

‘Can Christocentrism be sustained in the face of competing religious claims and pluralist Christian objections?’¹

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Introduction

'Christocentrism' may not be an elegant word, but it well describes the traditional Christian view that the fullness of divine revelation and the finality of humanity's redemption centre upon Christ.² In recent decades, however, it has often been asserted that, for a number of reasons, such christocentrism impedes or even destroys the prospect of dialogue with people of other faiths. This paper will argue a contrary view: namely, that christocentrism (at least when stated with some minor qualifications) rarely impedes dialogue and, in fact, actually *enables* a fruitful encounter – with Hindus, for example – in a way that diminished christological alternatives do not.

The paper attempts to defend that perspective against a range of criticisms that have been made against it, especially the charges that Christocentrism is morally inadequate (because it encourages triumphalism and intolerance), epistemologically naive (in its narrow view of religious truth), is theologically deficient (in its high Christology and rejection of the theocentric alternative) and, on the eve of a new millennium, is culturally unacceptable (in its rejection of the pluralist paradigms of religious truth and interreligious relations). The paper also draws attention to a notable contribution to the debate that has been made by Gavin D'Costa and it concludes with an outline of areas where further work needs to be done and offers suggestions about how Christocentrism might best be communicated.

The Indian Context

The recent Christian-Hindu encounter in India provides a helpful working example of what Christocentrism implies in practice. In this context Christocentrism mean those evaluations of or models for a Christian understanding of Hinduism which, however tolerant or positive their evaluation of Hinduism, nonetheless assert the centrality, finality and uniqueness for Christ and the revelation and/or salvation found in him. In India this christocentric perspective is central to the faith of the overwhelming majority of both Protestants and Catholics. And – one of the main points of this paper – it does not impede good relations among the vast majority of Hindus and Christians.

Although 'mainstream' Protestant³ opinion in India is often quite positive in its assessments of Hinduism, these assessments have almost always been made from a Christocentric point of view. Such Protestant opinion also wants to tie Christian faith to the claim that Christ is the world's only saviour and the fullest expression of God's revelation. (MM Thomas even argues for a 'Christ-centred syncretism'.⁴) Even when Christians have formulated a description of Christ as an *avatāra* (divine 'descent') it has, in line with the traditional assessment of Christ, usually been expressed in terms of uniqueness and historical particularity.⁵ Protestants writing in an Indian context have, of course, long been familiar with the problems posed by 'the scandal of particularity' in any claim that in the person and action of Jesus Christ God has overcome the otherwise relativising actions of history; they have acknowledged and sought to resolve those problems.⁶

The generally positive Indian Catholic appraisal of Hinduism is also tempered by some important qualifications deriving from the Christocentric nature of much of that appraisal. Hinduism, despite the grace of God found within it, is seen to fall short in two ways. Either its virtues are attributed to the immanent presence of Christ, or Hinduism remains essentially incomplete when measured against the revelation and salvation offered in Christ.

Chethimattam offers an example of the first (inclusivist) point of view when he writes that those Hindus who are not separated from the grace of God are, 'in the Christian view, saved only through the grace of Christ, the one Saviour of the whole of humanity'⁷. Also to be found are a number of statements about the essential incompleteness of Hinduism. The supposedly authoritative *Guidelines for Inter-Religious Dialogue* issued by the Catholic Bishops' Commission of India states that the religions must be placed in the context of the history of salvation so that they do not appear as 'parallel movements to Christianity but as, in God's providence, stepping stones to the growing revelation of the total Christ'⁸. Dupuis discusses at some length the way in which Hinduism, through Christ's presence within it, 'mediates divine grace'. Nonetheless, it is clear to Dupuis that 'the visibility of divine grace is lesser in Hinduism than in Christianity'⁹).

Recent Catholic theological opinion in India is anxious to move away from ecclesiocentrism and to acknowledge both revelation and redemption outside Christianity. But it also usually continues to assert that Christ is normative for (even if not constitutive of) whatever revelation and salvation are found outside the church.

It could therefore be argued that, because of their Christocentrism, both the mainline Protestant and principal Catholic positions share a fundamental point of agreement in viewing Hinduism as inadequate in itself or, at least, inadequate when measured against what Christ

has done and can offer. In other words, there is an essential incompleteness in Hinduism – and christocentrism both requires and sustains that claim.

