

Pluralism and the particularity of salvation in Christ

Ng Kam Weng

Ng Kam Weng is Director of the Kairos Research Centre, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

Keywords: Religious pluralism, incarnation

The challenge of religious pluralism

Many ruling authorities in past Asian societies have exploited religion to legitimize their authority. Rulers then ensured religious homogeneity in their societies to reinforce conformity through religious and cultural loyalty. Today, however, religious allegiance is seen as an expression of one's intellectual and spiritual integrity. Intellectual and spiritual integrity presupposes unhindered access to different religious options that allow choices to be made after careful thought in contrast to a blind submission and conformity to social or legal coercion. After all, religious allegiance is genuinely possible only if authorities acknowledge the reality, if not the desirability, of religious plurality and respect the freedom of all believers to proclaim, practice and propagate their faiths in the context of mutual tolerance. In this regard, religious plurality presents new opportunities for the proclamation of the gospel in Asia.

On the other hand, liberal critics often reject mainstream Christianity on the grounds of its message of exclusive salvation in Christ. The charge is that exclusive salvation in Christ represents an intolerant if not imperialistic attitude. Admittedly, an exclusive commitment to Christ as saviour is certainly central to mainstream Christianity. That it is therefore intolerant and promotes social conflicts is, however, disputable. In this respect, a distinction should be made between *descriptive pluralism* and *prescriptive pluralism*. Christians celebrate *descriptive pluralism* since plurality and diverse orientations of social structures arise from the richness of God's creation. In contrast, *prescriptive pluralism* is rejected as the packaged ideology of epistemological relativism that undermines religious commitments. One should also make a distinction between *social tolerance* and *epistemological tolerance*. *Social tolerance* ensures freedom of choice in the market place of ideas and is vital if intellectual discussion is to flourish. On the other hand,

epistemological tolerance merely masks a radical relativism which renders meaningless the pursuit of truth.

Throughout this paper, it is my assumption that Christianity promotes and practices social tolerance and affirms plurality. What I dispute is the contention that social tolerance is possible only if Christians embrace a prescriptive form of religious pluralism. I shall further address the issue of prescriptive pluralism, henceforth referred to as religious pluralism within the framework of Christian discourse, and analyse the logic under-girding religious pluralism. In particular, I shall argue

Christianity promotes and practices social tolerance and affirms plurality

that religious pluralism is not only internally incoherent but that in seeking the least common denominator, pluralism offers a religious faith that is too dilute to meet religious needs. Finally, religious pluralism entails the abandonment of the central beliefs that historically define Christian identity such as normative revelational truths and the historical particularity of the incarnation of God in Christ. As such religious pluralists represented by major thinkers like John Hick and Paul Knitter have no basis to speak on behalf of Christianity.

Religious pluralists, like liberal theologians, often mirror the spirit of the times. Hence religious pluralists often go through phases of theological pilgrimage, moving from ecclesio-centrism to cosmic Christology and finally religious pluralism. Shifts or drifts occur when one no longer has a secure anchorage and is driven by one's universalistic senti-

ments and the need to gain social acceptance in a pluralistic environment. This is especially true of 'free floating' intellectuals operating apart from the context of grass roots Christian communities. Being unable to connect their theologizing with plausible social structures, such intellectuals come under tremendous pressures to abandon the exclusiveness of mainstream Christianity.

Religious pluralism is attractive for short term survival to intellectuals of minority groups like Christians in Asia. However, one doubts whether a Christianity that has abandoned the mainstream message of exclusive salvation in Christ can resist assimilation to the other dominant religions. Religious pluralists no doubt deny that they are yielding to immediate social pressures. On the contrary, in their view, Christianity has credibility only if it takes cognizance of the contemporary understanding of truth and interacts with new social realities.

