which throughout the past four decades has inspired, enriched and challenged me as a Christian fellow-believer deeply interested in Muslims and Islam. Any inner dialogue with these must, I submit, start and return again and again from the reality of Muslims' faith and attitude densely expressed in the rite of *wuqûf* during the *hajj*. It is here, where true believers in God, whether members of the *umma* or not, can continually 'communicate', notwithstanding - and without in any way minimizing - all the essential differences that obtain between the two universes of faith and practice, of vision of God and of divine-human relationship.

A. Kamal writes in *The Sacred Journey*:

> '*This is the Hajj.* These are the supreme hours...Here by the mountain, the pilgrim will pass what should be, spiritually and intellectually, the noblest hours of life. The tents of the Faithful will cover the undulating valley as far as the eye can see. This immense congregation with the sacred mountain as its center is the heart of Islam. This is the day of true brotherhood, the day when God is revealed to His servants. We are promised that in these hours by `Arafat, God will send down His forgiveness and mercy on those who are deserving and they will feel his presence. This is the day of brotherhood and heartbreak – heartbreak that we have not yet learned to cling to his solidarity where we dwell and labor in valleys and on mountains far from `Arafat. This is the day of promise: the guarantee of what Islam shall be when Muslims everywhere achieve the oneness today only known at `Arafat.'[1]

Lex orandi –lex credendi: the prayers pronounced on this occasion teach us the basic faith and spirituality of Muslims. They lay open as it were the heart of Islam. Here some extracts:

> *There is no deity except God, the One, without companion!*
> *For Him is the Kingdom and the Praise.*
> *He maketh to live – but dieth not!*
> *And in His hand is goodness,*
> *And He is All-Powerful!*
> *Our Lord, thou hast granted that we may stay here ...*
> *Following the path of Thy Friend,*
> *And following the footprints of Thy Chosen*
> *From all Thy creatures,*
> *Our Prince, Muhammad,*
> *Upon whom be Peace and Blessings .*

[Tauhid, God: Creator, eternal, good and powerful; Muhammad, His chosen model]

> *And I seek of Thee, Our Lord, Thy forgiveness,*
> *And that thou art pleased with me,*

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[1] Ahmad Kamal, *The Sacred Journey* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1964), p69.

After which there can be no anger;
And guidance, after which there can be no error;
and a good end, and liberation from the fire, and reward with Paradise,
And to be remembered by Thee
When I am in misfortune,
When the mortals of the world forget me, and the earth covers,
And I am parted from my loved ones,
And all is severed.
O Most Glorious! O Bestower!
O Most Merciful of those who show mercy!

[God: giver of forgiveness, guidance, merciful liberator from eternal death]

I am miserable and poverty-stricken ...
Lamenting and confessing and knowing my sins,
Seeking from Thee as the humble seek.
And I implore of Thee with the supplication of an abject sinner,
And I pray to Thee the prayer of a blind and frightened man,
The prayer of him who submits his neck to thee,
And weeps to thee,
And is prostrate before Thee ...

[Humble prayer of forgiveness from sins]

Our Lord, create in my heart light,
In my ears light,
In my eyes light,
In my tongue light,
At my right light,
Above me light,
And create light in my soul –
And for me glorify light!

[Prayer for transforming grace]

Lord of all,
And King of all,
And Predestinator of all -
I pray to thee to grant me:
Wholesome knowledge,
And virtuous deeds,
And real Faith!
And grant that we may experience:
The repentance of the Faithful,
The submission of the submissive,
And the deeds of the virtuous,
And the conviction of those who are convinced,
The felicity of the God-fearing,
And the High Degree of the successful!.

[Prayer for real, effective faith]

What is Thy Command? I am here, O God! (labbaika!)
Happiness attend Thee!
And all good is in they hands,
And I repent unto Thee!
Amen.[1]

[The servant utterly ready to obey any divine command]

3. The scope of this paper and acknowledgements

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1 Kamal, *op cit*, pp69-81 *passim*.

In what follows I try to give a short account of the essential and distinctive features of my Christian faith as it has developed in the encounter with Islam. I shall present the relevant points not in their quality as basic dogmas of the Catholic Christian faith as one would find them in any catechism; rather I intend (a) to indicate the emphases of my Christian faith and practice, given the peculiar context of Christian-Muslim dialogue in which it has developed and (b) to indicate the basic structure, the inner logic that holds together these various emphases. Concretely this means: I shall try to show which place Christ occupies in my overall vision of faith and why my religious vision and my intelligence of faith centers on Christ and, through him, on the mystery of the triune God of love. In the course of this exposition I shall only here and there explicitly refer to elements of the message of Islam. However, the challenging context of the Islamic message, as testimony of the Truth claiming continual attention, conversion and adherence, will be present effectively throughout this presentation as it has been throughout my adult life. Put differently, I shall expose the emphases and the inner logic of my faith and my central beliefs 'in the presence' as it were of believing and theologically reflecting Muslim interlocutors.

As a Christian who tries to explain his distinctly Christian beliefs in the context of Islam I know myself standing in a large crowd of co-religionists belonging to practically all ages since the appearance of Islam, Christians who have tried to give account creatively and faithfully in the context of Christian-Muslim encounter. I am thinking especially of the tradition of Arab-Christian theological thought. Following this tradition I take as my basic plan the divine design of God for humanity. It is the structure of all the eastern and western anaphoras: they speak about the design of God for humankind as it realizes itself in Jesus Christ.

Part One

4. God creates the universe and man because He is the Giver of Good

4.1. The motive for God creating the universe and man

Meditating the universe in its grandeur and order the Christian tradition concludes - indeed together with the Jewish and the Islamic tradition – that there exists a Creator. What is God's motive in creating us? Creation certainly did not come about by mere chance. Also, God certainly did not create, because He was bored and was looking for a companion. He also did not create just for a joke, *`abathan*, as it were. (The Qur'an insists on this point, using this very term, cf. Q 28,115) Certainly God was 'motivated' in creating. By which motive?

We can say, together with all the Christian Arab theologians, God has created us out of goodness, mercy, compassion, love. They express this by the following Arabic terms; *ra'fah*, *rahmah*, *lutf*, *jûd*, and sometimes *hubb*, although this last term is used much less frequently, because it does not figure in the Muslim vocabulary designating God. In any case, the overall answer is: God created because He is by nature generous, He is essentially

al-Jawwâd (the Giver of good), the Bestower. This is the motive of God in creating man and the universe together with and for man.

This attribute *al-Jawwâd* (in some of the many respective lists it figures as one of the 'beautiful names of God' in the Muslim tradition) is one of the terms normally used by the Arab Christians in rendering the phrase of Saint John: "*God is love*" (1 Jn 4,8 and 4,16). They translate: "*Allah huwa l-Jawwâd*", i.e. God is the Bestower *par excellence*. And they start from this notion, when they expose their vision of the Christian faith.

God out of His goodness has created the universe and man as the responsible master of it, in other words, as the representative (*khalîfa*) of God on earth, as the one responsible here on earth for the universe.

Starting from the action of God in the universe, I discover His deep nature, His essence. I ascend from His acts to His being and recognize Him as good, the only good, as Christ tells the young rich man (Lk 18,19). God as the Giver of good par excellence. Whatever is good here on earth, it derives from the goodness of God, as the letter of James teaches: '*Make no mistake about this, my dear brothers, all that is good, all that is perfect, is given us from above; it comes down from the Father of all light*' (Jas 1,16-17).

4.2. God takes the initiative and continuously seeks man

In the light of the history of the God-man relationship as traced by the biblical Scriptures, we affirm the extraordinary fact that God is constantly in search of man, long before the latter searches God. God again and again takes the initiative, pursuing as it were man with his love, even when man forgets or even opposes God. If man searches God, it is always in response to God's initiative. As Jeremiah puts it (cf. e.g. 20,7): '*You have seduced me, Yahweh, and I have let myself be seduced; you have overpowered me: you were stronger*' (cf. also the images of the shepherd [Ez 34] and of the vine [Is 5; Ez 17,6-10], expressing the same ardour and drama of God's initiatives).

The first letter of John repeatedly states the fact of the anteriority of God's love: '*Love consists in this: it is not we who loved God, but God loved us...*'(4,10). And: '*Let us love, then, because He first loved us* ' (4, 19).

St. Paul expresses the same in his own way: '*So it is proof of God's own love for us, that Christ died for us while we were still sinners*' (Rm 5,8). And again: '*He [the Son of God] loved me and gave himself for me*' (Gal 2,20).

John of the Cross has taken up this idea poetically in the canticle *The Dark Night of the Soul* where he speaks of God and man as the hunter and the game, and where he asks himself, who of the two is the hunter and who is in pursuit of the other.

5 The Incarnation completes creation and indicates its meaning

5.1. The act of creation continues, and achieves itself, in the gift of the Incarnation

If God is essentially the Bestower, he will never cease to bestow. It is not thinkable that He should have given all in the beginning in the act of creating, and that He would suddenly cease to bestow. To believe in God the Creator means to believe that God continues to create and re-create now and always.

God continuously takes care of the world created by Him, especially of the human person and each person individually. In this way God is faithful to Himself, to His deepest being.

In the line of this approach, the Arab Christians set out to present the 'necessity' of the Incarnation: God is the Giver. By Creation God seeks the human being because He desires to give Himself to it. He desires to share Himself and to unite Himself to the human person, the apex of His Creation.

Now if God is the Giver *par excellence*, it is necessary that He bestow what is the most precious and valuable in the world. It is not thinkable that he would give as it were a good of secondary value. But what is the absolutely best that exists (*ajwad al-mawjûdât*)? The best that exists is evidently God.

If then God is God – that is, the Bestower per excellence, *al-Jawwâd*, then He will give not less than Himself. With Yahya bin `Adi (Christian philosopher fl. 974), one can say: the giver gives the best of the beings*: Al-Jawwâd yajûd bi-ajwad al-mawjûdât*).

5.2. Reply to a possible objection

Yahya ibn 'Adi, at this point of his argument, makes an objection to which he replies himself. Two things could prevent this self-gift of God: on the part of God, the incapacity or the refusal of God to give Himself; on the part of man, the impossibility to receive this gift.

On the part of God such incapacity is unthinkable, because it would mean that God cannot give Himself, in other words that He is not omnipotent, but rather that there would be in him an *`ajz* (weakness, deficit) - something that is impossible in God. Equally impossible is a refusal on the part of God, because it would mean that God does not want to give Himself, which is contrary to his nature of Giver of Good, of *Jawwâd*. And there would exist in God a kind of avarice (*bukhl*), which again is impossible. If God is God, then He wishes to give Himself to man and He can do so. On the part of God nothing hinders this Gift, on the contrary.

On the part of the human person, in a similar way, God's uniting Himself to man is possible. Because the only thing that could render impossible the union (*ittihâd*) of God and man would be an essential opposition (*tadâdd* or *madâddah*) between the two. Now, it is impossible that such an opposition should obtain between God and man, because God has crated man and the contrary cannot bring into existence its contrary.

Rather, the act of creation implies a link between God and the human person, a link of love. There is then a certain compatibility between the two . This is in effect confirmed by Holy Scripture which tells us that God created Adam and Eve, *'in His image and likeness'* (vgl. Gn 1,26). Now, who says *'image'* says: what is called image, carries in himself something of the other, which is more than a mere compatibility.

5.3. One and the same movement unites creation and Incarnation

This presentation of the 'necessity' of the Incarnation is clear, beautiful and above all deeply Christian: in the same movement God creates man (which leads Him to communicating Himself to man) and *'takes flesh'* (in order to become the other, man).