Christocentrism Challenged

However there are potentially negative implications for the meeting of Hindus and Christians if one partner brings to the meeting the claim that, even though Christ might not be the only revelation of God's saving love, he is its fullest and definitive revelation - and that Christians experience the salvation he brings in its fullest measure. But this, in turn, is to invite the kind of criticism found in the sympathetic discussion of Christian claims by the Hindu philosopher KS Murty. He believes that there have been many *avatāras* but that these have been discernible only by the faith of those who display loving trust in God.¹⁰ He considers that there is, however, no reason why all should 'believe that the life of a single historical person is the revelation *par excellence* of God'. Only an individual's 'own predilection' would lead to a declaration that one religious tradition is to be the pattern for others.¹¹

Other critics argue that, both from the Christian tradition itself, as well as evidence from the encounter with the religions and questions that derive from convictions about the historical relativity and fallible finitude of all knowledge and claims to truth, there are good reasons for questioning any claim that Christ is necessary for salvation and is the final and decisive revelation of God.¹²

There are several ways in which the weight of this criticism might be diminished. There is the assertion that claims to the possession of truth, whether by Christians or Hindus, need not necessarily hinder open dialogue. The notion of the finality of Christ might be defined in such a way as not to exclude progress and growth in understanding in other faiths.¹³ Cosmic Christology might be employed to argue that, although the fullness of divine revelation is found uniquely in Christ (although knowledge of this fullness is tied to the relativities and limitations of particular linguistic and cultural expressions of the Christian community), this same Christ might be discerned and acknowledged elsewhere; in fact, the very act of meeting sincere Hindus might facilitate that discernment and acknowledgement.

In the Hindu-Christian encounter, this viewpoint is well represented by Raimundo Panikkar - or, more accurately, by Panikkar's writings since the early 1970s.¹⁴ Of central importance in Panikkar's thought at this point is his distinction between the universal cosmic Christ (known by many names and in many religions) and the particular Jesus of history. Although Panikkar affirms the uniqueness and universality of Christ, he does not want to assert the superiority of Christianity.

Theocentrism as an Alternative

In more recent years there has been a growing number of advocates of another viewpoint. This seeks to revise Christian attitudes in such a way as to view the religions with reference not to Christ but to a common divine centre such that no one faith can claim to be normative for others. The advocates of this 'theocentrism' eschew the evaluation of the religions in terms of their relationship, actual or potential, to Christ or the Christian church and usually call in question notions of the finality of Christ and Christianity, or attempts to define truth in terms of Christ; though they do not doubt the distinctiveness of either Christianity or other faiths.¹⁵ This point of view does, of course, build upon an extensive discussion and affirmation in the more liberal traditions in Christianity (too extensive to document here) about the presence and purposeful activity of God in the religions.

In India, Stanley Samartha is one notable advocate of Christian-Hindu dialogue whose thought has developed from a Christocentric to a theocentric view of world religions. He rejects as 'patronising' the 'co-option' of other faiths or adherents to those traditions by means of the notions of anonymous Christianity or a cosmic Christology¹⁶ (although he himself once embraced a form of cosmic Christology)¹⁷. Instead, Samartha wants Christians, together with those of other faiths, 'to draw attention to a transcendent centre, the ultimate mystery'.¹⁸ He is critical of the 'Christo-monism' of much Christian theology and draws attention to the witness that, in the Gospels, 'Jesus Christ himself is theocentric'. With this in mind, he calls for an acknowledgement that 'no [religious] particularity should claim universality' among the world's religions; an alternative possibility 'may be to recognise God alone as Absolute and to consider all religions to be relative'¹⁹. Other Indian Protestants argue for a similar shift from traditional Christology to theocentrism in the interests of dialogue.²⁰ For example, they discern an important theocentric dimension to universalistic passages in the Old Testament.²¹

Among the global discussions of the issue, Paul Knitter has vigorously and persistently argued for such a theocentric theology of the religions. It is a theocentric model for a theology of religions that promises most for the inter-faith dialogue that he regards as an urgent ethical imperative.²²

Some Inadequacies of Theocentrism

Nonetheless, the theocentric model remains open to criticism. The opposition of theocentrism to Christocentrism might be rejected on the grounds that the central concerns of each are embraced within the usual trinitarian description of God. And, at least for the Christian, Christocentrism is a species of theocentrism rather than opposed to it. Knowing and following Christ *is* the traditional Christian way of being theocentric. It can be argued that theocentrism misrepresents the major religions since all of them do contain exclusivist elements: they reject as untrue incompatible beliefs held by other faiths. Moreover, advocates of theocentrism appear unable to elaborate the actual content of the *theos* that it prefers to Christocentrism for its normative centre: the religions simply do not provide an inclusive portrait of a divine centre or, in fact, of any definable centre at all.²³ And, as Lesslie Newbigin has asked of theocentrism: why should we believe that an impersonal undefinable abstraction is a more worthy and more accessible centre of the religious universe than a known person from recorded history?²⁴ Furthermore, the inability to specify the supposed centre might, perhaps unwittingly, point to the agenda of the proponents as a covert centre.

The Advantages of Christocentrism in an Indian Context

It seems clear that in the Indian context discussion that begins with Christ has some distinct advantages over other possible Christian starting points which might also be claimed to have a universal, cosmic dimension and thereby provide potential common - or more neutral - ground between Hindu and Christian. Two such starting points might be 'God' and 'spirit'.