Religious pluralists press for a Christianity which comes to terms with the consequences of contemporary historical consciousness, which radically relativizes all ideas as contextual and cultural. The very foundation of Christianity resting on an absolute historical event becomes questionable. After all, all reality including history, is in the process of becoming, and change implies being non-absolute. Christianity is faced with the spectre of 'radical relativism'. However, Paul Knitter resists such 'radical pluralism' as the unavoidable outcome since all things are also fundamentally related to one another. There is no need to absorb the 'many' into 'one' nor to nullify the 'one' into 'many'. By the same token God is one although his mystery exceeds being confined to any single religion. Knitter stresses that the one God is necessary to provide the basis for 'unitive pluralism' and the parity of diverse religions. Knitter then calls for a paradigm shift to 'theo-centricism'.

Religious pluralists argue that Christianity needs to discard religious exclusivism since exclusivism intensifies social conflicts. More importantly, new global challenges demand

all religions work together to overcome these challenges. Since social injustice has assumed a global scale, social activists from different religions must come together and work from a common platform. It is not surprising that the World Parliament of Religions II in Chicago (1990) was a 'Universal Declaration of a Global Ethic'. Knitter emphasizes the 'dialogical imperative' to achieve a common ethical platform for social action for justice in the context of 'unitive pluralism'. Knitter sees that there is no problem for Christians to respond positively since increasing inter-religious encounters in a global society means 'members of one religion must to some extent be members of other religions'.¹

Religious pluralists argue that Christianity needs to discard religious exclusivism

Knitter draws out three further consequences for Christian theology. First, Christians need to abandon any talk of the exclusive nature of Christ. The way forward is to look at christological images not as literal-definitive but as literary-symbolic. Doctrines, after all, are not propositions about truth and reality but 'rules of life' [a thought drawn from Linbeck's cultural linguistic model of religion]. Second, Christians need to follow Jesus' preaching example which Knitter suggests was a kingdom-centred theology of religions. Jesus, in Knitter's estimate, becomes decisive but not absolute. Jesus is unique but only in the sense that he relates to and complements other unique figures. Finally, Knitter calls for a liberation-centred dialogue: 'Without denying the abiding significance of the church, Christ and God, Christians should rather hold up *Soteria* – a shared concern for the promotion of human welfare and the removal of human suffering – as the basis, the starting point, the "condition of the possibility", and the primary goal of inter-religious dialogue. Elsewhere, he calls it "shared liberative praxis".²

Knitter's theological revisionism finds philosophical support from John Hick. Hick likewise went through a similar theological pilgrimage. He confessed to having a 'born again' experience. However his faith was successively changed in the process of dialogue with believers of other religions. In the seventies he called for a 'Copernican revolution'. He argued for the need to abandon the 'Ptolemaic model' of religions which operates with

fixed points of reference in inter-religious relationships such as the exclusivist model which judges the significance other religions only in relation to Christianity. He expressed dissatisfaction with minor adjustments by resorting to 'epicycles' which merely granted concessions to other religions. Christians must accept the plurality and moral parity of religions.

But how can one talk about moral parity and religious plurality and ignore the obvious differences between world religions? Hick relies on Kant to justify his new perspective on religions. As is well known, Kant proposed an epistemological dualism which divides the world into the *noumenal* and *phenomenal*. Hick invokes a parallel move in his approach to religions. He grants that religions exhibit different conceptions of God. However, he relegates these differences to the secondary status of the *phenomenal*. What matters is the shared underlying goal of the 'real' (*noumenal*).

However, Hick is able to maintain a unity of religious essence and the equidistance of different religions from the 'real' only by dropping the word 'God' from his analysis. Instead, he suggests that 'God' be substituted with new terms such as 'real', 'reality', or 'ultimate reality'. This 'ultimate' Hick defines as 'that putative reality which transcends everything other than itself but is not transcended by anything other than itself. The ultimate, so conceived, is related to the universe as its ground or creator, and to us human beings, as conscious parts of the universe as the source both of our existence and of the value or meaning of that existence.'³

We are all united by our common ignorance

Hick contends that the 'real' transcends logical and personal categories and 'is personal or impersonal, one and many, active or passive, substance or process, good or evil, just or unjust, purposive or purposeless. No such categories can be implied, either positively or negatively, to the *noumenal*... [these concepts] which have their use in relation to human experience, do not apply, even analogically, to the Real, *an sich* [in itself].'⁴ The suggestion then is that differences between religions are perceived because they are all non-exhaustive, if not inadequate, descriptions of ultimate reality. But notice how differences between religions are now united by a transcendent unknown. An unknown reality or an unknown God provides a convenient unifying essence for all religions. We are all united by our common ignorance.

