

Critiquing Pluralism

(This Paper which looks at the contemporary dilemma of pluralism is an extract from impending book which deals with the broad subject of tolerance in contemporary society.)

(Stephen McQuoid)

In the heart of Glasgow is an interesting museum called St. Mungoes Museum of Religious Life and Art. It would be no exaggeration to describe this museum as a temple to post-modernism. Funded by local government it is a celebration of the multiethnic nature of the city and proof that Scotland, once known as the land of the bible, is rapidly changing. The museum contains works of art that have been donated by the various religious communities in Glasgow. The idea behind the museum is that visitors can get an insight in to the various religious traditions through their works of art. Some of the works of art are stunning, such as Salvador Dali's Christ the Redeemer. But the great tragedy of the museum is that those who built it were convinced that all religions, including Christianity, were basically equal to each other.

The endemic nature of religious pluralism within our society poses a new challenge to Christian apologetics. As Peter Berger aptly states, 'We have a problem of belief, and it not only raises the question of why we should believe in God but why we should believe in this God. There are others, after all, and today they are made available in an unprecedented way through the religious supermarket of modern pluralism'¹.

It is interesting that religion continues to be important in our modern world. After all secularism has become a global phenomenon and many a post-enlightenment thinkers have predicted the demise of religious belief². This religious commitment is remarkably diverse and turns whole societies into a patchwork of different beliefs. Even in a country like the United States where Christianity is both dominant and evangelistic, the diversity of religious belief is apparent. Diana Eck of Harvard University states that, 'The United States has become the religiously most diverse nation on earth'³. But many other nations in the developed world including France, Australia and the United Kingdom are also becoming increasingly religiously diverse⁴. Despite this, religion throughout the world is flourishing and the presence of so many religions provides Christianity with one of its greatest challenges.

It is hardly surprising that this challenge has become so prominent. After all, in a society where there are no absolutes and no real concept of truth, all religions are bound to be viewed in more or less the same way. Each is true, only in as much as it is true for those who practice it. And when so many options are available and easily accessible, the

¹ Peter Berger, *A Far Glory: The Quest for Faith in an Age of Credulity*, p.146.

² Peter Berger, *The Desecularization of the World: A Global Overview*, p.9

³ Diana Eck, *A New Religious America: How a Christian country has Become the Worlds most Religiously Diverse Nation*, p.4.

⁴ Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom*, p.94-99. Jenkins notes that with the dramatic demographic changes in Europe, the continent will have to open up to an influx of immigrants to remain economically stable. This in turn will mean that religious diversity will increase and Islam in particular will become a major force.

problem is further exacerbated. As a result, in our liberally tolerant society it is unacceptable to claim that any one religion is true in an objective sense. We must all be pluralistic, recognizing every faith system as equal to our own. Or as Richard Lints puts it, 'The Golden rule of postmodernism is Grant to all other religions the same presumption of truth as you grant to your own religion'⁵.

Defining Religious Pluralism

At this point it would be useful to define what we mean by religious pluralism. As we noted from chapter 4, if the language we use is ambiguous then we will never be able to offer a proper Christian critique of the worldviews around us. So what then is religious pluralism?

Harold Netland looks at some of the ways in which the term pluralism has been used in contemporary society. He also adds some wise comments that enable us to understand how Christians should respond to each of these situations⁶. At a very basic level the term religious pluralism has been used simply to mean religious diversity. In that sense to say the Europe and America are religiously pluralistic is really no more than to say that they are increasingly characterized by religious diversity. But the term can go beyond merely noting religious diversity, to having generally positive attitudes towards it. This second usage includes the situation where legal and political structures within a country are developed to accommodate religious diversity. In this second case there could be an explicit commitment to religious freedom within a country. This is the situation that exists in most western democracies and an increasing number of developing countries. Certainly Christians should support this view and would expect to be treated in the same way. We do not believe that anyone can or should be coerced into accepting Christianity, and if they were it would not be an authentic spiritual conversion. Neither do we believe in using the powers of state to push for an exclusively Christian agenda. After all, as Jesus himself stated, the kingdom of God is not of this world.

There is also a third usage of the term religious pluralism which is acceptable to Christians. It is entirely possible to afford legal rights to religious minorities within a country such as Hindus and Muslims, and yet to socially exclude them. The law might prevent them from being discriminated against, but they might still feel unwelcome due to the fact that they are socially excluded. This social exclusion can take a number of forms but in its essence makes those who are excluded feel as if they do not quite belong, at least not if they continue to follow their religious practices. Once again Christians should support this form of acceptance, even if it leads to some complications in the way it is worked out. Christ commands us to love even our enemies and to do good even to those who persecute us (Mt.5:44). It would therefore be utterly inappropriate for any Christian to make someone who belonged to another faith feel unwelcome or inferior, simply because that person belonged to a different faith community.

⁵ Richard Lints, *The Fabric of Theology: A Prolegomenon to Evangelical Theology*, p.246.

⁶ Harold Netland, *Religious Diversity and Religious Pluralism: An Evangelical Christian Perspective*, found in *From Athens to Jerusalem* Volume 5, Issue 1, p.2,3.

There are, however, two further levels in which the term religious pluralism is used, and these are ones that Christians would contend with. Firstly there is the enthusiastic acceptance of religious diversity. That is, the view that although Christianity is the preferred option and should be considered normative in the west, yet other religions could be regarded as instruments through which God works and reveals his grace. Those who hold to this view see Christianity as the 'greatest' of the world's religions, but also recognize that there are other religions that reveal God. It seems to me that this position should be unacceptable to any Christian given that Jesus made so many exclusive claims. Carl Henry comments on this issue by noting that people from other religions can have some sense of the true God on the basis of their being made in the image of God and the evidence of God in creation. However, he then goes on to say that the, 'notion that the living God meets humans through their diverse religions as structured systems ignores the biblical emphasis on false gods and false religions'⁷. We will deal with this point in more detail later, but we must now think about the last definition of religious pluralism.

The final definition of religious pluralism suggests that all the world's major religions are basically the same. They are all equally true and in the words of Netland they, 'provide equally legitimate ways in which to respond to divine reality'⁸. It is this final definition of religious pluralism that has caught on so strongly in western thinking. It is the firm belief of many in our culture that to distinguish between different world faiths or to single out one as being unique is simply wrong. As all are equally true, favoring one against the rest is intolerance. By implication this means that evangelism is one of the great evils of the age. Evangelism pre-supposes that the person doing the evangelism believes those on whom his work is focused do not have an adequate belief system. His is better and that is why he is sharing it with them. In a religiously pluralistic society this is an anathema.

Where did religious pluralism come from?

It might seem surprising that religious pluralism has taken such a grip of the western world given that many western countries were at least nominally Christian only a few decades or so ago. However there are a number of reasons why its impact has been so profound⁹. Firstly there is the unprecedented exposure that people in the west now have to other religions. When my father was growing up he heard about Muslims and Hindus, but had never actually met one. Indeed it was not until he went as a missionary to Ethiopia that he had his first conversation with someone from another religion. That kind of experience is completely alien to anyone in my generation. I have rubbed shoulders with Muslims, Hindus, Sheiks, Buddhists and Jews in my every day life and therefore am aware, to some extent at least, of the world they inhabit. This exposure to other faith has forced many people in the west to reject Christianity as exclusive truth.

