

Edward Irving and the Uniqueness of Christ

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1. Introduction

The Rabbinic tradition of Israel recounts a tale about the creation of the world. Having completed creating everything in five days, the Creator asked one of the attending angels whether anything were still missing. The angel answered that everything was, of course, perfect, as one might expect of God's own handiwork. 'Yet perhaps,' the angel ventured, 'perhaps one thing could make this already perfect work more perfect: speech, to praise its perfection.' God thereupon approved the angel's words and created the human creature.¹

Praise, and the attendant well-being associated with it, according to current psychoanalytical theories, is good for you. It creates a feeling of well-being and ease. Indeed, the ability to create by means of words is a fundamental human characteristic. Words are able to throw light on the darkest of subjects: they have a revelatory and positive effect. However, they also obscure the most simple of issues, blurring and destroying. It is their peculiar prerogative to be both constructive and destructive.

This double force can be most clearly seen in the Judeo-Christian creation narrative where such power is played out amongst the different actors: the Creator merely utters the word and his thoughts are materialised. The villain, embodying the negative power and subtlety of language, has merely to *suggest* the word, and its divisive and accusatory power is set free to wreak havoc. Finally, the victims' attempt at self-justification and the Creator's subsequent judgment

¹ Cited in D.J. Hall, *Imaging God: Dominion as Stewardship* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 294.

Mission and Meaning
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summarise the delusory power of language wherein the intent for praise is reduced to a curse. Whether fact or fiction, as far as the Judeo-Christian creation narratives are concerned, it would appear that there is a direct correlation between language and reality as it is *out there*.

Why is it, then, that when we turn to contemporary deconstructionists, we find a strong suspicion of anything vaguely hinting of this directness? The philosopher Richard Rorty strips language of any such directness standing well in line with his Enlightenment predecessors in undercutting language from any extrinsic meaning or basic structure of things as they are, transcendent or otherwise. Language becomes contingent, the product of 'time and chance'.² Being reduced to the metaphorical rather than the real, language can only be understood as the expression of *man-made* constructions. It becomes, rather, the means by which we construct not only meaning but our very selves. And since we are historical beings caught in the flow of various forces each self is a historically contingent product that changes through time. There is no Other who acts upon us in any personal way. In essence, *we* are the makers of our own identity and existence by means of our linguistic ability. Consequently, the power of language is castrated of any ability to refer to what we may call the numinous or transcendent, i.e., God.

One of the major consequences of this way of thinking with its aristocratic pedigree is the removal of any epistemic certainty. This, of course, has rather alarming consequences for the practitioner of religion. If our language is self-made, if we have no certainty that what it says correlates with what is *out there*, then we most certainly can have no confidence in the craftsmen who have traditionally dealt with the things of the divine. It would appear, then, that there is a very definite epistemological crisis. As D.Z. Phillips reminds us, we have a real problem in 'speaking confidently about religious belief'.³

Behold, we know not anything;
I can but trust that good shall fall
At last – far off – at last, to all,
And every winter change to spring.

So runs my dream: but what am I?
An infant crying in the night:

2 Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* (Cambridge: CUP, 1989), 22.

3 D.Z. Phillips, *From Fantasy to Faith: The Philosophy of Religion and Twentieth-Century Literature* (London: Macmillan, 1991), 3.

An infant crying in the night:
And with no language but a cry.⁴

The origins of this crisis are not too hard to trace. With Kant, the division between certainty and speculation was articulated with force. Whilst one may be certain about phenomena which are verifiable it follows that one cannot have certainty about the unverifiable, especially the divine, the very 'stuff' of religion. The two become antithetical, locked in a battle of competing opposites. And within this context we may observe the origin of two developments. On the one hand we meet with the cult of the 'fact', and on the other the early developments of privatisation. The two go hand in hand. Once certainty is reduced to the phenomenological, to that which we can touch and taste and see – in essence, to facts – then whatever else is left outside the circle of certainty must become a private affair: it must be privatised until its only council of reference is the individual's own private taste and opinion. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that as the scientific mind-set increases its influence, that of religion diminishes.

