



Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization

The Whole Church taking the Whole Gospel to the Whole World

**THE UNIQUENESS OF CHRIST  
IN A POSTMODERN WORLD AND  
THE CHALLENGE OF WORLD RELIGIONS**

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***"A New Vision, a New Heart, a Renewed Call"***

In encouraging the publication and study of the Occasional Papers, the Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization does not necessarily endorse every viewpoint expressed in these papers.

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## The context for the production of the Lausanne Occasional Papers

The Lausanne Movement is an international movement committed to energising  
“the whole Church to take the whole gospel to the whole world”.

With roots going back to the historical conferences in Edinburgh (1910) and Berlin (1966), the Lausanne Movement was born out of the First International Congress on World Evangelization called by evangelist Billy Graham held in Lausanne, Switzerland, in July 1974. The landmark outcome of this Congress was the *Lausanne Covenant* supported by the 2430 participants from 150 nations. The covenant declares the substance of the Christian faith as historically declared in the creeds and adds a clear missional dimension to our faith. Many activities have emerged from the Lausanne Congress and from the second congress held in Manila in 1989. The Covenant (in a number of languages) and details about the many regional events and specialised conferences which have been undertaken in the name of Lausanne may be examined on the website at [www.lausanne.org](http://www.lausanne.org).

The continuing Lausanne International Committee believed it was led by the Holy Spirit to hold another conference which would bring together Christian leaders from around the world. This time the Committee planned to have younger emerging leaders involved and sought funds to enable it to bring a significant contingent from those parts of the world where the church is rapidly growing today. It decided to call the conference a **Forum**. As a Forum its structure would be to allow people to come and participate if they had something to contribute to one of 31 issues. These issues were chosen through a global research programme seeking to identify the most significant issues in the world today which are of concern in our task to take the *good news* to the world.

This Lausanne Occasional Paper (LOP) is the report which has emerged from one of these Issue Groups. LOPs have been produced for each of the Issue Groups and information re these and other publications may be obtained by going to the website at [www.lausanne.org](http://www.lausanne.org).

The theme of the Forum for World Evangelization held in 2004 was “**A new vision, a new heart and a renewed call**”. This Forum was held in Pattaya, Thailand from September 29 to October 5, 2004. 1530 participants came from 130 countries to work in one of the 31 Issue Groups.

The Affirmations at the conclusion of the Forum stated:

There has been a spirit of working together in serious dialogue and prayerful reflection. Representatives from a wide spectrum of cultures and virtually all parts of the world have come together to learn from one another and to seek new direction from the Holy Spirit for world evangelization. They committed themselves to joint action under divine guidance.

The dramatic change in the political and economic landscape in recent years has raised new challenges in evangelization for the church. The polarization between east and west makes it imperative that the church seek God’s direction for the appropriate responses to the present challenges.

In the 31 Issue Groups these new realities were taken into consideration, including the HIV pandemic, terrorism, globalization, the global role of media, poverty, persecution of Christians, fragmented families, political and religious nationalism, post-modern mind set, oppression of children, urbanization, neglect of the disabled and others.

Great progress was made in these groups as they grappled for solutions to the key challenges of world evangelization. As these groups focused on making specific recommendations, larger strategic themes came to the forefront.

There was affirmation that major efforts of the church must be directed toward those who have no access to the gospel. The commitment to help establish self sustaining churches within 6000 remaining unreached people groups remains a central priority.

Secondly, the words of our Lord call us to love our neighbour as ourselves. In this we have failed greatly. We renew our commitment to reach out in love and compassion to those who are marginalised because of disabilities or who have different lifestyles and spiritual perspectives. We commit to reach out to children and young people who constitute a majority of the world’s population, many of whom are being abused, forced into slavery, armies and child labour.

A third stream of a strategic nature acknowledges that the growth of the church is now accelerating outside of the western world. Through the participants from Africa, Asia and Latin America, we recognise the dynamic nature and rapid growth of the church in the *South*. Church leaders from the *South* are increasingly providing exemplary leadership in world evangelization.

Fourthly, we acknowledge the reality that much of the world is made up of oral learners who understand best when information comes to them by means of stories. A large proportion of the world's populations are either unable to or unwilling to absorb information through written communications. Therefore, a need exists to share the "Good News" and to disciple new Christians in story form and parables.

Fifthly, we call on the church to use media to effectively engage the culture in ways that draw non believers toward spiritual truth and to proclaim Jesus Christ in culturally relevant ways.

Finally, we affirm the priesthood of all believers and call on the church to equip, encourage and empower women, men and youth to fulfil their calling as witnesses and co-labourers in the world wide task of evangelization.

Transformation was a theme which emerged from the working groups. We acknowledge our own need to be continually transformed, to continue to open ourselves to the leading of the Holy Spirit, to the challenges of God's word and to grow in Christ together with fellow Christians in ways that result in social and economic transformation. We acknowledge that the scope of the gospel and building the Kingdom of God involves, body, mind, soul and spirit. Therefore we call for increasing integration of service to society and proclamation of the gospel.

We pray for those around the world who are being persecuted for their faith and for those who live in constant fear of their lives. We uphold our brothers and sisters who are suffering. We recognize that the reality of the persecuted church needs to be increasingly on the agenda of the whole body of Christ. At the same time, we also acknowledge the importance of loving and doing good to our enemies while we fight for the right of freedom of conscience everywhere.

We are deeply moved by the onslaught of the HIV/AIDS pandemic – the greatest human emergency in history. The Lausanne movement calls all churches everywhere to prayer and holistic response to this plague.

"9/11", the war in Iraq, the war on terror and its reprisals compel us to state that we must not allow the gospel or the Christian faith to be captive to any one geo-political entity. We affirm that the Christian faith is above all political entities.

We are concerned and mourn the death and destruction caused by all conflicts, terrorism and war. We call for Christians to pray for peace, to be proactively involved in reconciliation and avoid all attempts to turn any conflict into a religious war. Christian mission in this context lies in becoming peace makers.

We pray for peace and reconciliation and God's guidance in how to bring about peace through our work of evangelization. We pray for God to work in the affairs of nations to open doors of opportunity for the gospel. We call on the church to mobilize every believer to focus specific consistent prayer for the evangelization of their communities and the world.

In this Forum we have experienced the partnership of men and women working together. We call on the church around the world to work towards full partnership of men and women in the work of world evangelism by maximising the gifts of all.

We also recognize the need for greater intentionality in developing future leaders. We call on the church to find creative ways to release emerging leaders to serve effectively.

Numerous practical recommendations for local churches to consider were offered. These will be available on the Lausanne website and in the Lausanne Occasional Papers. It is our prayer that these many case studies and action plans will be used of God to mobilize the church to share a clear and relevant message using a variety of methods to reach the most neglected or resistant groups so that everyone will have the opportunity to hear the gospel message and be able to respond to this good news in faith.

We express our gratitude to the Thai Church which has hosted us and to their welcoming presentation to the Forum. We are profoundly grateful to God for the privilege of being able to gather here from the four corners of the earth. We have developed new partnerships, made new friends and encouraged one another in our various ministries. Notwithstanding the resistance to the gospel in many places and the richness of an inherited religious and cultural tradition we here at the Forum have accepted afresh the renewed call to be obedient to the mandate of Christ. We commit ourselves to making His saving love known so that the whole world may have opportunity to accept God's gift of salvation through Christ.

These affirmations indicate the response of the participants to the Forum outcomes and their longing that the whole church may be motivated by the outcomes of the Forum to strengthen its determination to be obedient to God's calling.

May the case studies and the practical suggestions in this and the other LOPs be of great help to you and your church as you seek to find new ways and a renewed call to proclaim the saving love of Jesus Christ

*David Claydon*

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# 1. INTRODUCTION<sup>1</sup>

“So are you saying there’s such a thing as absolute truth?” the student confronts the pastor after his talk. “I don’t believe there is absolute truth. I think you can believe whatever you want to believe. All religions are the same, so whatever is good for you is good for you, and whatever is good for me is good for me.”

As a Christian, who by definition believes in the Christ who gives meaning and significance to all things, how do you deal with a challenge like this? This kind of challenge is part of the world view called “Postmodernism.”

## ***What do we mean by the “uniqueness of Christ?”***

The Lausanne Movement has clear statements on the uniqueness of Christ and its relation to evangelism:

*(On Jesus) We affirm that there is only one Saviour and only one gospel..... Jesus Christ, being Himself the only God-man, who gave Himself as the only ransom for sinners, is the only mediator between God and people. (Lausanne Covenant Clause 3, 1974)*

*(On Jesus) We are called to proclaim Christ in an increasingly pluralistic world.... In the first century too there were “many gods and many lords.” Yet the apostles boldly affirmed the uniqueness, indispensability and centrality of Christ. We must do the same. (Manila Clause 3, 1989)*

*(On Evangelism and Culture) The development of strategies for world evangelization calls for imaginative pioneering methods.... The gospel does not presuppose the superiority of any culture to another, but evaluates all cultures according to its own criteria of truth and righteousness, and insists on moral absolutes in every culture. (Lausanne Covenant Clause 10, 1974)*

*(On Evangelism) [The Lausanne Movement] is determined to bear a positive and uncompromising witness to the uniqueness of our Lord, in His life, death, and resurrection, in all aspects of our evangelistic work including inter-faith dialogue. (Manila Clause 3, 1989)*

## ***What do we mean by Postmodernism?***

Though the term ‘Postmodern’ applies to a variety of philosophical perspectives, mindsets, orientations and moods, we have discerned four major areas of similarity of the concerns and issues which point in a similar direction. They are:

1. the loss of meta-narratives (grand narratives, stories that purport to give meaning to all),
2. the collapse of absolute truth (or scepticism about absolute truth claims),
3. scepticism about history, and
4. the general loss of meaning.

The focus of this paper is to explore how the challenges and the opportunities presented by post-modernism might influence and shape the Christian proclamation concerning the uniqueness, that is, the decisive pre-eminence of Jesus Christ. The thesis of this paper is that those who believe in the uniqueness of the Lord Jesus Christ must find new ways to creatively and effectively communicate His person and work within a Post-Modern framework. We will explore four crucial areas for consideration:

1. Biblical and Theological Foundations for the Uniqueness of Christ
2. Opportunities and Cautions Offered by Postmodernism
3. Systematic and Apologetic Engagement with Postmodernism and Pluralism
4. Methods of Communicating the Uniqueness of Christ

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<sup>1</sup> See Appendix 1 for the documentation of both Lausanne (1974) and Manila (1989) for their contributions to the Evangelical world on the issue of the uniqueness of Christ.

## 2. BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS FOR THE UNIQUENESS OF CHRIST

We believe that the **Triune (Tri-unity of) God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit**, has spoken through all times in various ways into the world (see Colossians 1:15-20; John 1:1-18; Philippians 2:1-11; Hebrews 1:1-4), which we must hear (see 2 Timothy 3:16-17; Hebrews 3:7-13). Each of these passages affirms that the Son is never understood in isolation. We therefore affirm the tri-personal nature of God as the divine context for the *uniqueness* of Christ as expressed in the Bible. In 1 Peter 1:2-3 and Matthew 28:18-20, a Trinitarian context is given for Jesus' uniqueness in terms of the one who has been given all authority by God and the one with whose blood we are atoned. We also affirm the essential outworking of the uniqueness of Christ in these passages. From these passages we see a consistent parallel outworking in our lives. This outworking is expressed in terms of Christian *being* and *doing*. In terms of being, 1 Peter 2:9 affirms that we are to be the chosen and holy people of God; Matthew 28 tells us that we are disciple-makers living our lives in response to Jesus' authority; in addition, disciples are those people in whom Jesus inwardly dwells forever. In terms of action, 1 Peter 2:9 calls us to declare the praises of Him who called us out of darkness and into light and Matthew 28 calls us to baptize in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit and to maintain the uniqueness of Christ as we teach people to obey His commands. Therefore, in concert with historic Christian confessions, we affirm that Jesus Christ is the second person of the Triune God. As the Trinity (Tri-unity), God is by nature a relational God. Therefore, we see entrance into Christ as entry into the community of faith that has its source in God himself.

### *(a) Special concerns with Postmodernism:*

We are concerned about the special theological challenges which the community of Christ faces in being witnesses in a Postmodern world. We call the church to further theological reflection in the face of Post-Modern scepticism towards truth claims, the loss of meta-narrative, relativism towards history and the general loss of meaning.

### *(b) Biblical Foundations for the Uniqueness of Christ*

#### **1. The Revelation of the Triune God in Jesus Christ**

The living, triune God, as He has reliably revealed Himself in the Bible, to all of humanity is the only true God.

The Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments tell us clearly that God is eternally one and as the living and sovereign One, He differs fundamentally from all false "gods" (Deuteronomy 6:4f.; Psalm 115:3-7; Isaiah 44:6; Jeremiah 10:6; 1 Corinthians 8:4-6). In His tri-personal nature as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, God is one perfect and complete community of love in Himself who has fulfilled His redemptive plan in the person of His Only begotten Son Jesus (Genesis 1:1f.; John 1:1f.; 15:26; 1 John 4:9; 2 Corinthians 13:13). Because He made humankind in His own image (Genesis 1:27), God is, as Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer and Renewer, the origin and ultimate purpose and goal of every human being. For this reason God calls all humanity to acknowledge Him and believe in Him, to worship, and to share his life (Ecclesiastes 11:9; 2 Corinthians 5:10; Psalm 46:11).

#### **2. Jesus Christ as the Answer to the Lostness of Humanity**

Since the 'Fall of Man', all human beings have been in a condition of alienation from God, depravity, subject to death from birth on and cannot free themselves from this state.

Human destitution goes back to a rebellion against the Holy One (God) which is repeated by every human being and leads to a state of sin (Genesis 3:1-19; Psalm 51:7; Romans 3:23; 5:12). The Holy Scriptures call this condition **lostness** and **life without God** (Luke 19:10; Ephesians 2:12), and rule out every thought of self-redemption (Psalm 49:8; Ephesians 2:8f.). The absolute validity and indispensability of the gospel is based on the fact that salvation and the Kingdom of God have come to us only in Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who became man.

In Jesus Christ the Son, as His *special revelation* of salvation (Hebrews 1:2), God the Father has spoken to us in a final way. By the initiation of the Father (John 1:1-2; 3:16), through His Incarnation by the Holy Spirit, and with His atoning death Christ reconciled lost humanity to God and redeemed it from the destructive powers of sin, death and the Devil (2 Corinthians 5:19; Ephesians 1:7f.; Hebrews 2:14f.).