To be sure, the threat of radical relativism looms large since such radical openness precludes an evaluative judgment of any religion. Indeed, Hick is even prepared to accept naturalists as an expression of implicit faith [anonymous religionists]. Nevertheless, Hick insists that religions are not all the same. Religions can be viewed functionally and tested on pragmatic grounds such as their ability to fulfil soteriological functions. The question for him is, is this complex of religious experience, belief, and behaviour soteriologically effective? Does it make possible the transformation of human existence from self-centredness to reality-centredness? Hick insists, 'religious phenomena... can in principle be assessed and graded; and the basic criterion is the extent to which they promote or hinder the great religious aim of salvation/liberation.'⁵

Hick elaborates,

... the great world faiths embody different perceptions and conceptions of, and correspondingly different responses to the real from within the major variants ways of being human; and that within each of them the transformation of human existence from self-centredness to reality-centredness is taking place. These traditions are accordingly to be regarded as alternative soteriological 'spaces' within which, or 'ways' along which, men and women find salvation/liberation/ultimate fulfillment.⁶

Salvation represents the obvious choice for a unifying factor given its diffused potential or fluid conceptual possibilities. But what would adopting a new perspective on salvation amount to for the Christian? Hick suggests that Christian salvation can be defined thus: 'the concrete reality of salvation is the transformation of human existence from a sinful and alienated self-centredness to a new centering in God, revealed in Christ as both limitless claim and limitless grace. The [Christian] experience of salvation is the experience of being an object of God's gratuitous forgiveness and love, freeing the believer to love his or her neighbour.'⁷

The familiar string of Christian religious terms should assure the believer that he has not been shortchanged. Indeed Hick is open to the criticism that for all his talk on pluralism, he essentially smuggles in a Christian religious baggage. For example, he assumes that human destiny is managed by a higher reality and he talks of a universal love of God and his liberating love. But is he entitled to speak of liberating love if the 'ultimate real' is essentially the unknown *noumenon*? Still, the impression on the Christian is like the strange but distorted familiarity one experiences when one enters a museum display of Picasso artworks. As in the old debate between evangelical and liberal theologians, terms used such as 'truth', 'salvation' and even 'Christ'

may be the same, but would have been either redefined or have assumed different significance in conflicting conceptual frameworks.

Pluralism and truth claims

What then about the question of truth? W.C. Smith argues that Christianity 'is not true absolutely, impersonally, statically; rather, it can *become* true, if and as you or I appropriate it to ourselves and interiorize it, insofar as we live it out from day to day. It becomes true as we take it off the shelf and personalize it, in actual existence.'⁸ Propositional truth is naturally ruled out and the question of truth is rejected as inapplicable to religions since religious teachings merely express personal experiences and values and recommend a certain disposition towards life. In other words, to look for propositional truths would be to commit a 'category mistake'.

Religious teachings merely express personal experiences and values

It has been noted that the religious pluralist on account of his epistemological agnosticism is not permitted to undertake any comparative evaluation on differing religions. To be sure, the religious pluralist does not deny that different concepts are operating in the different religions. But the surface differences are not decisive, being grounded on a more fundamental, common essence. Thus the common recourse to epistemological dualism when they make a distinction between esoteric and exoteric religion (F. Schuon), inner faith and the cumulative tradition (W. Smith), the *noumena* and the *phenomena* (J. Hick).

This epistemological strategy is not neutral. As such Harold Netland has argued that dualism of religious knowledge is more akin to oriental religions – like Hinduism: '*para*' (higher truths) and '*apara*' (lower truths); Zen Buddhism: '*zokutai*' (relative truth) limited to the phenomenal world of ordinary experience and '*shintak*' (absolute truth) identified with ultimate undifferentiated reality – rather than to Christian propositional revelation.⁹ Furthermore, it is submitted that religious pluralists like Smith create a false dichotomy between theological propositions as statements on reality on the one hand and subjective experiences or personal values on the other. Indeed, Smith has confused the believer's response to truth with the question of truth itself.