⁷ Carl F.H. Henry, *God Revelation and Authority*, Volume VI, p.364.

⁸ Harold Netland, *Religious Diversity and Religious Pluralism: An Evangelical Christian Perspective*, found in *From Athens to Jerusalem* Volume 5, Issue 1, p.3.

⁹ I am indebted once again to Harold Netland for his clear thinking on this issue (*Dissonant Voices*, p.28-33).

Secondly, the rise of religious pluralism has been driven by the collapse of confidence in the bible caused by skepticism and liberalism. During the time of the reformation European society accepted the authority of scripture as a given. Even if people did not practice biblical truth, there was a general feeling that it was indeed true. This has now gone and the average man in the street has serious misgivings about whether or not the bible is the word of God in any unique and authoritative way. Naturally this leads to a questioning of the truth claims of Christianity for the Christian faith is a faith based on scripture. Liberal scholars in universities and theological colleges throughout the west have done untold damage to the bible's reputation and in turn have reduced Christianity to the status of 'just another religion' in the eyes of western society.

A third reason for the rise of religious pluralism is the tendency in contemporary society to make a demarcation between the public world of facts and the private world of belief. Most people equate the concept of truth with the public world of facts which, in practice, is more or less consists of mathematics and the sciences. When it comes to belief on the other hand, they see this as a private world of preferences and not truth. To put it another way, if I were to state that $1 + 1 = 2$, most people would recognize this as a mathematical formulae and would think that we are dealing with the realm of truth. But if on the other hand I say that Jesus is lord, they would not think I was dealing with truth, but only my faith and my private preferences. This assumption that people make is automatic because the public and private worlds have been placed into regimented categories. There is no need, therefore, when dealing with different religious claims to seek for the truth, because truth lies in the public realm not the private. These claims are simply to be accepted and accommodated as part of a pluralistic society. As Leslie Newbigin states, 'The rival truth claims of different religions are not felt to call for argument and resolution; they are simply part of the mosaic...of different values that make up a whole pattern'¹⁰.

A fourth reason for the rise of religious pluralism is that people tend to take a pragmatic view of religion. For most people, it is not really all that important what a religion actually teaches, but that it works for its adherents. They reason that life is complex and often painful, and the function of religion is to help people through. The truthfulness or otherwise of a particular faith is therefore irrelevant for all intents and purposes. What matters is that the devotee is helped by practicing his religion. I remember having a conversation with a man following an open air service that I was preaching at in a large city centre. He shared something of his belief system which was a strange mixture of Christianity, Buddhism and New Age Theosophy. When I challenged him on the intellectual bankruptcy of his belief he merely replied, 'I don't really care if my belief makes sense or even if it is true. It works for me and that is enough'. This intellectually vacant and pragmatic view of religion makes any theological or truth claim redundant.

A fifth reason for the growth of religious pluralism is that assumption that anyone who holds to exclusive beliefs is necessarily arrogant and intolerant. Given that we now live in a global village where nations and cultures are interdependent, and given that there is a great desire globally for peaceful co-operation, such 'arrogance and intolerance' is out of place in a modern civilized society. Of course this only holds true if there are no truth

¹⁰ Lesslie Newbigin, Foolishness to the Greeks: The Gospel and Western Culture, p.16.

claims in any religion. If one faith is actually true then believing it to be that is no more arrogant and intolerant than believing that $1 + 1 = 2$. But as we have already noted, many people do not see that religion and public truth inhabit the same world. It is therefore perceived to be highly arrogant for one person to see his religious preference as better than another's. This in turn gives an apparent moral thrust to religious pluralism.

A sixth and final reason for the growth of religious pluralism is the popularity, even in Christian circles, of a doctrine of universalism. There is a widely held assumption that as God is a God of love, in the final analysis he will never condemn people to hell just because they have not taken a particular religious path. Indeed he will treat all men as equals whatever their belief system and will never judge and condemn people who are basically good. Although the term universalism is a theological one and one with which the average man in the street will be unfamiliar, nevertheless it is believed at a popular level as well as in the academy. I have often talked to non-Christians about their spiritual state and heard them assert with confidence that they feel safe eternally because a God of love could not possibly judge someone as nice and good as them. It is this same woolly thinking that has banished the idea of hell from people's belief system¹¹. A form of thinking that fashions God in our own image rather than recognizing that he is the immutable creator and judge of the universe.

Meeting the big hitters

Probably the most influential religious pluralist today is John Hick¹². Hick began his career as a conservative Christian, but in the 1970's came to the conclusion that if Christianity was exclusively true then all the other world religions were necessarily wrong and therefore a huge proportion of the human race was damned to eternal punishment. For Hick this was simply too much, so he began to adapt his theology in order to make reality seem more palatable. His first theological shift was to move from a Christ centered theology to a God centered theology as this position could encompass other theistic religions and not just Christianity¹³. This position logically required him to deny the literal reality of the incarnation because that event focused attention on the person of Christ as God with us, Emanuel. Instead Hick suggested that the incarnation was metaphorical and a myth¹⁴. His most recent theological shift is a move to a reality-centeredness which accommodates both theistic and non-theistic religions¹⁵. He suggests that there is a realm beyond the grasp of human perception and consciousness and that all religions are a human response to this world. Whether a person believes in Allah, Jehovah, or the pantheist god of the Hindu faith, therefore, he is worshipping the same reality.

¹¹ For an excellent critique of 'conditional mortality' see Don Carson's *The Gagging of God*.

¹² Don Carson, *The Gagging of God*, p.146. Hick's influence is profound, but his is not the only significant voice in favor of pluralism. Others such as Wilfred Cantwell Smith of Harvard are also enormously influential.

¹³ John Hick, *God and the Universe of Faiths*, p.131.

¹⁴ John Hick, 'Jesus and the World Religions' in, *The Myth of God Incarnate*, p.172

¹⁵ Don Carson, *The Gagging of God*, p.146.

Netland sums up Hick's position in three steps¹⁶. Firstly Hick believes that there is a religious ultimate reality to which the major religions are all legitimate responses. Secondly, the various religions are historically and culturally conditioned interpretations of this reality. Thirdly the power of these religious interpretations to transform people from being self centered to being reality centered is more or less equal. They should therefore be affirmed as equally legitimate religious alternatives. If any individual has a preference for one religious option over another, this is due not to its inherent truthfulness, but merely because of social and cultural factors.

Hick takes religious pluralism to its philosophical extreme and does so from his elevated position within the academy, but his views find a home in the attitudes of popular western culture. I have often found myself in an evangelistic situation challenging my hearers to respond to the gospel. Upon hearing my appeal many of my listeners have asked how I view the fate of Muslims and Hindus when they die. They make the assumption that people from those religious backgrounds must have as good a chance as Christians of getting to heaven. Some have commented that they have Muslim and Hindu neighbors and work colleagues who are very good people, certainly deserving of God's favor. One person even said to me, 'My Hindu neighbor is a better person than any Christian I know'. The thought that people from these religious persuasions could actually be wrong is not one which my listeners would countenance. Indeed if I were to suggest that a Muslim or Hindu is eternally lost and believing in a false religion, I would be denounced as an intolerant bigot. Such is the spirit of our liberally tolerant age!