The uniqueness of Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, demands a response. The necessity of personal belief, of placing one's faith in this unique One, is at the heart of the Christian gospel. Christ fulfills and completes all the aspirations of humanity. He comes as the Second Adam to recreate (restore) sinful humanity and a broken world. When people come to know Christ, they discover meaning and purpose and their full identity is regained. While a decision to accept the free offer of salvation is crucial to evangelism, it must also affirm that this unique Saviour offers not merely salvation as a work but He

also offers Himself in a transformational way. The whole purpose of the Christian life is to become like Jesus.

By Christ's bodily resurrection and ascension to Heaven, God the Father has confirmed Him as the only Mediator between Himself and humanity and appointed Him the universal Lord over all powers and authorities as well as Judge of the world (Matthew 28:18; Acts 10: 36-42; I Timothy 2:5f.). Therefore, eternal salvation or (eternal lostness) damnation is decided by either turning to Him in faith or by rejecting Him (John 3:16; Mark 16:16). He will come again.

#### ***(d) Applied Christology in a Postmodern Milieu***

What does the NT offer as a picture of Jesus that is unique? Below is an example of a possible approach at a practical tool for those who desire to communicate a non-oppressive Saviour in a context where distrust of truth and of 'metanarratives' has discouraged mutual communication between the postmodern mind and Christian witness. If a statement of authority is problematic in a postmodern setting because the abuse of power has produced a rejection of Christian concepts, i.e., Master, Lord, Sovereign, lordship, it is important for the witness of the Church to assist in the redefinition of these categories so that they are not construed as abusive or dominative in a coercive way.

The Gospel of John offers a view of Jesus that challenges the paradigm of a sovereign Saviour whose authority is unquestionable or irresistible.

#### **1. The Creator (Messiah) is rejectable**

In the prologue of John's Gospel we find strong divine statements about the Word (Jesus) in relation to the Father. Yet, in that same context we find that the Creator of the cosmos comes to His own and His own received Him not. It is not that they did not recognize Him but that they knew exactly who He claimed to be and chose to reject him (John 1:11). The Lord of the universe, *in the time of His Incarnation*, is met with a resounding rejection. He is identified with those on the margins.

#### **2. The Sovereign who is Humble**

Throughout His life it was easy to miss Him or dismiss Him because, as they were to discern, in His self-giving authority, He never coerces anyone to bow the knee to Him in offering salvation.

The paradox that it was the Lord of Glory who:

borrowed the stable for His birth  
borrowed an animal of burden to announce His kingdom  
"borrowed" the robe of mockery and crown of disdain  
and finally, even had to borrow a tomb for His burial.

Jesus had come to His own (John 1:11) and then He arrived in fulfilment of the promise to Israel that her King would once again enter the gates. He is on the back of a donkey (John 12). The Lord who is meek at His birth is also meek here. He reveals sovereignty of a "humble" sort; He fulfils prophecy; He had healed the blind, led Zaccheus to salvation, brought a friend from four days in a tomb and indicated knowledge of the future. (See Zechariah 9:9-10, Luke 19, John 11, Matthew 21:2-3, cf. 26:1-5). His kingship and kingdom are of a different order. Yet He is King, in the language which the Children of Israel would have understood. His Lordship in both testaments is affirmed. The use of divine attributes [or *kenosis*= "emptying", i.e., *Christ's relinquishment and renunciation of the form and privilege of God in becoming entirely man, i.e., Incarnation, while remaining truly God and suffering death.* (Philippians 2:5-8)] is never manipulative; they are only expressions of the King's agenda in the aid they offer in His mission of redemption.

#### **3. The Saviour who Serves**

It ought not surprise us, then, that in John 13, we find the sovereign Lord at the feet of His disciples, not in a corrective stance, but in a position which reveals His nature as Servant (Matthew 10:28; Luke 22:27; Mark 10:45). The Triune self-giving is fully revealed in Jesus. This God is focused on us, He wants to serve, He wants to give Himself for us.

#### **4. The Lord who Lays Down His Life**

Thus, the self-giving nature of God is revealed in all of the gospel. Or better, **'The gospel reveals the self-giving nature of God'**. The Cross is not an occurrence that is divorced from what is **already** revealed about the nature of Jesus. He is rejectable, He is humble, He is a servant and He gives His life for the redemption of the world (John 18).

Recommended Christological Passages for further study and transmission for a full-orbed Christology (these are already mentioned in the revelation section).

John 1: 1-18

Philippians 2:1-11

Colossians 1:15-20 and 2:15 (powers and authorities)

Heb 1:1-4

(Other important passages include: Matthew 28:19-20; 1 Peter 2:4-10; Revelation 5:6-14; 21:5-7)

*(e) The new context of Postmodernism has caused us to reemphasize these key areas:*

1. **Proclamation:** The Christian community has the responsibility not just to proclaim the gospel in words, but also to live out its belief in authentic relationships. As in every generation, the Church must communicate fully the life it has in Christ with the surrounding cultures. Likewise, we need to know the Post-modern persons to whom we are communicating. While we cannot let the Postmodern mind order our discussion, we must understand it as best we can and strive to witness in a way that is relevant to that mindset.

2. **Awareness, Sensitivity, and Intentionality:** The gospel of Jesus Christ must be offered within an increasingly pluralistic and Post-modern world.

3. **Relationality:** The Trinitarian basis of proclamation is Biblical and relevant in a context where interrelationships are essential to understanding God and humanity properly and evangelism.

4. **Presence of Christ:** It is the actual, historical, experiential presence of Christ the only Son of God which is being witnessed to and lived out through His church. It is in Him that the personal identity of the Christian is found. He indwells His own and His work is done through those who belong to Him. The gospel must flow out of a living relationship with God and effectively call people into a new relationship found only in Christ. This relationship is a relationship wherein we live in Him and He in us.

5. **Christ's Unique Lordship:** Christ is the universal, pre-incarnate and eternal Lord of the whole cosmos and of all principalities and powers (Colossians 1: 16) and He is also the historical Jesus of Nazareth. In Jesus alone, the transcendent God became incarnate and thus the Creator has become human. Christ's rule is complete, without competitor and through Him God's recreation (or restoration) of the entire cosmos has dawned. These are some of the Biblical foundations of the uniqueness of Christ.

### **3. OPPORTUNITIES AND CAUTIONS OFFERED BY POSTMODERNISM**

#### **Introduction**

##### ***A short history on Postmodernism:***

Where did the term “Postmodern” come from? In 1979, the French philosopher Jean Francois Lyotard published a landmark article entitled, “The Post-Modern Condition: A Report on Knowledge.” In the article, he coined the word ‘Post-Modern’ and stated what has come to represent the growing crisis of trust in Western civilization and, coupled with globalization, this crisis is quickly influencing many parts of the world. In the Modern world there was a belief in an overarching truth – whether informed by a Christian world-view or even a secular belief in progress and in the perfectability of humanity. Lyotard argued that Modern societies maintained (or even produced) order and stability by generating what he called “grand narratives” or “master narratives.”

These ‘meta-narratives’ provided a clear sense of destiny. All intellectual reflection was understood to be a journey with a clear destination – the pursuit of truth. In the emerging Postmodern context, it is thought that we are only on a virtual voyage where we explore self-created worlds. In short, the very nature of truth has begun to collapse. There is no longer a cohesive ‘canopy of truth’ or meta-narrative which gives meaning and purpose to civilization. Thus, Postmodernism is defined by four features: the loss of meta-narratives, the collapse of absolute truth (or scepticism about absolute truth claims), scepticism about history and the general loss of meaning.

However, Postmodernism also presents possibilities which may benefit or assist Christian communication. Postmodernity has challenged the foundations of the Modernist project with its smug confidence in the perfectability of people, the certainty of never-ending progress and the unassailable reliance on human reason. The collapse of the false meta-narratives of Modernity (reason, perfectability, progress) provides an opportunity to communicate the true meta-narrative that is rooted in the person and work of Jesus Christ. Thus, Postmodernism represents new challenges as well as new opportunities for Christian reflection and action. We are convinced that we are called to be faithful witnesses to the Christian gospel with the time we have been given.

##### ***Opportunities and Caution***

Jesus gives his Church the privilege of witnessing to His supremacy. Such witness affirms God’s creation of the world and each human life. Additionally, believers testify to his exclusivity as Saviour and his supremacy as Lord. The call of Jesus to each person to respond to his claims is universal.

The Bible affirms that God is sovereign over history. He calls His people to communicate the gospel in their particular cultural context. Each generation uniquely engages its contemporaries with the Bible’s message, both in word and deed. We are messengers of God’s salvation to humankind and we are required to understand the cultural setting in which we live. Effective communication in culture is a challenge.

In many respects, believers at the beginning of the 21st century find themselves in a shrinking world, where people in radically different geographical and socioeconomic settings nonetheless experience the effects of common cultural features. This context is being increasingly referred to as “postmodern” culture, a significant worldview shift. Humanity is grappling with this reaction to the long dominance of modernity. Because of its relatively recent emergence, the postmodern mindset is notoriously difficult to define. In whatever way “postmodernism” is understood, we recognize that Christians in many settings find themselves facing common realities.

This is particularly the case in Western and urban areas of our world, although other areas find themselves encountering its realities to differing degrees as well. Yet, a Christian assessment and engagement of the phenomenon of postmodernism is vital. The health of the church and our witness to the gospel require no less. In this context, it should be emphasized, believers are emboldened in remembering God’s sovereignty over history, in the midst of any context, and in the particularities of human life. God is Lord of all history and will decisively achieve His purposes, even in “postmodern” times. The following observations attempt not only to understand its effects, but also to suggest some parameters to effectively guide witness to the uniqueness of Christ in this era.

##### ***Framework***

As with all dominant cultural phases, postmodernism offers both opportunities and challenges for Christian faith and witness. It represents complex realities which demand appropriately differentiated responses from believers. Neither a wholesale rejection nor a total embrace of postmodernism is

appropriate. Both fail to effectively engage the cultural era in which God has placed us. Most of the core facets of postmodernism merit both critical caution and, at the same time, emerging opportunity for God's people. The following observations represent some key postmodern features:

(Revelation=*Truth*) Postmodernism affirms the possibility that a spiritual reality exists. It also rejects the possibility that truth is attainable through human reason alone. However, postmodernism regrettably asserts that truth no longer exists in any ultimate way. The Scriptures attest to the existence of both revelation and truth, embodied most profoundly in the person of Jesus. In Christianity, the one true God has come near.

(Epistemology=*Knowledge*) Postmodernism exposes the modern myths of exhaustive knowledge and human progress. This helpfully reintroduces the possibility of spiritual reality and leaves place for awe and wonder. Yet, it is radically sceptical about human ability to apprehend knowledge and regards the claim to possess knowledge as an attempt to gain power. The Bible affirms our ability to know in part, even if not fully.

(Theology=*Spirituality*) Modernism excluded any role for a God who is involved in human history. Postmodernism reintroduces the possibility of spiritual realities and influences while at the same time possessing much scepticism for a God who is personal, sovereign, and active in the human situation. Christian faith affirms a personal, transcendent God.

(*Human Society and Morality*) As such, postmodernism rejects a standard for good and evil which stands above the created world and human life. Yet, Biblical teaching repeatedly attests to human responsibility. Helpfully, though, postmodernism reveals how many moral and ethical assertions (including some done in the name of Christianity) have been used as mechanisms of power, manipulation, and oppression, thus dehumanizing people.

(*Human Nature and Identity*) Postmodernism highlights the presence of human alienation, suffering, and fragmentation. In doing so, it reveals the significant human longing for identity and community, reintroducing great opportunity for Christian answers. Yet, in and of itself, postmodernism appears to be incapable of satisfying such desires, apart from the call for the creation of self-identities and fuelling the pursuit of self-fulfilment.

Postmodernism denies the existence of a meta-narrative, which gives life meaning and history a purpose. A unified reality does not exist in postmodernism, however understandable people's search for meaning may be. Yet, postmodernism reintroduces the value of both stories and experience in life, allowing for a measure of worth and fulfilment in daily life. As a result, diversity and pluralism are much celebrated and tolerance for variety in human thought and living is embraced.

Christians seek to critically engage their fellow humans and the postmodern world, taking advantage of its opportunities and avoiding potential problems. Christian witness embraces the new opportunities provided by postmodernism while remaining alert to its dangers. Our hope remains in the unique person of Christ. He alone addresses people and can transform cultures in which we live. The postmodern context is no exception.

## 4. SYSTEMATIC AND APOLOGETIC ENGAGEMENT WITH POSTMODERNISM AND PLURALISM

The following are some challenges to the Christian faith commonly brought by postmodern individuals with a pluralistic mindset:

1. "Jesus may be your god, but I have my own god. All religions are the same."
2. "You can't believe the Bible, it's just a paternalistic tool to dominate the masses."
3. "I can believe whatever I want. You Christians are so intolerant."
4. "How can I trust Christianity when its track record is so marked by wars & power abuses?"
5. "How can your God allow Hell?"
6. "I create my own reality. We're all God."

### *Introduction*

Jesus criticised his contemporaries for being good at interpreting weather conditions, but not being able to understand the time they were living in (Luke 12:54-56). For the Christian church it is imperative to take Jesus seriously in his criticism. If we want to fulfil the calling to share the gospel with our contemporaries, it is crucial for us to understand the time we are living in.

#### **1. Modernism: an evaluation**

The last 200 years have been dramatically shaped by what is known as the Modern Project, that is, the project to direct all of life by the light of reason alone, without any reference to God as revealed in the Bible. Gradually, this rejection of the Christian faith has led to a rejection of everything supernatural. The result is a secular mindset, highly sceptical towards revelation and miracles and therefore highly sceptical towards the Biblical material.

With the Modern Project (Modernism) we affirm the validity and necessity of reason. We affirm the positive progress in areas of science, medicine, technology, etc. Furthermore, we affirm the developments leading to freedom, democracy and the emphasis of the dignity of every individual human being. We see all of these as ultimately an outworking of the Biblical teaching about human beings as God's images and God's stewards.

At the same time, we reject the ideas, so fundamental to the Modern Project, of the autonomy and the sufficiency of reason and the ultimate rejection of God. Human beings are more than their minds and reality is more than this world.

#### **2. Postmodernism: An evaluation**

As a reaction towards the Modern Project we have now seen the rise of a Postmodern mindset. This is a revolt against the reduction of human beings to their intellect, the authoritarian way of imposing "meta-narratives" from above, the misuse of technology at the expense of human qualities and the loss of community.

We agree with much of the Postmodern criticism against the Modern Project and want to affirm the importance of the personal, the need for community and the richness of human culture. At the same time, because of its anti-intellectualism, subjectivism, relativism and the fragmentation of life that follows from that, we are as critical of Postmodernism as we are of Modernism. The grave imbalance of the Modern Project is not helped by the opposite extreme.

The problem with both the Modern and the Postmodern is their anthropocentric outlook, putting man at the centre of everything. The many differences between them fade away in the light of the common theme of humanism that binds them together. As Christians, we acknowledge God instead as the ultimate source of all being and all knowing and, therefore, we want Him to be the focal point in our lives.