The word 'God', especially if not qualified in a personal or dualistic sense by the Christian partner, may well be seen by both Hindu and Christian as an item of faith common to both traditions. Some Hindus assume the essential unity of all religions in Brahman; some Christians are prepared to assert that all the religions 'revolve around' and in some measure reveal the Absolute. One advantage of such a theocentric starting point is that it appears to

bypass the scandal of particularity which traditional Christian claims about a unique revelation and salvation in Christ appear to make when asserted in India.²⁵ However, this seeming advantage is purchased at a cost. In the words of the rather forceful appraisal of Richard Taylor:

Probably all of those who object to the Indian [Christian] propensity for seeing Christ there [in the world] would be willing to see God there. But ... in our Indian culture ... the word "God" may mean so many different things that it is either misleading or truly meaningless.²⁶

It might, of course, be found possible to reduce some of the ambiguity of the differing meanings of the term 'God' by means of a discussion of the various words for the Absolute in the Sanskritic languages.²⁷ But, even if Hindu and Christian were to agree on one word, or on a conjunction of words (such as *Brahman* as *saguna-nirguna*) the raising of questions concerning, for example, the relationship between *paramātmān* and *ātman*, or between God and the world, would almost certainly reveal differences of meaning that no verbal agreement could cover. Neither Hindu nor Christian claims the ability to define the Absolute or God exhaustively. But it is likely that each would defend definitions of the Absolute that would appear to be irreconcilable with those made by the other - and equally probable that belief in 'God' could not, therefore, be considered to be an area of common ground conducive to fruitful dialogue.

The terms 'spirit' (or 'Spirit') and 'spirituality' might also be seen as pointing to that 'spiritual' essence thought by some - for example, apologists for Vedānta and some Christian advocates of dialogue - to constitute the inner dynamic shared by all religions.

Abhishiktananda, for example, lays considerable emphasis upon the unity (*ekatvam*) of all things in the Spirit.²⁸ In fact, he believes that both the *Advaita* and the Christian experience of God share this same mystery of realised oneness in the Spirit.²⁹ Panikkar argues that the Spirit is God immanent (rather than transcendent) - the *Atman* that is the Ultimate Ground and *Brahman* itself.³⁰ The terms *śakti* (power),³¹ *ātman* (spirit) and its cognates *paramātmān* and *antarātmān* (supreme spirit and inner spirit), are not only known to Hindus but can be, and in fact are, invested with appropriate Christian meaning and are widely used in the Indian Church. Furthermore, Hindus identify *Brahman* with *paramātmān* even as Christians identify God as Spirit.

However, there are difficulties with the suggestion that a common acknowledgment of 'spirit' or 'Spirit' might function as a basis for dialogue. Within the Christian tradition (including most of the Indian Christian tradition)³² one major function of the Spirit is seen as that of mediating the presence of Christ - in which case the problem of particularity is hardly avoided. It is also probable that in an Indian context, the word 'spirit' would remain as ambiguous as the term 'God', and for comparable reasons. If used without qualification the word can function as the justification of almost any 'spirituality' which cares to appropriate it. But, if the word is qualified, it is probable that both Hindu and Christian would draw upon elements in their own traditions that would appear to be irreconcilable with the beliefs of the other. The Christian view of the world, and of definitive revelation in Christ, might, for example, make the definition and nature of the Spirit's activity unacceptably 'concrete' to a Hindu. In other words, the supposed advantages to dialogue of using the words 'God', 'spirit' and their cognates (rather than 'Christ') are outweighed by their disadvantages. As Raimundo Panikkar concludes, symbols such as 'God' and 'Spirit' are liable to truncate reality and limit the centre of life to an abstract principle³³ - which is why he argues for Christ as the defining point of Christian discourse in dialogue.

So, to return to christology: there are a number of distinctly positive reasons why discourse with Hindus is best framed in christological categories. (a) Christianity in India (and elsewhere) has always drawn attention to the unique and irreplaceable position occupied by Christ in Christian self-understanding. (b) Comment has already been made about the advantages of a concrete christological focus over the more abstract notions of 'God' or 'Spirit'. (c) It might also be argued that it is the person of Jesus that, more effectively than any other aspect of Christianity, enables the Christian 'word' to be enculturated and understood. This is because – to use a helpful metaphor of Mark Heim - 'people cross the membranes between different cultures more effectively than ideas or concepts do'³⁴ and so to focus upon Christ is to help enable the determining measure of Christian belief (Christ) to take an appropriately central place in the discussion. (And it goes without saying that this focus upon Christ can and should be made in distinctly Indian categories.)