Reasonable Stupidity

There can be no doubt that those who express tolerance of a variety of religious views perceive themselves to be entirely reasonable. Evangelicals on the other hand are declared to be intolerant, bigoted and unreasonable. Some would even say unloving. This reasonableness, however, is frankly quite stupid. The belief that all religions are basically the same, just different shades of a shared truth, is a position that is intellectually incoherent, and a nonsense. The reason for this is that where you have two beliefs that both claim to be true, but nonetheless are completely different, is defies logic to claim that both are indeed true.

I will illustrate this with a simple analogy. Suppose I were sitting before an audience in a university art class giving a lecture on the use of color. As an illustration I bring two large pieces of card with me and I hold them up. The card in my right hand is bright red, while the card in my left hand is green. As I deliver the lecture I suddenly make the claim that the two pieces of card are actually the same color. The class is surprised, and no wonder. They know that the card I am holding in my right hand is red. That is an indisputable fact because for all of their lives that particular color has been labeled as red. The card on my left hand, however, is very different – that is because it is green. At this point they all wonder why their lecturer has taken leave of his senses and is claiming that these two cards, which are clearly very different, are in fact the same color. I try to

¹⁶ Harold Netland, Religious Diversity and Religious Pluralism: An Evangelical Christian Perspective, found in From Athens to Jerusalem Volume 5, Issue 1, p.3

reassure them by stating that it would be politically correct to claim that the two cards are that same color, further more it would demonstrate just how tolerant they all were if they were able to say that the two cards were basically the same. Despite my protests the class simply cannot accept that two things that are clearly different colors can actually be the same color. It is simply illogical!

The same, of course, is true of different religions. It is simply not logical to claim that they are basically same thing, even if it is tolerant and politically correct to say so. Every religion claims that it is true, and true in an objective sense. As Ravi Zacharias states, 'At the heart of every religion is an uncompromising commitment to a particular way of defining who god is or is not and accordingly, of defining life's purpose'¹⁷. What is more, though there might be some small similarities between different religions, there are also radical and irreconcilable differences between them.

A brief look at the comparison between Christianity, Hinduism and Islam will clearly illustrate the point. These world faiths are so different from each other that they cannot find common ground even in their definition of who God is. Muslims are monists, people who see God as a single entity. Christians on the other hand, while believing in only one God, see Him in the three persons of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Hindus meanwhile cannot even agree among themselves as to what they believe about God. Some believe in one God, others in millions of Gods, while others still believe that everything is God.

Likewise when it comes to defining the nature of the human predicament, further disagreements emerge¹⁸. Hinduism and Buddhism believe that humans are trapped within the cycle of rebirth (samsara) through which one transmigrates in accordance with karma. Shinto on the other hand does not have a strong sense of the fallen ness of humanity, there is merely an imbalance. Islam does have an understanding of sin, but it is not a clear as the Christian understanding. There is no sense of the depravity of man and his bondage to sin, rather it is merely a weakness. These differences continue when it comes to the question of what salvation is¹⁹. For the Hindu salvation is liberation from reincarnation, for the Buddhist it is the complete elimination of desire and the conditions for rebirth. In Shinto salvation is achieving a healthy and robust life in the present and for the Muslim salvation is a future reality when Allah grants entry into paradise.

Even when apparent common ground is found the wrangling continues. An example of his relates to the person of Jesus Christ in Islamic and Christian thought. Both Muslims and Christians have a belief system that includes Jesus. However, for the Christian Jesus is the author of salvation whereas the Muslims merely recognize him as a great prophet. For Christians he is the incarnate son of God, a point which the Muslims claim is blasphemous²⁰. When it comes to the great work of Christ on the cross, another major

¹⁷ Ravi Zacharias, *Jesus Among other Gods*, p.7.

¹⁸ Harold Netland, *Encountering Religious Pluralism: The Challenge to Christian Faith & Mission*, p.184.

¹⁹ Harold Netland, *Encountering Religious Pluralism: The Challenge to Christian Faith & Mission*, p.184.

²⁰ Harold Netland, *Encountering Religious Pluralism: The Challenge to Christian Faith & Mission*, p.182.

division emerges. Christians believe in the historical event of the crucifixion of Christ, Muslims do not²¹.

It is also important to note that throughout his ministry, Jesus said and did things which clearly separated him from other world faiths. For example Jesus stated that God is the author of life and that if people wanted meaning and purpose in life they should come to him and find life. This is diametrically opposed to Buddhism which is a nontheistic if not atheistic religion²². Jesus also claimed that he was the son of God and that if anyone saw Jesus they were seeing God. Such a claim would be outrageous to a Muslim who, being a monotheist, would have no concept of God having a son or an equal. Jesus claimed to be the resurrection and the life, to be the one who gives eternal life, a concept very different from the Hindu idea of reincarnation. If that were not enough, Jesus also claimed that we could know God personally, indeed he would be able to introduce us to God. This is a point that an agnostic would find offensive because he would contend that God is unknowable. In all these ways Jesus drew a sharp distinction between his disciples and other world religions. We therefore do not have the luxury as Christians of saying the all religions are basically the same.

Sincerity does not make something True

When faced with this apparently harsh reality, people who espouse religious pluralism go on the defensive by saying, 'but what happens if these people from other religious are sincere, surely you couldn't condemn them for that'. This is such an emotive issue that I have even been the focus of people's hostility when discussing the issue. The basic rationale to their argument is that if someone is sincere about something, then their belief system must be true. This, of course, does not follow.

A number of centuries ago a society known as the Flat Earth Society was formed. The members of this society were committed to the belief that the earth was flat and not round. Subsequently modern science has proved beyond all reasonable doubt that the world is a globe and not flat, yet ironically the Flat Earth Society still exists. It is not that evidence for the shape of the world is scant and dubious. On the contrary it is overwhelming. Indeed we can even view photographs taken from outer space which conclusively demonstrate the spherical nature of the earth. Despite this, however, the society persists and their members sincerely believe that the earth is flat. In such a situation it would be utterly ridiculous to accept the beliefs of the Flat Earth Society simply because they are sincerely held. The fact is they are wrong and sincerity is not an issue. Indeed it is not even a kindness to be tolerant of their beliefs and allow them to continue in their deluded state. What they need is the truth and the truth will set them free from the sad situation they find themselves in.

By the same token, religious sincerity is not an arbiter of truth. We should not judge the truthfulness of a religious claim simply because some people are deeply committed to it. Given that the realm of religion deals with the issue of man's eternal destiny, this issue is

²¹ Harold Netland, *From Athens to Jerusalem, Religious Diversity and Religious Pluralism*, p.5

²² Ravi Zacharias, *Jesus among other Gods*, p.5.

consequently of far more importance to us than the shape of the earth. In the end it really does not matter very much what shape the world is, but it is of huge importance to all of us that we discover which religious belief is actually true and which are cruel delusions. We should never allow sentimentality and political correctness to dam mankind to an empty eternity just because they were not aware of what the truth was.

