



Global Connections National Conference 4-6 November 2009

The Uniqueness of Christ in a Pluralistic World Feedback

Expectation of the participants at the beginning of the first session

- Interest in others views and ideas to stimulate and develop my own understanding in this area.
- Curiosity – wanted to see how, theologically speaking, folk from mission organisations answered the question.
- I work with Muslims who say that Jesus and Mohammed are similar. Christianity and Islam are both equal and true.
- Theme reflects my conviction and is crucial in mission.
- I am sure of the answer but the question seems to be being asked more and more: can we really say Christ is the only way?
- It is the most important issue of mission in the 21st century.
- How to encourage better understanding of plurality so that the gospel can be more clearly proclaimed.
- Challenge of uniqueness in an “all tolerant relativistic” culture.
- What is truly effective contextual Christian witness?
- Interested in how the gospel can be shared in very different cultures and languages.
- Interest in contextualisation.
- How and why is Christ unique and how can I be a witness to him today?
- Because the ‘uniqueness of Christ’ is a vital issue in this multi-everything “pick and mix” society. It is increasingly hard to maintain this stand when it is not PC to so stand. The gospel only has power when the ‘uniqueness of Christ’ is upheld.
- To understand more how we proclaim Jesus to a post-modern world, perhaps understanding traditions etc
- I’m homing in on the importance of story-telling and testimony in sharing Christ.
- To see the big picture of Christianity throughout the world.
- To explore what it means to be a Christian in today’s world and culture, with all the changes in recent years. Don’t want glib answers.
- Christ is the source of truth. At this critical moment in history, we could fragment as a culture and civilisation if we don’t root our thinking in him.
- A vital topic which seems to be of diminishing importance to the church in the UK and in some places around the world.
- Frustrated by head-in-the-sand evangelicals. We need to articulate our thinking on this issue.
- This topic is vital to why we do mission, what sort of mission we do and how we do it.
- As I work with churches overseas and in the UK the expressions of being an evangelical Christian are different. The UK seem far more fixed in their views and I’d like to explore ways of helping them journey towards change.

- Europe’s post-modern pluralistic context challenges many Christian doctrines, especially the uniqueness of Christ. What are the ways in this context and what can we learn from the world church?

Session 1: Models of pluralism

Alan Storkey

Two good, four bad

1. Horizontal or Institutional Pluralism

GOD – Creator
CHRIST – Redeemer

Family	Stewardship/Economics		
Marriage		Church	State
Education	Arts		Community

Creation Rule of God

- Christian
- Created structure of human societies.
- Kuyper: “When you bow the knee to God you bow it to no-one else” – Freedom.
- Christians always playing at home in God’s world.

2. Vertical Pluralism

- Faith in every area of life – Christian and non-christian.
- Life open to God, not subject to totalitarian control.
- We are tolerant in principle, voluntary response to the gospel.
- Christ is key in all areas of life, not just institutional church.
- Vertical faith directions
- Religion – Christianity, Secularism, Hinduism, Islam, Folk religion, Nationalism.
- Political – Christian, Socialist, Conservative, Republican, Populist, Communist.
- Economic – Capitalist, Fair Trade, Stewardship, Financial capitalism, Socialist.

3. Secular State pluralism

STATE (neutral, areligious)
(public arena)

Economy	Education	Nation	
	Law	Health	Arts

(Family) Individual (at home) Religion

4. Religious Pluralism

Neutral State

Most		Christianity
Of		Islam
Public		Witchcraft
Life (Secular)	Aliens	

Religious Pluralism

- No establishment YES.
- Religious boundaries.



- Neutral areas.
- State – no convictions.
- No Christian understanding of politics.
- Pig's ear

5. Postmodern, subjective relativism

Populist State (we'll give you what you want)

Institutional breakdown.

"I did it my way". Self-interest.

What I like.