As well, given the importance of what I call 'secular' dialogue between Christians and Hindus, a christological focus might be preferred. This is because the example of Christ provides a more compelling personal and practical focus in the quest for a just society than any basis grounded in the more abstract notion of theocentrism.³⁵ Even as the example of Gandhi might inspire Hindus (and Christians) and be offered by them as an example for such dialogue, so, as MM Thomas has repeatedly pointed out, the person of Christ inspired and sustained the reascent Hindu discovery of the importance of personhood and history.³⁶ For this reason, Thomas has insisted upon the continuing potential of a christocentric vision for what he calls 'cultural renewal and the humanisation of the corporate structures of life in India'.³⁷

The Supposed Triumphalism and Arrogance of Christocentrism

Two advantages of theocentrism are said to be its openness and tolerance (over against the supposed triumphalism and intolerance of a traditional Christocentrism) and its epistemological superiority. It is taken for granted by Stanley Samartha, for example, that any Christian exclusivism is morally deficient since it necessarily entails 'condemning other peoples, cultures and religions to an inferior status, to be humiliated, dominated, exploited and conquered'³⁸. Now it is certainly true that some religious exclusivists have behaved in arrogant and abhorrent ways towards other believers - a phenomenon found not only in Christian history but also, it should be noted, among Muslims, Sikhs, Hindus and Buddhists as well (both past, and present).³⁹ But to concede this point is not to imply that the notion of exclusivism necessarily demands arrogance and intolerance on the part of its advocates. For a Christian to consider the beliefs or practices of a Hindu (or vice versa) to be wrong is not incompatible with treating that person with tolerant respect as, in fact, most conservative Indian Christians (and Hindus) do. The contingent connections between belief in certain truths and the development of certain attitudes and behaviours is insufficient reason to the reject the truths concerned. Sadhu Sundar Singh (1889-1929) - 'perhaps the most famous Indian Christian who has yet lived, and whose influence has been widespread and prolonged'⁴⁰ - combined a deeply Christocentric faith, and notable evangelistic zeal, with a quite positive attitude towards Hinduism, including an extensive use of Hindu terminology.

Moreover, missionaries to India were (and are) often found exhibiting the same combination of Christocentric faith, commitment to evangelisation - and tolerant respect for Hindus.

To take but one example, the rise of interest in 'comparative religion' with its quest for informed understanding; of this phenomenon Eric Sharpe writes:

It is little short of remarkable ... to realise how much of the change in the climate of opinion had been brought about by the very people - the missionaries - who were popularly supposed to be dedicated to inter-religious insensitivity and obscurantism. The recent history of Christianity, as popularly conceived, contains many misapprehensions and not a few libels; perhaps none is more unjustified than the stereotype which would make of every missionary an impatient iconoclast.⁴¹

The Supposed Epistemological Naivety of Christocentrism

Nor is it possible convincingly to sustain the opinion that the exclusivist view of truth (with its acceptance of the principle of noncontradiction) is epistemologically naive, or less plausible than what Knitter calls theocentrism's 'new model of truth' as primarily relational, ongoing and pluralistic.⁴² As Netland argues, 'even in religion, the price one must pay for rejecting the principle of noncontradiction is simply too high'⁴³. Christocentric exclusivists are not found claiming an *exhaustive* knowledge of God and, fundamentalists excepted, are rarely found advocating the absoluteness of Christ; rather, they argue that certain claims are accurate and true. It does seem as if much of the rejection of metaphysics centres on a functionalist view of religion – usually the view that the function of religion is to enable some kind of transformation. However, as critics have pointed out, those who profess religious doctrines usually believe they

express truths about the way things are, truths which are what they are independently of the transformative effects professing them might have, and ... this indisputable historical fact raises certain difficulties for a purely functionalist reading of religious doctrines.¹

Often the argument against Christocentrism amounts to this: since there are so many exclusivist claims to truth all must be regarded as doubtful. However, as Kenneth Surin points out,

no canons of logic are breached in asserting that God's work to defeat the power of evil reaches its completion in the events surrounding the life of one particular individual. It is entirely compatible with the position ... that God reveals himself to [others], in other times and in other places⁴⁴.

Moreover, the very logic of such an assertion - whether it has Christ or Krishna in mind - implies the opposite of triumphalism; since there is a divine initiative in revelation and salvation there is no room for human pride. The fact that such actions have an original cultural location (used as an argument against exclusivism since an ethnocultural bias is thereby supposedly shown) is, of course, inevitable and does not constitute a ground upon which, *a priori*, the truth claims of the exclusivist can be dismissed. In the particular case of exclusivism, not only is that viewpoint epistemologically defensible, it appears also to offer a more balanced (even if less congenial) representation of the biblical material than the theocentric alternative.⁴⁵

A Critique of Christian Pluralism

¹ Paul J Griffiths, 'The Uniqueness of Christian Doctrine Defended', in *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered*, 160; his critique has John Hick's inspiration christology mainly in mind.

The advocacy of theocentrism is a subset of a wider pluralist model for interreligious relations. Again, John Hick and Paul Knitter are among the most influential advocates of a prescriptive pluralist paradigm.