#### **3. Is communication possible?**

One crucial aspect of the Post-Modern culture is its scepticism towards the possibility of real communication. Because we belong to different cultural groups and use different "language games" communication is said to be undermined and viewed only as a hidden attempt for power. If that is true there is little meaning in sharing the gospel or showing its truth with anyone outside the Christian tribe, but, as Christians, we believe that all human beings are connected to each other in two important ways, which opens the door for communication. First, we all live in the same created world and therefore, we share the same basic reality. Secondly, as created in God's image, we all share a basic humanness, which no culture can wipe out. That means that communication, although often difficult, is possible. However far away a culture is in its mindset, it can still understand and receive the good news about Jesus Christ.

#### **4. Apologetics: An appraisal**

If communication is indeed possible, that reopens the question of apologetics. In our view, the task of apologetics is as important in a postmodern culture as it has ever been. Even if many people make feelings and experience a priority, it does not mean that they are without reflection. On the contrary,

much of the postmodern perspective is promoted by reasoning and therefore needs to be answered by reasoning! In order to faithfully and meaningfully communicate the supremacy of Jesus to a postmodern culture, we believe it to be vital for the church to rediscover its apologetic calling.

The word, **apologetics**, comes from the Greek word *apologia*, which means defence. So when Peter writes, "*Always be prepared to give a defence (apologia) for the hope that is within you,*" he is teaching that Christians must be willing and able to communicate the gospel persuasively to their neighbours. Jesus did that and, following Him, the apostles continued to do it.

### ***Jesus and apologetics***

There is profound richness in the way Jesus related to people and how He shared His message. He gave public speeches, He dialogued with small groups and He had long conversations with individuals. He asked questions that invited to further reflection and He often provoked his audience. He told stories and expounded Scripture. He answered questions and identified the deepest longings in the human heart. He exposed prejudices and took away obstacles. All the way He lived out his message by reaching out to the sick and needy and restoring the broken. He was outstanding as a communicator! He was always ready to meet the specific needs of the person in front of Him and He was prepared to argue for the truth of His message!

One text which illustrates the way Jesus embraced apologetics is the dramatic sequence of events in John chapter five. Jesus came to Jerusalem to celebrate one of the religious holidays. There he sees a lame man who has been sick for 38 years. Jesus is moved with compassion, heals the man and releases him from the tragic situation which has ruined his life up to this point. Since it is the Sabbath, His critics become angry with Him. They accuse Jesus on two counts: the first concerns the Sabbath. According to their definition, by healing the man on the Sabbath, Jesus worked! Then Jesus encouraged the man to sin by telling him to get up and carry his bed! Jesus answers them by reminding them that God also works on the Sabbath – by sustaining all of creation. I work in the same way, claims Jesus. This leads to the second accusation, which is much more serious: Jesus is charged with having committed the "crime" of Adam and Eve. He who is just a man makes Himself out to be God (v. 1-18).

In response to these accusations, Jesus holds a defence speech which is a brilliant work of apologetics. He begins by giving a detailed description of the content of His claims (v 19-30). He denies that He is committing Adam's crime, since He and Adam are not in the same situation. He is not just a human who is trying against the will of God to become God. Instead, He is the Son of God who has become a human. In everything He does, He follows the will of the Father and lives in unity with Him. He shares the Father's nature and work ("like Father, like Son"). He also has a unique relationship to humanity. He is our destiny (we are going to stand before Him as our judge) and He is our hope (He gives eternal life to everyone who believes in Him).

Based on these amazing claims, the people listening must ask themselves the questions: "Why should we believe a person who says these things about himself? What reasons would lead us to bow to His claims?" Jesus Himself seems completely aware that these are fully legitimate questions in light of what He has just said. That is why He continues with arguments which confirm His claims (v. 31-40).

He calls in four witnesses who reinforce the truthfulness of His statements. Yet He begins with a surprising statement: "*If I testify about myself, my testimony is not valid*" (5:31). He respects the fact that people would not have reason to believe Him if it were only something which He said (even though the claims could still be true). He takes our reason and our need for understanding seriously since He has created us that way! Instead of challenging us to blind faith, He calls in confirming witnesses. They are:

- i) the Father, who testifies for Jesus,
- ii) John the Baptist, recognized as a prophet from God and who testifies for Jesus,
- iii) His works, in this case the healing of the man, which testify that the Father had sent Him,
- iv) the Scriptures, which testify about Him.

Jesus is not afraid of arguments, and respects people's need to know and understand. He presents arguments, which at that time were quite weighty, as confirmation of the truth of His message.

The speech concludes when Jesus very typically turns the whole situation on its head. His accusers had claimed He was blasphemous. Now, Jesus presents some serious accusations against His critics (v. 40-47). The problem for them is not that they don't have reason enough for deciding who Jesus truly is. The problem is their attitude. They are seeking neither God nor the truth. According to Jesus they

- i) will not (do not want to) come to Him;
- ii) have no love for God;
- iii) do not seek the praise that comes from the only true God;
- iv) do not truly believe Moses.

Jesus' challenge is crystal clear. They must repent and humble themselves. By answering their intellectual questions, He leads them to the point where their deepest needs could be laid bare.

### ***Paul and apologetics***

When we look at Paul, sharing the gospel with a pagan, relativistic and pluralistic culture, we see a similar picture. He preached and defended the gospel of Christ among his contemporaries. He went first into synagogues to persuade his fellow Jews that Christianity is true, proving and arguing from Old Testament Scriptures that Jesus was the Christ. In addition, he also went to pagan Greeks. Starting with their literature and cultural artefacts, Paul demonstrated that the “unknown God” has been revealed and proclaimed in Jesus the Lord and Judge. Likewise, in front of King Agrippa, Paul declared the gospel to be “true and reasonable.”

A careful reading of Acts reveals Paul’s extraordinary ability as a communicator. He was at home in any venue, could meaningfully convey truth to those of any world-view and was not afraid to engage in vigorous debate. While he made full use of his opportunities in the synagogue (Acts 13:14-43), he was equally comfortable out of the pulpit, whether it was in the marketplace (Acts 17:17), lecture theatre (Acts 19:9), civic centre (Acts 17:22), or private home (Acts 28:23). Wherever people were prepared to listen, Paul was ready to speak.

Paul did not deliver a stereotyped message. He never compromised the truth of the gospel, but he did contextualise the way the gospel message was presented so that it made sense to his audience. Old Testament Scripture provided an appropriate entry point for religious Jews (Acts 13:16-41), but he did not use it when speaking to farmers at Lystra, to philosophers at Athens, or to an angry mob in Jerusalem. Rather, he argued from nature (Acts 14:15-17), from polytheism and pagan poetry (Acts 17:22-28) and from personal testimony (Acts 22:1-21). He took the concepts they already knew to establish initial points of contact.

He then established points of confrontation: exposing wrong beliefs, showing the inconsistencies of individuals’ world view and pulling apart the false ideas that were a barrier to faith. All this he did in the context of dialogue - a two-way street. Paul “reasoned” (17:17), “discussed” (19:9), “argued persuasively” (19:8), “confronted” (13:46), and “disputed” (17:18) with his hearers. He summed up his ministry by saying “...we try to persuade”, (2 Corinthians 5:11) and “... we demolish arguments and every pretension” (2 Corinthians 10:5).

It is important to notice that Paul was not content merely to contextualise and confront. He used these approaches to convey the gospel of Christ’s death, resurrection, promise of salvation and coming judgment. We see this from people’s responses. Some “received the message with great eagerness” (Acts 17:11), “were persuaded” (17:4) and “believed” (17:34), yet others “sneered” (17:32).

If we build bridges or expose false teaching without preaching the gospel, then we are failing in our witness. Paul’s heart’s desire and prayer was that people be saved (Romans 10:1) through hearing the gospel (1:16). His priority was to win people to Christ. Yet, while he always finished by preaching Christ crucified, his strategy also involved both contextualization and confrontation. Moreover, Paul did apologetics in an environment where the hearers felt comfortable, in a way that made sense to them and in a manner that gave them opportunity to discuss and raise objections. It is this understanding of apologetics that needs to be revived in order for us to communicate the uniqueness of Christ into a postmodern culture.

### **5. Language and the person of Jesus**

In a Biblical perspective, truth is not merely a statement or a proposition; it is ultimately a person, who says of Himself: *I am the Truth* (John 14:6). One of the wonders of this person is that He has chosen to reveal Himself to us. This He has done in coming to us as a human being (incarnation) and speaking to us in human language (revelation). Today, it is common to see a tension between these two categories, between the personal and the propositional. The result is an affirmation of the personal and a rejection of the propositional. However, this will not do. The personal and the propositional are related in an intimate way. Only a person can communicate. Furthermore, for a communication to be meaningful it must contain a “propositional dimension”, that is, it must have content that refers to reality and therefore can be discussed and understood in terms of true and false. This is not to deny the richness of human language or the manifold functions that language has, but it is to secure the meaningfulness of language. If language does not in some sense refer to reality, it loses its meaning and all communication breaks down.

We all know that in human relations it is impossible to divorce the personal from what a person reveals of him or her self through one's words. We cannot know them if they are silent or if we ignore what they are telling us about themselves. In a similar way, we as Christians believe in a person that has communicated through words. We cannot know Him personally without Him communicating with us in

a language that refers to our reality. Therefore, the personal and the propositional are not categories that can be put in opposition towards each other. Consequently, we cannot put tension between the person of Jesus and the word from Jesus.

**Conclusion**

According to the New Testament, Jesus is unique. He is:

- (i) the only way, John 14:6
- (ii) the only name, Acts 4:12
- (iii) the only foundation, 1 Corinthians 3:11
- (iv) the only mediator, 1 Timothy 2:5.

A faithful and effective witness to Him in a postmodern culture must include fresh and creative apologetics.

## 5. METHODS OF COMMUNICATING THE UNIQUENESS OF CHRIST

### *Mission Responses in Postmodern settings*

If we have a solid Biblical foundation, a clear apologetic understanding and are familiar with the opportunities as well as the challenges thrown up by postmodernism, then we have a firm foundation from which to flexibly engage with real, live, human beings influenced by postmodernism.

If the uniqueness of Christ is to be evident in the world, then we as the Church must reflect Christ in all aspects of our life. This includes how we spend our time, money and energy. The Church has often become culturally captive. The evidence of Christ must also be manifested in society at large, especially with those issues that concern the marginalized, the poor and the weak.

The first step, therefore, in our practice must be an emphasis on our spiritual life with God. We must be in relationship with God and increasingly be conformed to His likeness. Through prayer, study of the word, participation in the Lord's Supper and obedience to the Spirit we are continually transformed. Today, more than ever in the West, there needs to be tangible expression of our faith. There needs to be a life marked by the cross and sacrifice, a life in which people live out the gospel.

Words are not enough. The uniqueness of Christ is demonstrated in His teaching and preaching. It is also demonstrated in His healing of the sick and the demon-possessed and in His acts of justice and mercy. In particular, Jesus announced the Good News of the Kingdom of God. In the Kingdom of God, God is Lord over all of life. The transformation is not simply personal, but social, structural, environmental and touches all aspects of life.

Implications for the four features of postmodernism selected by this paper are given below:

#### **1. Loss of meta-narratives**

We need to provide opportunities for others to share their stories. At the same time it is fair and necessary for us to re-introduce the Biblical meta-narrative (the story of how God has worked throughout history to save people), as it is incorporated into our personal narrative, which in turn helps to give meaning and which re-interprets history in terms of the active presence of God. Furthermore, since another characteristic of our age is that of Biblical illiteracy, we do need to communicate anew the Good News of God to this generation, as it will indeed be new to many of them.

This communication must be gentle, respectful and holistic. It will include questioning, listening and noticing the presence of God already evident in their world. It will value the person more than "the sale" and as such refuse to be manipulative. We must use dialogue and be genuinely interested. We will coach people, helping *them* to find their next step towards God, rather than what *we* think it should be. However, we also have a right to tell our story. Part of our personal story is The Grand Story of God, the incarnation in Christ, and the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit. We will speak of God's love and of the meaning, purpose and identity God gives us. This is what we offer in a spirit of love.

A specific methodological example: "Agree – Caution – Suggest" is a simple outline that can be adapted to any theme relevant to postmoderns.

Agree: first validate where God is already at work in people.

Caution: then validate the pain and the disconnectedness which many people feel.

Suggest: offer the unique part of the Jesus story that can resolve the disconnectedness or misunderstandings they may have.

For example, in the issue of "I'm a good enough person," we could agree that "Yes, you are good. I've seen your generosity..." etc. "But," we might caution, "doesn't that pressure to stay good enough wear you down?" A suggestion might be, "I just find it invigorating to know how my bad stuff can be forgiven..."

In whatever way we communicate the meta-narrative, it all needs to be accompanied by prayer and a dependence on the Holy Spirit's revelation to "bear witness" to the revelation of Scripture.

#### **2. Loss of absolute truth**

The loss of absolute truth beckons a mission response from the church. We first must be sure of our own foundations, having a concrete understanding of the revelation of truth expressed in the unique person of Christ so as to engage in apologetic discussion on a more philosophical level when needed. However, apologetics as such becomes increasingly effective where there is a trusted relationship and a safe environment within which dialogue can occur.

Further, truth need not be reduced to merely scientific reason and the intellectualism of the Modern Age. Truth can be ascertained through other ways of knowing such as experience. Experience is a key defining feature of the post-modern era and the church should seek opportunities for active involvement, participation and ownership. Where possible, involvement in serving the poor, weak and marginalized in the local and global community should be encouraged. Join together with humanity in

our common needs, from drug rehab to community affairs of state, or schools, or needed infrastructure. This is demonstrating a “saltiness” that postmoderns can taste.

The more holistic basic faith courses (like Alpha) are appealing to postmoderns because there is open dialogue. You can ask any questions, you are respected, you can share your own story. Plus there is an element of hospitality and community, especially around the meal. There is low external structure and it includes spiritual experiences and participation. So there is often a desire to continue the community afterwards although there is no obligation to return.

Follow-on groups make the most of what starts as a good faith-discussion group. In postmodern settings, they should develop outwardly, focusing on their local community, not just themselves. This is the *ecclesia* as a ‘community development movement’. By focusing on holistic care and concern, the unique Kingdom of God is increasingly *demonstrated* and *experienced*, even as it is *explained*.

Such engagement also contributes to a sense of belonging and identity, which are in short supply in the postmodern context. We can avoid developing co-dependency in the group dynamic by working to develop responsibility for self and others.