We could describe this as the twilight of suspicion, where words have been stripped of their power. They become arbitrary and competing forces within an assumed closed universe. It is hardly surprising, then, that when we turn to the specific phenomenon of religious belief we find a similar state of affairs: it has become a marginalised and privatised affair. In turn, this crisis of belief leads to a crisis of culture. Whilst religion may be tied down to one specific location (I am Christian because I am British, but had I been Indian I would be Hindu), it also leads to a crisis in what it means to be British in that one must, by virtue of being western and therefore open-ended epistemologically, tolerate and even assimilate the plurality of religious belief taken root in western culture. It is, in essence, the logical consequence of the Enlightenment project.

A good illustration of this is to be found in one of Keith Ward's most recent books, *A Vision to Pursue*.⁵ Ward, arguing from the observation that Christianity is in crisis observes 'a complete breakdown between faith and modern culture'.⁶ This, of course, is very much the case. What Ward offers as a solution is a pluralistic model for religion. It is his opinion that the time is ripe for moving

4 Wallace Stevens, 'Sunday Morning', *Selected Poems* (London: Faber & Faber, 1965), cited in Phillips, *From Fantasy to Faith*, 28.

5 Keith Ward, *A Vision to Pursue: Beyond the Crisis in Christianity* (London: SCM, 1991).

6 Ward, *Vision*, vii.

away from belief in the supremacy of one ancient religious tradition. Rather, we should develop 'a convergent spirituality wherein a number of traditions can be enriched by mutual interaction'.⁷

The question we must ask, however, concerns the sort of Christ proposed here. What Ward does, in effect, is to reduce the significance of Jesus Christ from an ontological position to a functional: the significance of Jesus lies not in *who* he is so much in *what* he does. Jesus Christ is not necessarily the Son who is equal with the Father. Rather, he serves to *reveal* God in a unique way at a particular historical time and serves as the foil for 'the lure of the Spirit' which calls us to 'new vision, to an expansion of imagination and an acceptance of creative change'.⁸

What is clear is that Jesus Christ does not require a divine status in order for this to happen. He acts as a mediator of the divine, mediating God in a unique way whilst not necessarily maintaining an exclusivist position as God. As Ward exclaims: 'One unique incarnation may be just too particular, too exclusive of other modes of revelation, too restricted in temporal and spatial location, to be the one final disclosure of God to all creatures everywhere'.⁹

What Ward espouses as ultimate goal is the notion of 'convergent pluralism'. Each of the world religions encapsulates some aspects of truth concerning divine being. If each of the different religions converge or combine, a new, synthesised religion will emerge which should, in theory, contain a greater degree of the truth about the Real than each religion on its own. In so doing we will arrive at a fuller understanding and grasp of the Real. Perhaps in a world in which technology and global market forces facilitate an ever increasing possibility of world domination, we are merely entering 'the Third Stage of religious thought and practice'.¹⁰

Ward offers us nothing new, however. English theologian, John Hick, has articulated much of what Ward says and more. According to Hick we have undergone a *Copernican revolution*, by which the way in which we understand our world has shifted. Thus, Christianity can no longer be understood as being *the* faith. It is no longer at the centre. Rather, we must realise that it is 'God who is at the centre and that all the religions of mankind, including our own, serve and revolve around him'.¹¹ Once again we meet the notion of a

7 Ward, *Vision*, ix.

8 Ward, *Vision*, 215.

9 Ward, *Vision*, 81.

10 Ward, *Vision*, 134.

11 John Hick, *God and the Universe of Faiths: Essays in the Philosophy of Religion* (London: Macmillan, 1973), 127.

global religion, what Ward has called the Third Stage, which is deemed compatible with the continued existence of a plurality of religions. Each religion is the best expression of the Real for a given culture. And with Ward, Hick does not see any problem in maintaining the place of Christ: Christ is simply one aspect of the Real.

