

SPECIAL AGENDA III

PRIVATE MEMBERS' MOTIONS

UNIQUENESS OF CHRIST IN MULTI-FAITH BRITAIN

A background note from the Secretary General

1. I attach a paper from Dr Martin Davie, theological consultant to the House of Bishops, on some of the issues arising from Mr Eddy's motion concerning the uniqueness of Jesus Christ in God's plan of salvation for the human race.
2. Dr Davie has produced for the House of Bishops Theological Group a more extensive paper '*A Church of England approach to the unique significance of Jesus Christ.*' Since that runs to 66 pages it has not been included in the general circulation but any Synod member who wishes can obtain it (either by hard copy or electronically) by e-mailing 'charles.beddows@c-of-e.org.uk', telephoning him on 020 7898 1380 or by requesting a copy at the information desk during the group of sessions.

WILLIAM FITTALL
Secretary General
January 2009

**The witness of Scripture, the Fathers and the
historic formularies to the uniqueness of Christ.**

1. In line with the doctrinal basis of the Church of England set out in Canons A5 and C15, what the Church of England believes about the uniqueness of Christ is based on the primary witness of Scripture and then the witness of the Fathers and of the Church of England's three historic formularies, the *Thirty Nine Articles*, the *Book of Common Prayer* and the 1662 *Ordinal*.

The witness of Scripture

2. In the Bible the uniqueness of Christ is seen in the context of the uniqueness of the LORD, the God of Israel.

3. According to the witness of the Old Testament, the God of Israel is the unique God. He alone creates, sustains and rules the world.¹ From Genesis 3:15 onwards he promises that he will bring blessing and renewal to a world marred by human rebellion against him and from Genesis 12 onwards the descendants of Abraham, the people of Israel, are seen as the vehicle through whom this blessing and renewal will take place.²

4. According to the witness of the New Testament, Christ is unique because in him the God of Israel has come in person into the world he created, taking human nature upon himself, dying on a cross, rising again and ascending into heaven in order to fulfill his promises to Israel and the world by bringing in his kingdom and making eternal life available to all who believe.³ In Christ he will also come again in glory to judge the world and to make his rule manifest throughout the whole created order.⁴

5. Reflection upon the presence of the LORD in Jesus and on Jesus' relation through the Spirit to the one he called Father led the New Testament writers to view the Godhead as a unity consisting of the Father, the Son and the Spirit.⁵

The witness of the Fathers

6. In the Patristic period the New Testament account of the uniqueness of Jesus was challenged by theologies that denied either his true deity or his true humanity. The Fathers eventually rejected these theologies and summarized the core of the New Testament teaching about Jesus in the three Catholic Creeds, the Nicene, Athanasian and Apostles' Creeds, and in the Chalcedonian definition. The Creeds and the definition echo the witness of the New Testament by affirming that the one creator God is Father, Son and Holy Spirit, that Christ is both fully human and fully divine and that in Christ God became incarnate, suffered, died, rose and ascended for our salvation and will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead.

¹ Exod 15:11, Deut 4:35, Neh 9:6, Isa 45:5-6.

² Gen 12:1-3, Exod 19:5-6, Isa 2:1-4, Ezek 47:1-12.

³ Jn 1:1-18, 2 Cor 5:16-21, Phil 2:5-11, Col 1:15-20, Heb 1:1-2:18.

⁴ Mt 25:31-46, 1 Cor 15:20-28, 2 Pet 3:1-13, Rev 20:11-22:5.

⁵ Mt 28:18-19, 1 Cor 8:4-6, 2 Cor 13:14, Eph 4:4-6.

The witness of the historic formularies

7. From the earliest days of its history the English Church accepted the biblical and Patristic witness to the uniqueness of Jesus Christ which has just been described. It continued to maintain this witness at the Reformation when it was challenged by English religious radicals who questioned both Jesus' deity and his true humanity and suggested that it was not necessary for those with opportunity to do so to have faith in Jesus in order to be saved.

8. We can see this in the three historic formularies. If we look first at the *Thirty Nine Articles* we find that the first two articles, 'Of faith in the Holy Trinity' and 'Of the Word, or Son of God, which was made very man,' we find that they affirm the Trinitarian nature of God, the true deity and the true humanity of Christ, and the belief that Christ 'truly suffered, was crucified, dead and buried' for our salvation.

