

Pernicious Pluralism.

They left their families and friends and risked their lives by sailing to a foreign destination half a world away. What was this strong, driving motivation behind the faith of our colonial missionary forefathers? What was it that kept Hudson Taylor awake at night thinking that no Chinese person should die without knowing Christ? It was the wide spread conviction that people without a personal faith in Jesus Christ were eternally lost. Today this concept of a lost world is understood as a narrow ‘exclusive’ view that restricts salvation to those who consciously trust in Christ. The church has now changed its position to opt for an ‘inclusive’ attitude that says God’s mercy and love is so wide that it surprises us and it embraces everyone, not just the social disadvantaged but the heretic, atheist and non-Christian religions. The Uniting Church has said that through the Holy Scriptures and the gift of the Holy Spirit it continues to learn from the witness of the Reformers and the Westminster Confession of Faith. (Basis Union Para 10) In other words, in these times of unprecedented change the faith and life of the Uniting Church is said to be guided by the Scriptures, the Creeds and Confessions of the Church through the ages. The problem is fully focused by the words of the Westminster Confession that says that “*people not professing the Christian religion cannot be saved in any other way whatever--- and to assert and maintain that they may, is very pernicious.*” The word pernicious is defined as saying something is very wicked, bad, damaging, offensive, noxious, destructive and harmful. While all of the charges against the church in the 21st century are far from true, sadly ‘pernicious’ describes a list of accusations to which the charges of religious relativism and pluralism can now be added.

While the world changes, the Bible and the Confessions of the church still make it clear that the nations of the world are lost and perishing without God. Amid sweeping changes to the way we view things since the days of early mission enterprise, rationalism and pluralism have combined with culture and philosophical theology to strangle the urgency of Christian evangelism. Today could be said that the propagation of the Christian faith is much more holistic. This may not be a bad thing but in a multi-cultural context it can be confusing.

Relativism

Once we lived in a world where people thought there was only one way but today we are surrounded by so many voices and opinions. Because we know everything is changing it is easy to end up being a casualty of relativism. Our culture assumes and constantly tells us that nothing can be absolutely true and that truth takes many different forms. All world religions are often understood as different ways of understanding what might be called an ‘ultimate life source’ or mystery. Christians however believe that truth resides in the unique person of Jesus Christ and that no one comes to the Father apart from him. In fact it is this ‘particularity’ that claims Jesus alone is the way, the truth and the life and the only way to God, that is offensive to today’s mind-set. The question then becomes, “Is the confession that Jesus is Lord, just one of many opinions, a subjective personal preference statement, is it just an inherited cultural feature we can modify or is it universally true in an objective sense?”

There is an inclusive pluralism within the church that quickly dismisses this question by insisting that on the grounds of cultural change the meaning of evangelism has to

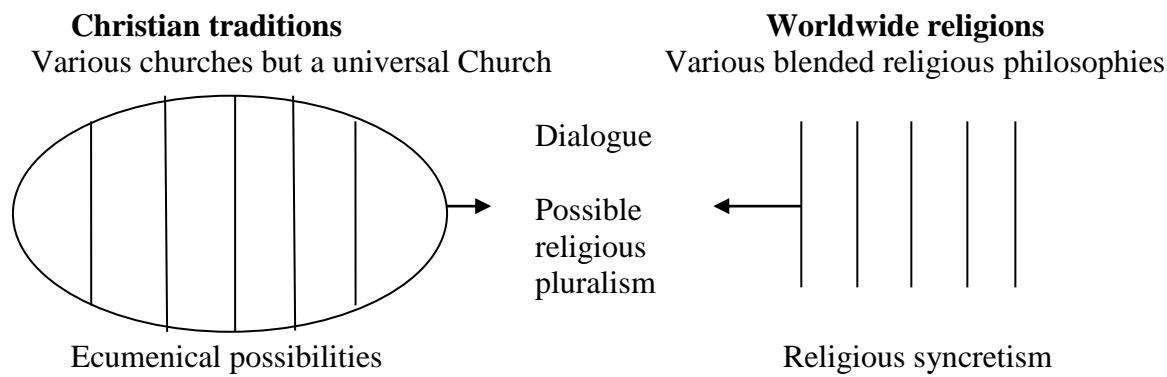
change and that evangelism is no longer a matter of seeking personal conversion or salvation.

Pluralism

Australia cannot live in isolation from other cultures and religions. We need to welcome others and share our country especially with the world's dispossessed. The reality is that in our changing world migration creates religious pluralism. In itself this need not be bad. It certainly helps us to learn to respect and to relate to others who are different. Our country supports freedom of religion and Christians actively support laws that protect the rights of people to profess and practise religious views. Our society should certainly be protected from extreme fundamentalism and ideologies that inflict harm. Christians should certainly be advocates of social-cohesion and tolerance towards other faiths but this does not mean having a blank mind or tolerating every religious view as equal or being intellectually valid.

In a multi-faith community where the interest in promoting social harmony is high, many people of good will within the church are ready advocates of inter-faith dialogue and relations. There can be real value in learning and socialising with people of different faith backgrounds but if we are poorly informed or not clear about our own faith we can be pre-disposed towards ignoring the real differences that exist.

Within the church this has increasingly led to an understanding of evangelism being seen as an inappropriate aspect of mission. Cast in a negative light, proclaiming the good news can be regarded as opportunism or as an unacceptable proselytism. Seen in this way the traditional understanding of evangelism is modified and changed to a more acceptable process. Christian evangelism is turned into a quest for mutual understanding, common ground, and a search for an ultimate unity of religions. This is similar to the Hindu thought that insists that, 'all paths lead to God.'