What are we to make of this developing state of affairs? Certainly, it is no new state: what *is* new is that this development takes place within the ranks of the Church. The central beliefs of Christianity are now conditioned both by the external criterion for tolerance and the internal criterion concerning uncertainty with regards knowledge of the Real.

From this brief survey two issues arise. Firstly, the assumption that we *can* merge different religions, and secondly, the belief that in doing so we do not lose anything of the unique and particularising identity of Jesus Christ.

It is with these two concerns in mind that we turn to Edward Irving in order to determine whether or not his christology, what some may even deem a unique christology, has anything of worth to offer in response to such contemporary developments.

2. Words and Relations: Irving's Doctrine of Christ

It may appear somewhat anachronistic to turn to a pre-critical thinker who was born 200 years ago and died three years after Hegel, two after Goethe, and the same year as Coleridge and Schleiermacher, in order to address modern issues such as have been outlined above. At first glance Irving's context appears to be radically different from that which we face today. He struggled on the one hand against a form of Reformed theology, called Federalism, with its belief in the limited atonement of Christ, and on the other with Socinianism, a unitarian doctrine of God denying the essential threeness of God. The former, Federal Theology, was eventually to claim not only his own career but also that of his close friend John McLeod Campbell. For Irving, the character of Federal Theology was such that as a pastor he was forced to consider how his parishioners could both have a sense of assurance of sins forgiven as well as the more pressing need concerning the character of God – namely whether one meets first and foremost a figure whose wrath requires to be placated, or one who is primarily a God of love.

Such were the pastoral issues that are clearly to be seen as under-currents to Irving's ongoing theological development and which

were to act as catalysts to the debate for which he is more widely known, namely the kind of human nature assumed in incarnation. However, this is a superficial understanding of the matter. What motivated Irving here was a profound soteriological concern: that is, he was deeply concerned with the kind of salvation involved in the Christian message. And it is this same concern that we find running as an undercurrent in Irving's earlier sermons on the nature of God. What *kind* of 'saving' do we meet in Christ? On what grounds are we able to declare and defend this kind of 'saving'? Such issues motivate him both on christological and theological levels: that is in his understanding of the person of Christ, the work of Christ and the nature and being of God. It is of no surprise, then, that when Irving is confronted with the Socinian doctrine of God he responds from a deeply soteriological concern.

It is in his Trinity sermons, first preached in 1825 to his Hatton Garden congregation in London, and in response to the growing unitarianism of his day, that Irving's doctrine of God as Trinity was given shape. Interestingly these sermons have received scant attention both when first published in 1828 and in subsequent discussion. Consequently, the importance of these germinal sermons to Irving's theology has gone unnoticed, except with Irving's earliest biographer.¹²

Irving's concern is strongly motivated by his doctrine of salvation. He is concerned with the subject of grace, for if human beings are the objects of divine grace, the identity of the source of grace and the means by which we may be certain that we are beneficiaries of grace are important issues. For Irving the issue is simple: it is *God's* grace and it is to be discovered in *incarnation*. The two go hand in hand. Obviously, then, Irving falls well into the category we may identify as *exclusivism*, namely, the very opposite response to the pluralism argued by Ward. For Irving, it is a trinitarian exclusivism based on the narrative of both the New Testament and the church's ongoing experience of grace.

It is in his series of sermons based on Ephesians 1:2, 'Grace to you and peace from our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ,' that Irving develops his understanding of the relation between the Father and the Son focusing particularly on the identity of the Son. In Ephesians 1:2 he finds combined the notions of God's eternal being alongside the grace made known to human beings in Christ. Despite the

12 M.O.W. Oliphant, *Edward Irving* (London: Hurst and Blackett, n.d. 5th edn.), 220.

plurality of persons (Father and Son), the source of this grace is unequivocally singular. From this Irving argues:

Seeing that it is not in the way of share or division that the grace and peace cometh from these two Divine fountains, it must be in the way of passage or transition from the one to the other... from God our Father to our Lord Jesus Christ.¹³