Individualised Christianity

5. Islamic Monism

ISLAMIC STATE

Economy	Family	Education
	Penal System	Religion

- Religious control.
- Totalitarian.
- Good News to the whole world
- Non-coercive gentle kingdom of God
- Recognition of the faith direction of all of life (cf secularism)
- Awareness of Christ's way and rule in every area of life.
- Awareness of the voluntary kingdom of God.
- Respect for all views.

Session 2: Biblical and theological foundations for the uniqueness of Christ

Elaine Storkey

Of the many strands of evidence for the Uniqueness of Christ (prophecy, birth, miracles, teaching, death and resurrection, and transforming effect on people's lives) the most persuasive, because totally unique, is the incarnation/death/resurrection.

Biblical evidence for Uniqueness of Christ is compelling for those of us recognising the authority of Scripture, but how do we communicate the Uniqueness of Christ to those 'outside the circle'?

Answer: There will be as many starting points as there are people. In relating to people where they are at, there will be opportunity to tell the Jesus story, relating it to our own experience and backing it up with a consistent life-style.

Opportunities and cautions offered by postmodernism and pluralism

Richard Tiplady

These recent philosophical and social trends need not be considered as entirely hostile and threatening to Christianity. They can also help Christians shake free from a harmful institutionalism where 'truth' becomes wooden and monolithic. In fact what these trends are really seeking for finds its fulfilment in Christ.

Session 3: Challenges to Uniqueness of Christ

Challenges from Islam

John Azumah

Islam, too, has its Christology (virgin birth, 'more-than-a-prophet', unique, Word and Spirit of Allah, creator of life), but makes of Jesus not fully God, not fully man, while Christianity affirms fully God, fully man.

Persuading Muslims will not come through argument or even Scripture, but through revelation, often in dreams (?and consistent Christian life-style).

Much debate about expression 'Son of God' (taken up in later session)

Challenges from Eastern Religion

Kan San Tan

Relatively little response from Buddhism & Hinduism. Why?? Could be down to the sovereignty of God, but perhaps also lack of engagement with the religious and philosophical background of these religions. Christianity still identified as a Western religion.

Session 4: Christians in the world marketplace

Alan Storkey

Differentiated 'good' and 'bad' pluralisms.

Challenges of holistic/integral mission

Elaine Storkey

Vital in a pluralist world. Tapping into every dimension of life in this world: science, arts, education, theatre, family life, work, education, ecology, sport. No area is to be Christ-free, beyond the reach of his lordship.

Questions for discussion

"I can believe whatever I want. You Christians are so intolerant!" Admit that we Christians sometimes do come across as arrogant. But is reality actually just what we personally prefer it to be? Eg, I might prefer to believe that gravity draws objects upwards rather than downwards, but does it then do so? Lesson for us Christians: if there are non-negotiables, then may we communicate them not with arrogance and dogmatism but with warm-hearted, relaxed conviction. (We seek to win people, not arguments)

"How can I trust Christianity when its track record is so marked by wars, etc". Again acknowledge and repent of the measure of truth behind the assertion. Seek to show that the errors have nothing to do with Jesus Christ who is the heart and focus of Christianity.

Session 5: Free discussion about the written word and the Living Word

One participant gave a thoughtful affirmation of inspiration of the words of Scripture. Another warned against a wooden 'one-size-fits-all' notion of verbal, textual inspiration, reminding of the wide spectrum of different genres within Scripture (prophecy, prose, song, parable, apocalyptic, etc, etc).

We were reminded of the importance of the hermeneutical process that engages with Scripture, and that these processes will inevitably and rightly reflect the different cultural, historical, and philosophical backgrounds of the particular contexts of those who do the interpretation.

Important not to dismiss the historical development of doctrinal formulations from the past, but to be open at the same time to fresh ways of seeing truth brought by the Holy Spirit. Final discussion on specific expression relating to the Uniqueness of Christ: "The Son of God". Since it is used so often in the NT we are not free to dispense with it. But recognise that it came out of a (mainly) Jewish context. The expression in, for instance, a Muslim context is offensive because it can convey erroneously notions of physicality and sexuality (procreation) that are rightly blasphemous to Muslims. In our use of this expression, therefore, we should a) not use it as the 'selling card' label for Jesus but only further down the line when other things have been said about Jesus that will make the expression more understandable, b) explain the term, distancing it from those misunderstandings that offend a Muslim unnecessarily. There is an inevitable offense to the Cross and to the Gospel, but let us avoid unnecessary obstacles by sympathetic understanding of the issues.