9. The third and fourth articles, 'Of the going down of Christ into Hell' and 'Of the Resurrection of Christ' then underline the true humanity of Christ by declaring that when Christ died he went to the place of the dead⁶ and that the body with which Christ rose and ascended had 'flesh, bones and all things appertaining to the perfection of man's nature.'

10. The uniqueness of Christ is further affirmed by articles fifteen and eighteen. Article fifteen, 'of Christ alone without sin,' affirms that unlike all other human beings Christ was without sin and further affirms that his unique sinlessness enabled him to be 'the lamb without spot, who by sacrifice of himself once made, should take away the sin of the world.'

11. Article eighteen, 'Of obtaining salvation only by the name of Christ,' tackles the view put forward by certain radical thinkers in the Sixteenth century that those who know about Christ and choose to reject him can still hope for salvation.⁷ It rejects this view on the grounds that 'Holy Scripture doth set out to us only the name of Jesus Christ, whereby men must be saved.'

12. If we go on to look at the *Book of Common Prayer* and the *Ordinal* we find that they affirm in their own ways the same beliefs about the uniqueness of Jesus Christ that are set forth in the Articles:

- Provision is made for the constant re-affirmation of the biblical witness to the uniqueness of Christ in the context of a Trinitarian view of God by means of the recitation of the Apostles', Nicene and Athanasian Creeds.
- The Trinitarian nature of God, and therefore the deity of the Son as part of the Trinity, is affirmed:
 - in the collect for Trinity Sunday;

⁶ This is what is meant by 'hell' in Article 2 rather than the place of eternal punishment.

⁷ It is important to note that in its original context the article was not concerned with those of other faiths. As Charles Hardwick explains in his history of the Articles: 'The eighteenth article is levelled at a philosophical theory of the rationalistic school of the Anabaptists, who contended that if men were sincere in following out their own systems, their deliberate rejection of the Saviour of the world would prove no obstacle to their salvation.' C. Hardwick, *A history of the Articles of Religion*, George Bell & Sons, 1895. p.101.

- in the *Book of Common Prayer* Catechism which teaches a Trinitarian understanding of God;
- in the fact that baptism is ‘in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Ghost;’
- in the fact that glory is given to ‘the Father, Son and Holy Ghost’ at the end of Psalms and on other occasions;
- in the fact that the services of Morning and Evening Prayer and the Burial Service close with the use of the Trinitarian ‘grace’ from 2 Corinthians 13:14;
- in the fact that blessings are given in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Ghost;
- in the fact that in the litany (prayers of supplication) mercy for sinners is sought from the Holy Trinity.
- The terms ‘Son, ‘Lord’ and ‘Christ’ are constantly used to refer to Jesus in their traditional Christian sense. That is to say, Jesus is the Christ, the one who is anointed by God to fulfil his promises and bring in his kingdom, because he is the Lord, the one who shares the identity of the LORD, the God of Israel, as the eternal Son of the Father.
- In the Prayer Book Catechism those being prepared for confirmation are taught to profess their faith ‘in God the Son, who hath redeemed me and all mankind;’ and in the prayer of consecration in the service of Holy Communion we are told that in his death on the cross Jesus made ‘a full, perfect, and sufficient sacrifice, oblation and satisfaction for the sins of the whole world.’
- There are constant references to the resurrection of Jesus from the dead, his ascension to the right hand of the Father and his coming in judgement. For example, the *Te Deum Laudamus* in the service of Morning Prayer declares:

When thou hadst overcome the sharpness of death: thou didst open the kingdom of heaven to all believers.

Thou sittest at the right hand of God: in the glory of the Father.

We believe that thou shalt come: to be our Judge...

The witness of the Church of England from the eighteenth century onwards

13. From the eighteenth century onwards the Church of England’s traditional witness to the uniqueness of Christ has been called into question by those who have asked whether the understanding of his uniqueness developed by the Fathers and reflected in the historic formularies truly corresponds to the teaching of Scripture and whether it still makes sense in the light of our developing understanding of the nature of the world.

14. In the face of this questioning the Church of England as a whole has remained committed to its traditional witness. The Church has continued to base its theology on the witness of the Creeds and the historic formularies, the Church’s traditional understanding has been defended

and expounded by a continuous series of Church of England theologians and in the twentieth century this traditional understanding has also been affirmed by the 1938 report of the Archbishops' Commission on Christian Doctrine, *Doctrine in the Church of England*, and in a series of three reports from the Doctrine Commission, the 1987 report *We believe in God*, the 1991 report *We believe in the Holy Spirit* and the 1995 report *The Mystery of Salvation*.