Another Christian Arab, al-Safi Ibn al-`Assâl, took up this argument in 1239 in a simple and clear fashion. He says: In the same way in which God by creating man has perfected him, in the same way by incarnating himself does he perfect His love (*jûd*) and perfect the perfection (*kamâl*) of man. Here one could coin the telling phrase: *Allâh huwa Ajwad*.

It is then one and the same movement which links the two actions or manifestations of God. If one admits the creation of the world by God (the starting point of all believers, not least, Christians and Muslims), then one must also admit the Incarnation. By Creation God bestows something, whereas in the Incarnation God bestows Himself. To say that God incarnates Himself means to say that God is so much in search of man that He wants to unite Himself to him, and that He does so intensely that, finally, He realizes this union in the Incarnate Word (we are fully aware, that only *post factum* we realize the Incarnation to be the end (*finis*) and objective of Creation).

Let us try to see now, at which point exactly does this vision depart from that of our Muslim interlocutors?

5.4. Muslim perceptions of God and God-human relations

Studying the history of Islamic religious thought and listening to different contemporary Muslim thinkers have taught me that there exists a great variety of Muslim perceptions as to the Love of God (*gen. subjectivus*, i.e., on the part of God) and consequently of God's relationship to man. I confine myself here to mentioning two positions:

(1) Fazlur Rahman (1919-1988) in his well-known work *Major Themes of the Qur'an* (Minneapolis/Chicago, 1980) states about God's power and lordship in relation to his 'infinite mercy': 'His power, creation, and mercy are ... not only fully co-extensive but fully interpenetrating and fully identical: *'He has imposed the law of mercy upon Himself'* (6,12), and *'My mercy comprehends all'*(7,156)....'God exercises His greatness, power and all-comprehensive presence primarily through the entire range of the manifestations of mercy...' (pp. 6, 7) However, 'God's mercy reaches its logical zenith' in guiding man (*hidâyah*) by way of 'sending messengers,' 'revealing books', and showing man 'the Way.' The prospect of final Judgement helps man 'to develop that inner torch (called *taqwa* [i.e. reverential fear of God] by the Qur'an) whereby he can discern between right and wrong'.(p. 9).

In Rahman's reading of the Qur'an the 'all-powerful, purposeful, and merciful God "measures out" everything, bestowing upon everything the range of its potentialities.' Thus He ensures the orderliness of nature and at the same time 'expresses the most fundamental, unbridgeable difference between His own divine nature and the nature of man: the Creator's measuring implies an infinitude wherein no measured creature – no matter how great its powers and potentialities (as in the case of man) – may literally share. It is precisely this belief in such sharing that is categorically denied by the Qur'anic doctrine of shirk or "participation in Godhead' (pp. 12f.).

The divine mercy of the Qur'an in the thinking of Muslims like Rahman remains a function of all-powerfulness in the image of a - however benevolent – ruler or patriarch. To imagine God as bestowing Himself upon the human person amounts to 'lack of *taqwa*'. Accordingly Rahman states: 'For the

Qur'an, then, Jesus can be as little an incarnation of God as Muhammad itself or, indeed, any other prophet.'(p. 169) As incontrovertible as the fact is that the Qur'an regards Jesus and his followers 'as exceptionally charitable and self-sacrificing', this does not gainsay the other teaching of the Qur'an: Jesus' divinity and the Trinity are unacceptable. The Christian doctrine of the incarnation, in the light of sura 112 ('which', as Rahman states, 'has been rightly regarded by the Islamic tradition as presenting the essence of the whole of the Qur'an' [p. 10]).

> *'Say: He is Allah the One!*
> *Allah, the eternally Besought of all!*
> *He begetteth not nor was begotten*
> *And there is none comparable unto Him!'*

and in the light of Q 3,64:

> *Say: O People of the Scripture! Come to an agreement between us and you: that we shall worship none but Allah, and that we shall ascribe no partner unto Him, and that none of us shall take others for lords beside Allah. And if they turn away, then say: Bear witness that we are they who have surrendered (unto Him).'*

is nothing less than *shirk* [the capital sin of associationism].'

Hope for a change of this situation, Rahman adds, depends on whether 'recent pioneering efforts continue to yield a Christian doctrine more compatible with universal monotheism and egalitarianism.' (p.170)

(2) But what about Sufi perceptions of God and God-human relations? They are far from uniform. Generally speaking, it is no exaggeration to say that they always have been marginalised by the official doctors of Islam. From the beginning of my encounter with Islam I have been conscious of the danger for a Christian of either identifying the Sufi approach with Islam, forgetting that it is far from being accepted by all Muslims as an integral dimension of true Islamic faith and practice, or of considering Sufism a sect, in other words, something separate or alien to true Islam.

Always fascinated by this remarkable dimension of Islam I have also become convinced that although Sufis do not add anything essential to what Christians have in their religious culture – if only they be familiar with it – the Christian believer can and should draw (spiritual) profit from it. How? By 'reflecting' the light of Sufism in the mirror of a Christian thinking, not in order to annex it but in order to see its image, to understand it, recognize and appreciate its values. And what is this Christian thought which functions as reflecting mirror? It is simply a Christian thought nourished from the Old and New Testaments, sensitive to all that these sacred biblical texts have inspired in the great Christian mystics. Along with advancing in my Christian spiritual formation I discovered values in Sufism - in all its variety - highlighting central truth of my own spiritual tradition.

Leaving completely aside here the elaborations of esoteric and theosophical Sufis and the rich tradition of Sufi poetry of later centuries, we take just one example, Ibn Mansur al-Hallaj of Baghdad, who among the Sufis of the classical period is perhaps the one to have meditated most profoundly the question that presents itself not only to the Sufis but to all thinking believers in the One God who speaks to men: How is it possible that God , the absolutely

Transcendent, can all the same speak to humans, in a language understandable to them commanding them to recognize Him in His unicity and to observe His commandments, obeying Him as their Lord?

A Sufi is essentially a Muslim believer who – practicing asceticism (*zuhd*) by which he becomes detached from worldliness – intends to discover himself as he is in the hands of God. The Sufi is highly conscious of God as creating him within the pact (*mithâq*) which binds him to God, his Lord. God, in the very act of creating man by His word: *kun*, demands of him to recognize Him as Lord and to come to Him in total freedom. When the Sufi puts his whole person to listening in the depth of his being to the revealed Word of God, he desires to arrive at hearing in the intimate secret of himself (*sirr)* the sound of the command *kun* which bestows existence.

In this perspective Al-Hallaj arrives at the following answer to our question:

> 'Whereas created human nature (*nâsût*) insofar as it is creature is infinitely apart from the divine nature of the Creator insofar as it is creative (i.e. *lâhût)*-- since these two natures by definition are distinct and separate -- the divine creative being (*lâhût*), in contrast, encloses in itself the effect of its act of creation. This is *nâsût,* i.e. Humanity that manifests its [the divine creative being's, i.e. *lâhût*'s] sublimeness. There exists in effect a pre-eternal relation between *lâhût* and *nâsût,* and Humanity (=*nâsût*) as manifestation of Divinity (*lâhût*) is for the human creature which eats and drinks, the place of the truthful Witness in which it [i.e. Humanity = *nâsût]* unites itself to the unique Word which proclaims the divine Unicity and Lordship and which, at the same time, creates the being which it [i.e. Humanity] is, in its authentic purity'. (R. Arnaldez, p. 27)

Such a meditation on the enigma which constitutes the first part of the *shahâdah*: *lâ ilâha illâ Allâh* (which we find literally in the prophets of the Old Testament, cf. e.g., Is 45, 21) will hardly leave the Christian indifferent, who will rather regard with respect and sympathy the effort made by Sufis like al-Hallaj to respond with an undeniable spiritual depth.

The Christian doctrine responds to the same problem by a meditation of the mysteries of Trinity and Incarnation. Put very shortly: The Word of God is His Word, the second person of the Trinity, made flesh in Christ Jesus. Jesus is 'the faithful witness' (Rev 1, 6) who declares in front of Pilate. 'I came into the world for this, to bear witness to the truth; and all who are on the side of truth listen to my voice'(Jn 18, 37). And: 'these who were born not from human stock or human desire or human will but from God himself' (Jn 1.13). Thus, the believer in God the Truth can through Christ, with him and in him, render the same authentic testimony as Jesus. Born from God he will be son of God by adoption. It is man in the authenticity of his humanity that has been created in the Christ, by and in him (cf. Cool 1, 15-17). The truthfulness of Christ's witness is based on the reciprocity of the two testimonies, that of the Father and of the Son, and man can, through, in and with Christ, give an equally authentic and truthful testimony. But to make sure of the authenticity of this testimony Christ has sent His Spirit (Jn 15, 26-27).

6. God is Triune Communion because He is the Giver of love

We said: the two actions of God, creation and incarnation, flow from His very nature of being Bestower, Giver par excellence. The *process ad extra* (in creation and Incarnation) flows from the *process ad intra* (the Trinity), as the

great medieval Latin thinkers said. This continual, inner-divine Gift which manifests the mystery of the Trinity of Persons in the absolute Unity of the Substance, is prolonged outside, as it were, in Creation and it perfects itself in a unique way in the Incarnation.

We are thus lead to discover the trinitarian nature of God, rising from his actions (creation and incarnation) to His being (Love = Trinity). Because God is Gift not only as to outside Himself but also and above all as to inside Himself. The *processio ad intra* signifies simply the internal dynamics of God. God is in Himself a dynamic and dynamising (energizing) unity.

In the beginning we set out to speak of Christ and Christology. Our question was: Who is Christ for you? But in effect I cannot speak about Christ without speaking about the Trinity, because Christ is at the heart of the Trinity. All flows from the Trinity which I discover starting from where I see its effect: i.e. from the work of God in the word, in Jesus Christ. In examining God's work in Christ I am lead to say: it is God's nature to bestow, to be the Giver. Now, who says gift, says plurality. That is the pivotal idea of the Treatise of Unity (*Maqâlah fi l-Tawhîd*) written by Yahya ibn `Adi in 941. He says in substance, without mentioning the Muslims: 'There exist believers who conceive of the unity of God as of a tautological unity: he is one because he is one. There is another way of conceiving of the unity, that which integrates plurality (*al-kathrah*) and otherness (*al-ghayriyyah*). Now, the *tawhîd* of the Christians is a *tawhîd* of otherness, and that is the true *tawhîd*, much richer in content than the tautological *tawhîd*.

It is probably Yahya himself who has invented the word 'otherness', formed from the element *ghayr*, a term which did not exist before him, says Samir Khalil. One may easily object: God is indeed the totally other, according to the Qur'anic formula: *Laysa ka-mithlihi shay'un*. But Yahya's point here is this: God is the totally other not because he is one in the sense of an absolute monotheism, a numerical unity (which applies to all single beings), but rather because his unity includes otherness (and this is true only of God).

No other being is one and multiple in its very essence. In this sense, the God of the Christian faith is truly unique and one can say really only of such a God: *Laysa ka-mithlihi shay'un*.

This vision is not just a beautiful theoretical abstraction, as if the Trinity was something abstract. The mystery of the Trinity has concrete consequences for my everyday Christian life. It leads me to a distinct vision of inter-human relations based on giving and sharing which however in no way would exclude a meaningful hierarchy. This applies especially to the structure of the family (between the spouses on the one hand and the parents and children on the other, as one can see in the texts of Saint Paul) also to political society and to the Church. Societal structures become dictatorial and oppressive of personal identities, if they are not founded on giving and sharing.

Now the Incarnation is at the center of the movement of God towards man, and at the same time is its perfection.

7. Consequences of the Incarnation

Three consequences of the Incarnation would seem to be particularly important in the context of Christian reflection in the mirror of Islam.