Hick's understanding of religious pluralism has evolved over the years but a very recent definition of what he calls "the pluralist hypothesis" is that religious pluralism is

the idea that the great world religions are different human responses to the same ultimate transcendent reality. ... [T]he different world religions ... constitute different human responses to the ultimate transcendent reality to which they all, in their different ways, bear witness.⁴⁶

The theocentric model is logically dependent upon such a pluralist model. A number of telling objections have been made of the pluralist model,⁴⁷ but I want to draw attention to a critique developed recently by Gavin D'Costa of Bristol University. In an article in *Religious Studies* in 1996 entitled 'The Impossibility of a Pluralist View of Religions',⁴⁸ he argues that "pluralism must always logically be a form of exclusivism and that nothing called pluralism really exists"⁴⁹. The reason for this assertion is as follows:

there is no such thing as pluralism because all pluralists are committed to holding some form of truth criteria and by virtue of this, anything that falls foul of such criteria is excluded from counting as truth (in doctrine and in practice). Thus, pluralism operates within the same logical structure of exclusivism and in this respect pluralism can never really affirm the genuine autonomous value of religious pluralism for, like exclusivism, it can only do so by tradition specific criteria for truth.⁵⁰

He then goes on to illustrate his assertion from both Hick and Knitter and finishes the article with the somewhat provocative conclusion that "usually those called pluralists are exclusivists without knowing it, they are ... anonymous exclusivists!"⁵¹ With that somewhat provocative conclusion I agree.

Further Issues

There are, of course, a considerable number of issues that need to be established and defended before Christocentrism can be considered *the* best approach to a Christian view of the religions. For example, to mention five issues:

- The traditional reasons for asserting the uniqueness and finality of Christ are constantly challenged – even from within the Christian tradition – and an informed defence is constantly needed.⁵²
- The claim to universality; in the context of our present discussion the question of reconciling the historical *particularity* of Christ with that other scandal (increasingly offensive to postmodern ears): the scandal of *universality*.
- The way in which the Christocentrism we have defended fits in the wider trinitarian framework needed as a safeguard against 'Christomonism' – perhaps along the lines of what D'Costa calls trinitarian christology.⁵³
- The question of the *most appropriate* word or set of words to use in defining and defending Christocentrism and the related notion of uniqueness. Do any of the following best describe what we mean to assert of Christ: unique as singular; distinctive; original; particular; absolute; unsurpassable; exclusive; superior; decisive; normative; unique; final?
- The adjective 'exclusive' is also often found in the discussion and requires revision. It is an essentially negative term that even conservatives are becoming increasingly dissatisfied

with. One immediate advantage of the word Christocentrism (especially in a pluralist setting) is its positive tone. As with Van Engen's suggestion of 'evangelism' in place of the usual threefold paradigm⁵⁴, it strongly affirms the central affirmations of the faith – and for that reason may well be better than the term 'exclusivism'.

Communicating These Convictions about Christ

How, then, is a christocentric perspective best communicated in a pluralist setting? The Christocentrism for which I have argued is a *qualified* Christocentrism and the qualification might well be expressed in terms of a number of adverbs in order to underline the dynamic nature of Christology as a continuing interaction of received content and changing context; and to emphasise that orthopraxis does (or should) matter as much as orthodoxy. In other words, I would argue that any advocacy of Christocentrism should be undertaken:

- *Humbly* - because we do not, and dare not - because of the limited and finite condition of all human knowledge - claim an exhaustive or absolute knowledge of the divine way, even the one we have chosen (or feel has chosen us). And this humility might also extend to Western Christians learning from non-Western. In the case of conservatives that they *do* have things to learn from the faith of others; in the case of the progressive that there is no good reason to abandon traditional christocentrism.
- *Patiently* - because of the vast problem of understanding and communicating between dialogue partners who find common ground between committed positions desperately hard to find at times.
- *Modestly* - because even the exclusivist should realise that the divine mystery is inexhaustible and that the very certainty of revelation can induce a corresponding clarity, as it were, about how much remains unknown; an example is the way in which the task of Christological enquiry and understanding is never completed. And, if one might be permitted to connect particularity with universality, *there are many ways by which Christ is the only way*.
- *Charitably* - for the possibilities of triumphalism and arrogance (because of imagined superiority) remain.

But at the same time our advocacy can and should be undertaken:

- *Confidently* – because there are substantial, persuasive and defensible reasons for continuing to advocate a Christocentric view of reality. Or, to use the words of Stephen Neill – who was acutely aware of the realities of religious pluralism and its associated theological and Christological problems – in Jesus the one thing that needed to happen has happened. ... The universe has been reconciled to its God. ... The bridge has been built. ... For the human sickness there is one specific remedy, and this is it. There is no other.⁵⁵

Conclusion

There is, then, substantial reason to argue that the evidence remains adequate for belief in the older view of the uniqueness of the person and activity of Christ - the unique *Avatāra* because of the resurrection, as Irudayaraj argues with careful reference to the Indian context⁵⁶ - and for belief in the Christocentrism the view implies.