Propositional truth and personal truth are indeed related though their exact relationship needs to be more carefully nuanced. Netland suggests three possibilities:¹⁰

1. Personal truth can legitimately be applied to religions whereas propositional truth cannot.

2. Both personal truth and propositional truth can be applied to religions, but personal truth is somehow more basic and fundamental than propositional truth.

3. Both personal truth and propositional truth can be applied to religion, but propositional truth is more basic than personal truth.

It is arguable that propositional truth is more basic and that evaluation of personal truths presupposes propositional truth. Just as there is no uninterpreted experience, there can be no personal truth without propositional truth. For example, we acknowledge the supernatural being whom we meet in a religious encounter as God rather than an angel or the devil because we know something propositionally about God and the experience confirms our expectations although possibly we are led further to a fuller knowledge (both propositionally and experientially) about him.

Religious pluralists can maintain the dualism of religious truth and recommend universal religious essences so long as they keep their discussion at a general and abstract level. Take Hick's recommendation of 'salvation' defined as transformation from self-centredness to reality-centredness as the

Different religions will offer different ways of salvation

unifying essence of religions. All religions are then reduced to a universal concept generalized from diversity of religious experience. However, as Mary Midgley once quipped, the problem with universal languages is that no one speaks them. Hick overlooks the possibility that different religions do not necessarily address the same realities. Different religions have different interests and therefore are focused on different 'ultimate realities'. The reality [in the non-Hickian sense] is, different religions offer different diagnosis of the human predicament. Christianity talks about alienation from a personal creator because of a rebellious sin. Theravada Buddhism talks about slavery to selfish attachments. Naturally, different religions will then offer different ways of salvation. The point is, particular salvations are valid to the degree they are accurate in their diagnosis of the human predicament and to the extent their soteri-

ological solutions are adequate. Since we are offered different salvations, we are forced to make a fundamental choice between them.

Netland's pointed comments on Knitter are equally valid on Hick:

The adequacy of Knitter's soterio-centric criterion, then, is partially a function of the adequacy of his implicit views on the nature of the human predicament and the proper way to achieve release from that condition. We see again that the question of truth is inescapable. What is the ultimate nature of the human predicament and how can one attain release from it?¹¹

Hick's call for transformation from self-centredness to reality-centredness remains unhelpful until we are agreed as to what self-centredness consists of and how the purported ultimate reality brings about transformation. There is no agreement as to what exactly needs transformation in the first place. How much more difficult it is to agree on how transformation should be achieved or received.

A new paradise of consumerist salvation

Hick's own definition of salvation is itself unacceptable to historic and mainstream Christianity. Unlike mainstream Christianity, Hick views salvation as a self-turning rather than a divine rescue. Hick is either a Pelagian dressing up his salvation-by-works position or he is a crypto-Buddhist reinterpreting Christian salvation in terms of a new enlightenment. But if salvation is a matter of one's will or self-turning, why not decide for oneself what one's salvation should be? We are led into a new paradise of consumerist salvation. Leslie Newbigin's criticism of the contributors of the book, *Myth of Christian Uniqueness*, is pertinent.

'Reality' is not to be identified with any specific name or form or image or story. Reality 'has no form except our knowledge of it'. Reality is unknowable, and each of us has to form his or her own image of it. There is no objective reality which can confront the self or offer another centre – as the concrete person of Jesus does. There is only the self and its need for salvation, a need which must be satisfied whatever form of the unknown Transcendent the self may cherish. The movement, in other words, is exactly the reverse of the Copernican one. It is a move away from the centre outside the self, to the self as the only centre. It is a further development of the move which

converted Christianity from a concern with the reality of God's saving acts, to a concern with 'religious experience', the move which converts theology into anthropology, the move about which the final word was spoken by Feuerbach who saw that 'God' so conceived was simply the blown-up image of the self thrown up against the sky. It is the final triumph of the self over reality. A 'soteriocentric' view makes 'reality' as personal might address the self and its desires. It excludes the possibility that 'reality' as personal might address the self with a call which requires an answer. It is the authentic product of a consumer society.¹²