7.1. The habitual union with God is possible for all

In Christ, the Word incarnate (*kalimah munzalah*) the union of God and humanity, the union of god with each human being, becomes real and possible. Every Christian, in so far as he or she really lives the faith authentically, is a Sufi, a mystic united to God. What in Islam is a privilege, granted to a restricted elite (*khâssah)*, in Christianity is the natural way offered, at least in principle, to every believer. What in the Muslim religion is characteristic of a small group of Sufis (i.e. the continuous union with God) is basic norm of the Christian's life, by being sacramentally incorporated in Jesus Christ through and thanks to the mystery of the Incarnation.

7.2. The absolute value of the human person

Furthermore, through the Incarnation man acquires a hitherto unknown value, because God has made him a participant in His nature, and already now he is the temple of the Holy Spirit. In this perspective the concrete and most effective way to defend on this earth and promote the 'rights of God' (*huqûq Allâh*) is to defend the human rights. Through the Incarnation God and the human person are identified with one another to such an extent that I cannot longer distinguish between the rights of Man and the rights of God (*huqûq al-insân* and *huqûq Allâh*).

It would seem that in general the Muslim is more sensible to the 'rights of God' (always difficult to specify) than to the 'rights of man'. This is so not simply in consequence of merely socio-cultural factors but because the Qur'an underlines in a radical way the absolute transcendence of God. In Jesus Christ incarnate, the Transcendent has made Himself immanent.

7.3. The Eucharist 'prolongs' the Incarnation

In the Christian vision the Incarnation prolongs and completes itself in the Eucharist. This has been stated well by Arab Christian thinkers but is known also from more recent theological spiritual writing. In the words of medieval Arab theologians God has made Himself Word, the Word has made Itself Flesh, the Flesh has made itself Bread. The Eucharist is the final completion of this 'movement' begun in God. It is also the concrete expression of the whole *kénosis* of God, arriving' as it were in our daily life.

Furthermore, the Eucharist (without denying its 'substantial' reality) becomes efficacious in the believer who receives Communion. We start from the lived reality of faith: the believer who receives Communion in the Eucharist communicates with God in Jesus Christ. The believer realizes absolute mystical union in communicating, i.e. receiving the flesh and blood of Jesus Christ.

This coming of God into the 'flesh' as it were of our daily lives, is the Gift of God, the Giver of good (*al-Jawwâd)* who bestows Himself in the Incarnation and in consequence, in the Eucharist in order to transform me and making me participant in His life and goodness. St. Irenaeus of Lyons (c. 130-c.200) put it thus: 'God has made Himself human so that the human person may become God'. The incarnation of God and the divinisation of the human person meet one another.

Once again, in contemplating the mystery of the Eucharist I discover the deepest aspect of God's nature: LOVE. And we have known the love of God in this that He has handed over to us as a gift His own Son who has delivered Himself for us on the Cross and continues to deliver himself to us in the Eucharist. Once again it is this dynamic of the 'going out of oneself' and of 'handing over of oneself. In the Eucharist this amazing divine dynamic comes to the fore clearly and absolutely: the dynamic of divine *kénosis*.

Part Two

8. *Kénosis*: A key phrase of Christian faith

8.1. Theological considerations

Christian reflection naturally seeks a summary, an essential concept which expresses the very essence of the theological totality of revelation and salvation in such a fashion as to eminently expose, so to speak, the "heart" of God, the essential reality, that forms and moves everything else? Christian Revelation itself, it would appear, offers us with just such a concept, a concept that has proved effective in the life of such outstanding Christians as Francis of Assisi and Mother Theresa of Calcutta: the *kénôsis toû Theoû*, God's self-emptying love. Are we correct in thinking that a presentation and explanation of this key concept of our Christian faith might assist us and the Muslim to perceive the core of the affirmation of our Christian faith?

When the Apostle Paul introduced his letter to the Philippians with the exhortation: 'Make your own the mind of Jesus Christ!'(See 2,6-11), he did not just present an artificially ascetic appendix to our faith, but rather indicated its core.

Who, being in the form of God
Did not count equality with God
Something to be grasped.

But he emptied himself
Taking the form of a slave,
Becoming as human beings are;
And being in every way like a human being,
He was humbler yet,
Even to accepting death, death on a cross.

And for this God raised him high,
And gave him the name
Which is above all other names;
So that all beings
In the heavens, on earth and in the underworld,
Should bend the knee at the name of Jesus

And that every tongue should acknowledge
Jesus as Lord,
To the glory of the Father.

As other religions also maintain, God loves both men and women and He is merciful to sinners. However, this offer is largely rejected, and thus a drama unfolds which leads to the refusal of the message of mercy as well as of the repentance this message demands and ends in the ignominious crucifixion of the Savior. As this point all seems to be lost, because Jesus is the 'eschatological' deliverer and giver of salvation. After Jesus, God's 'own beloved son' (cf. Lk 20,13), no new offer on the part of God is possible. But

exactly at this turning point the unexpected occurs: God turns the rejection on the part of sinners of the ultimate deliverer of salvation, 'his own beloved son,' into their redemption: '*The stone which the builders rejected has become the cornerstone*' (cf. Lk 20,17, quoted from Ps 118,22). The cross, therefore, becomes the sacrament of salvation, the 'place' of resurrection to new life, in the power of the Spirit and through the Son of the Father.

The Son's offering of himself for sinful humanity is the act which St. Paul defines as *heautòn ekénosen*: He emptied himself. The letter to the Philippians states this offering of self directly of Jesus. But the oblation of self on the part of the Son ('for us' [Eph 5,2], 'for the Church' [Eph 5,25], 'for me' [Gal 2,20]) is inconceivable without Him being offered by the Father ('for us all' [Rom 8,32]):'who was handed over to death for our sins and raised to life for our justification' (Rom 4,25). The two concepts (a) *paradidónai* (to transmit, hand over, extradite) which in its noun form becomes *parádosis* (tradition, extradition) and (b) *kenôo* (to empty self) and its substantival form *kénosis*, theologically define one and the same 'act' or 'action', and that is the 'center or focal point of the content of revelation and faith,' it is 'the one foundation of Christian revelation.'

I should think that this kind of theological approach could be of significant 'use' in our meeting in faith with Muslims and our task '*to give account of our faith*' (1 Peter 3,15), when they request that we do so.

Jesus proves Himself to be the Son who alone can reveal the Father, because '*no one knows the Father except the Son*' (Matt 11,27) The 'revealing' concerning which the Matthaean text speaks is not only the communication of an intimate knowledge in words; rather, it is Jesus in his entirety (Gestalt) who reveals the Father, so that He can in reality affirm: '*He who has seen me, has seen the Father*' (Jn 14,9) Faith alone can assist in such 'seeing'. In the full Johannine sense of the expression 'to believe' it, is not only to acquiesce in a 'dark' mystery, completely inaccessible to the human spirit, but rather a *Wahr-nehmen* (per-ceiving; comprehending), *Ein-sehen* (*in-tuire*, recognizing), a spiritual contemplating which is mediated through *'the Spirit of truth who does not speak of his own accord but will say only what he has been told,'* (Jn 16,13-15). This is to aver that he will speak only from the Father and from Christ!

Therefore, God in himself and God for us form a totality. Thus Karl Rahner has formulated the principle: 'The "economic" Trinity is the "immanent" Trinity and vice-versa. If with St. Paul we would wish to understand the Incarnation of the Son of God as self-emptying out of Love, we must presuppose that there exists in God a kind of 'movement' that urges him to such self-emptying. This 'movement' cannot be but the inner-divine love which is itself a kind of 'self-emptying', 'a giving or offering of self': The Father does not cling on to His own being; rather He completely bequeaths to another, to the Son who possesses it only by owning it totally to the Father in gratitude (*ver-danken*), in a response qualified by an immeasurable depth (*Hin-gabe*); which profoundly denotes 'a giving of self.' This is, truly, a personal turning to one another of the first and second person, the fiery breath of their mutual love, the Holy Spirit.

One cannot comprehend the meaning of 'person' as long as one considers interpersonal love in God superfluous or impossible on the ground that God is only One and that, therefore, this divine unity of being, God, has no need of 'becoming' one through Love. In fact, there exists no higher or more noble spiritual act than personal love which is possible only by the free self-offering of persons to one another. This activity, although it corresponds completely to the *nature* of God, must as yet be distinguished from it on the 'thought level'; that is 'formally in thought'. God is in himself love through the *perichoresis*, the *circumincessio*, which is the self-giving into each other (*das Ineinanderverströmen*) of the Divine Persons.

The origin (*der Ur-sprung*), however, of any other 'self-emptying' of God (*der Selbstentäusserung Gottes*) is by way of creation and sanctification (*Begnadigung*), and by way of incarnation and the offering of self unto death 'for others.' The 'not-clinging-to-oneself' of the Divine Persons, *die Ur-Kenose*, is the *Ur-impuls* for the not-clinging-to-Himself' of God in His creation, in the 'marriage-bond' with Israel and, finally, for the son's not-clinging to His godhead, to his divine power and to His glory, but rather the entire and unqualified giving of self, and thus suffering, dying, rising from the dead and ascending to the right hand of the Father in heaven.

It is of utmost importance for a deeper understanding of God, constantly to keep before us these correspondences, because they constitute the presupposition for any 'justified' knowledge of God. It begins 'from below', in creation and the concrete historical Jesus whose transparency for God reveals the 'above', the inner life of God. Thus it becomes possible for any human knowledge of God to change, as it were, the perspective (point of view) and really to begin to understand creation, incarnation and the Cross from the viewpoint of the Tri-unity of God. Moreover, it is precisely there where we were 'transported' in our contemplating of the human person and the Jesus event in time and place. With this, indeed, we glean profound wisdom into the logic of the Incarnation.

We are searching for the culminating point of all theology, the position from which God and all that He does 'comes into view', and we discover it exactly here: it is the *kénosis* of our Tri-une God as One-and-all, as the genuine expression of the absolute freedom of His divine love.

At this point it is possible to distinguish seven modes of the divine *kénosis*:

1. the *Ur-Kenose* in God, which is the generation of the Son and the breathing of the Holy Spirit;

2. the *kénosis* of God in creation which we could detect in relation to the incarnation;

3. towards which it is ordered;

4. the *kénosis* of Jesus Christ on the Cross;

5. which is sacramentally continued in the Eucharist;

6. the *kénosis* of the Holy Spirit in the minds-and-hearts of human beings;

7. the participation of Christians and of all brothers and sisters of Jesus Christ (i.e. all human beings), in spirit and life, in the *kénosis* of Christ Jesus.

In sum: We Christians believe in the *kénosis*, i.e., the self-emptying, self-giving love of the triune God.

8.2. Practical implications

The notion of *kénosis*, like most theological concepts is abstract. If excerpted in isolation from the historical Jesus Christ-event, it definitely risks to remain bland and distant. However, in the live of Jesus and in that of His saints we see *kénosis* lived out before our eyes.

The Qur'an states that 'Christ disdaineth not to be servant of God'(*lam yastankifi l-Masîhu an yakûna `abdan*) (4,172, cf. 19,30; 43,59). It would suffice to change one word of the Qur'anic text, namely putting instead of *yakûn yasîr*, and we would have the text of Phil 2,7: Christ did not consider it below His dignity to become *doulos* = *`abd* = servant, slave. However, the idea of Paul could not enter the Qur'an because it presupposes the divinity Christ. For the Qur'an all are servants/slaves excepted Allah.

For Paul, in contrast, Jesus the Christ - notwithstanding his divine condition - chose to empty Himself of His Godhead out of love of us, in order to become one among us, even the least of humans, a slave (*`abd*).