Postmoderns may not agree with the idea of absolute truth, but they can still recognize truth when they encounter it and when this encounter is a relationship with Christ through the Holy Spirit, He can “lead them into all truth.” There may even be miraculous experiences of the Holy Spirit to report. Yet we can also be influential by recovering our own sense of awe and wonder by helping others to develop a passion and to discover how God has created each person uniquely. We also recover our sense of awe by learning to recognize God at work in the everyday, by honestly living in the truth, and by inviting others to encounter this truth with us.

### 3. Scepticism about history

Great pain and disillusionment have accompanied the deconstruction of virtually every structure that helped to shape modern history (politics, education, family, institutional religion). These structures have come to be associated with power, authority and often violence. As such we must adopt a posture of gentleness, sensitivity and care when interacting in this context. In postmodern settings, the church faces the challenge of regaining credibility. We must begin by being willing to agree with valid criticisms of the Church. The credibility gap only widens if we can’t admit the dark side of our history.

Not only do we need to develop genuine community, there needs to be a move toward more *diverse* communities reflected in the Church as the whole people of God. There is something powerful in the collective witness of a larger body of Christians that are radically different, holistic, Biblical, and authentic. People are attracted to those who are alive. (See the case study below)

#### ***A Case Study from the United Kingdom:***

A young Chinese man came to study at a British university. Eager to learn more about British culture, he decided to attend a local church. During that service, he was exposed to the genuine, heartfelt worship of God’s people. This experience made a deep impression on him. He commented that he had never experienced anything like that before. He immediately wanted to know more about what he had just experienced. Over a number of weeks, some of those Christians began to share Jesus with this student, explaining who Jesus is and what He had done and is doing. One Sunday morning, this student sat through another service and at its conclusion he stated confidently, ‘I want to ask Jesus into my life.’ He did, there and then. He continues to follow the Lord Jesus faithfully.

To be credible, the Church needs to regain its saltiness as a community development movement (working from a Christ-centred basis.) This is an accurate rendering of the Greek “*ecclesia*”. The primary posture of the group is like Christ: they are focused towards the people and towards the community. They seek to see the community shaped by the values of the Kingdom of God. It is these values (see Isaiah 65 and Jesus’ values) with Christ as the reference point that make this *ecclesia* uniquely Christian.

However, it must be acknowledged that more time allocated for relating with people in the local *community* may mean less time for *church* programs, in order to model Jesus Christ in concrete ways. Clearly, flexibility in church programmes is needed. We are not committed to gathering people into a monoculture. We are committed to going out to engage with others and to care for others. We affirm the need for “niche” events which are culturally sensitivity (such as gathering at a gym, a swimming pool, in a stadium or in cafes.) However, in consumerist cultures, these ought not simply pander to religious consumerism. It should rather be motivated by the desire to listen, to speak the gospel in the host language and to incarnate the gospel in the postmodern context. Mature Christians can be more flexible in these matters.

The Church needs to become involved at the crossroads of life (marriage, funerals, the swimming pool) and in the key issues in society such as drugs, law, AIDS, indigenous injustices, environment, etc. Yet we need to do it in *ways* that truly reflect the Kingdom of God with respectful,

humanizing relationships, rather than demonizing or objectifying people. Where the church acts as a sacrament to the world by mediating the grace and love of God to those who do not know Him, her witness may again become credible.

Postmoderns want to see some degree of ecumenism at least down-playing, if not overcoming, denominational divides which in postmodern times only serve to distract from the core issues of faith. The Church must be a sign of the coming Kingdom of God. We must re-establish relationships and regain hospitality.

While the essence of the church should be firm, the structures of the church should become increasingly flexible. To postmodernists our credibility will return as we identify with the marginalized in ways that embrace pain for the cause of Christ's love and as we endure well, when, even after all our best efforts, we may simply have no choice but to suffer in order to bring the message. The experience of martyrs shows this in itself to be a powerful missional action. The integrity of our present will alleviate some of the scepticism about our history.

#### **4. General loss of meaning**

The loss of meaning is irrevocably linked to history and is often paralysing. Many individuals have a painful past and no hope for the future. There is a need for connectedness and a flow of relationships and meaning. Meaning is integral to every Christian's story. We are part of a bigger story. We have encountered *Someone* Who is absolutely true, Who has been present throughout history up to the present and beyond. Compared to disconnected postmoderns, we should be relatively masterful at interpreting the times, the events and the metaphors of our age. We can be masterful because we have the advantage of knowing what we're looking for: God at work in people's lives. In Christ, we have a fair idea of what God is like.

On a sociological level, the advent of mass communication, media, globalization and information technology are crucial to a fuller understanding of postmodernism. In the face of overwhelming external stimuli, the use of images and symbols are profound vehicles for showing how relevant the gospel is to life, here and now.

The entertainment industry has not been able to answer the deep longings of this generation because it only seeks to entertain. Yet when they do strike a chord with people, it's almost invariably because they are using our meta-narrative, telling a story of salvation, of forgiveness and of love.

Thus our task is not to compete on the entertainment front, but to help people to interpret and bring meaning to the fore. We need to develop the ability to make connections and raise questions from theatre, drama, movies, music, dance, and art.

We don't have to compete in the high-tech, flashy, efficiency-driven market. We can simply offer time, depth, meaning, insight and reflection. We are becoming increasingly valued by postmoderns, who are discovering it is not experience alone that is the best teacher, but that **reflected-upon experience** is what is needed. We can also help others to delight in the simple and ordinary.

#### **Conclusion:**

We cannot compromise our love for the uniqueness of Christ, for we understand that it is this uniqueness that gives us life. However, we cannot compromise our love and respect for people. The gospel and the cross itself, calls us to uphold both who Jesus is and our love for all people, even if we must suffer to do so. Therefore, respecting our friends means that we must allow them to reject the gospel. Sometimes it is simply the gospel itself that offends people's self-centredness. Yet we must do all we can to ensure that it is indeed the gospel and its full message as the only route for salvation and not our methods, that is causing the offence.

## 6. THE MYSTERIOUS NAZARENE

### Traces of Jesus in Non-Christian Religions and the Question of His Uniqueness

#### 1. The Challenge of Bearing Witness to Christ

What is the purpose of a confusing search for traces in Jesus in non-Christian religions? It is quite unlikely that one will find much there which will lead one to the testimony: “*You are the Christ, the Son of the living God*” (Matthew. 16:16) for, as Jesus says, this can only come as revelation from the Father in Heaven. Yet, in fact, many people in the Western world, once influenced by Christianity, hardly know anything about Jesus any more, and what they suppose to know is very glossed over by very different and contradictory religious ideas about Jesus, rather than being defined by the New Testament message about Christ. When we talk about Jesus with our contemporaries, who are made uncertain by pluralism, then it is necessary to know and understand this philosophical and ideological background.

Moreover, there is yet another weighty fact of the matter. The patristic creeds, as we know them from our use in worship, were the common basis of faith of all major Christian churches from the 4<sup>th</sup> to the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Upon this foundation, the message of Christ left its profound mark on the history of the peoples of Europe and their respective cultures throughout the centuries. Nevertheless, in the Modern Age, it was, in fact, the central confession of Christ which was subjected to critical questioning in theology and in the church. The uncertainty tied to this has only been strengthened by the religious pluralism in the globalized world of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Why is Jesus unique? What is so unique about Jesus? The Christian answer to this most fundamental of all theological questions bears witness to Jesus of Nazareth as the Son of God, the Lord of the universe and the Saviour of all people. Yet, this confessional statement stands in more or less stark contrast to the portraits of Jesus found in other religions. At the same time, concepts of Christology as they have been developed in modern theological thinking, have been eclipsed by religious and secular ideas of Christ and have even been mutually accepted. Thus, we encounter these kinds of different christologies not only outside the doors of the church, but even in theology and in the Church itself.

In dealing here with non-Christian religions, we do this for the following reasons, one of which is diacritical, the other apologetical. The Greek word *diakrisis* describes according to 1 Corinthians 12:10 one of the “*charismata*” given by the Holy Spirit. This has to do with the discernment of spirits and means first and foremost the spiritual and theological ability to distinguish between biblical and heretical teachings in terms of doctrinal contents and between right and wrong prophecy within the Christian community. This discernment of spirits is relevant because new heretical ideas concerning the intrinsic being of Jesus Christ and his redemptive work were brought up in the church during the last two centuries. The gift to distinguish the spirits – *diakrisis* - includes also the ability to evaluate the understanding of Jesus in the living world religions of our days from a New Testament perspective. Where are there points of reference to start a fruitful dialogue? Where are the contradictions that must be corrected or even rejected? Therefore, the discernment of spirits has an apologetical dimension which helps to carry on missionary conversations with outsiders.

The ideas about Jesus in different world views thriving today are important points of contact for the proclamation of the Biblical message because Christian missions can and must, in fact, understand such preconceptions about Jesus and work from them. After the fall of the Berlin Wall in Germany 1989/1990, for example, the IFES affiliate student mission organization in Germany (SMD), experienced lively interest in the person of Jesus at German universities. Who was this Jesus really? What can one really find out about him and his teachings from the New Testament sources? These kinds of questions were met with amazing openness among students, who only had vague knowledge about Jesus from their secular backgrounds and they challenged Christian leaders with their diffuse ideas about Jesus. It is important to accept this challenge in an increasingly missionary setting and awakening understanding for the traces of Jesus outside of the walls of the church.

In doing so, we should first take a closer look right at the very start at a surprising exegetical observation. In the New Testament, namely, we come across statements of people, who faced Jesus down very sceptically, even totally rejecting him. The New Testament itself makes reference to how Jesus was seen critically by his contemporaries and fundamentally misunderstood. These contexts can help us in our situation today in properly dealing with criticism and misunderstandings about Jesus. The subsequent three scenes from the New Testament serve to illustrate this.

### **1.1. Taking a Survey**

The discussion about Jesus of Nazareth among the Jews intensified even during Jesus' lifetime itself. Who is this itinerant preacher that everyone is talking about? Who is the man who does such incredible miracles, whose preaching attracts hundreds and who is so harshly opposed by the country's religious and political leaders? Jesus takes up this question in Caesarea Philippi, the answer to which really led to a pivotal point in the group of Jesus' disciples: "*Who do the people say that the Son of Man is?*" (Matthew 16:13). In view of the rumours and speculation circulating about him, Jesus takes this survey among his own followers. It is obvious very quickly that the results of the survey are delightfully quite positive. Jesus is placed in a line among the great prophets of Israel. He calls for an uncompromising decision for God as Elijah did; he is an empathetic prophet like Jeremiah and a fearless admonisher like John the Baptist. Yet, still not satisfied with all of these titles of honour, Jesus gets personal and asks his own disciples and friends: "*But who do you say that I am?*" Thus, by not even shrinking back from asking quite generally for the opinion of the man on the street, Jesus provokes the response, the foundational confession of the Church throughout the centuries. Peter expresses it here representative of the others: *You are the Christ, the Son of the living God*. The way to confessing Christ can take its end in the results of surveys, yet, it may not stand still at this point. In the end, it is not a matter of human opinions, but of divine clarity. This must be considered in looking at our topic.

### **1.2. A Powerful, Moving History**

Since the early apostolic age, Jesus has become known in an incredible and powerful history; at first, because of the resistance which the gospel of his crucifixion had and then his resurrection called forth a response among Jews and Greeks. Within a few decades the word of Christ which had made its start in Jerusalem, had reached the metropolis of the Roman Empire. The Apostle Paul reached the city and asked the Jewish diaspora community there about the rumours concerning Christianity circulating in Rome. The answer was prompt and harsh: ". . . *for we know that people everywhere are talking against this sect.*" (Acts 28:22). The power of the Risen One is shown so clearly that one cannot remain neutral about Him. People are either lead to accept Jesus as the Christ, or they speak against Him strongly. Even in another centre of the ancient world, in the Athens of poets and philosophers, the Apostle ran up against two very divergent reactions because he preached Jesus as the Creator and as the Judge of the world (Acts 17:23f.). It was his talk about the resurrection which had an unusually polarizing effect on the educated citizens of Athens: some began to mock him, others postponed the discussion until later, and only few found faith in Jesus. Preaching the message of Christ means, therefore, running up against every kind of prejudice, preconception, and objection among the hearers. Yet, those who expose themselves to what people who are outside the church are saying or objecting to, are more likely to be able to share the gospel in a meaningful way.

### **1.3. A New Emerging Uncertainty**

The difference between purely human opinions about Christ and the confession of His divine Sonship of Jesus is a fundamental one. Nevertheless, this confession can also become brittle and uncertain in existential crises of faith. The extraordinarily courageous John the Baptist, who had publicly pointed the way to Jesus when he exclaimed: "*Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.*" (John 1:29), was the very first person, then, who confessed the clear connection between the person of Jesus Christ and the salvation which God sends. Yet, in view of his futile anticipation of the emergence of the Kingdom of God in Herod's dungeon, where he had to count on his execution every day, huge doubts came upon him: "*Are you the one who is to come, or should we wait for another?*" (Matthew 11:3). The Messianic question was open for him anew again. Despite all the Messianic promises, John could no longer integrate the continuation of the violence of the human rule by the Roman powers, with the announcement that Christ was here walking the earth at this time. The Baptist's original "internal view", which he had gained by means of divine insight, became again, as a result of his trials, an "external view" of the person and story of Jesus. "Is He really the Christ?" John asked, thereby touching upon the quite sensitive side of the discussion about the Nazarene. How can the person and work of the man from Nazareth be identified with the person and work of God? Apologetic questions which stem from the criticism of unbelievers, or from the doubt of believers, thus lie at the origin of many dogmatic formulations.

### **1.4 The Ultimate Victory**

In spite of the apologetic questions people have with Jesus detailed above, the New Testament is clear in its overall and conclusive confession of Christ. Still, the confession of Christ and the denial of Christ stand irreconcilably opposed to one another until the end of this world. Some truth about Jesus lights up in the prejudices about Christ. On the other hand, the Church's confession of Christ always becomes dimmer in trials. Still, this vacillation between the contradictory convictions will find its

definite end with the Second Coming of Christ, when God will confess His Son and thus, it will be shown what is true in the end: “*Therefore, God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.*” (Philippians 2:9-11).

With the apocalyptic revelation of Jesus Christ at the end of time as Lord and Judge of the world, human history, with all its disputable, false, and uncertain christologies will find its end. The knee of every Jew and Muslim, every atheist and agnostic, will bow before Him and the tongue of every Hindu and Buddhist as well as those of every Communist and free-thinker will have to confess Him as God and Lord.

It is this very horizon of hope which gives the controversy about Jesus in all its seriousness still the calm composure of faith. It is not the Church, but, rather, God the Father who will demonstrate Jesus to be the eternal Son in the end. Therefore, we can listen objectively in the paragraphs to follow to what people say about Jesus and we can start up with their contradictory, from time to time even downright wrong opinions, in order to proclaim the Biblical Christ.