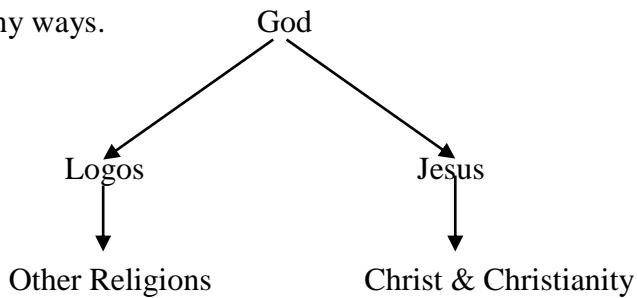
The Theo-centric, Logos. Many ways view.

This inclusive approach recognises that God works in many ways in the world. All people have a knowledge of God via nature and it points out that most cultures believe in a transcendent being and have a morality. An adjusted sort of Christian world view then suggests that Christ is the logos, the Word in which all of the human race share. (John 1:4).

This approach claims that the logos, that which we see in the man Jesus, was already at work in creation from the beginning and although we have different ways of expressing it, this transcendent reality embraces all religions. Clark H Pinnock suggests that it is faith in God that saves, not the possessing of information about Christ. "A person is

saved by faith even if the content of faith is deficient--The issue God cares about is the direction of the heart, not the content of the theology.” This approach assumes a common source and an inclusive ‘God.’ Jesus Christ and the church then is understood as just one way of knowing a common ‘god’. This is clearly not the God revealed in the Bible. Robert L Reymond points out that, “*Faiths value depends upon its object. Speaking more precisely, it is not even faith in Jesus Christ that saves, it is Jesus Christ who saves the sinner who places his trust in him.*” It is Jesus himself who sets Christianity apart.

Theo-centric/Many ways.

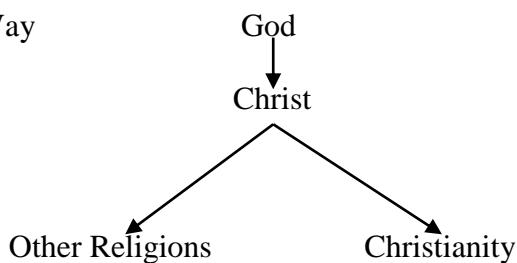


The Christo-centric. One Way John 14:6

While over time the language we use to express our faith changes, the core concepts of our faith always remain. The Uniting Church Basis of Union, Para.5 states, “*The Word of God on whom salvation depends is to be heard and known from the Scriptures.*” In other words, God speaks and sets the agenda or lens through which we look at the world by giving us the Scriptures. While many issues that confront us are not specifically mentioned in Scripture, our multi-faith culture creates questions that must drive us back to seriously looking into the Scriptures. Most multi-cultural congregations within the Uniting Church have come from countries where they have been surrounded by many religions. Unlike many Christians in Australia they have had to clarify what they really believe. It is not that we need to prove that Christianity is superior or the best religion but we need to show that Christianity differs from all other religions and is unique.

The Bible teaches us that Jesus is both God incarnate and the Saviour of humanity. Instead of us reaching up to God, God comes to us. It is the incarnation and deity of Christ that makes Jesus and Christianity distinctive and different from all other religions. (Acts 20:28, Rom.9:5, Tit.2:13, Heb.1:8, 2 Pet.1:1, John1:1&18; 20:28, 1 John 5:20) The birth, deity, atoning death and resurrection sets Christ apart. His unique transcendence is universal and if Christians and the church are to be governed by truth it needs to insist on this uniqueness. This is the basis of the churches proclamation that Jesus Christ is the only saving way to God the Father.

Christo-centric/One Way



Because Jesus has this universal significance we are called to be bearers of the Gospel to all people. This confession that Jesus has a name above all names is an essential part of our life and also means He needs to be universally received. **This Christ-centred theme says there is one source of a saving relationship and knowledge of God.** The essence of sin and driving motivation behind religious systems is self-salvation. In contrast, in Christian revelation it is the transcendent God who comes to do for us what we cannot do for ourselves. Those who reject Christ condemn themselves to separation from God. While a readiness to listen and dialogue can be a way of witness it cannot replace or substitute for trust in Jesus. Karl Barth points out that it will not be Christianity that judges the nations, it will be Christ.

The biblical vision is not just about being personally saved from sin and death. There is more to it than that. The resurrection of Christ signals that God is saving and restoring all the creation and that he invites us into this work. Romans 8: 18-25. This is not a matter of being social evolutionists. Having deal with evil, the cross and resurrection of Jesus assures us that we are now part of Gods transforming work and in a spiritual and material way his kingdom will come on earth as it is in heaven.

Finally, Dr Jong Sung Rhee of Korea makes a helpful statement when he says, “*There are two groups of opponents to evangelism, one is from the non-Christian world, the other is in the church itself. The former is easily identified and recognised. The latter is not so easily distinguished since this group is inside the gate. They look like orthodox Christians but when they are pressed to confess their faith--whether they really believe in Jesus Christ as their Saviour or in the Bible as the living Word of God--they are found wanting. We are liberals and free people as Luther said, in obeying God's word, but we are neither liberals nor free to deny God's authority and Jesus Christ as our Saviour. -- We may hope that God can be revealed in other religions but we know God can't be known apart from Jesus Christ. We may earnestly hope that no one will be excluded from the Kingdom of God but this is our hope not God's promise. It will be Jesus Christ who will be the final judge. This is part of our certain faith.*”

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