Christianity is fundamentally reinterpreted and reshaped beyond recognition

The 'Christian' pluralist seeks acceptance by adherents of other religions. But in the process of fitting to the lowest common denominator, Christianity is fundamentally reinterpreted and reshaped beyond recognition. Netland's criticism of Hick is fully justified,

It is difficult to escape the conclusion that his [Hick's] resolute desire to resolve the problem of conflicting truth-claims without admitting that some beliefs of some traditions are false has driven him to a radical reinterpretation of religious beliefs and doctrines in mythological terms. The price for resolving the problem in this manner, however, is that Hick's theory must be called into question as a general explanation of the nature of religious experience. For his understanding of religious beliefs bears little resemblance to that of most believers in the major traditions and consequently will be vigorously resisted by all within the mainstream of these tradition.¹³

Mark Heim agrees,

What it [pluralistic theology] claims to assure as the truth of all religion is too generic and too detached from the concrete particulars of the traditions to be satisfying to their 'adherents'. It is too close to being a truth that is not recognizable as 'religious' at all in terms that carry significance. Even for believers troubled by the acids of modernity, this is too thin a guarantee to replace the hopes of a concrete tradition.¹⁴

Pluralism and the claims of Christ

John Hick achieved notoriety as the editor of the book *The Myth of the God Incarnate* with its rejection of the incarnation which is central to mainstream Christianity. One suspects that Hick's rejection of the incarnation was driven by universalistic sentiments when he writes, 'if Jesus was literally God incarnate, and it is by his death alone that men can be saved, and by their response to him alone that they can appropriate that salvation, then the only doorway to eternal life is the Christian faith. It would follow from this that the large majority of the human race so far have not been saved.'¹⁵

In other words, if the incarnation is literally true then there is no room for other ways of salvation. Therefore it cannot be correct. Nevertheless Hick still wants to maintain an honourable position for Christ in the faith of Christians.

That Jesus is the Christ of God is a confession of faith by the Christian community. It does indeed remain normative to Christians everywhere, but to make it 'absolutely singular' and to maintain that the meaning of the mystery is disclosed *only* in one particular person at one particular point, and nowhere else, is to ignore one's neighbors of other faiths and who have other points of reference. To make exclusive claims for our particular traditions is not the best way to love our neighbours as our selves.¹⁶

Hick feels the liberty to recast the classical doctrine of the incarnation because he assumes that the incarnation was a late invention of early Christianity in its apotheosis of Jesus. Hick rejects grounding the incarnation by appealing to the authority of Scripture since for him the New Testament writings themselves are only 'documents of faith'. Hick polemically exploited a statement made by W. Pannenberg without accepting the latter's own vigorous defence of the deity of Jesus. 'Today it must be taken as all but certain that the pre-Easter Jesus neither designated himself as Messiah or Son of God nor accepted such a confession to him from others.' Hick added, 'Indeed, Jesus would probably have regarded the idea that he was God incarnate as blasphemous.'¹⁷

Likewise, the historical Jesus has to be reconstructed. This is evident in Knitter's suggestion about the need to imitate Jesus own openness to others which

... will allow [Christians] to affirm the uniqueness and the universal significance of what God has done in Jesus; but at the same time it will require them to recognize and be challenged by the uniqueness and universal significance of what the divine mystery may have revealed through others. In boldly proclaiming that God has

indeed been defined in Jesus, Christians will also humbly admit that God has not been confined to Jesus.¹⁸

The historical Jesus has to be reconstructed

According to Hick, Jesus only saw himself merely as a human being. At most, Jesus only achieved a special awareness of God.