## **2. Jesus and World Religions**

Our world has become a global village. While religious cultures were limited to clear distinguishable geographical areas in past centuries, economic and politically-related migration as well as modern communications technology and mobility have led to an immensely powerful encounter of different religions and worldviews. In view of the direct confrontation with the claims to truth made by other religions, Christian faith needs clarification and grounds for its premises in a totally new way. The question, “Why Jesus?” begins to gain in its depth and explosive nature within this horizon. In the face of multicultural societies, particularly in the rapidly growing and expanding cities, it has become the central challenge of the theology in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

If we take up the search for the traces of Jesus in non-Christian religions, then different perspectives must be considered from the very start, from which the religions look at Jesus. First of all, there are all those religions which arose entirely without any knowledge of the New Testament tradition and which formed their own view of God and the world independent of Christian influences. Not the least of these are, of course, the major religions of East Asia, Hinduism and Buddhism. From the standpoint of their already clearly defined teaching and spirituality they first dealt with Jesus in a later confrontation with Christianity. It is significantly different, though, with Islam as the most important post-Christian world religion. The Qu’ran makes reference to Jesus in an intensive way, even with clear knowledge of New Testament traditions, which, of course, though, are interpreted in the sense of the prophet Mohammed.

Finally, Judaism has its very own and very unique way of relating Jesus to the Jews. The unique Jewish way of dealing with Jesus is particularly determined by the fact that, without the promises of the Messiah in the Old Testament, there never would have been any doctrine about Christ as it is preached by the Church on the basis of the testimony of the New Testament.

Judaism in Jesus’ day, which shared its Hebrew Bible with the Christians, separated itself from the emerging Church, particularly with respect to Jesus and went its own way from then onward consciously as a post-Christian religion in conflict with the “Sect of the Nazarenes”. We shall begin, then, with the most difficult and most complex relationship to the figure of Jesus in respect to the history of religions, namely, that of Judaism.

## **3. Jesus in the Horizon of Jewish Messianic Expectations and Disappointments**

For the Christian church, the entire Biblical message is centred in the person of Jesus as the Christ. Thus, Matthew structures his gospel as proof of the fulfilment of Old Testament Messianic promises in the life story of Jesus, whose way is marked out even into the details in the writings of Moses and the prophets and who is attested to and confirmed by the prophecy preceding it in detail. The view of Judaism concerning the Messiah who is to come is very different. The term *Judaism*, however, must be defined more precisely in the context of our analysis. For our context, Judaism is to be understood as that epoch of Israel’s history, which begins with the New Testament and extends all the way to the present.

In this age spanning centuries, Messianism is interpreted anew in clear contradistinction to Jesus and is even conceived anew for an open future, without giving up its basic Biblical substance. This Jewish concept will be briefly sketched subsequently.

### **3.1. The Expectation of the Messiah and Its Crisis**

The history of Israel must be understood as one directed movement in time to a final, time-ending and world-transcending, completed goal. The inner movement of the historical existence of Israel is most essentially defined by the expectation of the Messiah because the Messiah will bring about the Kingdom

of Israel as the true Kingdom of God. As an inner motivation of a believing Jew, the expectation of the Messiah even points beyond death. Thus, Rabbi Jeremiah, for example, orders in his last will: "Bury me in white linens lined with pockets and in a tunic with a collared cap, clothe my feet with shoes, put a staff in my hand, and lay me on one side that I may be prepared [to follow Him] at the arrival of the Messiah."<sup>2</sup> Full of pleading desire, he also asks that the words of the Kaddish Prayer (Prayer for the Dead): "*Great and holy may your great name be in the world, which He created according to His will, and may He cause His Kingdom to arise, may His redemption sprout forth and may His Anointed One come near in your lifetime and in your days and during the lifetime of all the house of Jezreel, immanently and in the near future.*"<sup>3</sup>

Yet, until the Messiah can come, Israel passes along in the diaspora on a thorn-filled path of disappointing Messianic hopes again and again. Martin Buber talks about this in his work, "The Stories of the Hasidim"<sup>4</sup> how God fears that His people could fall throughout the centuries into a dulled stupor and give up the hope of the Messiah. Therefore, the Almighty decides to wake them up from their slumber from time to time through the appearance of false messiahs until one day, in the first light of dawn, the true Messiah appears. In fact, the temptation occurs again and again on Israel's path through world history to give up faith in the coming of the Messiah completely out of despair. This temptation to give it up is, on the one hand, because it is said that the Messiah had already appeared and Israel had not recognized Him. Rabbi Hillel comments, for example, here: "*There is no longer a Messiah for Israel because they already tasted him in the days of Hezekiah.*"<sup>5</sup>

On the other hand, the argument from despair appears even more profound for Rabbi Yochanon, who ties the appearance of the Messiah to conditions, which, in fact, do not exist in reality. "The Son of David will only come in an age which is either very worthy of His coming, or which is completely sinful."<sup>6</sup>

On the other hand, one can also find long, in-depth discussions among the rabbis on whether or not it is possible to calculate the arrival of the Messiah from the dates given in the Biblical chronologies: "(Rabbi) Elijah spoke once to Rab (Rav) Judah, the brother of Rab Sfalla the Pious: The universe will last no fewer than 85 jubilees (85x50=4250 years), but, in the final jubilee, the branch of David will appear. Rab Judah asked him: at the beginning or at the end of the jubilee period? The prophet answered: I don't know. Will that period ever end or not? Rab Judah probed further. Elijah repeated: I don't know. Rab Asher thought the prophet wanted to explain it to him: Until that time, you cannot hope for him at all; from that time onward you may expect him."<sup>7</sup>

Besides these, apocalyptic scenarios are portrayed which either precede or accompany the age of the Messiah. These descriptions<sup>8</sup> talk about the desolation of the land, the moral decay of the people and the chaotic human relationships between people. It will come down to a final battle between the Messiah and His opponents. Yet, the important thing in these threats is the very fact that the massive apocalyptic afflictions and confusion will announce the imminent Messianic Age.

### **3.2. *The Harsh Rejection of Jesus in Judaism and the Modern Appreciation of the "Jesus' Brother"***<sup>9</sup>

Two basic streams of Old Testament Messianic prophecy flow together in view of Judaism's horizon of expectation. One is the hope of an Anointed One from the Davidic Dynasty, who will raise anew the political kingdom of David, the conqueror and founder of the great Israelite empire. Along this line, for example, Rabbi Judah comments in the Talmud on Jeremiah 30:9 as follows: "One day the Holy One of Israel will raise up a second David as it is written (in Jeremiah 30:9), "*They will serve LORD their God and David their king, whom I will raise up for them.*" It doesn't say, '*has (already) raised up*', but, '*will raise up*'."<sup>10</sup>

In referring back to David, Messianism gets its indispensable political orientation, which most definitely becomes clear in the claims and failures of numerous pretenders to Messiahship who fought as freedom fighters. The Jewish historian Josephus thus describes the founding of the party of the Zealots alongside the already existent Sadducees, Essenes and Pharisees.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Talmud Jerusalem (Kil'ajim IX, 32a).

<sup>3</sup> Talmud Jerusalem

<sup>4</sup> Zürich, 1949, p. 364.

<sup>5</sup> Sanhedrin 99a.

<sup>6</sup> Sanhedrin 98a.

<sup>7</sup> Sanhedrin 98a

<sup>8</sup> See, for example the Mishna Sfota IX,15.

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, Pinchas Lapide's work on Jesus.

<sup>10</sup> See this passage in the Babylonian Talmud.

<sup>11</sup> "But of the fourth sect of Jewish philosophy, Judas the Galilean was the author. These men agree in all other things with the Pharisaeic notions; but they have an inviolable attachment to liberty, and say that God is to be their

More specifically, Josephus recounts as an example of this the story of a man who travelled from Egypt to Jerusalem during the days of the Roman governor Felix between the years of 52 and 60 A.D., proclaimed himself to be the Messiah and surrounded himself with a large number of armed Jews on the Mount of Olives to attack the Romans. Josephus ends the war story with the comment that, after the defeat of the Jews, the same Egyptian escaped and, “then it happened – he became invisible.”<sup>12</sup> It is understandable that Judaism at the time of Jesus was not, under these conditions, very open to the Preacher who preached the Sermon on the Mount and the Suffering Servant of God. Fed, instead, by Messianic visions, the readiness for revolutionary struggle in Judaism has survived even into modern times. In this regard, the French state attorney Cahier-de-Gerville explained the involvement of the Jews in the French Revolution on January 30 in the year 1790:

“Of all the districts of the city of Paris, it is the Carmelite District which has the largest number of Jews. More than any other district, this one had, therefore, since the beginning of the Revolution, the possibility to observe the position of Jewish residents . . . No other category of citizenry showed greater zeal in the fight for freedom than the Jews; no one panted so much for the uniforms of the national guard than they did . . . Although the Jews living in Paris have still not reached the status of Frenchmen, we can still assure you that they are most definitely worthy of this name. I would even dare to say that they are already counted as Frenchmen in our midst.”<sup>13</sup>

The political expectation is strengthened by – and this is the second stream that has flowed into Jewish Messianism – chiliastic, or millennial, that is, prophetic statements of the Old Testament such as Isaiah 11:1-2, which the Church later related to the so-called “Millennial Reign of Christ”.<sup>14</sup>

In view of this background of expectations, the crucifixion of Jesus could only be considered as a failure of any claim to Messiahship. This is why the curse of the Nosrim, that is, the Nazarenes or the Christians, is found in the Eighteen Benedictions Prayer (Birkat al-Minim), which was so important to early Judaism in the early period of conflict between the Church and Judaism. The prayer states: “*May there be no hope for the apostates, take their presumptuous rule away from them quickly in our days. May the NOSRIM and the heretics disappear in an instant. They should be erased from the Book of Life and not be written down together with the Preserved Ones. Blessed are You, O LORD, who brings the proud down low.*”<sup>15</sup>

This harsh attitude was later given up in part. Yet, even with a moderate Jewish thinker like Moses Maimonides (1135-1204), this determinedly critical conflict with the person and history of Jesus

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only Ruler and Lord. They also do not value dying any kinds of death, nor indeed do they heed the deaths of their relations and friends, nor can any such fear make them call any man lord. Since this immovable resolution of theirs is well known to a great many, I shall speak nor further about that matter; nor am I afraid that any thing I have said of them should be disbelieved, but rather fear, that what I have said is beneath the resolution they show when they undergo pain. It was in Gessius Florus’s time that the nation began to grow mad with this distemper, who was our procurator and who occasioned the Jews to go wild with it by the abuse of his authority and to make them revolt from the Romans..“ Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, 18,1,6. (“See the translation of Josephus by William Whiston).

<sup>12</sup> *Antiquities of the Jews*, 20,8,6.

<sup>13</sup> Quoted in J.Höxter, *Quellenbuch zur jüdischen Geschichte und Literatur*, 5.Teil, Frankfurt 1930, 8f. The official proclamation of equal rights for all Jews was announced on September 28, 1791 by the French National Assembly.

<sup>14</sup> “A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesus; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit. The Spirit of the LORD will rest on him – the spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of power, the Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the LORD – and he will delight in the fear of the LORD. Hew will not judge by what he sees with his eyes, or decide by what he hears with his ears; but with righteousness he will judge the needy, with justice he will give decisions for the poor of the earth. He will strike the earth with the rod of his mouth; with the breath of his lips he will slay the wicked. Righteousness will be his belt and faithfulness the belt around his waist. The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat, the calf and the lion and the yearling together; and a little child will lead them. The cow will feed with the bear, their young will lie down together, and the lion will eat straw like the ox. The infant will play near the hole of the cobra and the young child will put his hand into the viper’s nest. They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain, for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea. In that day the Root of Jesse will stand as a banner for the peoples; the nations will rally to him, and his place of rest will be glorious. In that day the Lord will reach out his hand a second to time reclaim the remnant that is left of his people from Assyria, from Lower Egypt, from Upper Egypt, from Cush, from Elam, from Babylonia, from Hamath and from the islands of the sea. He will raise a banner from the nations and gather the exiles of Israel; he will assemble the scattered people of Judah from the four quarters of the earth.”

<sup>15</sup> From the Eighteen Benedictions Prayer (Birkat al-Minim) according to the oldest extant manuscript from the Cairo Geniza collection (quoted from K.G. Kuhn, *Achtzehnbittengebet und Vaterunser*, Tübingen 1950, p. 24).

can still be found. Typically, though, only indirect reference is made to Jesus. Maimonides writes, for example:

“Don’t let the thought enter your mind that the King Messiah can perform signs and wonders, create new things in the world, raise the dead, or do any of the like. These kinds of things will not be valid. ... When a king arises from the House of David who studies the Torah and lives according to the commandments as his forefather David did, according to the written and oral Torah, when he obligates all Israel to walk in its ways, . . . . and when He fights the wars of the Lord, then this one is surely the Messiah. When He does (all) and has success and rebuilds the Temple on its place and gathers the dispersed of Israel – then He is the true Messiah.”<sup>16</sup>

Martin Buber (1878-1965) is one of the most important representatives of Judaism who made an effort to achieve a new appreciation for the person of Jesus in the sense of a philosophy of dialogue. Nevertheless, in spite of all of his esteem for the Jewish rabbi Jesus, even he noted the Christological confession of the Church only with critical displeasure, when he remarked:

“I am more certain than ever before that he deserves a great place in the history of Israel’s faith and that this place cannot be rewritten by one of the traditional categories. As history of faith, I mean the history of the human part known to us, what has happened between God and man. Yet, Thomas believes and makes his faith known: Jesus, whom he recognizes as the risen one, is his God. We do not learn what brought him to believe that and we don’t get any further explanation for it. There is no other choice for us but to imagine anew that the resurrection of a single person does not belong to the body of ideas present in the Jewish world of faith. Because no individual person can rise from the dead, this one here is no human being, but a god, and because he had been for him the man, his man, he is therefore his god. But, with this, the Jewish world of faith, which knows no other god than God, collapses all at once for the Thomas of the narrative. Among all Jesus disciples, he is the first Christian in the sense of Christian dogma.”<sup>17</sup>

Pinchas Lapidé is recognized as a Jewish author who stands for a new level of dialogue between Judaism and Christianity in the present. Even the title of his book on Jesus, “Jesus the Jew”<sup>18</sup>, makes his new perspective clear. In his work, Jesus is brought back home to the Jewish family as “Brother Jesus”. In the summary of his work, Lapidé starts out by pointing to historical-critical research done on the life of Jesus, that Jesus did not understand himself to be the Messiah, and therefore, he also could not have been rejected by Israel. However, Lapidé recognizes from a Jewish standpoint Jesus as a teacher of Israel and as a righteous person. His special significance consists, however, in the fact that he called the Gentile peoples to faith in the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Lapidé even quotes the church hymn: “Come now, Redeemer of the Gentiles”, lyrics written by Ambrosius of Milan before 397 A.D. and translated by Martin Luther into German, 1524 (the melody is from a Medieval melody adapted by Luther in 1524) and concludes: “*I believe, Ambrosius and Luther both are right. In the inscrutable ways of God, Jesus of Nazareth has become the redeemer of the world.*”<sup>19</sup> The common faith in the only one true God and Creator as well as the hope of His salvation strengthen Lapidé’s certainty that the still deeply controversial questions of faith between Christians and Jews compel us to a real dialogue, “which will begin tomorrow”.<sup>20</sup>

In view of the Jewish conflict with Jesus of Nazareth and how he is perceived in Judaism, we must remember the following: The longer it goes, the more the history of Israel is complexly interwoven with the question of the Messiah. Basic to it is the idea of the Son of David, who exercises the rule of king, commissioned by God. Out of political oppression and centuries of deportation, hope for liberation by the Messiah has increasingly grown in Judaism. By contrast, Jesus directs His claim to truth to the question of sin, reconciliation with God and the forgiveness of sins. The signs and wonders He performs point to the dawning of the approaching Kingdom of God. Yet, it is in fact, not the political-military expansion of power of the Messiah, but rather, the “suffering Servant” of the prophet Isaiah who is evident in the person and saving work of Jesus. In this respect, in view of the widely differing Messiah

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<sup>16</sup> Maimonides, *Mishne Tora* (Yad Chasaka), Book Shoftim, Section Melachim (Kings).