This is the total submission to the Will of the Father, it is the most perfect obedience, submission (*islâm*) in all its depth to the will of the Father. In this sense Christ is the true Muslim (*muslim*), totally 'given over' to the love of the Father. He can realize this because He is God. And He invites and enables the Christian to follow Him in this, to live the same. This is the deep meaning of the Passion-Death-Resurrection (Paschal) mystery of the *kénosis* of Christ.

This *kénosis* of Christ should have a fundamental importance in the life of the individual Christian and of the Church: it signifies the refusal of power for power's sake and the understanding of authority as service, as Jesus teaches the apostles (Mk 10,42-45, almost identical with Mat 20,25-28):

> *You know that among the gentiles those they call their rulers lord it over them, and their great man make their authority felt. Among you this is not to happen. No; anyone who wants to become great among you must be your servant, and anyone who wants to be first among you must be slave to all. For the Son of man himself came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.'*

St. Luke places this teaching at the eve of the death of Christ as if to give it the value of last testament. In his vision, the motive of such an attitude which contradicts all normal usage in the world, is Christ Himself: 'For who is the greater: the one at table or the one who serves? The one at table, surely? Yet here am I among you as one who serves!' (Lk 22,27)

This is the key teaching of the Gospel and – as history amply demonstrates – most difficult to accept and live . In St. John's gospel the reality of Christ's choice to be the Servant of all and his call to follow Him precisely in this, finds expression in the washing of the feet: 'When he had washed their feet and put on his outer garments again he went back to the table. "Do you understand" he said, "what I have done to you? You call me Master and Lord, and rightly; so I am. If I, then, the Lord and Master, have washed your feet, you must wash each other's feet. I have given you an example, so that you may copy what I have done to you" (Jn 13,12-15).

Christ is conscious of being the Master and Lord, to have the power and authority over his disciples, and yet he chooses to be their servant. This should be of heightened significance in the context of Christian-Muslim relations. Why? I perceive Islam as a religion of power, a religion which seeks, in the name of God with all legitimate means, to take power and having once attained it, in the name of God, to hold on to it. There exists in Islam a tactics of power and a great ability to arrive at the final goal, in the name of God. This is not a reproach (in as much as the means employed be honest and respectful of the freedoms of the others). It is rather an observation.

The individual Christian and the Church should be fully conscious of their call to be sons of God in Christ and of the fact that they have received all in Jesus Christ, the Alpha and Omega of history. Beyond insisting on the basic rights of all our fellow humans, individuals and groups, we are called as individuals and as Church to give the witness of self-less service on the pattern of Christ. Christians as individuals, as groups and as Church will have to discern ever anew what are the proper ways of living their vocation to service in given Christian-Muslim circumstances.

9. Speaking about the God of our faith in parables

My personal experience over the past years in teaching Christian themes on Muslim faculties of theology in Turkey has convinced me that the most adequate way of speaking about the heart of our Christian faith - it is understood that I have always been invited by Muslims to do so – is through the narrating of stories and parables, the way in which Jesus also taught. I have repeatedly told the following parable in the context of personal conversation, either in small groups or even in classroom teaching. It will become immediately evident that my parable is an adaptation and modification of Jesus' parable about the 'prodigal' son (or, better, of the loving father) in Luke 15,11-32 and of the master of the vineyard in Luke 20,9-18.

> There lived a wealthy and widely respected banking director in Frankfurt. He was married and had several children They resided in a magnificent villa in the lovely green and quite outskirts of the city. They lacked nothing. But one day the youngest son disappeared. In fact, his busy father had not noticed that his son became friends with a group of youths in the neighborhood. These were youngsters who were given to drugs and dreamed of a life of arrant independence, far away from straight German society. Without informing his father, one day the son had disappeared, he left for the Goan coasts of Western India. He lived there off the money, which his father had put into a special bank-account towards his university education.
>
> This sudden and sly departure saddened and hurt the father. It took some time for him to discover his son's whereabouts. He wrote him letters after letters, but his letters never brought him any reply. This is what he wrote:
>
> *My dear son,*
>
> *I think of you constantly. I do not know why you left me. Perhaps I have been too busy with my work and thus failed to be with you as much as you would have liked and deserved. Maybe it is precisely this that made you feel unwanted and lonely at home. But whatever may have happened, please do come back. And please be sure that I have pardoned you and desire to be close to you, to spend much tine with you. All you have to do is to come back think of you all the time, every day, and I long for the day of your return home!*

The son did not respond in any way tot the father's plea. But one day the father learned of some friends of the family who intended to spend their holiday in India. He immediately contacted them and informed and told them about his son in Goa. He mercifully implored them to visit his son whilst there were there. 'Here is his address. Please go and personally tell him in my name how very much I yearn for his coming back home. Because of his absence and silence, I suffer deeply in mind-and-heart. Please, try to persuade him to believe that in no way do I harbor any grudge against him. On the contrary...

The family's friends went to India and met the son. Their unexpected visit surprised and profoundly moved him. At first he was inclined to return back to Germany with them. But as much as he tried he found it difficult to separate himself from his friends and their frivolous lifestyle. This, in spite of the fact that he was left with practically no money and so was compelled to beg.

When his friends back in Frankfurt informed the father about this, he said to himself: 'I myself must go to Goa, India, to be reunited with my son. In any event, life without him has become meaningless for me. I'll resign from my position and become a 'hippie' like him. Just to be with him will be my joy in life. When he sees and understands my concern and deep love for him first hand, he will surely not remain unmoved. As I see it, this is the only way, hopefully, that he will be able to freely to decide to return home with me.

But his family, friends and associates in Frankfurt protested: 'How can you abandon your important position in the company, which is crucial to the economy of the State? Just because you want to join your incorrigibly ungrateful son? Forget it! You're exaggerating! Haven't you already done all that's possible and expected of you as a righteous and merciful father? You discovered his whereabouts. You sent him letter after letter. Even messengers! You have not forgotten him. Your way of acting now is outrageous, even scandalous, not worthy of your high standing. Furthermore, your son is intelligent enough to understand your many invitations and you generous offer to forgive him in spite of everything he had done. Now let him act like a responsible person; he knows quit well what to do.

Still, the father insisted: 'Everything that I have done has had no effect on my beloved son. It is clear to me that he lacks the courage to return home alone. When he sees me, touches me, hears my voice, surely he will be moved. It's really up to me now to take the initiative. I'll become like him and join him. He will surely repent. I know my son.

To conclude, the father, the affluent and renowned banker, resigned from his honorable position. Now prepared, he put his back-pack on his shoulders and so made the long journey to the shores of Goa in India.

When he met his son, his son was completely overwhelmed, deeply ashamed. His first reaction was again to reject his father, but his father just stayed on, without uttering many words. Eventually the son's resistance began to soften. But one day he went to his father who lovingly embraced him and so both returned home. Together they lived in joy and peace for the rest of their lives.

So, if we wish to understand God's greatest greatness', as Christian faith perceives it, it is exactly here. It was reveled in Jesus' parable, in his life. God, Jesus' Father, brought to light this divine magnanimity. It exceeds all human comprehension of imagination, especially when he makes Himself equal to us human beings, sharing with us every aspect of our human condition except sin. Thus God in Jesus has offered us an example of how we can transform our hearts-and-minds, our entire lives, to imitate Him in order to share his triune life of love forever!

10. Jesus Christ – The Liberator[1]

Jesus Christ is free and makes his disciple free from all constraints and all dimensions. St. Paul expresses this clearly:

> *'But now that faith has come...there can be neither Jew nor Greek, there can be neither slave nor freeman, there can be neither male nor female – for you are all one in Christ Jesus'* (Gal 3,28).

Or as Colossians 3,11 puts it:

> *'Now there is no room for distinction between Greek and Jew, between the circumcised and the uncircumcised, or between barbarian and Scythian, slave and free. There is only Christ: he is everything and he is in everything'.*

10.1. Christ Frees us from any Sharî`ah

When Paul says: 'There is no longer Jew nor Greek', he underlines the fact that Christ has freed man from the Jewish Law as he now frees him from the *sharî`ah* There is no need to remind us of the detailed prescriptions of the Jewish Law as taught and authoritatively proposed by the teachers of the Jewish Law, the *fuqahâ* of the time. One understands the revolution brought by Jesus and the scandal it provoked. This Law as taught and practiced by established religion in Jesus' time, in His view ultimately paralyzed man's movement towards God. Christ frees us and all humankind of any *sharî`ah.*

The Christian who lives in Islam-determined societies becomes vividly aware of the centrality of this point, even more so in the context of the vigorous efforts over the past decades towards a world-wide revival of Islam in terms of reinstating integrally the *sharî`ah*, including its political component. At this point it is worth underlining that the so-called fundamentalist movements of Islam, whilst they do not represent the whole of Islam, they certainly are and understand themselves to be an authentic Islam in that they continue in the context of our times a respected and powerful tradition of interpreting the normative sources of Islam.

The major concern of the leading figures of the Islamic revival as, for instance of Khomeini, Maududi and more recent Islamist thinkers of the type of Ghanoussi is conformity with the detailed and comprehensive prescriptions of the *sharî`ah.* One of their constant basic concerns is, how to fulfil the legal prescriptions of the *sharî`ah* (esp. regarding 'the five pillars') integrally and in a ritually pure manner (*halâl*). This concern clearly takes precedence over the content of the ritual actions themselves. The same could be said of the catechism taught to children in the mosques the world over. Concerning alimentation, buying and selling, sexual relations etc. there are numerous rules which should make sure that the act performed will be *halâl* and not *harâm.* And if by leaving out detail, the prayer has become illicit, what must I do in order to make it a licit performance. The study of these books which address themselves to all sincere followers of Islam, represent authentic Islam. The Christian believer in close and regular contact with practising Muslims becomes aware how much Christ liberates his followers from the straightjacket of the Jewish Law and any other Law resembling it as to matter

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[1] Here again, I follow closely Samir Khalil Samir – see bibliography.

and spirit. In this way I have come to appreciate better the passionate mind and language of St Paul, someone who after having tried to live this kind of religion uncompromisingly, met Jesus Christ as Liberator from the Law.

10.2. Christ liberates from all discrimination

Similarly, Christ liberates his true disciple from any ethnic-racial, cultural, social, sexual or even religious discrimination. Clearly the Qur'an and the Tradition condemn any ethnic-racial discrimination. As a Hadith says: 'I have come to bring together white and black, yellow and red.' However, the Qur'an makes a net distinction - of grave juridical consequences - between believer and non-believer. More exactly, it distinguishes three categories of men: the Muslim (member of the *umma* and called 'believer', *mu'min*), the Jew and the Christian or *dhimmî* and the others.

The Gospel, in contrast, does not know in a comparable way, of such a categorisation, not even on the religious level:

> *You have heard how it was said, You will love your neighbor and hate your enemy. But I say this to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven, for he causes his sum to rise on the bad as well as on the good, and sends down rain to fall on the upright and the wicked alike* (Mt 5,43-45).

And a little afterwards:

> *You must therefore set no bounds to your love, just as your heavenly Father sets non to his'* (Mt 5.48).

In this way Christ invites his disciples in treating people not to distinguish between good and bad, just and unjust (the *abrâr* and the *kuffâr*), in order to act in the image of God the Father.

10.3. Christ inaugurates a truly universal fraternity

The notion of brotherhood either applies universally or not at all. To say that all the believers are brothers and at the same time implying that they are not brothers with the non-believers, equals gainsaying the notion of fraternity. From the moment I exclude one single person in principle, there is no more universal brotherhood.