Thoughts at the end of the last session

- Recovering God's word in multiple contexts
- Balancing propositional teaching and preaching with story-telling which invites people in
- The way the Bible or Jesus challenges the corrupt power plays and oppressive meta narratives of religion.
- This was the best iGroup type of discussion I've ever been to at a GC conference.
- Real inspiration and challenge as to how I have/or not responded to the uniqueness of Christ. The input from John and the Storkeys and the session on Buddhism have been helpful and stretching and I have been challenges to really put Jesus first much more in my life as well as living a more fully integrated life. An inspiring group of people!
- Food to raise the meta-question of language and to think of its implications for evangelism. I hope some will take this further, not least in working in education to help redeem confidence in the meaning of words/authorised intent.
- Could Global Connections encourage mission agencies in finding, keeping and telling stories? I surmise many stories are lost because no one records them.
- The life and person of Jesus is what we should witness to –
 - Christian evangelical culture
 - Western/ Northern culture
 - Both are/have blocks to this we need to address in our witness.
- We need to look more at lifestyle, deeds and miracles - these were referred to but not discussed and would have been useful when considering post-modernism and pluralism.
- Thinking about Islam and Buddhism and how we can portray the uniqueness of Christ. Also that we get very hung up on language in a way that isn't always very helpful.
- Learning from Alan and Elaine Storkey, their wisdom, grace, love, life and was to communicating – inspiring!
- Stimulation of hearing different and sometimes opposing opinions. Challenging! It's good occasionally to be 'jolted'. Eg on language and terminology.
- We cannot argue anybody into a personal relationship with Christ. This should impact the way we evangelise and point us towards holistic mission.
- Idea of integral/holistic mission.
- Challenge – how to put all that's been said/heard into practice now.
- The issue of the uniqueness of Christ hinges on our source of authority which for us is in the Bible. Therefore our stand on its reliability is crucial, particularly in its witness to Christ's sayings, life, suffering, death and resurrection. Our stand for Christ's uniqueness stands or falls on the truth of the Bible.
 - The narrowness of our understanding of and communication of 'the gospel'
 - Global hermeneutical community 'global conversation'
 - Variety of pluralism

- I was encouraged on the legitimacy given to integral mission – refreshing to hear enthusiasm for once on approach where I often feel I am fighting in a corner against proclamation-focused evangelicals.
- When one makes friends with Muslims it is a temptation to begin to feel that maybe one can compromise on the uniqueness of Christ. So these studies are a reminder that this is not a place for compromise. But one cannot argue people into the kingdom; the Holy Spirit reveals His truth through Scripture, dreams, TV, radio, internet, testimony to true seekers. God can and does use us all.

Notes collated by Bryan Knell. 'The Uniqueness of Christ in a Pluralistic World' Group Coordinator: John Azumah

A Paper by Richard Tiplady:

The opportunities and cautions for Christology offered by postmodernism and pluralism

Postmodern era

A plethora of socially- and linguistically-constructed meaning systems, each one unprivileged, nonhegemonous and thoroughly tolerated

Jacques Derrida

Casts doubt on the ability of language to represent reality accurately and objectively.

Logocentrism – words refer to an external reality. The Western intellectual tradition, in all its forms (philosophical, theological, scientific, materialist, secular) claims to reflect and represent things reality accurately, mirroring the way things actually are.

Deconstruction challenges this. Reality is not accessible through language. Words are slippery objects, endlessly ambiguous and hard to define. Nothing exists outside the text. Truth is not metaphysically present in language. It is metaphysically absent.

Peter Berger

To what extent is any social reality accepted to be a non-human reality (i.e. “it’s just the way things are”)?