Now we want to say of Jesus that he was so vividly conscious of God as the loving heavenly Father, and so startlingly open to God and so fully his servant and instrument, that the divine love was expressed, and in that sense incarnated, in his life. This was not a matter (as it is in official Christian doctrine) of Jesus having two complete natures, one human and one divine. He is wholly human; but whenever self-giving love in response to the love of God is lived out in a human life, to that extent the divine love has become incarnate on earth.¹⁹

Hick at most allows the incarnation to be used only as a metaphor, for example,

... as in 'Abraham Lincoln incarnated the spirit of American independence' or 'Hitler was evil incarnate'. And in the metaphorical sense we can say that insofar as any human being does God's will, God is 'incarnated', embodied in a human action. Whenever anyone acts in love on behalf of the sick in body or mind, the weak or oppressed, refugees, vulnerable children, the exploited poor, or the bereaved and grieving, then God's love becomes incarnate on earth.²⁰

We observe that Hick's rejection of the incarnation follows from a critical methodology which includes the following elements.

1. Scepticism about the historical reliability of Scriptures: rejecting the gospels as reliable eyewitness accounts. This follows the conclusions of liberal critics who argue that the gospels were written decades after the event from the individual's point of view. Hick in his later writings appeals to radical scholars like John Dominic Crossan and E.P. Sanders in response to evangelical requirement of authoritative gospels.²¹ It is quite clear that for Hick radical historicism rather than revelational history determines what is credible in the first place.

2. Presupposition of the evolution rather than the development of New Testament christology arising from the influence/contamination of Hellenisation which climaxed in the Chalcedonian creed.

Indeed New Testament christology was the product of a myth making process. Hick assumes that early Christianity developed along lines parallel to neighbouring religions. After all, to create speeches of famous and revered figures of the past and to attribute to them miraculous deeds was a standard practice in the ancient world. As such, New Testament christology is merely the product of a process of deification of the historical Jesus.

3. Assertion that the two-natures incarnation is incoherent. Hick repeated the usual objection that both divine and human attributes cannot be attributed to Jesus at once. He granted an interesting possibility to T.V. Morris's two-minds theory but rejected it as one dimensional, that is, being focused on the cognitive aspect of mind. But is it not the case that the charge of incoherence is most acutely raised at the cognitive level of the mind in the first place. Hick's criticism of Morris's model of a one way access of the human to the divine as insufficiently dynamic is well taken. But it should be noted that Hick has only voiced reservations by demanding a more complex model without demonstrating an alternative model.

Hick has only asserted the incoherence of the incarnation rather than demonstrated it logically. In effect, Hick finds unacceptable the following conjunction of the propositions:

- (1) Jesus is fully man and (2) Jesus is fully God
- (1) and (2) jointly imply
- (3) Conclusion: Jesus is the only Saviour.

Hick finds the conclusion unacceptable since proposal of the uniqueness of Christ is incompatible with a progressive understanding of other faiths. It should be noted

Religious pluralism is inconsistent with Christianity

that religious pluralists like Hick can reject the claim of Christian uniqueness by ignoring the historical factuality of the Christ event. The religious pluralist seeks rather to engage with Christianity as a set of religious doctrines, whether as a symbolic structure or as in specific religious ideas or as a religious experience. The religious pluralist rightly understands the veracity of the incarnation in history as decisively undermining his pluralistic intentions. By the same token it must be conceded that religious pluralism is inconsistent with Christianity.

It is therefore not surprising that religious pluralists feel compelled to deny the historical

factuality of the incarnation and universalize the Christ event, reducing it into a symbolic structure to mediate a generalized religious experience that is equally appropriated by all. To buttress his case that Christianity is not unique, the pluralist claims to find sufficient parallels to Christ's unique birth, death and resurrection in other faiths. Such 'parallels' are questionable in the first place. More importantly, they function as red herrings which enable one to ignore the self-testimony and personal claims of Christ as to his deity and as unique saviour of the world.

As noted above, Hick seeks to veto the incarnation as inadmissible evidence by claiming that the incarnation is conceptually incoherent. As such, in the absence of a demonstrable incoherence of the incarnation, religious pluralists like Hick should at least maintain an open mind as to the possibility of the incarnation in history. Indeed, one can even argue that the incarnation is reasonable in the light of God's progressive revelation in the Old Testament. More importantly, for all of Hick's insistence that truth claims be religiously significant, one may argue that classical christology is more religiously significant than his own watered-down christology.