For Irving, then, God is understood in terms of a dynamic activity:

I lay it down as the first principle in all sound theology that the fulness of the Father is poured into the Son, and returneth back through the Holy Spirit unto the Father, all creatures being by the Holy Spirit brought forth of the Son, in order to express a part of the Father's will and of His delight in His Son, which they do by union with.¹⁴

What is of importance here is to note the fact that the character of Christian grace is neither divided nor individual: both the Father and the Son define the source of grace. Indeed, the one cannot be understood without the other. To declare God as Father, we must understand the Son. It is therefore important for Irving to establish the nature of this sonship. How Irving does this is in itself a window into his understanding concerning language and meaning, for he turns to a comparison between God's-being-for us as Word and that as Son.

3. The Son and The Word

In a conversation between Alice and Humpty Dumpty Lewis Carroll describes, in almost satirical terms, what can happen when words are emptied of any referential meaning.

'When I use a word,' Humpty Dumpty said in a rather scornful tone, 'it means just what I choose it to mean – neither more nor less.'

'The question is' said Alice, 'whether you *can* make words mean different things.'

'The question is,' said Humpty Dumpty, 'which is to be master – that's all...'¹⁵

13 *The Collected Writings of Edward Irving in Five Volumes*, ed. G. Carlyle (London: Alexander Strahan, 1864), 4:228.

14 *Collected Writings*, 4:252.

15 Lewis Carroll, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland, and Through the Looking Glass* (London: J.M. Dent & Sons Ltd, 1981), 185-86.

The theses of Ward and Hick depend on a use of language somewhat akin to that of Humpty Dumpty. However, unlike them and Humpty Dumpty, the function of language, for Irving, lies not in making a word work 'terribly hard' and rewarding it for doing so, but rather in the ease and precision by which a word brings a subject to expression. Like Alice, he questions any extravagant claims attributed to particular words. Rather, for him, there is an intimate relation between language and thought, word and object.

It is of no surprise, then, that we discover this intimate link in Irving's theology between God's inner being and his outer acts. All talk of God is derived from what we see of him in the work of salvation. Throughout Irving's Trinity sermons he argues from his understanding of, and implication involved in, the incarnation. When we turn to his Trinity sermons we discover a clear distinction between our talk of God as Word and Son. For Irving, there is no doubt that the latter is a much richer theological term. Putting it bluntly, the description of Jesus Christ as Word does not carry the referential meaning necessary to make sense of the Christian story. In order to understand more clearly what Irving is driving at here it may be helpful to identify two different but complementary aspects of his argument. Firstly, he focuses on the particularising identity of God the Word, that is, on the divine status of Jesus Christ. Secondly, he focuses on the general identity of creatureliness, that is, on the question as to whether or not what we meet in Christ is created or uncreated.

What, for instance, is the significance of God's being as 'Word'? In considering the notion of God's being as Word there can be no doubt that Irving takes for granted the belief that the Word has the identical divine nature as that of the Father. What does concern him is its *relational identity*. Thus, because Irving derives the basis of his knowledge of God from God's gracious activity towards us in incarnation, he is adamant that, 'there could be no manifestation of the grace of God in the purpose of redemption from the simple knowledge of Christ as the Word.'¹⁶

In that this paper is concerned with establishing a foundation for the uniqueness of Christ in the face of Ward's 'convergent pluralism' it may be helpful to look at how Irving handles the notion of creatureliness, for with it he focuses attention on the *substantial identity* of the one we meet in incarnation, namely, whether or not he is a creature. In a nutshell, if the one we meet in Jesus Christ is merely a creature like ourselves, then any exclusivist claim is eroded:

16 *Collected Writings*, 4:245.

Ward's quest for a convergent pluralism becomes a necessary one. However, if the one we meet in incarnation is *not* a creature, but divinity, then the pluralist thesis is seriously undermined.