Tolerance of What

A useful perspective on the issue of tolerance is provided for us by Mortimer J. Adler in his landmark work *Truth is Religion: The Plurality of Religions and the Unity of truth*. He assesses the tolerance of religious pluralism and makes the following statement:

The doctrinaire liberals of the twentieth century espouse pluralism and tolerance as if they were desirable values on which no restrictions or qualifications should be placed when they are applied to the life of society and of thought.... Pluralism is a desirable policy in all realms of action and thought except those in which unity is required. When unity is required pluralism must be restricted...Pluralism is desirable and tolerable only in those areas that are matters of taste rather than matters of truth. Preferences with regard to cuisine, dress, patterns of dance, social manners, artistic style, do not raise any questions of truth....Such matters belong to the sphere of the voluntary. But with regard to matters that belong to the sphere of intellect, matters involving truth not taste, a persistent pluralism is intolerable....to view pluralism in regard to values as desirable and tolerable is tantamount to dismissing all value judgments as matters of taste rather than matters of truth²³.

The point that Adler is making here is profound and important. In any free society there is a place for pluralism when it deals with the issue of taste. We should be open minded and accepting of people from other cultures in relation to their particular tastes. To be intolerant of them in this regard is to be ethnocentric and culturally snobby. But when it comes to matters of truth, the ground rules change. Here pluralism can be very damaging especially when it means that we accept as normative something which is in fact wrong. If we remain tolerant and pluralistic on truth issues then there can be no credible value judgments. The question therefore is, are religious ideas matters of truth or matters of taste? The answer to this question is that the bible so emphasizes the truthfulness of its storyline that it must be part of the realm of truth. Jesus himself claimed to be the way, the *truth* and the life. He was not just talking about the realm of taste, but the realm of truth. Of course every religion claims to be the truth. But this emphasizes Adler's point even more. The basic clash between different world religions is not one about their respective tastes, rather it is a clash between competing truth claims. The question is, which one really is true?

The Transcendent Christ

²³ Mortimer J. Adler, *Truth in Religion: The Plurality in Religions and the Unity of Truth*, p.1-4.

Of course when we deal with the truth question, Christianity also ends up in the spotlight. This is entirely reasonable as Christianity should have no intrinsic right to a hearing over and above any other religion, except if it is indeed uniquely true. Like all other religions, Christianity makes truth claims and these in turn must be tested to see if they stand up. Of course even the investigation of Christianity is not politically correct in a tolerant society, but logic forces us to launch such an investigation in order to find the truth.

Christianity has several qualities that make it unique; but the central thing that makes it unique is the person of Jesus Christ. This not surprising because, after all, Christianity is basically about Jesus. Without him there is no Christianity, but with him everything falls into place and it all makes sense. In short, Christianity is unique because Jesus is unique. The validity of the Christian faith is based on the person of Christ and what he did. If Christ can be seen to be unique, then the uniqueness of Christianity will be self evident. But in what ways is Christ unique?

Virgin birth

Firstly Jesus is unique because he came into the world by miraculous means. He, unlike any other man who has ever lived, was born of a virgin. Some have questioned this, but such questions cannot adequately be sustained. Mary and Joseph could have gained nothing from their claim that the baby Jesus was not actually Joseph's son. The scandal was a terrible burden to bear, and not one that they would have willingly endured, except for the fact that they knew that his conception was miraculous. He was conceived as a result of the activity of the Holy Spirit. This is the only credible explanation for their actions. That makes Jesus unique, for Mohammed, Krishna and Buddha all came into the world as a result of a conventional and ordinary birth, one in which nothing miraculous occurred.

Moral Purity

Secondly Jesus is unique because he lived a life of utter moral purity. His adversaries continually tried to trip him up to find way of accusing him, but their efforts were always in vain. Even at his trial under close investigation, the judge stated that no fault could be found in him. Jesus was a man who was utterly morally perfect.

The same could not be said of Mohammed, Buddha or even Krishna²⁴. Indeed their own scriptures admit to this. In the Koran we are told that Mohammed had to ask for forgiveness for his sin. The Bhagavad Gita has lurid descriptions of the immoral life that was lived by Krishna. As for the Buddha, the very fact that he had to go through so many reincarnations points to the fact of his sinfulness. In each case the lives of these founders of world religions were flawed. Interestingly the adherents of these faiths claim that their founders are able to empathise with ordinary people precisely because they are flawed characters. Jesus unique led a life of purity that no one could question.

Proven Miracles

²⁴ Jesus among other Gods, p.40

Thirdly Jesus is unique because he performed many miracles that can be historically attested. Again there are those who doubt the veracity of the miracles of Jesus, but their objections are unreasonable. There are at least two compelling reasons why we should believe in the historicity of the miracles of Jesus²⁵:

- Firstly the miracles of Jesus were done in a public setting and in the presence hostile witnesses. Many of those who watched these miracles taking place, therefore, were not people with open minds, ready to accept and believe. Rather they were bitter cynics, desperate for the opportunity to humiliate Jesus and show him to be a fraud. Despite their opposition they simply could not deny miracles had taken place.
- Secondly some of Jesus' miracles were openly attested to after the event. The healings, for example, were proved to be valid in perpetuity by those who had been healed. It would be hard to convince Lazarus after his resurrection that the miracle that brought him back to life was actually bogus.

The historically attestable nature of Jesus miracles makes him unique, for no other religious founder performed miracles that can be historically attested as Jesus miracles can²⁶.

Claimed Deity

Fourthly Jesus is unique among the founders of world religions because he actually claimed to be God (Jn.10:30). He spoke with great clarity about who he was and left people in no doubt as to his divine nature. Steve Kumar helpfully provides us with a summary of the claims that Jesus made about himself²⁷. He states that Jesus claimed to:

- forgive sin – see Matthew 9:1-8
- judge the world - John 5:27, 30
- give eternal life - John 3:16
- be sinless – John 8:46
- be the object of faith – John 8:24
- answer prayer – John 14:13
- be worthy of worship – Matthew 14:33
- be the truth – John 14:6

²⁵ These are taken from a longer list of reasons found in Protestant Christian Evidences, by Bernard Ramm, p.140-143.

²⁶ Some might want to dispute this claim insisting that other founders like Mohammed performed miracles. However, the alleged miracles of Mohammed are neither of the caliber of Jesus miracles, neither are they testable. As Craig points out they were not claimed by either Mohammed or the Koran, rather they are a later and unverifiable tradition (Lee Strobel, The Case for Faith, p.70,71).

²⁷ Steve Kumar, Christianity for Skeptics, p.89-94.