Now Christ teaches that there is absolutely no frontier or barrier between human beings. In a sense this is quite uncomfortable. Ephesians formulates this teaching in its own inimitable way:

> *For He [Jesus Christ] is the peace between us, and has made the two into one entity and broken down the barrier which used to keep them apart, by destroying in his own person the hostility, that is, the Law of commandments with its decrees. His purpose in this was, by restoring peace, to create a single New Man out of the two of them, and through the cross, to reconcile them both to God in one Body; in his own person he killed the hostility* (Eph 2,14-16).

The universality of Christ's message thus understood distinguishes it from any other. Christ comes to bring a liberating message which tears down all barriers and walls. It says: Ultimately there is not, and there must not be supposed to be, any duality of: God and Man, man and man, believer and unbeliever, man and woman (we could think of Q 2,228 which says that there obtains between man and woman a degree of difference (*darajah*) or the

verse (Q 4,34) which affirms that men have superiority or authority (*qawwâmûn `ala)* over women, and so on). There is only God who is all in all, in Jesus Christ.

Christ brings to humanity with himself the message of absolute, total liberation.

10.4. Christ liberates from death

This same message expresses itself finally in the tearing down of the ultimate wall, the wall of death which Christ Himself destroys. This is the absolute and total liberation. The Qur'an states: 'They slew him not nor crucified, but it appeared so unto them' (4,157). One can interpret this verse in various ways; however, whatever the interpretation may be, the Muslims in the diversity of their opinions are agreed in the denial of Christ's death and crucifixion. Now, if Christ has not died, he is not risen. As Paul reminds us: *'And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is pointless'* (1 Cor 15,17).

Quite clearly this point is fundamental. The death of Christ, for us, as well as for anybody else informed about history, cannot be doubted. The resurrection of Christ, in contrast, is an act of faith which can be refused or accepted. Its meaning is basic for us. Once all the walls (as e.g. religious, theological, cultural, psychological, etc.) have been torn down by the passion of Christ, the last wall (which is the wall of death) is being destroyed by His divinity, by the fact that He is God and Man in one being.

Furthermore, by this passion-resurrection, Jesus Christ – who through the Incarnation identifies with every man – raises all and everyone towards God His Father, as he has promised Himself: *'And when I am lifted up from the earth, I shall draw all people to myself'* (Jn 12,32).

In Greek, being lifted up has a double meaning (as the Gospel according to St. John frequently employs words of double meaning). It gives expression to the lifting up of Jesus on the cross as well as of his being lifted up to heavenly glory.

11. Concluding remarks

In this talk I have referred to various different doctrines. I have pointed out the emphases of my Christian faith in the context of encountering Muslims and Islam. However, ultimately the Christian faith flows from, is sustained by, and wants to lead to, only one mystery, that of the self-giving Love of God. All statements the Christian faith makes about God refer to different manifestations of the one movement of God's self-giving and self-emptying love in which shines forth His divine glory and power. Consequently, all the Christian faith has to say about man's true nature and vocation is summed up in the one commandment of unconditional love of God and neighbour. The 'commandment' is really the invitation to all and everyone to allow themselves to be transformed into participants in divine life, the communion of triune Love.

The teaching of Jesus Christ in Mt 5,48: 'Try to be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect' (Bible of Jerusalem: 'You must set no bounds to your love, just as your heavenly Father sets none to his') seems to ask for the humanly impossible. And indeed, taken to be a legal prescription, this command would

be absurd. However, what Christ tells us is this: no limits are set to your spiritual growth, because the energy, the model and the aim of such growth is the triune God Himself. He invites us and enables us through His Spirit to grow ever more into being living images of His Son. The only real failure on our part would be lack of confidence and faith in God.

The essence of my Christian life is *Sendung (*being sent) as Jesus Christ was sent. Which concrete form this *Sendung* (mission) takes will depend on the particularities of a given situation. If it is not informed by self-giving love and deep respect for the freedom of the other as other, it lacks in the qualities of the One, in name of whom it claims to speak. Hence Christian *Sendung* (mission, apostolate) will be marked by deep respect for everything that has been brought about in human beings by the Spirit who blows where it wills, and it will be aware of the dangers of manipulation and exploitation of ignorance in so-called missionary efforts. Whether life-in-mission takes the form of a silent presence, of service, of patient listening and research, of exchange of ideas and ideals, of struggle for a more adequate understanding of the truth, of work for peace or also of *parrhesia*, that is, the courageous announcing of the good news of God's mystery of love as it has been revealed to the Church for the benefit and joy of all.

The aim of God in sending Christ and hence the aim of all God does in preparation for it, namely, creation and guidance through the prophets, is stated by Christ himself: 'I have come so that they may have life and have it to the full' (Jn 10,10) And this endless life consists in this: 'to know the only true God and Jesus Christ whom He has sent (cf. Jn 17,3).

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Christology as an Issue in Inter Faith Dialogue

James Dunn [summarised]

In Jewish-Christian dialogue, the important issue is not that of Jesus as a Jew or as a prophet, or even as Messiah; rather, the issue is that of the deity of Christ (as in dialogue with Islam). The question posed is, whether or not Christianity can still claim to be genuinely monotheistic if claims to Jesus' divine status are accepted. This paper sets out some of the implications of biblical research for this question.

1. From where did the language of deity or of incarnation for Christ emerge?

A century ago, the dominant scholarly answer to this question would have been expressed in terms of myths of gods dying and rising. However, such an explanation is implausible if we look more closely at the type of myths proposed. Thus, on one hand the Ancient Near Eastern motifs associated with the divinity of kings are not close enough in time; on the other hand, the 'Gnostic Redeemer Myth' suggested by Bultmann was not yet in existence.

The current consensus is that the origins of this Christological language are to be found in the Wisdom mythology of Judaism, as exemplified in Prov 8.22-31, Sir 24, Bar 3.9-44, Wisdom of Solomon (e.g. 9.9), and Philo. However, this raises the question: 'What is Wisdom?' Three possible answers can be discussed here.

(a) Wisdom might have been viewed as a 'Second God' – one of many intermediaries between the primal divinity and creation. Suggestive here would be the glorification of angelic beings (e.g. in Ezek 8.2-3 or Dan 10.5-6), or of heroes. However, Judaism, rooted in the *Shema*, remained firmly monotheistic, as 2nd Isaiah testifies. No cult of Wisdom is known to have developed; the 'angels' were interpreted as a heavenly retinue (e.g. Job 1-2), and any idea of a 'second divine power' was rejected.

(b) Wisdom could be viewed as a *hypostasis*. Yet it must be recognised that this is a technical term from the vocabulary of later centuries; as an ontological way of describing a relation to personhood, this concept did not exist in New Testament times.

(c) We could speak less precisely of a 'personification' of Wisdom. Two scriptural backgrounds can be adduced here. On one hand, in the vigour of Hebrew poetry, Wisdom functions as an extended metaphor (cf Ps 85.10-11, Is 51.9, Joseph & Asenath 15.7-8, Sir 24.13-18). On the other hand, 'Wisdom' is also used as a way of speaking about God (e.g. Wis 10-11) in ways parallel to the use of 'Spirit', 'Word', 'Glory', etc (Ps 139.7, Wis 18.15).

Of these possible answers, (a) could explain the emergence of early views of Jesus, with Christianity as a kind of mystical Judaism; (b) should be seen as a solution to a later problem, not as itself a source of an emerging conceptuality; (c) raises the question of the extent to which one can speak of a 'binitarian' view of God in Second Temple Judaism – as in the polarity of God being far

and God being near. It is questionable whether Jewish scholarship would accept such an interpretation – it would certainly be ruled illegitimate if seen as in any way a challenge to the unity of God.

2. What light does this shed on the earliest Christology?

Paul draws repeatedly on Wisdom language – for example in 1 Cor 1.24, 30; 8.6; 10.4; Gal 4.4-6; Col 1.15-20 – to speak of Christ as the divine agent in creation. What is Paul doing in these passages? He is arguing that, if Wisdom can be seen as a way of summing up God's relation with the cosmos and with humankind (or specifically with Israel), then Jesus expresses and embodies that Wisdom. Jewish writers had used the same approach in relation to Torah: Sir 24.23, Bar 4.1 insist that to understand or to access God's Wisdom it is necessary to turn to the Torah. Paul can be understood as treating Christ in just the same way (1 Cor 1).

Three remarks may be noted here. First, Paul holds this kind of talk within the context of monotheism (Rom 3.30; 1 Cor 8.4, 6; Gal 3.20; 1 Tim 1.17; 2.5; 6.15-16). Second, he uses 'Lord' primarily in the sense of Ps 110.1 (note 1 Cor 15.24-28). He can apply to Jesus the "Lord" which appears in some YHWH texts (Phil 2.10-11; Rom 10.13), yet he also speaks of God as the 'God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ'. Third, it is significant that Paul's Christology was not objected to by fellow Jews except with specific reference to the Cross (1 Cor 1.23; Gal 3.13).

So we may say that Paul's Christology remained within the complex of Second Temple monotheism. Of course, it stretched the boundaries of this tradition, and seems to have been the first to apply Wisdom language to a human person in quite this way, yet Paul's commitment to monotheism in itself remained unbroken.

3. What of Johannine exclusivism (John 14.6)?

Here it is even more imperative to set John's Christology within its historical context. John was writing at a time when the concern to know divine revelation was at fever pitch – as evidenced by a longing for the revival of prophecy, by a dabbling in apocalyptic visions and mystical journeys (Ezek 1; 1 Enoch), and by speculation about the figure of the 'Son of Man' in Dan 7 – and about Wisdom. John jumps right into all this, through developing his motif of the Son's 'sending' by the Father, through the pattern of the ascending and descending Son of Man, and through the equation of Jesus with the Logos (Jn 1.8, 20; 1.17; 3.13; 4.13-14; 6.30-35),

Bultmann claimed that in John's Gospel the 'the only thing Jesus reveals is that he is Revealer'. However, this is not in fact all: he also reveals God (Jn 1.18, 47-51; 6.46; 12.41, 45), and indeed is the definitive revealer of God (Jn 14.9). Jn 14.6 should be read as an expression of the Wisdom Christology: Jesus is to be recognised as the definitive embodiment of that Logos which enlightens everyone (Jn 1.9).

4. The first great Christological controversy was over monotheism.

The issue at stake in this controversy was: 'Is Christianity monotheistic?' This question was bound to be raised at a time when the Rabbis were becoming nervous over some of the speculative elements in Second Temple Judaism –

rabbinic literature sees warnings against mystical speculation, the disappearance of apocalypses, and the repudiation of 'second power' heresies. Johannine Christianity was seen as guilty of these kind of excesses (cf Jn 5.18; 10.33). Christians were judged by the rabbis to have abandoned the unity of God – hence Jn 9.22 and 12.42, By contrast, John and the first Christians saw his Christology as being still within monotheism.

It is significant that this initial high road of Christology was mapped out by the concepts of Logos and Wisdom. The deity of Christ, as formulated in these terms, was an attempt to spell out the continuity between God and Jesus – in fact, the two-stage pattern of the Logos as unspoken and spoken allowed for this transition to be made rather easily, so that Jesus could emerge as an expression of the hidden mind of God. Consequently, the alternatives available to the Christian community at this stage were seen as being either docetism on one hand or modalism on the other. Both of these were theological paths designed to remain within the parameters of monotheism, the givenness of which for Christian faith was retained.

It was only later, when the battle over Christian monotheism had been long since won, that the Logos Christology gave way to the Son Christology (as at Nicaea), and the question of continuity gave way to the question of relation. Our problems in Christology arise from the fact that we make the latter issue our starting-point, and tend to forget about the former; yet such a strategy exposes us to the danger of lapsing into tri-theism.