The Christology outlined above (a qualified Christocentrism) implies a rejection of the theocentric model (with its diminished Christology)⁵⁷ in which Christ would seem, at least to Hindu eyes, to be 'only an avatar, a manifestation, like which there can be many'⁵⁸. If the uniqueness and decisiveness of Christ are a part of what is seen as the essential content and distinctiveness of the New Testament and the Christian tradition, then it can be argued that to abandon this Christology would violate Christian self-understanding – and impoverish the Christian-Hindu encounter.

APPENDIX:

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End Notes

- ¹ Note: an earlier version of this paper was published as 'Can Christocentrism be Sustained?', in *'With All Humility and Gentleness': Essays on Mission in Honour of Francis Foulkes*, edited by Allan Davidson and Godfrey Nicholson (Auckland, New Zealand, 1991), pp 15-22 ; parts of it are also to be found in chapter VI.I of the author's (as yet unpublished) 1992 University of London PhD dissertation, 'Recent Hindu-Christian Dialogue with Reference to Christology'.
- ² This traditional view of Christ – usually simply described as 'the uniqueness of Christ' - has been well defended many times. For this writer the most persuasive defences include those found in the Select Bibliography (see Appendix above).
- ³ The two largest examples of this 'mainstream' Protestantism are the Church of South India and the Church of North India (together with their associated institutions); the Christian Institute for the Study of Religion and Society in Bangalore has also been a substantial shaper of this mainstream Protestant opinion.
- ⁴ 'Christ-Centred Syncretism', *Religion and Society* [Bangalore], 26.1 (March 1979), pp. 26-35; revised as 'The Absoluteness of Jesus Christ and Christ-centred Syncretism', *Ecumenical Review*, 37 (1985), pp. 387-97.
- ⁵ See, for example, AJ Appasamy, *The Gospel and India's Heritage* (London, 1942), p. 259.
- ⁶ Most accessible to Western readers are: JE Lesslie Newbigin, *The Open Secret*, especially chapters VII ('The Gospel and World History') and X ('The Gospel Among the Religions'); *A Faith for This One World?* (London, 1961); *The Finality of Christ* (London, 1969); and Stephen C Neill, *The Supremacy of Jesus* (London, 1984).
- ⁷ John Britto Chethimattam, 'The Scope and Conditions of a Hindu-Christian Dialogue', *Concilium*, 3.1 (March, 1965), p. 93.
- ⁸ Revised draft (Varanasi, 1977), section 42.
- ⁹ James Dupuis, 'The Presence of Christ in Hinduism', *Religion and Society*, 18.1 (March 1971), p. 39 (though he also adds that 'Christ may be as personally present - or even more - to the Hindu as he is to a Christian).
- ¹⁰ *Revelation and Reason in Advaita Vedanta* (New York, 1959), pp. 279-82.
- ¹¹ *Revelation and Reason in Advaita Vedanta*, p. 296.
- ¹² See, for example, Christopher Duraisingh, 'World Religions and the Christian Claims for the Uniqueness of Jesus Christ', *Indian Journal of Theology*, 30 (1981), pp. 168-85 in which he affirms the 'decisiveness' of the revelation in Christ - but only for the Christian 'paradigm'.
- ¹³ See DG Moses, *Religious Truth and the Relation between Religions* (Madras, 1950), pp. 116f.
- ¹⁴ As seen most explicitly in the development of his thought between the first and revised editions of his *The Unknown Christ of Hinduism* (London, 1964 and 1981).
- ¹⁵ See, for example, John Hick, *God and the Universe of Faiths* (London, 1973) and *God Has Many Names: Britain's New Religious Pluralism* (London, 1980); Knitter, *No Other Name?*, chapters 8 & 9.
- ¹⁶ See his 'The Lordship of Jesus Christ and Religious Pluralism', in *Christ's Lordship and Religious Pluralism*, edited by Gerald H Anderson and Thomas F Stransky (Maryknoll, N.Y., 1981), p. 35.
- ¹⁷ See, for example, his *The Hindu Response to the Unbound Christ*, Inter-Religious Dialogue Series, 6 (Madras, 1974), pp. 198-200.
- ¹⁸ Stanley J. Samartha, 'Mission in a Religiously Plural World: Looking Beyond Tambaram, 1938', *International Review of Mission*, 78 (1988), p. 323.
- ¹⁹ 'The Lordship of Jesus Christ and Religious Pluralism', pp. 27,29.

²⁰ For example, M Thomas Thangaraj, 'Teaching Theology in a Multifaith Context', in *Ministerial Formation in a Multifaith Milieu*, edited by Sam Amirtham and S Wesley Ariarajah (Geneva, nd [c 1986]), p. 34.

²¹ For example, J Russell Chandran, 'Christian Contribution to Religious Dialogue', *Islam and the Modern Age*, 3.2 (May 1972), pp. 72f. Among global discussions, see Krister Stendahl's theocentric interpretation of universalistic biblical passages: 'Notes for Three Bible Studies', in *Christ's Lordship and Religious Pluralism*, pp. 7-18.