- have all authority - Matthew 28:18
- be one in essence with God – John 10:30

In the face such claims we are forced to make a choice about who we think Jesus is. Either we dismiss him as some sort of delusional lunatic, or we take his claims seriously. As C.S. Lewis stated that when you think of the enormity of Jesus' claims, he was either, 'a megalomaniac compared with whom Hitler was the most sane and humble of men' or 'a complete lunatic suffering from that form of delusion which undermines the whole mind of man, or he was indeed God'²⁸. What we cannot do is just sit on the fence because these claims are simply too extraordinary to allow for that. Moreover Ramachandra points out that if Jesus did not actually believe his own claims, then we would have no grounds for seeing him as a moral exemplar for the rest of us²⁹. This has huge implications for Christians and indeed the whole of western culture. And if we hesitate to acknowledge the truth of his claims then our only choice is to dismiss him as a liar and charlatan, and thus make the accusation that the whole edifice of Christianity is built on a gigantic hoax inspired by a self - deceived fool. The choice is simple and we must make it. However with all we know of the person of Christ, the only real option is to acknowledge him as the son of God.

Again his claims make him unique among all the founders of world religions, for none of them claimed such a remarkable list of qualities about themselves.

Rose from the Dead

Fifthly Jesus is unique in that he rose from the dead. The resurrection is without question the greatest miracle associated with life of Christ. It is remarkable not least for the fact that Jesus actually predicted his death and resurrection long before it ever happened (Matt. 16:21). Like all other key events in the life of Jesus the evidence for the resurrection is overwhelming. The evidence for the resurrection of Christ is based on four facts; that he was dead; that he was buried; that the tomb in which he was buried was subsequently found to be empty; and Christ's post-mortem appearances to his followers and to others. If these four facts can be established beyond all reasonable doubt then it follows that the resurrection can be safely accepted as a fact of history. We shall look at each of the four facts in turn.

The Death of Christ

The fact of the death of Jesus is not difficult to verify. After all his executioners were professionals who knew exactly what they were doing and it was very much in their interests to ensure that their victims genuinely did die. Of all the crucifixions that took place in Palestine at the time of Jesus there is no record of anyone ever surviving this brutal form of capital punishment. We can also look back with the benefit of modern

²⁸ CS Lewis, *God in the Dock*, p.88.

²⁹ Vinoth Ramachandra, *Faiths in Conflict*, p.109,110.

science and see from the historical description that we have been given of the crucifixion, that all the medical evidence for death was there and clearly apparent³⁰. It is reasonable therefore to accept it as a fact.

The Burial of Christ

The fact of the burial of Christ is equally easy to verify. Burial did of course commonly happen following death, but the burial of Jesus is particularly interesting because of its detail. We are told that Jesus was buried in the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea, a wealthy and prominent member of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish parliament. Jesus was a scandalous figure in his day and there was a real risk in being associated with him because of this. There is no way that prominent figure like Joseph of Aramathea could have his name linked with the scandal of Jesus and his death as a criminal if the story were not true. It would have been exposed within days. This overt link with Joseph provides us with compelling evidence that Jesus was indeed buried.

Empty Tomb

The third fact that provides the evidence for the resurrection relates to the empty tomb. This too can be readily verified historically. At the feast of Pentecost, which took place after the resurrection, the disciples were in Jerusalem preaching to the Jewish Diaspora who had returned to the holy city for the festival. Their preaching was a huge success with many Jews converting to Christianity. Needless to say this greatly angered the Jewish religious leaders because, despite having got rid of Jesus, they were now faced with the threat of his disciples carrying on his ministry. They would have loved to stop this preaching and prove Christianity to be fraudulent.

At the heart of the message that the disciples were preaching was the claim that Jesus had risen from the dead. They were also preaching this message in the same city where Jesus had been buried. The solution, therefore, could not have been more simple for the Jewish religious leaders. In order to disprove Christianity, all they had to do was to produce the body of Jesus. If they did this then not even the most ardent follower of Christ would be able to claim that he had risen from the dead. But they did not do this, indeed they could not, for they knew full well that no body was in the tomb, it was completely empty³¹.

Appearances

The final fact that verifies the resurrection of Christ are the post-resurrection appearances of Jesus. These are most interesting because Jesus did not just appear once, but several times and to all kinds of people. He appeared individuals, but also to small groups as

³⁰ Josh McDowell, *The New Evidence that Demands a Verdict*, p.224.

³¹ William Lane Craig provides a very compelling defense of the resurrection citing both the historical reliability of the texts and the individual components of the case (*Apologetics: An Introduction*, p.167-206). With regard to the disciples preaching he notes how the early Christians suffered a most terrible persecution with many dying painful deaths. He then states, 'It is equally clear that it was for a miraculous story that these Christians were suffering' (p.176). This absolute commitment can only be explicable if they genuinely were convinced that the tomb was empty.

well as to five hundred people all at the same time. Some have tried to suggest that these appearances were a form of hallucination, but Little counters this claim in the following way:

Hallucinations occur generally in people who tend to be vividly imaginative and of a nervous makeup. But the appearances of Christ were to all sorts of people. True, some were sensitive, but there were also hardened fishermen like Peter and others of various dispositions. Hallucinations are known to be extremely subjective and individual. For this reason, no two people have the same experience. In the case of the resurrection, Christ appeared not just to individuals but to groups, including one with more than five hundred people. Paul said more than half of these people were still alive and could tell about the events (1 Corinthians 15). Hallucinations usually occur only at particular times and places, and they are associated with the events fancied. However, these appearances occurred both indoors and outdoors, in the morning, afternoon and evening. In general, these psychic experiences occur over a long period of time and with some regularity. These appearances happened over a period of forty days and then stopped abruptly. No one said they happened ever again³².

It is also worth noting the sheer physicality of these appearances with Jesus inviting Thomas to touch him (Jn.20:26-31) and later eating with his disciples by the sea shore (Jn.21:1-23). This unquestionably rules out the possibility of these appearances being hallucinations. Many of these people died for belief in Jesus and his resurrection. Their martyrdoms provide further proof of the fact that they encountered Jesus after resurrection.

Jesus return from death undoubtedly makes him unique, for no other religious founder has died and then come back to life to be with his followers. Muhammad is dead, as is the Buddha and Krishna. Only Jesus is alive today because at his resurrection he conquered death as he procured forgiveness and salvation for the world.

So who has got it right?

We return now to the question that was asked earlier on. Why should we choose Christianity rather than any other world faith? In answering this question we need to reflect of the words of Jesus in John 14:6 where he said, 'I am the way, the truth, and the life, no man comes to the father but by me'. This was an exclusive claim which denies the pathway to God offered by any other world religion. Jesus does not give us any options here and he certainly does not allow for a religiously pluralistic response. He clearly states that we are either for him or against him and that there can be no other competitor for our affections. He exclusively claims to be the only way to God. This begs the question, can we trust him? Why should we trust him over any other religious founder? The reason is obvious, the evidence clearly points to the fact that he is unique and they not.

³² Paul E Little, Know Why you Believe, p.54.

Living in a Pluralistic Society

We now turn from the exclusive claims of Christianity to the practical application of our Christian commitment in a pluralistic society. How do we live in a society where there are many competing religions and what should our attitude to them be? To what extent should we be tolerant of the growing religious diversity in society and where should the battle lines be drawn? How do we handle the accusations of intolerance that are bound to come our way?