5. Conclusions for dialogue

This suggests some clear directions for Christology in dialogue. The language of Jesus' divinity, I have argued, developed because Christology was seen as a way of speaking about God; the Incarnation Christians initially confessed was the incarnation of God, not of the Son of God. Christology expresses the conviction that Jesus shows us what God is like. There is a need to get back to this through the later dogmatic definitions, which could in fact in some situations be seen as over-definitions. Later developments are today in danger of obscuring the early foundational points of Christian belief; we need through dialogue to recover Christology in the service of our core belief in God as One.

Christology and Other Faiths

Ruth Page

My remit was to report on what is happening in Christology research at the moment which has a bearing on relations with other faiths. But I have to report that very little is happening. This is due, partly, to the current theological enthusiasm for the Trinity, and that in the mode of the Greek Fathers, not in relation to other conceptions of God. I went through ten years of book reviews in the journal *Theology* to give me a start on what to read, but there was little enough there on interfaith relations, let alone something which looked at the primacy every Christian gives to Christ in relation to other accounts of revelation. Such books on Christology as treat the subject are mostly already on the booklist for this conference. What I have decided I will do today, then, is state what I believe on this matter, which will include giving an account of where I diverge from other writers. Perhaps one rounded account is better than an itemised report, and, since there is an excellent amount of space in this conference for discussion, no doubt other views will emerge, with mine as the one to bounce them off.

There seem to me to be two fundamental understandings of God which underpin everything else and need to be in place before we come to the question of Christ and other faiths, although of course the Christian understanding of God is shaped by Christ. One of these may be seen as an implication of the Incarnation in the first place, and the other comes through cultural changes in our own society.

The first reflection on God concerns the increasing importance given to divine immanence in recent theology. Immanence has always been a minor theme in theology, deriving both from the incarnation and the presence of the Holy Spirit. But undoubtedly the notion of God's transcendence of creation in ineffable glory has been dominant. Indeed the problem has been that transcendence and immanence have become opposite and competing quasi-locations for divine presence. In the end I believe these two have to be thought together, so that God's transcendence radiates out infinitely from every local immanence, and God is never thought to be absent from creation. In the meantime, however, immanence became more important again through the 1970's when God as the fellow-sufferer with those who suffer become critical for liberation theology, and in the description by Moltmann of *The Crucified God*. This was not a transcendent God immune from the suffering of the Son or the suffering of other people, but one who was there, involved in it all.

Thus far, however, divine immanence had been thought only within Christian borders. But if it is taken as a theological datum in relation to other faiths it sets up a number of important possibilities, especially when immanence is not separated from transcendence. For instance, when God was primarily thought of as distantly transcendent, it was possible to think of revelation as coming, so to speak, down one beam of light to one place – Israel, say, but not Africa or China. These could then be thought of a dark and godless places with

which God had not communicated. So the missionary movement of the nineteenth century, with great courage, faith and perseverance, certainly, undertook to 'take' God to the godless places. It was believed that God could not go unless God were taken. That could not have happened except that the emphasis on transcendence implied God's absence outside the sphere of revelation – in spite of the belief in God as Maker of heaven and earth.

What a difference, however, when God is thought of primarily as immanently transcendent, indwelling creation, for in that case God is omnipresent – there is no place in which God is not to be found. Such a God cannot be 'taken' anywhere – in fact, only a partial, tribal god can be taken around. Missionary after missionary recorded with surprise that God was not so much taken as met where they were going; that they were discovering people whose lives manifested what in Christian terms are the fruits of the Spirit. But in God's presence is thought of as only communicated here but not there is no way of accounting for these characteristics, and in many theologies of the traditional type they are simply irrelevant, falling short of saving knowledge in Christ.

Alternatively, if one believes that God is everywhere immanently, is constant and thus is never out of character, so that the divine presence is always a creating/saving presence, one may see such 'saints', as John Hick does not scruple to call them, as signs that the religion in which they grew is what he well calls 'a context of salvific transformation'.[1] That conclusion seems to me right, for God can never be other than God, and never out of character. Those who would deny the character of other faiths as responses to the presence of the omnipresent God must hold that God is for the most part absent and uncaring; those who would affirm such a character for other faiths must hold that God is omnipresent, and that the divine presence is available to everyone who will respond to it.

Yet the religions themselves which produce such saints are very different. But that, I believe, is because the encounter with God does not take place in a vacuum, but in the midst of the culture in which the person lives. The experience will be expressed in terms of that culture – its concepts, images, values and social organisation – and these may vary widely. The very experience will therefore be different. Of course the experience may also critique the culture, as Jesus criticised some contemporary forms of the Jewish religion, and as the Buddha stringently criticised the culture he had grown up in. I include non-theist Buddhists in this category, not because I wish to say that they are 'really' theists, another imperialist move, but using Hick's handy abstract of 'the Real' rather than God for that to which one responds. He defends the wideness of the term by saying that 'infinity is an experience-transcending concept', and what we are talking of is in the end a mystery.[2]

I have just been writing a book on the church in which again the immanence of God was primary. I realised about the second last chapter that I had been tracing a kind of paradox: that a stress on the immanence of God requires a

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1 John Hick, *The Rainbow of Faiths: Critical Dialogues on Religious Pluralism* (London: SCM, 1995), p.111.

2 John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent* (London: Macmillan, 1989), p.258.

stress on the transcendence of men and women – a lateral transcendence of all set positions, for God is always ahead of us, beyond the boundaries by which we limit our ideas and actions, and that is true in relations with other faiths as well.

There is another related characteristic of God which is slowly making its way into the theological scene which is relevant here, and that is God's enjoyment of diversity. That change of perception, I believe, coheres with our culture's move away from modernity to post-modernity – though that change is, of course patchy. Modernity was, and still is, characterised, among other things, by a drive for uniformity of rational thought on the model of scientific empiricism, and a centralisation of institutions for maximum efficiency. Post-modernity, on the other hand, resists both uniformity and institutions, enjoying freedom of choice and the existence of the widest possible variety of choices. While such a free-for-all, in shopping, for instance, or in some New Age beliefs, has its problems, it has encouraged an appreciation of diversity, and not only in secular contexts.

One clear instance of this comes from the WCC. While it has not abandoned its concern for 'visible unity', it has suddenly come to appreciate the diversity of cultures, and cultural forms of religion, among its members representing 320 churches worldwide. Modernity was in effect the implementation of the belief that the modern western way of thinking and doing things was right and timelessly true. That belief has been shown to be faulty, and in response post-modernity enjoys variety without an immediate urge to rank things in order or criticise for differences interpreted as defects.

Certainly that diversity can present problems for the traditional, or even the partly traditional believer. I am not saying this cures all ills. Some have problems when Africans insist that their 'living dead' ancestors are part of the Christian community; or when a Korean women finds an image of the Holy Spirit in a *boddhisatva*, or a Chinese women suggests that the *Tao* may do for Chinese Christianity what the *Logos* did for the Greeks. But I doubt that we are in a position to cry syncretism, give how much of western culture has affected Christian belief here – one need only think of the problems the question of miracles has caused in the last 300 years can criticise if the fruit of the Spirit is lacking, but not if it is merely different.

So Christianity is itself a collection of rainbows within the one faith, and it is only by sticking with our own local and contemporary version that we may think of it as a unified collection of beliefs. If I may digress to give you one instance of diversity which has given me quiet amusement. You know that images of God within the Christian faith are many – biblical and post-biblical. The maritime British have added one – God as pilot, which would not have occurred to the Jews. An African theologian, Lamin Sanneh, has listed some from Africa, new to the west. One of these is God as the 'dewy-nosed One of a cattle rearing people'.[1] I thought of our climate in Britain, and of how common the common cold was, and thought that God as the dewy-nosed one would have quite a different resonance here – though perhaps that would be God as fellow-sufferer again!

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[1] Lamin Sanneh, 'Theological Method in Cultural Analysis', *International Review of Mission,* January-April 1995, p.59.

An unjaundiced look at the world – and our world is so much larger than even our fathers' – will perceive its diversity, and may come to enjoy it. From that it seems to me not a difficult move to suggest that God also enjoys diversity. Indeed, if God does not, then creation, from the very beginning, let alone the history of Israel and the Christian Church, to go no further, must have been very disappointing to the Creator. So diversity, including diversity among the world faiths, is not a thing to be overcome in a drive towards uniformity, but a matter to be enjoyed.

I have dwelt on these two characteristics of God – omnipresence and the enjoyment (enjoyment, not toleration) of diversity, because these seem to me to be the underpinning of all relationship with other faiths, and that if we start with Christ and that particularly we will not come to these characteristics. Further, I believe that the problems met in speaking of Christ's universality, finality and uniqueness find their perspective within these beliefs about God.

But it is to the particularity of Christ that I now turn. Vatican II made a gracious and eirenic 'Declaration of the Relationship of the Church to non-Christian Religions', finding estimable and profound features in all the main faiths and recommending prudent and loving dialogue as a result. Yet some of the thinking behind that declaration, particularly from Karl Rahner, caused concern for people of other faiths, and concern among people of other faiths. I regret this, for I think much of Rahner's writing on the grace of God is the best anywhere. But in the Christocentric 1960's he did express God's grace in other faiths as Christ's presence there, so that their members were 'anonymous Christians'. That, not surprisingly, came over as Christian imperialism, subsuming other faiths under their own saviour. Talk of a 'latent' Christ in other faiths has the same effect.

Hans Küng, ignoring all the other good things Rahner wrote on grace, argued forcefully that this was an endeavour to bring all people of good will and good life into the Roman Catholic Church by the back door, while those belonging to other faiths knew that they were not at all anonymous.[1] This is the situation where enjoying diversity where it is without trying to bring it prematurely into a unity shows its importance. Let me give you another example, this time from the Lebanese Orthodox Georges Khodr:

> Christ is hidden everywhere in the mystery of his lowliness. Any reading of religions is a reading of Christ. It is Christ alone who is received as light when grace visits a Brahmin, a Buddhist or a Mohammedan reading his own scriptures. Every martyr for the truth, every man persecuted for what he believes to be right, dies in communion with Christ.[2]

Yet in expressions of belief that all grace is Christ's grace, I want to ask: what does 'Christ' mean in this context? It is certainly not Jesus of Nazareth, a man of a particular time and place; rather this must be the cosmic Christ whose activity in this respect is not different from that attributed to the Holy Spirit. And since it has always been held that the effective work of the Trinity is the action of all three together, we are back with a notion of God, though a Christian perception of that. I therefore see no need to alarm those of other

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1 Hans Küng, *On Being a Christian* (London: Collins 1977), p.98.

2 Georges Khodr, 'Christianity in a Pluralistic World: The Economy of the Holy Spirit', *Ecumenical Review,* April 1971, pp.118f.

faiths by this manner of speech, for we need to think not only of what we say, but also of what we will be heard to say, and Christianity often comes over as a threatening rather than an attractive faith. You may have heard the saying: Two thousand years of Christian love is enough to make anyone nervous.

I am not at all saying that we relinquish the Christian faith in Christ. I believe the horizon of the Christian faith is universal, such that there is no one of any race or time who cannot be saved by the grace of Christ. But because I believe God to be omnipresent, I do not believe divine grace has been absent elsewhere, so I cannot say that everyone must be saved by Christ, or that all the grace experienced is Christ's. Yet even when I say that it is God's grace, my understanding of that and what it means has been shaped by the Christian faith. I cannot do otherwise. There is a limit to the amount of self-transcendence possible for anyone or desirable in interfaith relations. No doubt when Muslims join in inter faith dialogue their use of Allah is similarly coloured by their religion. But while the connotations of God for a Christian speaker will always be those of the Christian faith, that need not lead to the sense of superiority which subsumes the others under Christ's name. If God enjoys diversity God may well enjoy the diversity of responses to the offer of divine grace which runs through creation.