15. In addition, the Church of England's traditional witness to the uniqueness of Christ has been maintained in the liturgies of the *Alternative Service Book* and *Common Worship* and it has also been affirmed in the ecumenical agreements into which the Church of England has entered. An example of the latter is provided by the *Anglican-Methodist Covenant* of 2001 which declares that the two churches involved both accept the traditional belief of the Church in:

The triune nature of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, who creates, sustains, redeems and sanctifies;

The incarnation of the eternal Word of God, in the person of Jesus of Nazareth who is truly human and truly divine - son of Mary and Son of God;

The atoning death and resurrection of Jesus Christ in the fulfilment of God's saving purpose;

The final appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ, the judgement of the world by him, the eternal consequences of rejecting God's mercy offered in Christ, the final triumph of God's kingdom of righteousness and love and the new creation.⁸

The uniqueness of Christ and inter-faith relations

16. The challenge of bearing witness to Jesus Christ in multi faith societies has been present from the earliest days of the Church (witness the variety of places from which those gathered on the Day of Pentecost were drawn and to which, no doubt, they returned). But there was quite a long period in this country's history when encounter between Christians and people of other faiths was unusual. It is from the end of the seventeenth century onwards that there has been an increasing encounter between Anglicans and those of other faiths as a result of the missionary movement, the growth of the British Empire and the large scale immigration of people of other faiths into Britain in the years since the Second World War.

17. These encounters have raised the question of how the uniqueness of Jesus Christ and the Church's responsibility to bear witness to this are to be understood in terms of relations between Christians and those of other faiths. There have been a variety of views on this issue, but in documents produced on behalf of the Church of England and in reports to recent Lambeth Conferences we find a consistent theological approach.

18. This approach affirms the belief that God is at work amongst those of all faiths and none, but also holds that this does not mean that the Church should abandon its belief in the uniqueness of Christ or that it should cease to undertake mission and evangelism amongst those of other faiths.

⁸ *An Anglican Methodist Covenant*, Methodist Publishing House/CHP, 2001, p.37.

19. A good example of this approach is contained in *The Mystery of Salvation* which declares:

...mission remains the central task of the Christian Church. The task is to proclaim by word and to display in action that God has created a world that is good, and that we are responsible for that creation; that the kingdom of God, the kingdom of justice and peace, has already begun in Christ, and that we can be assured of its future consummation through him; that the gift and assurance of salvation and eternal life is available now, and the mark of this life is love. We deny the fullness of that love if we deny the truth and goodness which Christ, as Logos, and God by the Spirit, can also inspire in those of other faiths and of none. We believe that God has chosen to provide the fullest revelation of himself in Christ, and the fullest revelation of his love for all humanity in the cross and resurrection. Hence we naturally pray that God will bring all people, including those of other faiths, to explicit faith in Christ and membership of his Church. This is not because we believe that the God revealed in Christ is unable to save them without this, but because Christ is the truest and fullest expression of his love, and we long for them to share it. In the Lord's words in St John's Gospel, 'I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly' (John 10.10).⁹

Presence and Engagement

20. In 2005 General Synod debated the report *Presence and Engagement: the churches task in a multi-faith society* and asked the Mission and Public Affairs Council to take forward the agenda for mission amongst those of other faiths set out in this report.

21. The Council appointed a task group chaired by the Bishop of Bradford to undertake this work and a report on the work undertaken so far is going to Synod separately in preparation for the debate on Thursday 12 February. That report contains a range of material, some of which begins to provide the 'examples and commendations of good practice' which Mr Eddy has asked for in the second half of his motion.

Dr Martin Davie
Theological Consultant to the House of Bishops
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⁹ *The Mystery of Salvation*, CHP, 1995, p.184. See also the Board of Mission and Unity report *Towards a Theology for Inter-Faith Dialogue* (CIO, 1984) the statement on 'Christ and People of Other Faiths' produced by the Lambeth Conference of 1988, Bishop Michael Nazir Ali's paper 'Embassy, hospitality and dialogue' produced for the Lambeth Conference in 1998, and the 2008 report *Generous Love: the truth of the Gospel and the call to dialogue*, produced by the Anglican Communion Network for Inter-faith concerns for the 2008 Lambeth Conference.