Sola Scriptura

It seems to me that the very first thing that we must do as Christians is to have a thorough understanding of the doctrine of scripture and defend it to the best of our ability. This is a key issue because as Netland points out, skepticism about the bible is one of the key reasons for the rise of religious pluralism³³. Christianity is a religion of the book. God is a communicating God and wished to self disclose something of His will and character. As this revelation took place the word of God was put to paper as men were inspired by the Holy Spirit. This process is something which took place in the past, but it nevertheless relates to us now. For as Middleton and Walsh state, not only do we have, 'The givenness of scripture as the authoritative story in terms of which we are to read our lives we have access to the author of the story. Whereas we would be on our own in interpreting the hypothetical unfinished play by Shakespeare, since the author is dead and gone, the Author of the biblical drama has sent his Spirit to be our compassionate and empowering Dramatic and Acting Coach, who helps us to discern what would be faithful improvisation in our own time'³⁴. If we lose a sense of the bible as the word of God then we have no defense against the various truth claims that religious pluralism throws at us. The bible is the standard by which we measure truth, and if we lose confidence in it then we will have no foundation for our beliefs.

Part of our commitment to the doctrine of scripture is the recognition that we cannot pick and choose which parts of the bible we believe and which parts we ignore. The whole thing stands together. To have a consistent view of the doctrine of scripture is to believe and accept as divine even those parts of the bible that we find both frustratingly difficult to understand and emotionally unpalatable.

The Truth Sets You Free

A second thing that we need to do is to argue that truth exists in a real and objective way. This is a hugely important thing for two reasons. Firstly, truth is important because the set of beliefs which we consider to be true enable us to have things in common with other people and thus enable us to live in community. If there was no such thing as truth then there would be no meaning or communication, everything would simply be anarchy. In that sense community is built on truth. Secondly, truth is important for us as Christians

³³ Harold Netland, *Dissonant Voices: Religious Pluralism and the Question of Truth*, p.29.

³⁴ Richard Middleton & Brian Walsh, *Truth is Stranger than it Used to Be*, p.184.

because unless those with whom we rub shoulders recognize this, then we have no basis for persuading them of the rightness of our case.

Of course the very issue of truth and it's knowability has been the subject of much debate throughout human history³⁵. The ancient Greeks saw truth as being something apart from themselves that exists whether it is recognized or not. In that sense truth is something we come across. Later when Christian ideas began to interact with Greek philosophy truth became something which was guaranteed by God. In that sense truth is something which is ultimately revealed so that what we know is a subset of what God knows. We can comprehend truth because God allows us to. Then in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries people began to shake off the shackles of past belief and argue that truth is only that which can logically be proved. Later again truth became a pragmatic thing, if it works and enhances life that it becomes a kind of working truth. Finally with the advent of post-modernity, truth became a personal thing. Truth is something that we as individuals make for ourselves. It does not need to be defended because it is entirely subjective and personal to me.

None of these viewpoints is completely true but some at least have commending features. The drawback with all of them, however, is that they do not actually define what truth is. Perhaps this is not surprising because truth is a complex notion to understand³⁶. It cannot just be reduced to as simple a formulae as, for example, something which can be logically and scientifically proved. For example it is true that I love my wife, but I cannot think of a mathematical equation of scientific experiment which could demonstrate this truth. Despite this, however, there is a rational aspect to truth. This rational aspect does not actually create truth, rather it tests it. It asks the question, is there any evidence to support the truth that I believe in?

Given this, perhaps we can come up with a simple (maybe simplistic) definition of truth. Truth could be described as a belief which can be tested. Even as you read this definition you will note its inadequacies. For example what do we mean by tested. Clearly we are not referring to a test in the sense of a scientific experiment or mathematical calculation because as I have already stated, the truth of my love for my wife cannot be tested in this way. But beliefs can be tested nevertheless, even if this testing may not be able to be measured in a specific or numerical way. For example, my wife over a period of time has come to accept the truth of my love for her, because the evidence has been there consistently in the way that I have treated her³⁷. Likewise many other truths have come to be accepted as such through the process of experience and testing³⁸.

³⁵ For a useful survey see Truth can it be True, chapter 6 by Peter Hicks. What follows is a summary of the points which he makes.

³⁶ Peter Hicks, Truth can it be True, p.211.

³⁷ Even though I am a fallible human being who vacillates emotionally, there can nevertheless be a sufficient degree of consistency to communicate a quality like love.

³⁸ Stephen Evans helpfully suggests that several criteria can be employed in the testing of truths and these can include logical consistency, coherence, factual adequacy and intellectual fertility (Philosophy of Religion, p.169).

If we can establish that truth really does exist, then we have a basis for arguing for the truth of Christianity in the world of ideas. Needless to say, Christianity itself then needs to be 'proved' in the same way as all other truths. This, however, can be done, and convincingly, for it is a belief system that enjoys much in the way of evidential support. Christianity has at times been described as a leap of faith. But when we talk about leaps of faith Christians are not the only ones doing the leaping³⁹. We can only believe what seems true to us because belief is a belief in something that we believe is true. Therefore an atheist is equally taking a leap of faith.

It is entirely appropriate and certainly acceptable to test the truthfulness of the Christian faith while at the same time being committed to it. Just because we are asking questions about Christianity, it does not necessarily follow that we are trying to negate its truthfulness. Evans suggests that we need to distinguish between *logical doubt* and *existential doubt* when testing the truth claims of Christianity⁴⁰. Logical doubt is a willingness to consider the possibility that one's own convictions are mistaken by honestly looking at the evidence. Existential doubt, on the other hand, is a positive belief that one's own position is seriously flawed and possibly wrong. Clearly if existential doubt becomes too great then a person's faith might be crippled. But there is no such inherent risk in logical doubt. If I am genuinely convinced that my beliefs are true and sound, then I should have no fear of examining alternative explanations. A faith which evades critical questions is one which lacks confidence. On the other hand a faith which is willing to interact with critics is one which is built on the solid foundation of tested truth.

At the very heart of Christian truth is the truth that relates to the person and work of Jesus Christ. It is to this truth that we need to draw people's attention. Certainly all Christian truths are worth defending, but ultimately we need to bring our listeners to the cross. For this reason as we argue for the existence of truth in an absolute way we need to be deliberately Christocentric and argue for the absolute truthfulness of Christ.

Shifting the Spotlight

Thirdly we need to learn to shift the spotlight to focus on those who attack us for believing in truth and in particular the truth of the uniqueness of Christ. In doing so we need to attack the foundation of religious pluralism so that it can be shown to be a hollow and deceptive philosophy. Perhaps the best way of doing this is to question the basis of authority for religious pluralism. In many ways this is a bit like turning tables because those who favor religious pluralism question the authority by which we as Christians insist on the uniqueness of Christ, we should do likewise. When they tell us that all religions are basically the same and that they all lead to God, our first response should be, 'How do you know?'