The affirmation of the uniqueness, finality and universality of Christ is therefore a confession of faith within the Christian church. It may certainly be preached by Christians, and made attractive by their way of life, but it is a religion of love, and so cannot be used to bludgeon people of other faiths into believing. Christianity is the majority religion in Britain, and that, I believe, gives us even greater cause to be careful in our relation to other faiths. There are Muslim countries where life is very difficult for Christians, because the political arm is backed up by some intemperate clerics, and that is not a way to go.

It is instructive to hear what Christian theologians in a country where Christianity is a minority religion have to say about aggressive claims for Christ and campaigns in his name. The Sri Lankan theologian Wesley Ariarajah is clear on this. First he writes that Christianity expressed as the one true faith comes across, as I said earlier, not as an attraction but as a threat, since the aim is to overpower and displace the faith of others. He continues:

> If Christians also believe that the Christ-event has a salvific significance for the whole of humanity it has to be witnessed to as a claim of faith. We cannot use this faith-claim as a basis to deny other claims of faith. However true our own experience, however convinced we are about a faith-claim, it has to be given as a claim of faith, and not as truth in the absolute sense.[1]

Only at that point does dialogue really become possible. There will be a level of humility in it, for, as the white South African David Bosch comments, humility should be for a Christian a matter of course, since the Christian faith is a religion of grace which has been freely received.[2] There is nothing in us which has made us heirs of so great a salvation. But that humility does not exclude witness. In fact Ariarajah argues that witness is essential:

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1 Wesley Ariarajah, *The Bible and People of Other Faiths* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1994), p.31.

2 David Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Mission Theology* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1990), p.484.

> We must begin with the affirmation that dialogue does not exclude witness. In fact, when people have no convictions to share, there can be no real dialogue.... In any genuine dialogue authentic witness must take place, for partners will bear witness to why they have this or that conviction.[1]

Dialogue, of course, also involves serious listening, just as we expect to be seriously heard. It will also involve some learning. Claude Geffré of the Institut Catholique de Paris notes what other faiths may offer to Christians in the way we live now:

> A better knowledge of the religious traditions of the East can teach an excessively activist and pragmatic Christianity to rediscover the value of gratuitousness, of silence, of not being in command, of moderation in using the earth's resources.[2]

What we discover in dialogue is how the response to God's grace has taken shape elsewhere, and there may be things for us to learn in relation to our own response to divine grace. What dialogue is not about is a synthesis of all the faiths, just as ecumenism is not about a synthesis of all the churches. Diversity is there to be enjoyed, whatever problems it may throw up.

Other faiths, then, need not frighten the churches, and do not lessen the claim within them that Christ is the way, the truth and the life. But they are not God-forsaken harvest-fields ready for conversion. Instead they are elaborated responses to what lies beyond all human expression – often imperfectly practised, as in Christianity, but capable of producing saints. To learn of them is to pursue what is, for Christian theists, what the God who was in Christ has been doing in the world.

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1 Ariarajah, *op. cit.*, p.68.

2 Claude Geffré, 'Mission Issues in the Contemporary Context of Multifaith Situations', *International Review of Mission*, July 1997, p.408.

Chairman's Summing up

Michael Nazir-Ali

1. We need further reflection on the normativeness of the Great Tradition (defined in Scripture) and the contemporary tasks of dialogue, witness and service in a plural world and in widely diverse situations. What is normative in the Great Tradition and what are the possibilities of the recognition of greater truth in the context of dialogue? Can there be re-reception of the Tradition and even genuine development? What are the criteria for these? What is the relationship between a variety of approaches and consonance with Tradition?

2. We need more work on concepts such as uniqueness, universality, particularity, finality and definitiveness. Can 'unique', for example, mean more than just 'different', and does 'universal' mean more than 'universally available'? Can revelation be 'definitive' without being 'exhaustive'? (cf Prof. Dunn on *Logos*)

3. Is it possible (or desirable) to transpose Christian language of 'salvation', for example, on to people of other faiths who may have different leading values? (cf Riffat Saeed and Hans Küng)

4. a) Is Western imperial history a significant impediment in terms of Christian witness in the context of dialogue? Should Asian, African and Latin American resources be used more in such situations?

b) Should we seek to study and to make available resources such as the Arab Christian apologetic we heard about from Prof. Troll?

c) What value has the work of scholars like Raimundo Panikkar, Bede Griffiths and Herbert Jai Singh, who use Hindu vocabulary to convey Christian truth? Is this procedure legitimate?

d) Should dialogue with primal traditions be given a higher profile? (e.g. among the *Dalits* in India)

e) What does the history of inculturation teach us?

5. How do we maintain a balance in our theological work between the freedom of divine initiative and the freedom of the human response?

6. There is a need to be precise in our language about God. For example, metaphors about transcendence should not be confused with the concept itself. We should beware of a naive reading of the Scriptures.

7. The ontic and the historical have to be kept in a proper balance. History is important for Christian faith but also how things are, how they have been made and what makes for their flourishing is important. We cannot avoid either historical questions or questions about the nature and purpose of creation.

8. Prof. Dunn's emphasis on the unity of God (echoed by many of our partners in dialogue) should alert us to the dangers of an unprincipled use of

the Social Analogy of the Trinity without the safeguards (e.g. *perichoresis*) proposed by the Eastern Fathers.

9. The early Christian writers were often writing in highly plural situations and some of them (Justin, Clement of Alexandria, Origen) tried to be positive in their evaluation of their religious context. These writers can refer to the poetry, philosophy, morality and even religious practices of their interlocutors in a positive way. For them, the incarnate Word is the definitive revelation of the *Logos* experienced in the traditions around them.

10. Christian Theology's bondage to modern 'uniformity' should warn us of the dangers of too quick an endorsement of post-modern 'diversity'. Mere diversity is no more desirable than mere uniformity.

11. We should be informed and even handed in the treatment of the spread of Islam, Hinduism and Christianity. Accurate scholarship is needed in these areas.

12. Our understanding of our partner's tradition should include awareness of criticism and reform within that tradition.

Issues and Questions

Elizabeth Harris

The very term 'Christian' points to the centrality of Christ within Christianity. This centrality is not under dispute. 'Christology', however, has emerged through the insights of Christians into the meaning and significance of the life and death of Jesus of Nazareth. All speakers asked questions about the process which shaped this thinking and the result. All suggested, in different ways, that the 'doing' of Christology was an ongoing process, raising questions such as the following:-

- Is the Christology or the Christologies of the Church an irreducible doctrinal core or can they change as other aspects of faith have changed in history?
- What is the wider context within which Christology takes shape? For instance, how is it linked to the issue of what kind of God we believe in?
- Can Christologies change through a deepening experience of the world of many faiths?
- Is Christology to be placed at the beginning or at the end of our wider theological explorations?

As I read through the notes I had taken from the presentations, dialogues and discussions of the Conference, the questions above leapt out at me and took focus around three main areas of concern:-

1. The challenges which are being mounted to some familiar formulations of Christology, arising from inter faith encounter;
2. The need to revisit and reassess the ways in which the churches have arrived at christological statements of faith i.e. how we 'do' Christology;
3. What the next steps should be within inter faith relations.

All relate to the empirical and practical rather than the metaphysical and ontological, although the latter were by no means absent in the Conference. Below are some of the questions and observations that I believe arose within each of these concerns, ordered rather haphazardly. Many cry out for further work to be done on them and my hope is that those present at the Conference will not be slow to take up this challenge.

1. Challenges to Christology

a. The effect of some familiar formulations of Christology on inter faith relations. Thomas Thangaraj stressed that some traditional, exclusivist christological statements have broken the spirits of people of other faiths and have prevented understanding and mutual appreciation between faiths. In other words, they have contributed to the way in which the religions of the world have hurt one another, and continue to hinder inter faith dialogue in the present. This has been compounded by Western imperial history when the triumphalism of empire was sometimes linked with a missionary triumphalism,

the legacy of which exists in some countries to this day in terms of mistrust between faiths. One way for Christians to glimpse the potential for hurt here is for them to attempt to see their words about other faiths through the eyes of people of that faith. How far should this potential for hurt lead us to question the Christology that has caused it?

b. The situated and conditioned nature of doctrinal formulations. Jimmy Dunn in particular stressed that the way in which the Church articulated christological understanding in the early centuries was conditioned by the context in which the early Christians found themselves, in particular by the dialogical context, for example the need to communicate with the dominant surrounding culture and religious beliefs. What was true for the Early Church has been true throughout the history of Christianity. Theological thinking has not been done in isolation from the specificity of culture, in spite of the Church's rightful stress on revelation. The challenge which arises from this for the scholar and the reflective practitioner is to distinguish between, on one hand, the life and teaching of Jesus of Nazareth and, on the other, the interpretation of Christ's work formulated by the Early Church in dialogue with Judaism and Greek culture. Questions concerning the absoluteness of the doctrinal formulations agreed at the Councils of Chalcedon and Nicea arise.

c. The existence of multiple interpretations of the person of Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus let loose within a world of faiths changes his shape according to the lens through which he is seen. The Jesus of the Qur'an differs from Jesus through Buddhist eyes, differs from Jesus through Bahá'í eyes or Hindu eyes. This raises questions about the validity of multiple interpretations and Christians' willingness to learn from other interpretations.

2 Doing Christology Today

All the presenters opposed the idea that formulations of Christology should be used by Christians to undermine the truth claims of those of other faiths. Thomas Thangaraj explained very clearly how he had been encouraged to explore the significance of Christ in the light of the witness of other faiths. He suggested that our views about Christology could not be formulated without wider dialogue with the world of faith. Ruth Page stressed that Christology could not be divorced from developing insights into the nature of God. Taking these points and others, the following questions arise:-

a. Using Christology for condemnation or dialogue. Should Christology be used to undermine the truth claims of others in the light of Christ or to explore the significance of Christ in the light of the witness of other faiths? If the latter option is taken, it leads to the view that inter-faith dialogue is essential for doing theology.

b. Dialogue as essential for doing theology and for self-interrogation. Present in the thought of Thomas Thangaraj was that serious inter faith engagement should prompt Christians to interrogate their own beliefs in the light of the insights of those of other faiths. For him, Christology today involves the willingness to be both self-aware and self-critical in the process of such dialogue. Jimmy Dunn stressed that the findings of historical research should prompt Christians to be self-critical. These questions arise:-

- How far should members of other faiths be partners in the development of Christology?

- Can members of other faiths help Christians interrogate their own doctrinal formulations or refine their terms?

- Can Christians understand themselves better through doing justice to the interpretations of Christ within other faiths?

c. Bilateral dialogues as witness to diversity. 'Doing' Christology in this way, however, should take into account that dialogue with people of other faiths on the person of Christ differs according to the faiths involved in such dialogue. Christian Troll spoke movingly about dialogue with Islam on the person of Christ. A very different form of dialogue would have emerged if the partner had been Buddhist or Sikh. Questions such as the following arise:-

- Is it acceptable that the way Christians speak about Christ should change according to the context and nature of the dialogue involved?

- To what point can Christians take into account the views of Christ within other faiths, when these differ so considerably?

d. Attitudes to diversity. Ruth Page brought in contemporary culture as a backdrop for Christian self-interrogation, in particular society's attitude to diversity. Taking this with sections 1c and 2c, the following questions arise:-

- Given that there are multiple Christologies within the Churches and within the world of faiths, how should Christians react to this diversity?

- In the light of the post-modernist tendency to accept diversity uncritically, how can Christians develop a proper discernment to aid serious engagement with those of other faiths?

- What criteria should govern how far self-interrogation goes?

3. The Next Steps for Inter Faith Dialogue

In the light of the questions raised in my first two sections and the total witness of the Conference, I believe the Churches could take the following steps to ensure these questions are pursued:-

a. Training.