<sup>17</sup> Martin Buber, *Zwei Glaubensweisen*, (See English translation!) Heidelberg 1986, 93.

\*\*\*\*Note: *Quotations in this paper are occasionally taken from German translations of original works. If this text is published, standard published English translations will be used as much as possible*

<sup>18</sup> Zürich, 1986, 47ff.

<sup>19</sup> Martin Buber, *Zwei Glaubensweisen*, (See English translation!), p. 121 of the German edition.

<sup>20</sup> Martin Buber, p. 123 of the German edition.

expectations between Israel and Jesus, a chasm is opened up which is only deepened throughout the history of Jewish suffering among the peoples of the so-called Christian West.

Jewish-Christian dialogue and the positive welcoming home of Jesus as a son of Israel back into Judaism are good approaches to start from. Yet, in this dialogue, Christians can and must make clear by means of the Old Testament, that, while Christology has a relationship to Messianic promises, it is not exhausted by it, but rather, it goes beyond these promises in the sense of atonement through the cross and the better righteousness which Jesus himself brought. The unlimited rule of Jesus as Messiah-King still remains to be seen for Jews and Christians in expectation of the Second Coming of Christ. The testimony of Christ to the Jews in this context consists in helping the Jews realize that the Messiah they are expecting is the one who has already come.

#### **4. Jesus from an Islamic Perspective – A Humble Prophet of Allah**

In a big city in Europe, a theatre production is to be presented in which Jesus, together with His disciples, is presented as a homosexual and is subjected to public ridicule. In front of the city theatre, protesting alongside conservative Catholics and some Evangelical groups are Muslim Turks as well who live in large numbers in this industrial city. As a Christian, you would at first definitely not be able to count on this kind of Muslim solidarity, though Jesus is highly regarded throughout the Qur'an and is revered as one of the prophets of Allah. Muslims even fight against any kind of disparagement of this prophet who is explicitly revered in the Qur'an. In Sura 2,135 (Al-Baqara, *The Cow*), it is written: "Say: 'We believe in Allah, in what has been revealed to us, what was revealed to Abraham, Isma'il, Ishaq, Jacob and the Tribes, and in what was imparted to Moses, Jesus and the other prophets from their Lord, making no distinction between any of them, and to Him we submit.'" ("We are Muslims"; translation of Majid Fakhry)

Jesus is thus put in line with a considerable number of messengers of God, whom we know, particularly from the Old and New Testaments. The special birth of Jesus is mentioned in Sura 19, 19-33, though it is related in rather vague phrases. His mother, Miriam, mistakenly confused by Mohammed with Miriam, the sister of Moses and Aaron, is the only woman given any prominence in the Qur'an. Jesus' prophetic mission means, primarily, that He is a bearer of revelation. Moses was sent with the Torah to the Jews. Jesus' special prophetic message is the gospel and finally, Mohammed must bring the conclusion of redemptive history as the "Seal of the Prophets"<sup>21</sup> with his preaching of the Qur'an, first to the Bedouin tribes of the Arabian Peninsula. More than just portraying Him as a preacher, the Qur'an describes Jesus also as a great miracle worker, while there are no reported miracles performed by Mohammed. Mohammed then even goes beyond the New Testament in relating miracles Jesus supposedly performed as a child, material which is found only in the later apocryphal Gospel of Thomas.<sup>22</sup>

##### **4.1. The Rejection of Jesus' Divinity and the Trinity**

Despite Jesus' revered status as a prophet in the Qur'an, there is the very strict and strong denial, on the other hand, of the Christian confession of the divinity of Jesus. The worst sin in Islam is attributing to God a second, divine person. It is this very association which makes Christians guilty of committing it. Therefore, Christians in the Qur'an are even accused by Jesus Himself of idolatry and unbelief and Jesus even condemns the punishment of Hell on them for claiming He is the Son of God. "Those who say that Allah is the Messiah, son of Mary, are unbelievers. The Messiah said: 'O Children of Israel, worship Allah, my Lord and your Lord. Surely, He who associates other gods with Allah, Allah forbids him accept to Paradise and his dwelling is Hell. The evildoers have not supporters!'"<sup>23</sup>

The Messianic title, therefore, is not filled with any content; rather, it's New Testament sense is explicitly rejected. There is no more imaginable contrast in the question of Christ's identity than that between the Qur'an and the Gospel of John. In the Gospel, salvation hinges on the fact that people find forgiveness and new life through faith in the Son of God, while the Jesus portrayed in the Qur'an threatens with loss of eternal life the very ones who call on Him as the Son of God. Any Muslim who believes that Jesus is the Son of God must repent of it, as the Qur'an says: "Unbelievers too are those

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<sup>21</sup> Sura 33,40 (Al-Ahzab, The Confederates; from the Qur'an, a Modern English Translation, translated by Majid Fakhry, Garnet Publishing, Reading, UK, 1997; cf. 33,41 in the translation edited by Malik Ghulam Farid, The Holy Qur'an, Arabic Text and English Translation with Commentary, Islam International Publications, Ltd., 1981, Surrey and Islamabad).

<sup>22</sup> "... how I taught you the Book, the Wisdom, the Torah and the Gospel; and how, by My leave, you created out of clay the likeness of a bird, and breathed into it, and then, by My leave, it turned into a bird. And you could heal the blind and the leper by My leave and you could raise the dead by My leave. And [remember] how I restrained the Children of Israel from harming you, when you brought them the clear signs; whereupon the unbelievers among them said: 'That indeed is nothing but manifest sorcery.'" (Sura 5, 110, Al-Ma'ida, The Table; in Farid, 5,111).

<sup>23</sup> Sura 5,72. (Al-Ma'ida, The Table; in Farid, 5,73)

who have said that Allah is the third of three. For there is no god except the one God; and if they will not refrain from what they say; those of them who have disbelieved will be severely punished. Will they not repent to Allah and ask His forgiveness? For Allah is All-Forgiving, Merciful.”<sup>24</sup>

Behind the position of the Qur’an lies, first of all, the conviction that Jesus was a man and nothing more than a man. He does not belong to the side of the Creator, but to that of the creatures. The Qur’an explicitly states: “*Jesus in Allah’s sight is like Adam; He created him from dust, then He said to him: ‘Be’, and there he was.*”<sup>25</sup> Only as a created being is Jesus revered as one of the messengers of Allah, who, with a limited commission, brings the moral message of Allah, the content of which is always the same, at a certain time to a special group of people. “*After them, we sent Jesus, son of Mary, confirming what he had before him of the Torah, and We gave him the gospel, wherein is guidance and light, confirming what he had before him of the Torah and a guidance and admonition to the God-fearing.*”<sup>26</sup>

For the other part, Mohammed misunderstands the doctrine of the Trinity as a doctrine of three gods, which robs the one and only God of his honour. He makes one more fatal mistake as well. Mohammed interprets the Trinity as fellowship between God the Father, Mary the mother, and Jesus the Son, who proceeds from a sexual relationship of God with Mary to an extent like Greek demigods.<sup>27</sup> From all of this, it is obvious that Mohammed obtained his knowledge of the Bible plainly from only very mistaken oral narratives and traditions. In the meantime, there are certain enough proofs that important parts of the text of the Qur’an today originate from traditions of the Syrian Church, which were integrated into the Qur’an then as purely oral traditions in a very fragmentary fashion.

#### 4.2. *The Denial of the Crucifixion of Jesus*

Here we touch upon one of the most serious differences between the Qur’anic and the Biblical understanding of Jesus. While the special birth of Jesus and His miracles, which have been called into question in part by the modern, historical-critical theology of Christian exegetes, are positively affirmed by the Qur’an, Mohammed questions, of all things, the crucifixion as an historical fact. Basically, even extremely critical historians are unanimous in asserting that Jesus was executed on the Roman gallows under Pontius Pilate. Yet, it is this very historical fact which Islam denies with the claim that the eyewitnesses of the crucifixion had made a mistake and confused Jesus with someone else. “*And their saying: ‘We have killed the Messiah, Jesus, son of Mary and the apostle of Allah.’ They neither killed nor crucified him; but it was made to appear so unto them. Therefore, we curse him. Indeed, those who differ about him are in doubt about it. Their knowledge does not go beyond conjecture and they did not kill him for certain. Rather, Allah raised him unto Him. Allah is Mighty and Wise.*”<sup>28</sup>

The motivation for this strange claim is based in the prophetic self-understanding of Islam. Basically, a prophet of Allah is always successful and always ends up a winner. This is true for Mohammed, who with his troops occupied the Arabian Peninsula for the new religion of Islam. In the end, he died in the arms of his favourite wife highly esteemed by his followers. According to the conviction of the Qur’an, Allah would never allow one of his elect prophets such as Jesus to bleed to death on the cross and perish in a shameful way. Therefore, the New Testament accounts of the Passion of Christ must be forgeries. Mohammed is evidently unaware that the entire message of reconciliation through the free gift of God’s grace also is invalidated with this claim. As a result of the thereby non-existent redemptive work of Christ, the logical conclusion is a lasting uncertainty in Islam about salvation in view of the Final Judgment. Salvation or destruction depends on the fulfilment of the law and on Allah’s final judgment of a person. This final word of judgment upon a sinner remains hidden from the individual for an eternity. He must then accept it as his destiny (Kismet) in submission to (this is the meaning of the word “Islam”) the Allah’s arbitrary rule.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>24</sup> Sura 5,74. (Al-Ma’ida, The Table; in Farid, 5,74-75)

<sup>25</sup> Sura 3,55f. (Al-‘Imran, The Family of ‘Imram; in Farid, 3,60)

<sup>26</sup> Sura 5,45f. (Al-Ma’ida, The Table; in Farid, 5,47).

<sup>27</sup> “And when Allah said: ‘O Jesus, son of Mary, did you say to the people: “Take me and my mother as gods, apart from Allah?”’ He said: ‘Glory be to You. It is not given me to say what is untrue. If I said it, you would have known it; you know what is in my soul, but I do not know what is in Thine. You are indeed the Knower of the Unseen. I only told them what You commanded me: “Worship Allah, your Lord and mine”, and I was watcher over them while I was among them, but when You took me to Yourself, You became the Watcher over them; for You are the Witness of everything.’” “Should you punish them, they are surely Your servants, But should You forgive them, You are truly the Mighty, the Wise.” (Sura 5-Al-Ma’ida, The Table, 116-118; in Farid, 117-119).

<sup>28</sup> Sura 4,156. (Farid, Sura 4, 157-159).

<sup>29</sup> Sura 69,18-37; 84,7-15. The idea of a kind of precision balance scale, which weighs out good and bad deeds against one another (Suras 7,8f.; 23,102f.; 101,6-9), has great significance in the use of judgment metaphors. The Hadith, extra-Qur’anic Islamic tradition, which can be traced back to Mohammad’s activity as a teacher, is

#### 4.3. *Missiological Problems of Islamic Teaching About Jesus*

Islam is a determinedly post-Christian religion with a consciously anti-Christian character to it. The term, “anti-Christian” is not applied here polemically, but simply as a statement of fact in view of the Islam self-understanding sketched above. For John fills out the term “Antichrist” precisely with meaning and thus strikes upon the central point of Islamic criticism of Christology. *“Who is the liar? It is the man who denies that Jesus is the Christ. Such a man is the antichrist—he denies the Father and the Son. No one who denies the Son has the Father; whoever acknowledges the Son has the Father also.”* (1 John 2:22f). It is this very denial of the Son, as we have seen, which is an indispensable tenet of the Qur’an’s teaching about Jesus.

The post-Christian aspect of Islam has the effect of making reference to the historical Jesus and, at the same time, rejecting the testimony of the New Testament about Jesus. This contradiction between the New Testament and the Qu’ran is explained by the Muslim side with the claim that Christians have distorted the original revelatory message of Jesus into its very opposite. *“O People of the Book, do not exceed the bounds of your religion, nor say about Allah except the truth. The Messiah, Jesus, son of Mary, is only Allah’s apostle and His word which He imparted to Mary, and is a spirit from Him! So believe in Allah and His apostles and do not say “three [gods]. Refrain; it is better for you. Allah is truly one God. How – glory be to Him – could he have a son? To Him belongs what is in the heavens and on earth. Allah suffices as a Guardian! The Messiah does not disdain to be a servant of Allah, nor do the angels nearest to Him.”*<sup>30</sup>

The consequence of this is that whenever Christians preach the gospel to Muslims, they are already “immunized” against Christ, the Son of God. They start out with the conviction that they already know the true Jesus better and that Christians only have a distorted gospel, which they as Muslims must strictly reject for the sake of their own salvation. Because of this reason with respect to content, Christian missionary outreach in Islamic countries proves to be so infinitely difficult because every kind of resistance against Christ have already been spurred even before the missionary starts preaching.

#### 5. **Conceptions of Jesus in the Traditional East Asian Religions of Hinduism and Buddhism**

Hinduism and its fundamental reform in the form of Buddhism arose historically long before Christ. They developed over centuries without direct influence from the so-called monotheistic religions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. While there are historic traces of missionary activity in India from early Christianity, its effects have, in fact, remained marginal. In the 10<sup>th</sup> century, though, the violent collision of Hinduism and Buddhism with Islamic conquerors was a critical event which has had repercussions ever since. Islam advanced then into Indian and Far Eastern cultural territory and, with its military superiority, had a lasting determining influence on the subcontinent as well as upon Malaysia and the chain of Indonesian islands.