[We cannot at this stage discuss T.V. Morris's defence of the two-nature christology. His defence rests on a novel set of distinctions: 1. distinction between an individual essence and kind-essence; 2. distinction between common properties and essential properties; and 3. distinction between fully human and merely human. Morris's proposal offers a coherent account of classical christology, notwithstanding Hick's attempt to reject it on theological grounds by tarring it with Nestorian heresy. One may question Morris' concession that Christ may not have seen himself as necessarily good in the face of temptation, especially since it is not necessitated by his fundamental proposals. Readers may also refer to Geivett/Phillips who in their reply to John Hick (in *Four Views*, pp. 75–76) argue that the incoherence is not so much demonstrated as asserted.]

Pluralism and salvation

Hick's superficial reading of the human predicament and self-transformation may find sympathies from academics in ivory towers. The problem with Hick's case lies in the need for individuals to attain full knowledge of ultimate reality whether through personal insight or through supernatural revelation. Indeed, if the problem is a matter of knowledge, supernatural revelation can be repeatedly and immediately appropriated by the individual. Hence, the religious pluralists' rejection of any claim to uniqueness and normative status of any religious tradition.

In contrast to the religious pluralists, the New Testament christology is corporate

through and through in its view of salvation. C.F.D. Moule, after discussing the words in the New Testament such as 'in Christ', 'body' and 'temple', concluded that Paul viewed Christ as one who incorporates his believers into his new mode of existence. He notes that Paul described how Christians experienced themselves as being incorporated into the resurrected Christ without losing their own individual identity. Christ, after the resurrection, attained an 'inclusive' personality bringing about an organic union with his believers and permeating their new collective existence through his Holy Spirit. C.F.D. Moule finally concluded that 'in effect, Paul was led to conceive of Christ as any theist conceives of God: personal, indeed, but transcending the individual category. Christ is like the omnipresent deity "in whom we live and move and have our being".²² Not surprisingly, grass root Christians reject the diminished Christ of Hick as a pot of mess inadequate to nurture vibrant faith.

The religious pluralists reject the idea of the incarnation because they assume that the particularity of a historical incarnation rules

Why do we have to choose between the particular and the universal?

out the possibility of its universal significance. Perhaps such thinkers have allowed themselves to be impaled by an unnecessary dilemma. Why do we have to choose between the particular and the universal? Why foreclose the possibility that divine revelation could be both particular and universal in significance? How then should we view Jesus's incarnation as having universal significance?

In resolving the above questions I find particularly helpful the lucid discussion by Vernon White. White observes that divine intervention should be viewed in terms of incorporating action rather than imparting knowledge. This insight certainly differs from the views of Hindu and Muslim thinkers who assume that the human predicament consists only of the lack of knowledge of reality or of divine laws. This is however inadequate. Our experience of human conflicts and tragedies in history clearly indicates that the real and deeper problem lies in the fallen and rebellious nature of human beings. For this reason, God's revelation must aim at bringing about a creative atonement. As such the reconciliation between the holy God and sinful man rather than impartation of special knowledge is the reason for divine intervention.

But why should God need to intervene in

the human predicament in the first place? How does the Christian teaching of the incarnation of Christ fit in? Following White I would like to propose the 'criterion of moral authenticity' as a means to shed light on this issue. To begin with, estrangement between God and man is overcome not by special knowledge but by a demonstration of perfect love. Given the magnitude of the human predicament, surely such a revelation demands a costly love which does not compromise God's holiness. It has to be costly love to win over human sin and rebelliousness. But as White asserts, 'Unless and until God himself has experienced suffering, death, and the temptation to sin, and overcome them, as a human individual, he has no moral authority to overcome them in and with the rest of humanity.'²³

Our sense of justice demands that unless God has taken upon himself the sufferings of his creatures, he does not understand, much less be able to address, our plight. It is important that his involvement with us goes beyond mere awareness or sympathy. He has to be on our side as a fellow-sufferer who truly understands because he has experienced what we are going through. It is out of such moral considerations that we are able to appreciate the full dimension of the incarnation which finds its fulfilment on the cross where Jesus died in sacrificial love for us. Certainly no other God has acted so decisively and given proof of his moral credibility.