²² See his *No Other Name?*, chapters 8, 9, 10 and the comments on dialogue in his 'Five Theses on the Uniqueness of Jesus', in *The Uniqueness of Jesus: a Dialogue with Paul F Knitter*, Faith Meets Faith Series, edited by Leonard Swidler and Paul Mojzes (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997), p 5. Among other significant Catholic discussions, Hans Küng has also advocated a theocentric understanding of salvation; see, for example, his 'The World Religions in God's Plan of Salvation', in *Christian Revelation and World Religions*, edited by Joseph Neuner (London, 1967), pp 25-66; and his *On Being a Christian* (London: 1976), p 98 - however it should also be noted that he goes on to speak about other religions conveying salvation only in a relative sense (*On Being a Christian*, p 104).

²³ For example: Julius Lipner, 'Does Copernicus Help? Reflections for a Christian Theology of Religions', *Religious Studies*, 13 (1977), pp. 243-58; Duncan B Forrester, 'Professor Hick and the Universe of Faiths', *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 29 (1976), pp. 65-72; Peter Byrne, 'John Hick's Philosophy of Religion', *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 35, (1982), pp. 289-301; Newbigin, 'The Gospel Among the Religions', pp. 184-91; Harold A Netland, 'Professor Hick on Religious Pluralism', *Religious Studies*, 22 (1986), pp. 249-61; Mark Heim, 'The Pilgrim Christ: Some Reflections on Theocentric Christology and Enculturation', in *Christian Faith and Multiform Culture in India*, edited by Somen Das (Bangalore, 1987), pp. 102-27; Gavin D'Costa, *John Hick's Theology of Religions: A Critical Evaluation* (London, 1987); GH Carruthers, *The Uniqueness of Jesus Christ in the Theocentric Model of the Christian Theology of Religions: An Elaboration and Evaluation of the Position of John Hick* (Rome, 1988); D'Costa, Gavin (editor), *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered. The Myth of a Pluralistic Theology of Religions* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1990); Chris Wright, *Thinking Clearly about the Uniqueness of Jesus* (Crowborough, UK: Monarch, 1997), pp 69-85.

²⁴ See, for example, his 'Religion for the Marketplace', in Gavin D'Costa (editor), *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered: The Myth of a Pluralistic Theology of Religions* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books), pp 135-48).

²⁵ It is the opinion of Thomas Emprayil that, in India, 'the problem of God is considered as no theological problem, but Christ is still a stumbling block in the encounter of religions' (*The Emerging Theology of Religions* (Rewa, 1983), p. 144).

²⁶ 'Christ Acting in Our Society', p. 168 (original emphasis). Panikkar raises a similar objection: that symbols such as God, Spirit, Truth are liable to truncate reality and limit the centre of life to an abstract principle (see *TUCH(2)*, p. 27).

²⁷ See, for example, the discussion by Robin Boyd, *An Introduction to Christian Theology* (revised edition, Madras, 1975), pp. 233-37.

²⁸ *Hindu-Christian Meeting Point*, p. 72.

²⁹ *Hindu-Christian Meeting Point*, p. 109; see also his *The Church in India*, p. 130.

³⁰ See his *The Trinity and World Religions* (Madras, 1970), pp.32, 58.

³¹ And its cognate *mahasakti* (great power) used, for example, by Chenchiah, 'Jesus and Non-Christian Faiths', in *Rethinking Christianity*, p. 57.

³² See the distinctively Indian categories used by Chakkarai as he explains how the Spirit mediates knowledge of Christ: *Jesus the Avatar*, edited by A.J. Appasamy (Madras, 1926), pp. 114-21.

³³ *The Unknown Christ of Hinduism*, revised edition, p 27.

³⁴ S Mark Heim, 'The Pilgrim Christ: Some Reflections on Theocentric Christology and Enculturation', in *Christian Faith and Multiform Culture in India*, edited by Somen Das (Bangalore, 1987), p. 119; see also p. 123.

³⁵ According to Mookenthottam, Christocentrism is 'very relevant to the social and secular context of India' (*Indian Theological Tendencies*, p. 175) - by contrast with a theocentric approach.

³⁶ *The Acknowledged Christ of the Indian Renaissance* and in *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered*.

³⁷ In *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered*, pp 54f.

³⁸ 'Mission in a Religiously Plural World', p. 318. Another proponent of a non-exclusive approach to Hinduism also assumes that, 'To turn away from ... mutuality [of witness] and dialogue is to settle for a totalitarian regime of faith' (Diana L Eck, 'The Religions and Tambaram: 1938 and 1988', *International Review of Mission*, 78 (1988), p. 378).

³⁹ See the examples cited by E Geoffrey Parrinder, *Comparative Religion* (London, 1976), chapter 3, and the discussion by Harold Coward, 'Intolerance in the World's Religions', *Studies in Religion / Sciences Religieuses*, 15 (1986), 419-31.