The relatively scanty references to Jesus in East Asian tradition can be understood from these historical, religious, and geographical facts. In the following, we will therefore simply attempt to present some basic references to conceptions of Jesus in Hinduism and Buddhism.

##### 5.1. *The Person of Jesus from a Hindu Perspective*

In his work, “Freedom Without Violence” (p. 21), Mahatma Gandhi clearly states the fundamental concerns of Reformed Hinduism towards Christianity. He explains:

“It is true that each of us attaches his own interpretation to the word “God”. We are compelled to do so because God not only encompasses this our small globe, but also millions and billions of other such globes and worlds beyond worlds. How can we, tiny, crawling creatures that we are, possibly comprehend his magnitude, his boundless love, and his unending compassion? His infinite love and mercy are so great that He even allows people to presumptuously deny him, to argue about him, and even cut other people’s throats. I therefore ask you to leave a little room for honest doubt. Let us live our own lives, and if our life is the right one, what reason is there in hurrying about it? It will react of itself alone. Whatever the case may be, drink from the depth of the fountains given to you in the Sermon on the Mount, but, then you will also have to put on sackcloth and ashes because you will fail to live up to the preaching of Christ.”<sup>31</sup>

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instructive in this regard. It tells of a very narrow bridge leading over the way to Hell and which must be crossed over by everyone who has died before he may enter Paradise. In the end, whomever Allah allows to fall into the pit of Hell right before the final eternal destination, no one can predict.

<sup>30</sup> Sura 4 (Al-Nisa’, Women), 169.170. (172-173 in translation ed. by Malik Ghulam Farid)

<sup>31</sup> Cologne, 1968, 116.

At first glance, the great cosmological background is evident from which Hinduism begins to think. The Earth is viewed as a tiny, insignificant speck of dust and Man moves about on it in his emptiness. In view of the universal love of God, the violence conflicts between the adherents of different religions are absurd. In view of infinite reincarnations, the question of truth can be left open with great contentment. There is, after all, as Gandhi stated, no reason to hurry about. In the wake of reincarnation, Man can exist also in different forms of religion. What matters is a tolerant “live and let live” among different religions. The question of salvation is not at all tied to the time of life on earth as the age of grace, as the Bible talks about (2 Corinthians 6:2). There is no urgency related to the Last Day or the Final Judgment of the world in the sense we find expressed in the Book of Hebrews, for example: “*Just as man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment*” (Hebrews 9:27). Instead, an enlightened reform Hindu like Mahatma Gandhi places all the importance on practical ethics. The message is clear: Christians should first practice the Sermon on the Mount, which gives them more than enough to do, before they begin trying to convert people from other religions, such as Hindus.

The tragedy of Gandhi’s message, of course, lies in the fact that he himself was murdered by a Hindu fanatic. This problem is encountered also in the greater context of religious politics. Indeed, the history of the military conflict between Indian Hindus and Pakistani Muslims or between Hindu Tamils and Buddhist Sinhalese in Sri Lanka shows that the practice of Hinduism and Buddhism in political reality frequently contradicts the apparent tolerance of these world religions.<sup>32</sup>

Despite a Hinduism prone to violence in modern India, there have still been some prominent Hindu thinkers since the country’s independence in 1947 who have been affected by the person of Jesus Christ both spiritually as well as existentially. For example, Ram Mohan was moved by the incomparability of Jesus; Kesab Chandra Sen becomes Christlike – Bahakta; (“*Lover of God*”), Mozuomdar, bearer of the Mahatma (Gandhi) title of honour has been influenced all his life by his initial experience of Christ; a similar experience is true for how Akhilananda understood / interpreted Christ. These Hindu scholars try to tie to Christology the classical idea of Avatara, that is, the “*condescension*” of a god in different forms, especially as it is taught in the Vishnu faith. Thereby, we are faced with a tension which turns out, in fact, to be quite typical for inter-religious dialogue. On the one hand, we encounter in the major religions a minority of enlightened and tolerant representatives who, on the other hand, stand opposite a large number of ill-informed and also quite frequently fanatic adherents. It is thus evident that the constructive tie to Jesus Christ can, in fact, only be found among the enlightened minority, while the great majority is radically closed, unless, of course, the preached missionary word penetrates deeply and changes the lives of this people. In this case, there is repentance in the New Testament sense, which, unfortunately, only very rarely occurs in inter-religious dialogue at the end of the discussion. If, however, we are talking about these very “*inter-religious*” dialogue partners, then we do so because they make an effort to find links between their respective religions and the Christian faith in a pondered fashion. The results of this kind of dialogue cannot only give Christian missionary efforts important facts in understanding, for example, Hinduism and Buddhism, it can also raise the topics by which missionary preaching can best and most nearly bring the gospel to the broadest amount of the population.

It is worth coming back again to interpret the quote from Mahatma Gandhi already cited above. Gandhi makes the intellectual horizon clear by which Reformed Hindus try to accommodate Christian doctrine with Hinduism, that is, bringing Hindu ideas close to Christian ones. This results in the following three basic topics:

Hinduism starts cosmologically from the idea of unending worlds which pass away in countless cycles and then arise again. Our planet Earth with its solar system is, in view of cosmic events, only a temporary, passing speck of dust. They look for, then, the universal Christ who is woven into the cycle of the world’s coming into being and who thereby depicts one of the many embodiments of the incomprehensible divine. In this context, Hinduism turns out to be a immensely open and receptive religion, which has, as opposed to Islam, proven its power to absorb other worldviews for centuries now.

This ability to accommodate to other religions can be seen, for example, quite impressively in the religion of the Sikhs. This form of religion appears as a typical Indian synthesis of Hindu and Islamic teachings and rites. The mentality of the people on the subcontinent, who, for centuries have grown up in a multicultural environment, has brought about many forms of syncretism (mixing of religions). Christian missions, which start from the exclusiveness of salvation in Christ, appears, by contrast, to

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<sup>32</sup> Unfortunately, there have been and there still are shamefully many violent conflicts in the history of the so-called “*Christian West*”. The problem we are dealing with in this context, however, is that today, Hinduism and Buddhism are seen by many Europeans as examples of tolerance and non-violence even though these religions have not at all often behaved in a non-violent fashion in historical practice. Seen in such a way, a pacifist-tolerant cliché is maintained with regard to these religions.

Hindus to be too rigid and “dogmatic”; it is therefore rejected for having an inappropriate claim to truth. The fundamental conflict between Christianity and Hinduism is thereby already marked off clearly. The challenge for a contextual Christian theology of missions towards Hinduism consists in putting together intellectually the universal significance of the Christ who lives from everlasting to everlasting in the Trinity of God and His unity with the incarnate Christ. For God has, according to the Christian faith, connected His revelation exclusively to the Christ who became a man. God’s mediation with regard to creation as well as to redemption occurs only in Christ.

The most important point of entry for the Hindu to the Christian faith is, first of all, less the reflected permeation of Christian dogma, but, rather, spiritual experience. For it is the “bhakti”, that is, the love of God and God’s exalted nature, which, along with the way of conduct, placed even before all knowledge, according to Hindu understanding, is considered the most important way to salvation. Asceticism, meditation, and spiritual exercises play a predominant role. Hindu spiritual guidance by gurus is less interested in theological insights than it is in psychological sensitivity. Akhilananda says in his lecture on “The Hindu View of Christ”: “Indians have cultivated all throughout the centuries the technique of religious exercises and have developed a comprehensive psychology of the highest order, based on all the functions of the human mind whether they are unconscious, conscious, or meta-conscious”.<sup>33</sup> Typically, it is, in fact, in the rational and overly rationalized West today that a new longing for spiritual experience has appeared, which opens many people up for East Asian religiosity. Therefore, we must discover and develop anew from the New Testament, what it means to “Be in Christ”, which plays such a central role in Paul’s letters. Without a convincing profound dimension of the relationship to Christ and lived out practice of faith, Christianity will always appear to Hindus as cold, superficial, and empty.

Gandhi’s reproach in the statement quoted at the beginning shows just what critical importance befits the alternative ethics of the Christian with regard to Hindu acceptance of Christianity. If one looks for famous Christians who have had a very attractive and convincing influence on Hindus, one will run across the names of Sadhu Sundar Singh, the ascetic and itinerant preacher, and Charles Freer Andrews, missionary and theology professor, who made a name for himself as “Gandhi’s brother” and “friend of our country”, as well as the American missionary Stanley Jones. What all have in common is the distinctively consistent imitation of Christ. They were transparent “epistles of Christ” pointing to Christ and they differed in their ethical behaviour from the mere socially acceptable existence of other representatives of the West.

A story is told of Stanley Jones (1884-1973), which underscores in an excellent way the Christological difference in the meeting between Christians and Hindus. After one of his missionary sermons in a small Indian town, a Hindu scholar came up to Stanley Jones and explained to him: “*What the white missionaries can tell us is really nothing new, because we Hindus have a culture several thousand years old. Everything can be found already in our venerable Sanskrit writings. Therefore, I ask you to give me the opportunity, after your next speech, to clarify this fact to the audience.*” Stanley Jones agreed to the suggestion. He preached the gospel as he always did in which he presented Jesus as the crucified one to the people. The Hindu scholar was then called up to the front to present his criticism. He appeared unsure of himself and quite confused, until he finally just uttered one sentence: “We don’t have such a person!” (in Hinduism). He then walked off the stage quickly. This statement confirms the admission that, while profound human wisdom lies in the Hindu writings, this truth still cannot comprehend the unique form of an unmistakable man from Nazareth, who revealed Himself on the cross as the Saviour sent by God for all mankind.

## ***5.2. Enlightenment or Redemption – the Tension Between the Understanding of Buddha and His Teachings and Christology***

In his article entitled “The Western and the Eastern Way,”<sup>34</sup> Daisetz T. Suzuki articulates the obvious differences between Buddhism and Christianity as well as also the present willingness for inter-religious dialogue. In doing so, he really takes pains to present a dialectical process of understanding, in which the contradictory statements of thesis and antithesis are dissolved in an inevitable synthesis. Suzuki first works out the differing convictions of the Buddhist and the Christian concept of redemption (salvation), when he states:

“Always when I see an image of the crucified Christ, I have to think of the deep chasm, which lies between Christianity and Buddhism. The chasm is symbolic for the psychological difference between the East and the West. The personal “I” is heavily emphasized in the West. In the East, there is no “I”. The “I” is non-existent,

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<sup>33</sup> New York, p. 278.

<sup>34</sup> The German title is: “Der westliche und der ostliche Weg”, Berlin 1986.

and therefore, there is no “I” that could be crucified. The crucifixion has, in fact, a two-fold sense: an individualistic one and a general, human meaning. On the one hand, it symbolizes the destruction of the individual “I”, on the other, it represents the doctrine of the substitutionary sacrifice, by which all our sins are atoned for, for which Christ died. In both cases, the dead must be raised again. Without the resurrection again the destruction would have no meaning whatsoever. We die in Adam, in Christ we live. This must be understood in the dual sense explained above. In Buddhism, only enlightenment is needed, no crucifixion, no resurrection. Resurrection is definitely something dramatic and human, but there is also a hatred for the body in it. In enlightenment, we find happiness and true transcendence. Earthly things experience renewal, a transformation, which makes them fresh again.”

In this observation, Suzuki understands very precisely an primary difference between an East Asian and a Western worldview. In Buddhism the individual “I” is understood as a mere illusion, as delusion (Maya). Therefore, there is no importance in it. On the contrary, the “I” must be overcome and negated by meditation and asceticism. It is only in this way that the individual can be liberated from the cycle of reincarnations. This is, in fact, the Buddhist idea of the way of salvation. Resurrection appears to Buddhism to be the intensification of the person and it seems, therefore really counterproductive for salvation. The corporality and historicity of the person of Jesus and His way to the cross present, therefore a flagrant offence to Buddhist thinkers, because here, the concrete individual person is emphasized. Enlightenment, though, is a purely intellectual process which remains untouched by the material. Because sin is tied to the individual, the question of guilt is solved when a person enters into “Nirvana”. In the individual person with his earthly life his/her story cannot go the way to “Nirvana” as a representative for someone else. Buddha shows the way to salvation, yet he himself is not this way as a person.

Starting from this elementary distinction between Eastern and Western thinking, Suzuki makes the issue more concrete with respect to the relationship between the Christology (the teachings about Christ) and Buddhology (the teachings about Buddha). In doing so, he makes use of a visual aid with a crucifix and sculpture representing Buddha lying down. The typical symbols for both religions represent, in their geometric expression as vertical and horizontal respectively, differing spiritual mentalities. The vertical, in which Jesus faces man, stands for, according to Suzuki, “*action, movement, and the urge upward*”.<sup>35</sup> From the lying Buddha, that is, the horizontal, the feeling of peace and fulfilment exudes forth. Even the Buddha frequently depicted as sitting, conveys the impression of “*reliability, firm conviction, and unshakeableness*.”<sup>36</sup>

The conclusions which Suzuki draws from the difference he describes between the vertical and the horizontal positions are characteristically in the horizon of religious dialogue for the integrative approach to thinking of East Asian spirituality. The geometrical differences in no way describe a contradictory inconsistency, but, rather, they are to be connected to one another in a polar fashion, that is, they are mutually dependent and necessary in their existence like the thesis and antithesis in Hegelian philosophy. Suzuki explains:

“I suggest the following: when something always remains in the horizontal, death results.” When the vertical becomes set on itself, it collapses. In reality, the horizontal is only horizontal, if one imagines that it has the tendency to rise and to become something else, a line with the yearning for three-dimensionality. It’s the same way with the vertical. As long as it persists immovably in its vertical position, it ceases to be itself. It must become flexible, it must gain elasticity, it must keep itself in balance with movement.”<sup>37</sup>

Accordingly, Suzuki replaces characteristically the redemptive, soteriological meaning with a metaphysical, symbolic one. Christ symbolizes in the structure of reality only the other side of polar being, though He is, for His part, in fact, only a cipher (symbol) for action and movement. This action and movement is, however, like the lying Buddha, also only an expression of the timeless, infinite reality of the universe. The cross does not bring a unique event of salvation into the structure of being of the cosmos, rather, it simply expresses through its polarity the salvation which has only always existed in the first place (ontologically). For Suzuki interprets the difference between the crucified Christ and the lying Buddha as an expression of the mystery, which already lies as the foundation of all being. The cosmic reality rests in itself and remains existent in this polarity regardless of time beyond concrete history. However, with this dialectic, at least with respect to the Christian faith, the most important point has not yet been touched, which is the main issue in dialogue between Christianity and Buddhism. For in the

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<sup>35</sup> Dai setz T. Suzuki, *The Western and the Eastern Way*,” p.86.