- Inter faith encounter should be obligatory in the training of Church workers. Courses should encourage students to make connections between inter faith encounter and theological and Christological reflection.

- The life long learning of all Christians should include theological reflection in the light of religious plurality and inter faith encounter.

b. The Bible. Christians should be encouraged to use the Bible dialogically and biblical studies should include the dialogical. This means that the Church should work towards a stage when its members accept that doctrine and belief can be both challenged and enriched in the context of relating to people of other faiths.

c. Resources. It is incumbent on the Christian church to provide resources for such encounter and to encourage an awareness of the need for such encounter.

What else is there to say?

Michael Ipgrave

The Swanwick Conference generated a wide-ranging discussion on the topic 'Who is Jesus Christ in a world of many faiths?', but inevitably there were many important questions related to this which we did not really tackle. Some of these were raised at various points during the conference – for example: How do we, with integrity and sincerity, commend discipleship of Jesus to our dialogue partners? Is it possible to share in dialogue – about Christology or about anything else – in situations of religious conflict or oppression? What part in the Christological project can be played by those who have come to faith in Christ from another faith background?

As the two speakers who approached Christology from an experiential perspective were moulded by their encounters with Hinduism and with Islam respectively, there were also unaddressed questions about relations with other faiths. In the case of Judaism, of course, a vigorous Christological dialogue already exists, and this was to some extent reflected in Jimmy Dunn's presentation; but that in turn raises the question of how insights and questions from the Jewish-Christian context can be brought into the wider arena of what we might call 'inter faith Christology'. There are also intriguing issues around the structure and presentation of Christology in relation to non-theistic religious traditions such as Buddhism. All four speakers, in different ways, placed as central to their Christological explorations the theme of Jesus in relation to God; how then are Christians to speak of their Lord in the context of faiths where 'God' is not central?

However, in what follows I wish to draw attention to three more general issues which the conference did not really address. Of these omissions, it seems to me that the first was unfortunate; the second was unavoidable but led to a certain lack of balance; and the third was quite proper. Of course, each person at Swanwick would have heard differently what the four speakers said; each person would have agreed with different aspects of the four presentations and disagreed with others. Still more would each person have identified differently what was not said, for better or worse. So what follows is bound to be my own individual perspective, and others would doubtless see things very differently.

1 In the first place, realistically to address the question: 'Who is Jesus Christ in a world of many faiths?', it seems to me that the circle of discussion should reach beyond a purely Christian membership. Christology is often presented as a response by disciples to the question asked by the Lord in Mt 16.15 (and parallels): 'Who do you say that I am?' But before posing this direct question, Matthew records that Jesus first asked his disciples: 'Who do people say that the Son of Man is?' I do not read this as a simple contrast between the disciples' faith and all others' unbelief; rather, Jesus is showing that we can only express our own faith in him if we first recognise how others see him. Serious Christology means taking seriously different views of Jesus.

In today's world, where more people of various religions live closer to each other than ever before, this opinion of 'people' must include the views of Jesus that people of non-Christian faiths hold. This was a point made forcibly during the conference by Thomas Thangaraj, but it was not something we could develop at that time because - unwisely in retrospect – we had set the event up for an entirely Christian group of participants. Yet the fact is that for many people of other faiths also Jesus is an important figure, understood within the categories of their own traditions. 'Jesus Christ belongs to the public domain. Like it or not, his is a name that can neither be registered, trademarked or copyrighted.'[1] Those words were written by Richard Young, who has made a fascinating study of the place of Christ in Japanese New Religions. He explains how among some groups Jesus is revered as a divinely inspired teacher. From an older stratum of religious belief, the village of Shingo in Aomori prefecture, northern Japan, keeps a folk tradition that Christ, escaped miraculously from crucifixion, retired there to live to old age, died, and was buried – his grave is now being promoted by the government as an important tourist attraction.[2]

Similarly in other non-Christian religious contexts also Jesus is honoured in various ways. Let me give just three examples. Most obviously, orthodox Muslims accepts him as a prophet, born of a virgin, worker of miracles, to come again at the Last Judgement. Many Hindus revere him as an avatar, or manifestation of the divine, along with Krishna, Rama and others – I know several devout Hindu people in Leicester who daily pray the rosary meditating on the mysteries of his life and death. More widely still, for many with no particular faith Jesus is an inspiration and a challenge through the integrity of his life and the perfection of his teaching. All this richness of imagery and response needs to form part of our Christology if we are really to enter into the mystery of Christ as the one 'whose fullness fills all in all'. It is fatally easy for us as Christians to imagine that we already have a complete understanding of who Jesus is, and know him well. It is perhaps worth recalling here that strange description of the Lord in Rev 19.12 – 'He has a name inscribed that no one knows but himself': Jesus' ultimate identity, this seems to say, will only be made known when the nations are gathered in.[3] In the meantime, we are led into a deeper discipleship through recognising the many different ways in which people respond to him within their own faiths and cultures.

2 My second point perhaps runs in a rather different direction to this approach, though I do not think it contradicts it. It is this: that at various times in the conference I wondered if we were not trying to force too much into one category by dealing with all inter faith theological issues under the one

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1 Richard Young, 'The "Christ" of the Japanese New Religions', in Mark Mullins and Richard Young, ed., *Perspectives on Christianity in Korea and Japan: The Gospel and Culture in East Asia* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen, 1995), p117.

2 Mark Mullins, *Christianity Made in Japan: A Study of Indigenous Movements* ((Honolulu, University of Hawaii Press, 1998), p193.

3 Anton Wessels, *Images Of Jesus: How Jesus is Perceived and Portrayed in Non-European Cultures* (London: SCM, 1990), p174, links this insight particularly to Jewish-Christian dialogue, and quotes K H Kroon's remarks on Jewish missions: 'People say Jews must repent and turn. But if you ask them to what and to whom, they say: to Christ – as if that makes everything clear and as though we were speaking of a "well-known figure"'.

heading of 'Christology'. After all, Christian faith is directed not solely to Jesus, but to God as Trinity, and within that overall understanding of who God is it is possible to distinguish between the dispensation of the Son and the dispensation of the Spirit in a way that helps to make sense of Christian encounter with other faiths. Gavin D'Costa has written that: 'Pneumatology allows the particularity of Christ to be related to the universal activity of God in the history of humankind'.[1] Whereas Christ is essentially for Christians the identifiable focus and criterion of God's presence in particular places, the Spirit is the unlimited, unidentifiable, indeed unpredictable medium of divine activity in all places – so well represented by the symbol of breath or wind: 'The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit' (Jn 3.8). This thinking is echoed in the Church of England's Doctrine Commission description of Trinitarian thought as reconciling 'an exclusivist emphasis on particularity' with 'a pluralist emphasis on universality'.[2]

Of course, these two – what Irenaeus called the 'two hands of God'[3] – are intimately and indivisibly related: the Son secures the outpouring of the Spirit, and the Spirit bears witness to the Son. All the same, recognition of this Trinitarian distinction does help us better to honour the role which other faiths could play in the divine purpose while remaining faithful to the truth of God as we have known him in Christ. To illustrate this from my own theological perspective: of the four conference presentations, I felt most in agreement with the Christology of Christian Troll, in his argument for an orthodox account of incarnation based on the divine desire to communicate fully with creation. At the same time, I also appreciated the value which both Ruth Page and Thomas Thangaraj wanted to give to diversity in God's dealings with his people through a multiplicity of religious ways. Gavin D'Costa's thesis of the relation of pneumatology and Christology can be seen as a way of accommodating both these emphases - perhaps a subsequent conference should focus on the Trinity as a resource for inter faith dialogue.

3 Finally, the conference did not directly face a question which many believe to be central to Christology in a multi faith context – namely: 'Is Christ significant and fully authoritative for all people or just for Christians?' The question we focussed on was rather different: 'Who is Jesus Christ in a world of many faiths?' The former challenge is, of course, often posed in the rather more direct form: 'Can people of other faiths be saved, and if so how?' And then people talk about the three categories – going back to Alan Race's very helpful analysis – of 'exclusivism' (people can only be saved through explicitly acknowledging Christ), 'inclusivism' (people of all faiths can be saved in some way as they are through the grace of Christ), and 'pluralism' (people of other faiths can be saved through those faiths in the same way as Christians are

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1 Gavin D'Costa, 'Christ, the Trinity and Religious Plurality', in D'Costa, ed, *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered: The Myth of a Pluralistic Theology of Religions* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1990), p19 – the second of 'Five Theses' outlining a Trinitarian Christology in a multi faith context

2 *The Mystery of Salvation: The Story of God's Gift – A Report by the Doctrine Commission of the Church of England* (London: Church House, 1995), p176.

3 *Contra haereses*, IV, pref., etc. The Fathers also point out that this 'economy' of the Trinity is already seen in the work of creation: '*By the Word of the Lord were the heavens made; and all the host of them by the Breath of his mouth*' (Ps 33.6).

through Christianity).[1] I have grossly caricatured those three positions, but that perhaps does not matter too much just now, since the point I am making is that this is not the question which the conference was directly addressing.

In fact, it seems to me that we cannot rush into that issue – of the salvation of people of other faiths or the necessity of their conversion to Jesus Christ – without first facing what must be the logically prior question: 'And who is Jesus Christ in a world of many faiths?' The identity of the 'Christ' of inter faith Christology should be elucidated before the question of his authority for people of other faiths is tackled. As Thangaraj in particular insisted, Christ's identity is something which we as Christians cannot presume to define in isolation, but only in partnership with neighbours of other faiths – 'Who do people say that the Son of Man is? Who do you say that I am?' Through those partnerships of trust and friendship, we are led to deeper ways of understanding and experiencing salvation and conversion. Salvation is the gracious working of God to be seen in the lives of our neighbours of other faiths as well as in our own. Conversion is the response of a more faithful discipleship, asked of us as much as of them. And, for me as a Christian, I receive all this through the grace of Jesus Christ.

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1 Cf Alan Race, *Christians and Religious Pluralism: Patterns in the Christian theology of religions* (London: SCM, 1983), for a much more careful analysis of these categories.

Twenty Questions from the Conference

A very important part of the Conference process was work in small groups. Participants met in groups of 10-12 people to discuss three questions:

- *How does the Christological question arise for us in our situation?*
- *What do we consider the most important theological challenge in inter faith experience?*
- *What needs to happen to move forward the churches' thinking and practice in inter faith relations?*

The questions below are selected from the wide range of material produced by the groups in response to these questions.

1. How does our Christological understanding grow through our encounter with people of other faiths?
2. In Christology, are there limits to 'legitimate diversity', and if so how are they to be identified?
3. How far does Christology contribute to conflict, and how far does it provide a way forward to reconciliation and justice?
4. Is the importance of the Cross illustrative or decisive?
5. What is the difference between Christocentrism and Christolatry?
6. Is dialogue possible in a conflict situation?
7. Is Trinitarian doctrine the essential setting for the Christological question?
8. What is worth dying for?
9. How do we react to people of other faiths who are more godly than us?
10. What is the good news, the 'pearl of great price', in our various faiths?
11. Is Jesus Christ the universal mediator of salvation?
12. What does Jesus Christ save us from?
13. How can we understand the morality of supposedly one God whose message appears to be different to different groups of people?
14. If we cannot find a shared belief with other faiths, can we find a shared practice?
15. How can we use spirituality as a way into encounter with other faiths?
16. Do we have the humility to approach the Bible in a new, dialogical way?
17. Do the churches recognise that interfaith dialogue is a mission imperative?
18. What is the relationship of dialogue to evangelism?
19. Does Christian uniqueness mean that Christ is the only way?
20. Can we communicate to others the excitement of what we have been doing here?

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