“Reification is the apprehension of human phenomena as if they were things, as something other than human products – such as facts of nature, results of cosmic laws, or manifestations of divine will. Man is capable of forgetting his own authorship of the human world”

“Pardon him, Theodotus. He is a barbarian, and thinks that the customs of his tribe and island are the laws of nature” (from *Caesar and Cleopatra*, by George Bernard Shaw)

Reification betrays a deep aspiration for security and a longing for truth.

Much of postmodernism, deconstruction in particular, is geared to the task of enabling individuals and groups to realise that they have created their own worlds, whereas there is nothing permanent, natural or supernatural about them.

“By uncovering our reifications, deconstruction attempts to destroy, not in any nihilistic sense but to play a positive therapeutic role in the culture of late (and decomposing) modernity. We are to face up to our constructions and to own them as such”.

But not only are they fabricated, self-contained conceptual systems untethered to any external reality, as constructs with a deep history they serve as instruments of power and social oppression.

Michel Foucault

Every human discourse is a power play, every social arrangement oppressive, every cultural setting tyrannical. There are no transcendent or privileged discourses unencumbered by the dynamics of domination. The world is suffused with the will to power, and no social relationships are uncorrupted by it.

“Truth is neither outside of power nor itself lacking in power” (Foucault, *Power/Knowledge*)

He promoted the idea of the power/resistance matrix, whereby the expression of different opinions, as an end in and of themselves, serves to reveal the arbitrary nature of every rule and norm (not because airing such views might result in a nearer approximation to truth, in some kind of Hegelian synthesis).

Jesus in a postmodern world

There will always be a tension between the postmodern idea of many truth worlds and the truth claims made by Jesus Christ. But is that all we can say?

How do we do Christology in this kind of context?

- The celebration of diverse voices
- Suspicion of the 'will to power'
- Reified expressions of social reality that ultimately result in control
- *Deconstruction* and the *power/resistance* rule, both of which seek to demonstrate the arbitrary nature of all truth systems

'Holiness' was central to the Pharisaic worldview and their understanding of the covenant. Many were excluded from the covenant community (poor, disabled, tax collectors, prostitutes, 'sinners')

Jesus seems to avoid the term 'holy' in his teaching.

"Be holy, because I the Lord your God am holy" (Lev 11:44; 19:2; 20:26);

"Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful" (Lk 6:36).

Jesus reinterprets holiness as the loving inclusion of the marginalised and outcast.

Jesus decisively challenges Israel's self-understanding as the elect, which had marginalised so many outside and within Israel.

- Israel's election was meant to be a vehicle for the reconciliation of the nations to God
- The temple was a symbol of that election, as the presence of God among his people, and to which the nations would stream at the end of the age (Isa 60:1-3; 66:18-21)
- But Israel had become an impediment to this purpose (the temple being called a "den of robbers" rather than "a house of prayer for all nations" Lk 19:46)

Jesus was crucified on charges of insurrection against Rome – *the Roman totalising metanarrative*.

Jesus challenge to Jewish self-identity (their totalising, excluding view of election) is what precipitates the plot to kill him (Mk 11:15-18) – *the Jewish totalising metanarrative*.

The one who truly perceived the anti-ideological purposes of God (Israel as God's servant to bring blessing to the nations) and who came to create a new, inclusive remnant to this end, is sacrificed on the altar of the self-protective Roman and Jewish ideologies.

The biblical narrative of Jesus' life and death addresses the postmodern condition directly, and escapes the postmodern charge of violence and power:

- Christ exposes the violence of totalising narratives and takes the full force of their power and fury upon his own person
- The story told through the Bible shatters our own totalising convictions, converting us and aligning us with God's own globally-inclusive goal of compassion, justice and shalom
- Our eyes are opened to our own cultural conditioning, the reifications on which we build our lives, our corrupt sinfulness that perverts our understanding, and we are reoriented to serve the 'other', the outcast and the marginalised.

In this way, our christology, our understanding of who Christ is and what he came to achieve, ensures that we have good news to tell in a postmodern world, not by confronting postmodernity but by answering its deepest and truest questions.