⁴⁰ Robin HS Boyd, *An Introduction to Indian Christian Theology* (Madras, 1969), p. 92

⁴¹ Eric J Sharpe, *Faith Meets Faith. Some Christian Attitudes to Hinduism in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (London, 1977), p. 32

⁴² *No Other Name?*, pp. 217-23. The same argument is advanced (with some reference to the Indian context) by JAT Robinson, *Truth is Two-Eyed* (London, 1979) and, of course, by many others.

⁴³ Harold A Netland, 'Exclusivism, Tolerance and Truth', *Missiology*, 15.2 (April 1987), p. 84; see also his *Dissonant Voices*, chapter 4 (especially 141-50). For a defence of the universal validity of the principle of noncontradiction see Andrew Kirk, *Loosing the Chains: Religion as Opium and Liberation* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1992), 58-62.

⁴⁴ Kenneth Surin, 'Revelation, Salvation, the Uniqueness of Christ and Other Religions', *Religious Studies*, 19 (1983), p. 338. Lesslie Newbigin argues in similar fashion in his 'Religious Pluralism and the Uniqueness of Jesus Christ', *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, 13 (1989), pp. 50-54.

⁴⁵ See, for example, the excellent discussion in Wright, *Thinking Clearly about the Uniqueness of Christ*, pp 107-39.

⁴⁶ John Hick, *The Fifth Dimension: an Exploration of the Spiritual Realm* (Oxford: Oneworld, 1999), p 77. The most comprehensive elaboration by Hick of this understanding is in his *An Interpretation of Religion* (London: Macmillan, 1989).

⁴⁷ See, for example, JE Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (London: SPCK; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989).

⁴⁸ *Religious Studies*, 32 (1996), 223-322.

⁴⁹ 'The Impossibility of a Pluralist View of Religions', p 225.

⁵⁰ 'The Impossibility of a Pluralist View of Religions', pp 225f.

⁵¹ 'The Impossibility of a Pluralist View of Religions', p 232. It is also worth noting that, in the same issue of *Religious Studies*, there is an article that offers a similarly thorough critique of the Dalai Lama whose apparently open and generous pluralism is, in fact, grounded in an exclusivist affirmation of Tibetan Buddhism; see Jane Compson, 'The Dalai Lama and the World Religions: a False Friend?', *Religious Studies*, 32 (1996), 271-79. And, of course, there is considerable evidence – too extensive to document here – of a similarly exclusivist undergirding of many of the strands of Hinduism which makes disappointing the attitude of those many western proponents of dialogue who tend to overstate the degree of acceptance of pluralism within Hinduism.

⁵² See, for example, the items listed in the Select Bibliography above. Particularly valuable is Millard J Erickson, *The Word Became Flesh: a Contemporary Incarnational Christology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991) – for which a revised and updated edition is needed, especially one that takes a somewhat better informed account of the challenges of religious pluralism.

⁵³ See his essay in *CUR*.

⁵⁴ In an attempt to break what he sees as an unsatisfactory impasse between advocates of the usual threefold paradigm (exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism), Van Engen proposes a fourth perspective, that of ‘evangelism’. Van Engen uses this perspective because he wants as a starting point the evangel – by which he means the confession that “Jesus is Lord” – and not any preoccupation with who’s ‘in’ and ‘out’. He also believes that this approach incorporates the positive elements of the old paradigm. Charles Van Engen, ‘The Uniqueness of Christ in Mission Theology’ in his *Mission on the Way: Issues in Mission Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), especially pp 176-87.

⁵⁵ *Crises of Belief. The Christian Dialogue with Faith and No Faith* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1984), p 31.

⁵⁶ Xavier Irudayaraj, ‘An Attempt at an Indian Christology’, *Indian Ecclesiastical Studies*, 9 (1970), pp. 15-19. But it must also be pointed out that the resurrection narratives of the New Testament contain little of the element of proof that a normative Christology such as Irudayaraj’s wants to make of them.

⁵⁷ See for example: Surin, ‘Revelation, Salvation, the Uniqueness of Christ and Other Religions’; Julius Lipner, ‘Christians and the Uniqueness of Christ’, *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 28 (1975), pp. 359-68; Mark Heim, ‘Thinking about Theocentric Christology’, *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, 24 (1987), pp. 1-16.

⁵⁸ Michael Amaladoss, ‘Dialogue and Mission’, *Vidyajyoti*, 50 (1986), p. 77. In a similar context Newbigin asserts: ‘The Hindu can speak of many *avatars*, because none of them is part of public history’ (‘Religious Pluralism and the Uniqueness of Jesus Christ’, p. 52).

Editor’s Note: Republished by permission. Originally read at the Annual Meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society, Boston, MA, 18 November 1999. Dr Bob Robinson is author of *Christian Meeting Hindus: An Analysis and Theological Critique of the Hindu-Christian Encounter in India* (Paternoster, 2004) and a number of scholarly articles. He was an Anglican Vicar and theological lecturer in Singapore for a number of years and now teaches at the Bible College of New Zealand. His PhD is from the University of London. Send correspondence to bobr@netaccess.co.nz