<sup>36</sup> Daisetz T. Suzuki

<sup>37</sup> Daisetz T. Suzuki

conflict between Buddhism and Christian theology, it must be made clear, with respect to the cross, that the unique, individual story of Jesus does not allow itself to be presented dialectically at all with a cosmic doctrine of being which displaces the uniqueness of the person of Jesus. As much as Suzuki has worked out the contrasts in a clear cut way at the beginning of his presentation in the text quoted above, he relativizes them all the more in the continuation of his discussion of them under the circumstances of a Hindu-Buddhist cosmology. A basic problem of every religious dialogue becomes evident with this line of argument. The solutions given are each one so heavily influenced by one's own personal viewpoint that the danger exists that the dialogue partner is completely "taken over" in the end. Yet, Christian faith is not about "taking over" someone else, but about conviction by the evangelistic word which is preached. This missionary effort does not, in fact, exclude the necessary mutual understanding in the matter and respect for the worth of the other person, but, rather, includes it.

## 6. Meeting Jesus, the Christ, is Necessary for Salvation

### 6.1 *Jesus, the Desired One of the Gentiles*

If we look back on the confusing pieces of the mosaic, which are presented to us in the fragmentary images of Jesus in the various religions, a fairly general motif is evident, at least, despite all contradictoriness: the Nazarene fascinates people even where he is mocked or even rejected. There is no way around Him – and people apparently don't want it either. Something of the "desideratus gentibus" (desired one of the Gentiles. See the expression used in Jerome's Latin Vulgate translation of the Old Testament prophets) moves hearts for Jesus as a longing for Messianic salvation. His differentness and, especially, His protest against presumptuous religious authorities are provocative. Even when one totally rejects His demand for obedience through faith, there still remains an admiration for the radical consistency of His acts as well as for His unconditional love of God and for His fellow man. You could even just talk about respect for His ethically exemplary lifestyle.

From a Biblical and Christian standpoint, the religious portraits of Jesus briefly sketched in this paper are highly lacking deficient, in fact, completely wrong, because they all are oversimplified. Jesus is the self-revelation of God in human form. As completely human, He is also truly divine (God) and, only as the Son of God, does He build the bridge across the chasm of sin between God and Man. Only as truly God can Jesus lead the person who has failed in what God made him to be to the place where he finds himself completed in the image of God and true divine sonship. This refers to the kind of sonship which first occurs in the face of Jesus Christ. This understanding of faith which the Holy Spirit produces is implanted into people by the proclamation of the gospel. This is and remains the goal of missionary dialogue with people outside the Church.

Yet, in order to prepare this kind of preaching, there are some ways to connect with the different religions in spite of all the deficiencies already shown here. The ideas about Jesus we find in the religions point back to the longings of people that exist and they still contain, with all their fragmentary, deficient and false ideas, that small kernel of truth which the preaching of the Gospel can connect with.

For Jesus is most definitely, according the New Testament's understanding of Him, also a prophet of God, a teacher of a higher justice and a model of ethics which we should follow after. This dimension of the person and work of Jesus can certainly be understood by the natural person. Indeed, people of our time are attracted to the mystery of Jesus, even when they only encounter Him in a distorted form. Even today's person, in looking at the terribly broken and disfigured Jesus, can exclaim with Pontius Pilate, "*Behold the man!*" ("Ecce homo!"). In the person of Jesus Christ every individual person, in her/his guilt and in her/his destiny, is set against the image of humanity, which God Himself as the Creator has. This understanding matures (grows) in the encounter with Jesus: So this is the way we were supposed to be originally and we should become like Jesus in the end. With this deepened insight into the essence of the man Jesus, Christological truth already begins to shine forth and dawn on a person.

Nevertheless, the humanity of Jesus, which impresses many non-Christians, is not just a point of connection for missionary conversations among unbelievers, it is, at the same time, also a painful challenge to Christians, who often make themselves comfortable with following Christ inside the walls of the church building. For, in view of the incomparability of the Jesus Christ, critical people who have most definitely found a first positive access to the man from Nazareth, turn their backs, however, to the Church of Jesus Christ because they are disappointed by the ethical behaviour of many Christians. Especially in post-modern society, in which scepticism towards dogmatic doctrines is deep-seated,<sup>38</sup> the observation of the Apostle is still true: "*You yourselves are our letter, written on our hearts, know and*

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<sup>38</sup> Of course, understanding of and expression of doctrine related to the mystery of Christ are in no way unnecessary, even in post-modern society. But, here we are just talking about the first missionary approach. If this person is positively open to it, then catechetical instruction grows out of the missionary situation in the course of further conversation, which instructs the person being led to faith in the Biblical teaching about Christ.

*read by everybody. You show that you are a letter from Christ, the result of our ministry, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tables of human hearts.*" (2 Corinthians 3:2f). The message of the gospel is understood by our critical contemporaries through lived out imitation of Christ, but, only when the Church really offers a contrasted society in the secular world.

The ideas of Jesus in the different religions contribute, therefore, very little to a true understanding of Christ, yet, they say some very important things about the longing people have for Christ, who are looking for the truly different, totally alternative experience of God "in Christ". In this regard, the world's religions are a necessary provocation for the Church because there lies behind these yearnings for the new Man and for the new world an essential aspect of Jesus' Great Commission.

## **6.2. How does Christ reveal His divine uniqueness and finality?**

We need to note the most important reasons from the Scriptures to prove that Jesus Christ is the only Son of God. These arguments should be shared and proclaimed in the process of dialogue with people of other religious beliefs to give them the chance to understand the Biblical message about Jesus Christ.

Firstly, Jesus teaches with divine authority, as the prophet who was promised to come like Moses: *"The Lord you God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own brothers. You must listen to him."* Just as Moses received the Law on Mount Sinai, so Jesus ascended the mountain where he spoke the beatitudes in order to proclaim to His disciples the new Law of the Kingdom of God before all the people: *"You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, . . . But I tell you . . ."* (Matthew 5:21f.; 33f.; 38f.; 43f.). The authority of Jesus to proclaim the will of God authoritatively is also evident in his position on the Sabbath, which was provocative to Judaism: *"For the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath"* (Matthew 12:8)

Secondly, because Jesus, the Son of God is so unique, the eternal destiny of every human being depends on his relationship to Jesus Christ: (Luke 12:8f.)

Each person, to whom the death of the Lord is so proclaimed, so that he can understand in his context this message of salvation and can accept a personal relationship to Jesus in faith is responsible before Christ in a final eschatological sense. This makes up the finality of Christ. For all who had no personal confrontation with Christ through the preaching of the gospel, the criteria in the final judgment will be: *"Whatever you did for the least of my brethren, you did for me."* (Matthew 25:40).

By reason of the uniqueness and finality of Christ, it is therefore, valid and binding on us here and now that Jesus had the divine authority to bind people to Himself, to His person and to call them to follow Him. "Come, . . ." (Matthew 4:19). This power, to bind other people to His own person, exclusively belongs to the Son of God. Whenever a person tries to usurp this divine right and take it away for himself, it will always result in a catastrophe.

In Germany, we experienced this in the 30's, when Hitler required every soldier to swear an oath of allegiance to his person and not to the constitution or any other objective authority and thereby bound them absolutely to himself. Binding a person entirely to oneself, making a covenant of a absolute loyalty of faith and obedience are rights reserved only for God and for the one He sent, Jesus Christ.

Therefore, all of these are dependent upon Jesus and Jesus alone.

- our knowledge of God: because He reveals Himself on our level as a human being so that we could understand and comprehend Him.
- Our knowledge of the will of God is given to us through Jesus.
- He has the authority to forgive our sin, to cause it to be non-existent. Through His death on the cross, he took away the power of sin.
- He acts through signs and wonders, which point to His eternal Kingdom, in His Church and in the world.
- In this power of the Holy Spirit He was bodily raised from the dead and thereby, ultimately took away the power from death. He alone gives eternal life and in this resurrection, the new creation without suffering and death is its beginning and its guarantee.
- Finally, He calls us personally to be His followers and binds our lives to Himself for time and eternity through the obedience of faith. As His disciples, he gives us and His whole church on earth the right and authority to call people to follow Him.

*He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy. For God was pleased to have all his fullness*

*dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross."* (Colossians 1:15-20).

Thirdly, the confession that Jesus is the Son of God means that he belongs to the side of the Creator, not to that of created beings. As Creator, He has unlimited authority over all powers and forces of nature, so that people are amazed and ask: *"What kind of man is this? Even the winds and the waves obey him!"* (Matthew 8:27). The unique, creative power of Jesus is also shown in that He can make something from nothing, analogue to the *creatio ex nihilo*. This is evident in a most exemplary way in the events of the feeding of the multitudes of Five Thousand and Four Thousand. Jesus' creative power is recognizable based on the background of a New Testament occurrence under a totally different aspect, which opens up an entirely new dimension of His divine authority.

This aspect is, namely and fourthly, His power to forgive sins. In Mark 2:1-12 the story is told of how the masses of people push their way into the house where Jesus was preaching. Because of the four men who wanted to help their lame friend got up onto the flat roof of the house. They tore open the roof and lowered the lame man directly at Jesus' feet. People stared spellbound at the Miracle-worker and expected him to say: "Get up and go home," but Jesus looked at him and said: *"Son, your sins are forgiven"* (verse 5). The scribes and teachers of the Law are more than irritated by this remark. The authority to forgive sins is a right belonging exclusively to God's sovereignty, because the forgiveness of sins is, in a way, a creative act in the reverse direction. At the Creation, God called into existence what did not exist previously. No human being can do this. Man can only change the form of material which already exists, but he cannot produce and bring into being anything fundamentally new. Corresponding to this is the matter of forgiveness of sins, only, as we have already said, in another direction. Sin is produced by fallen Man and stands opposite him as a reality. The blood of Abel cries out from the earth to God and this fact can no longer be turned around and turned back as if it never happened by Cain, even if he regrets what he did. Sins are realities in whatever form they appear, which face the sinner as such, whether it involves a lie, adultery, murder, or any other kind of sin. Forgiveness is, then, sovereign act of God, in which he speaks out of existence, that which exists. No human being can do this either. No one can make that which exists to cease to exist. Yet, this is precisely what Jesus did when he said: *"Son, your sins are forgiven"*. In order to confirm this unique authority, He added: *"Which is easier to say to the paralytic, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Get up, take you mat and walk'? But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins . . ."* He said to the paralytic, *"I tell you, get up, take your mat and go home."* (verses 9-11). Through the power of Jesus as Creator, he proves publicly the other, yet greater power to forgive sins. Jesus has this power because he is priest and sacrifice at the same time on the cross. Being sinless, He was made to be sin by God. He carried the consequence of sin, death, in order to grasp people through forgiveness out of the power of sin and death. *"The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many."* (Matthew 20:28).

Last, but not least, we come to the most profound and all-encompassing confirmation of the divine omnipotence and completeness of Jesus, namely, to the resurrection.

Fifthly, one of the strangest statements in all of the New Testament is found in 1 Corinthians 11:26: *"For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes."* This challenge to proclaim the Lord's death, is, for this reason, odd, and, saying a bit much because it sounds absurd. One can, at best, commend the outstanding deeds performed during the lifetime of a dead person: that he was a great inventor of technology, a brilliant musician, an outstanding politician, a pioneering discoverer, etc. In certain cases, one could even praise the courageous, yet composed death of a person such as Socrates. Yet death, as death itself, one cannot make as the substance of one's proclamation. Yet, the mystery of the divine Sonship of Jesus which is revealed in the cross and in the resurrection as victory over sin and death is different. Holy God and sin are absolute opposites. The living God, Creator of heaven and earth, and death are radical opposites. In the Old Testament one can recognize this especially because every priest who touched a dead body became ritually unclean. He could no longer come near to God in the worship service. God and death are so radically separated from one another. Then, on Golgatha, the unimaginable occurred that the one who Himself is God, is made to be sin by God. Holy God identifies Himself with sin on the cross of Christ, because the sin of all humanity is laid upon Him. At Golgatha, judgment against the world takes place. In this judgment of sin the power of sin is not only conquered, but it is also utterly destroyed. In the same event on the cross the Creator of all life confronts death. The living God identifies Himself with death and annihilates therein the power of death. One death devours another and wins the victory. Satan is destroyed with all his works, sin and death: *"Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death - that is, the devil- and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death."* (Hebrews 2:14ff.).

Therefore, we should proclaim the death of the Lord because His death does not mean destruction, but redemption from the power of sin and a beginning of a new Creation through the resurrection of the dead. People who have accomplished much in their earthly lives, have, at best, improved somewhat the conditions of earthly life under the conditions of sin and death. The Son of God is, therefore, the only and unique Saviour of the world and the completion of God's plan of salvation and His revelation of Himself.

## 7. APPENDIX APPENDIX

### Some QUESTIONS about our responses in postmodern settings.

1. How do you present Christ in your personal evangelistic context?

#### Revelation sphere:

2. What Biblical narratives are relevant to a postmodern person? List some? For example, John 4: The woman at the well. The Exodus paradigm. Peter and Cornelius. Paul and Lydia.
3. Spirituality: Mission comes from the outflow of our relationship with God. A necessary first step.
4. Prayer.
5. Signs/wonders.
6. Symbols- images.

#### Action sphere:

7. What practical ministries could a church undertake which would be **relevant** to postmodern people/context?
8. How do we reach people in a corrupt society where Christians are involved in corruption – causing pain to the poor?
9. How do we overcome the perceptions of Christianity as a Western and colonial reality?

#### Interaction sphere:

##### Churches who are reaching the postmodern generation

10. What should be the **shape** of the local church which would reflect what we believe about Jesus?
11. In the context of a local church, what **tools** can members of the church use to evangelize?
12. How do we empower and encourage Christians to go into the postmodern world and speak with confidence? Note there are questions as to what language is meaningful to the postmodern mind.
13. What do we do when postmoderns are unable to fit into our church events?

##### Respectful relationships (yet uniqueness) in mission to postmodernists

14. How can we avoid arrogance in communicating? How can we present the gospel with passion and zeal without being arrogant or violent? ( e.g. in spirit, word and deed)
15. How do we **listen** to postmodern? What are their questions and concerns? Where is the pain? How can we share the pain?
16. How do we **know** for certain the mind and the behaviour of postmodern people? Can we enter their reality and get in touch with their deep seated thoughts and feelings?
17. How do we establish **trust** in relationships with people?
18. In a society where church is no longer relevant, how do we get people **interested** in Christianity?
19. What would be some relevant stories and literature for a postmodern person?
20. How do we empower and encourage Christians to go into the postmodern world and speak with confidence?
21. How do we reach those that reflect Christ better than the Christians? The happy and the **good people**?

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