When we put the spotlight on the religious pluralist we soon discover that his worldview is self-destructive. This can be demonstrated in a number of ways. Firstly most religious

³⁹ Stephen Evans, *Philosophy of Religion: Thinking about Faith*, p.162.

⁴⁰ Stephen Evans, *Philosophy of Religion: Thinking about Faith*, p.176.

pluralists argue that religious beliefs are culturally conditioned. By this they mean that a Muslim in Pakistan believes what he does because he comes from Pakistan and a Christian from the USA believes what he does because he comes from America. Because they believe what they do due to their background, we must accept that their truth is true for them, as opposed to universal truth, and we should accept its validity.

This argument is both weak and dangerous. In critiquing Hick's religious pluralism Nash states:

For Hick, truth is a function of geography, that is, where people happen to have been born. This idea, carried to its logical implications, would make Nazism, cannibalism, infanticide, and witchcraft true because they would all be a result of geographic and cultural conditioning. And Hick's position also implies that beliefs can be true and false at the same time, true for people conditioned in one way and false for others⁴¹.

This is a very obvious fault. To validate a belief and call it true simply because someone was inculcated in that belief from birth, opens the floodgates for the acceptance of almost anything. Carson also points out that many are atheists because they grew up in such a society, and this line of argumentation, rather than encouraging us to respect other religions, makes us wonder if any religion is better than atheism⁴².

Secondly, religious pluralism is inherently unworkable because the religious pluralist can't have his cake and eat it. What the religious pluralist is doing is to say that there is no such thing as absolute truth, and therefore no one religion can claim to be true in an absolute and exclusive way. But the statement, 'there is no such thing as an absolute truth', is in fact a statement which purports to be an absolute truth. It makes the religious pluralist intellectually arrogant because he denies anyone else the possibility of being right while claiming to be right himself, but more than that he is denying the veracity of his own statement by his own statement. This is a ludicrous position. Geisler sums up the dilemma in this way:

'The only way the relativist can avoid the painful dilemma of relativism is to admit that there are at least some absolute truths. As noted, most relativists believe that relativism is absolutely true and that everyone should be a relativist. Therein lies the self-destructive nature of relativism. The relativist stands on the pinnacle of absolute truth and wants to relativise everything else'⁴³.

In actual fact, when the religious pluralist makes an absolute statement in which he denies the existence of absolutes, he falls foul of the law of non-contradiction. This law, which has a recognized position on contemporary philosophy, simply states that it is impossible for two contradictory statements to be simultaneously true⁴⁴. The two

⁴¹ Ronald Nash, *Is Jesus the only Savior*, p.96.

⁴² Don Carson, *The Gagging of God*, p.177.

⁴³ Norman Geisler, *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics*, p.745.

⁴⁴ L.M. Regis, *Epistemology*, p.388.

contradictory statements in the case of the religious pluralist are, 'no religion or religious statement can claim to be absolutely true', and, 'religious pluralism is absolutely true'. While denying the existence of absolute religious truth the religious pluralist is himself claiming to speak with absolute truth. This might at first seem like nothing more than an intellectual gaffe on the part of the religious pluralist. One might simply state that he really isn't thinking very clearly about the issue. His conclusions, however, are not benign, for as Sullivan points out in his doctoral thesis on the issue, there are eight significant consequences of falling foul of this law⁴⁵:

1. To deny the necessity and validity of the Principle of Contradiction would be to deprive words of their fixed meaning and render speech useless.
2. Reality of essences must be abandoned; there would be becoming without anything that becomes; flying without a bird; accidents without subjects in which to inhere.
3. There would be no distinction between things. All would be one. Ship, wall, man would all be the same thing.
4. It would mean the destruction of truth, for truth and falsity would mean the same thing.
5. It would destroy all thought, even opinion, for its affirmation would be its negation.
6. Desire and preference would be useless, for there would be no difference between good and evil; there would be no reason to go home, for to go home would not be different from staying where one is.
7. Everything would be equally true and false at the same time, so that no opinion would be more wrong than any other even in degree.
8. It would make impossible all becoming, change, or motion for all this implies a transition from one state of being to another; but if the Principle of contradiction is false, all states of being are the same.

These consequences would make life a very confusing and uncertain thing. More than that they would make life a nonsense. This is the problem with relativism in general and or religious pluralism in particular, it is actually an illogical and nonsensical view of life.

Thirdly, religious pluralists are inconsistent in their application of their own principles. This is because although they claim that all religions are true and should be accepted as such, they do not actually believe this in a universal way. Indeed every religious pluralist will contend with aspects of the belief system of any faith⁴⁶.

A good example of this can be seen in the way that John Hick deals with Christianity. Far from accepting the doctrines of the Christian faith as true, he argues that they need to be reinterpreted. This is clear when dealing with the doctrine of the incarnation. If he

⁴⁵ James Bacon Sullivan, *An Examination of First Principles in Thought and Being, in the Light of Aristotle and Aquinas*, p.121-122.

⁴⁶ Netland comments on this by saying, 'This is seen, for example, in the way in which Hick characteristically reinterprets troublesome exclusive beliefs from various religions so as to avoid the problem of conflicting truth claims in religion' (*Religious Diversity and Religious Pluralism*, p.5).

were to accept the Jesus really was God incarnate, this would give rise to the exclusive claims of Christianity, and by implication, the falsity of other religions. To get round this Hick describes the incarnation firstly as a myth, and then as a metaphor which considerably softens the tone⁴⁷. In other words he claims that he sees Christianity as true just as all religions are true, but he denies the truthfulness of some of the most important aspects of Christianity. At best this is inconsistent, at worst hypocritical.

Demonstrating True Tolerance

Fourthly we need to demonstrate the appropriate tolerance of the Christian faith⁴⁸. Far from being an intolerant and bigoted faith, Christianity is a faith which loves and respects the individual and recognizes that he is a unique human being made in the image of God. Christian tolerance can be expressed in a number of ways. Firstly, there is the issue of legal tolerance. The Christian faith is a voluntary one and not a belief system that a person can be coerced into accepting. There are therefore no grounds for using the legal system to force people to adopt Christian ways. It is therefore the case that Christianity, by its very nature, is a faith that is committed to religious freedom. Church history actually suggests this. When the early settlers left England bound for America, it was precisely because their religious liberties were being threatened. When they arrived in the new world, the first freedom they insisted upon was religious liberty. Leslie Newbigin sums up the Christian position in the following way:

If we acknowledge the God of the Bible, we are committed to struggle for justice in society, justice means giving to each his due. Our problem (as seen in the light of the gospel) is that each of us overestimates what is due to him as compared with what is due to his neighbor...If I do not acknowledge a justice for which I fight, I am an agent, not of justice, but of lawless tyranny⁴⁹.

Certainly it is true that Christians do try and exert a positive influence in the world through evangelism. And it is the case that our goal is that all men hear the good news of the gospel (Mtt.28:18,19). But this proclamation is an appeal to people to voluntarily come to Christ. If it is not voluntary then it is not a true conversion. This kind of influence is therefore very different that, for example, the application of Shari'a law which is imposed in many Islamic countries⁵⁰.