No other God has acted so decisively

It is clear that the Christian understanding of divine intervention as creative atonement is an immensely profound teaching. It also better explains how personal revelation can attain universal efficacy. After all, if knowledge is the only necessity, God

only needs to reveal himself by inspiring prophets who will deliver his message. The logic of divine intervention also suggests that the divine agent will work personally through a particular historical instance which will eventually attain universal redeeming possibilities. By the same token, the divine intervention must achieve its universal goal under the same limitations.

However, such a transformation has to take place under the limitations of human conditions if it is to be authentic. More importantly, sinners who are reconciled must be active and willing participants. For this reason, Jesus through his incarnational experience became fitted to relate effectively with those he came to save. God in Christ having taken such relationships into his own experience attains universal significance because he has the moral authority and spiritual capacity to influence fellow-men everywhere without overwhelming their personal freedom. Vernon White succinctly explains how the particular intervention of Christ makes universal salvation possible.

God in Jesus consistently and perfectly did the very thing which must happen in all of us: he died to self and lived to God. He does this as an individual human being under the normal conditions of a finite, fallen world, 'learning' faith as a fragile mortal. Having done this as an individual (entailing historical particularity), his spirit (transcending spatial and temporal particularity), having access to all time and space can relate that achievement to every other individual. Because the spirit of Christ which is in and with us, potentially and actually, in time and eternity, is the 'experienced' spirit of the perfected man Jesus, the possibility of our ultimate perfection is established.²⁴

We should note the unexpressed assumption of the religious pluralist that any claim of the historical particularity of the incarnation and uniqueness of Christ's salvation can

only lead to insularity and exclusivity. It should be clear that this assumption is questionable. We may even argue that the pluralist's presupposition of an individualistic and hence its focus on self-transformation and 'saving' insight is a departure from historic Christianity. **■**

Notes

1. Paul Knitter, *No Other Name* (Orbis, 1985), p. 12.
2. Paul Knitter, *ibid.*, p. 28.
3. John Hick, *Disputed Questions in Theology and Philosophy of Religion* (Yale UP, 1993), p. 158. Quoted in Harold Netland, *Dissonant Voices: Religious Pluralism and the Question of Truth* (Eerdmans 1991), p. 41.
4. John Hick, *ibid.*, p. 177.
5. Quoted in Harold Netland, *Dissonant Voices*, p. 159.
6. John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion* (MacMillan, 1989), p. 240.
7. John Hick, *Interpretation of Religion*, pp. 46–47.
8. Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *Towards a World Theology* (Westminster, 1981), p. 187.
9. Harold Netland, *Dissonant Voices*, p. 147.
10. Harold Netland, *ibid.*, p. 129.
11. Harold Netland, *ibid.*, p. 164.
12. Leslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralistic Society* (Eerdmans, 1989), p. 169.
13. Harold Netland, *Dissonant Voices*, p. 231.
14. S. Mark Heim, *Salvations: Truth and Difference in Religion* (Orbis, 1995), p. 111.
15. John Hick ed., *The Myth of God Incarnate* (Westminster, 1977), p. 180.
16. John Hick & Paul Knitter, eds., *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness* (SCM, 1987), p. 76.
17. D. Okholm & T. Phillips, *Four Views of Salvation in a Pluralistic World* (Zondervan, 1995), pp. 84–85.
18. Paul Knitter, *No Other Name?* (Orbis, 1985), p. 143.
19. John Hick, *God Has Many Names* (Westminster, 1982), pp. 58–59. Quoted in Harold Netland, *Dissonant Voices*, p. 74.
20. Okholm & Phillips, *Four Views*, pp. 57–59.
21. Okholm & Phillips, *ibid.*, pp. 249, 34–36, 53.
22. C.C.D. Moule, *The Origin of Christology* (CUP, 1977), p. 95.
23. Vernon White, *Atonement and Incarnation* (CUP, 1991), p. 38.
24. White, *ibid.*, pp. 54–55.