⁴⁷ John Hick, *The Myth of God Incarnate*, p.180 see also *The Metaphor of God Incarnate: Christology in a Pluralistic Age*.

⁴⁸ Art Lindsley has an excellent section of this which I have used extensively here (*True Truth*, p.24-33).

⁴⁹ Lesslie Newbigin, *The Open Secret: Sketches of a Missionary Theology*, p.124.

⁵⁰ Bill Musk comments that the Islamic faith demands a submission to the will of God. He goes on to say that, 'It is in the Islamic state that true submission (Islam) finds proper expression' (*Holy War*, p.75). In other words Islam as a faith is at its full expression when everyone lives within a theocratic Islamic state and all are forced to abide by Islamic law. It is indeed a rich irony that many Muslims living in liberal western democracies harp on about not being allowed their religious rights, and are listened to, while at the same time in Islamic states (which they would theologially support) such freedoms are not afforded to non-Muslims.

Secondly, there is the issue of social tolerance. At the very heart of Jesus teaching was a command that his disciples should be loving. While it was true that this love should begin with each other (John 13:34), Jesus also broadened the scope of Christian love out to include everyone, even our enemies (Mt.5:44). On one occasion Jesus was asked about how people attain eternal life (Lu.10:25-37). Jesus responded by saying that the law stated that God was to be loved with all our hearts, and then we are to love our neighbor as ourselves. This in turn led to the question, 'who is my neighbor?'

Jesus' response to this question was to tell the parable of the Good Samaritan⁵¹. Marshall sets the scene for this story by saying that, 'It contrasts the lack of compassion shown by two members of the Jewish priesthood towards an unknown and unfortunate sufferer with the obedience to the law shown in practical compassion by – to Jewish eyes – the most unlikely of men, a Samaritan'⁵². It would be difficult in our culture to fully appreciate the significance of this gesture by the Samaritan. The Samaritans were a community of people who settled in Shechem following the Hellenization of Samaria as a result of the conquests of Alexander the Great⁵³. They then took on a distinctive identity, built a temple on Mt. Gerazim, and began what they thought was a pure form of worship. Because of this they were utterly hated by the Jews who saw them both as a rival group and a distortion of Judaism. Indeed Jews hated and despised Samaritans even more than they did gentiles. The idea that this Samaritan would help the Jewish victim in this story when the two pious Jews did not is a shocking counterexample⁵⁴. Bearing in mind that this parable is the answer to the question about who is my neighbor, and also that this parable was given in the context of our need to love our neighbors as well as God, the point is obvious. As Christians we are to love people even if they are people with whom we have fundamental disagreements.

The love of Christ which should live in the hearts of all Christians, should reach out to people of different cultural, racial, ethnic and religious divisions. It should be obvious to all within these groups that we love and respect them as people made in the image of God, and even though we have very different religious views from them, we will not treat anyone with prejudice. Not only will we openly support and affirm religious freedom in a legal sense, but we will go out of our way to demonstrate to Muslims, Hindus, Sheiks, Buddhists, Taoists and any other grouping, that we want to embrace them as friends and love them as Christ loved them.

Those who say that Christianity is an intolerant faith are frankly deceived or dishonest. Nothing could be farther from the truth. The book of Revelation (5:9) has a picture of the end of time when people from every tribe, tongue, ethnic grouping and nation are gathered before Christ in Glory⁵⁵. This is our great expectation. God's will is that the

⁵¹ Reference to this parable has already been made in a previous chapter but it is worth revisiting because it particularly relates to Christian attitudes to other religions.

⁵² Howard Marshall, Commentary on Luke, p.445.

⁵³ Hugh Williamson, in Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Part 3, p.1378.

⁵⁴ Craig Bloomberg, Interpreting the Parables, p.232.

⁵⁵ Beale makes the point that, 'This is not a redemption of all peoples without exception but of all without distinction' (Revelation, p.359). In other words the redeeming work of Christ by its very nature is utterly inclusive to the point that distinctions are not recognized.

gospel unites all men, not excludes, and that the kingdom of heaven is made up of people from every background, culture and heritage⁵⁶. Christianity in this sense is not a western faith (though pluralism certainly is⁵⁷), rather it is a faith for the whole world. People from India, Brazil and Ethiopia have as much claim to the Christian faith as do people in England, Australia and the USA. Indeed the fact that two thirds of the world's Christians do not come from the west is evidence of the rightness of this truth⁵⁸.

Speaking the Truth in Love

Having demonstrated the tolerance of Christianity, and having expressed the love of Christ to those with whom we have disagreements, we also need to make a stand on those things we believe to be true. I mentioned previously that true Christian love does not mean that we accept everything that people do, even though we accept them as individuals. Indeed to blindly accept differences in a way that minimizes them is patronizing. When people who espouse liberal tolerance suggest that there are no real and substantial differences between different religions they are not demonstrating a respect for those religions or the people who cherish them, rather they are saying that those beliefs which make each religion distinctive are insignificant and unimportant. This, frankly, is an insult, and not just to Christians, but to every religion. Christians are understandably angered when John Hick dismisses so fundamental a doctrine as the incarnation. Likewise there will be Muslims and Jews who are equally affronted by the cavalier way in which he treats beliefs which they count precious.

It goes without saying that the way in which we make a stand is as important as the fact that we do make a stand. Believing in absolutes and being committed to one particular faith as exclusive truth is not, in itself, arrogant. But Christians can appear arrogant if they communicate the exclusive claims of Christianity badly. We need to learn to communicate our beliefs firmly, but also with gentleness. Our communication needs to be done in such a way that we create light and not heat. This can never be achieved if we allow insults and cheap shot to come into our proclamation. Rather we need to allow the arguments speak for themselves. This requires the ability to articulate the Christian faith with confidence, but not with a raised voice. There needs to be the balance which portrays both the argument against false views but also a compassion for the lost individual.

Evangelism

The final way in which we must respond to our pluralist culture is to re-commit ourselves to the great task of evangelism. This is the natural outworking of our love for people of other religions. Given that the gospel is not only good news but also the only hope for the world, it is an act of great cruelty to keep this wonderful message to ourselves. The

⁵⁶ John Piper clearly demonstrates the multicultural nature of Christianity in his, *Let the Nations be Glad*, p.167-218.

⁵⁷ Art Lindsley, *True Truth*, p.31.

⁵⁸ See Patrick Johnstone, *Operation World*, p.4,5. Johnstone suggests that not only is this the case, but developing world Christianity will continue to grow as western Christianity stagnates.

truth is that when someone is depending on Islam, Buddhism or Hinduism for his salvation then he is deluded and has fallen into a powerful snare laid by the Devil, the great enemy of mankind. Jesus said that the truth will set us free (John 8:38). We have been set free by the truth of the gospel and if we allow political correctness or the corrupted values of our pluralistic society to hold us back from enabling others to be set free through the proclamation of the gospel, then we do them a great disservice. The confusion which has been caused by religious pluralism must be challenged by the gracious, clear and convinced proclamation of Christian truth. This is the best service that we can render for Christ in his world.