As we look at Irving's argument it is not difficult to see how it can take on a modern application. Ward's thesis is circumscribed by two apparently immovable presuppositions. Firstly, it rests on the premiss that no creature can offer a satisfying revelation of God: thus his quest for a 'convergent pluralism' – the sum of the whole outweighs the individual components, as it were. Secondly, it presumes that we can never know the Ultimate, the Real – God – since we have become victims of a war of linguistic and epistemological attrition.

Irving's arguments against the mere creatureliness of the Son may help us untangle some of the theological issues being ignored in such a thesis as Ward's. Irving identifies three criteria against the notion of creatureliness. Firstly, the act of God upon one particular creature will hardly incite love. Rather, it will evoke envy and a sense of unfairness.¹⁷ It is not hard to see, therefore, that Ward at least follows this through – we must give every religion a fair bite at the apple and seek to converge them all. But as Irving has now shown, there can be no recourse given to a sense of equality. And if the modernist takes offence at this proclivity towards negativity one has simply to point to the disintegration of human egalité, and fraternité in modern Europe with the collapse of nation states and subsequent ethnic rivalry and hatred.

Secondly, as a creature, he is unable to reflect the perfect and complete image of the invisible God. Again, Ward is correct: if there is no exclusive act of self-revelation on the part of the divine, and if all religious phenomena are man-made products, then it makes sense to seek a convergence of religious belief, pool the resources and gain further insight. What Ward has precluded, however, is this very notion of an act on the part of the Ultimate, the Real, on God's part to make himself known.¹⁸

Lastly, all we have in this event is the revelation of a creature's understanding of God, a comprehension that is finite, no matter how capacious the creature's abilities. Again, if this is the case, knowledge of the Real will always be an unending task, enriched only through the pooling of religious resources from around the world's community.¹⁹

17 *Collected Writings*, 4:246.

18 *Collected Writings*, 4:258.

19 *Collected Writings*, 4:258-59.

For Irving the subject of incarnation cannot be a creature, otherwise we *are* left with the subsequent theses of Ward and Hick. In addition, the concept of the *Word* of God fails to express what lies at the very heart of the Christian message. It omits the notion of love. What it does impart is the notion of Will. As such there is no revelation of personal grace. This is of fundamental import to Irving: the act of God in Christ is not that of a cold, calculating being. Rather, it is the expression of the Father love of God. The ultimate source of reality for Irving is not an impersonal Will, or what Hick describes as the Real. Rather, it is the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

How, then, can God's being as Son express that which his being as Word cannot? The answer lies in the place Irving accords to the notion of full and free love of one person to another. To identify Christ as Word is to identify him in a manner that is insufficient to express the personal and relational identity of the Christian God. If the Word contains the idea of one who shares in and expresses the Father's *will*, then the notion of Sonship contains the idea of one who shares in and expresses the Father's *love*. In order that the whole tenor of Christian doctrine and faith be maintained, namely, belief in a God who is love and acts in love, this God cannot be identified in impersonal terms. Rather, we must trace back to God the identity of one who is personal. The relationship of Father to Son, of Son to Father is essential for this. And for Irving, this is an attribute not open for discussion let alone convergence along the lines suggested by Ward. It is, therefore, to Irving's understanding of the Son's relationship to the Father that we now turn in order to outline the manner in which Irving understands the uniqueness of Christ.

4. The Son and the Father

It is God's being as Son that establishes the full character of the being of God as Father and thus enables us to talk of God in personal rather than impersonal terms. And lest we feel the need for accommodation, Irving precludes any notion of an Arian interpretation of incarnation, namely, that the Son may be divine, but of a lesser order of divinity to that of the Father. This is rejected on the simple grounds that we gain no satisfactory description of God's being from such a concept. If the Son is created in any way, the relations of Fatherhood and Sonship remain circumstantial and accidental.

What is the point of this theological hair-splitting? Behind it lies Irving's concern for the gospel of salvation. His God is a God of *love*.

But how do we establish this particularising identity? For Irving it is by means of exploring the notion of grace. He puts it simply: 'The greatness of the grace is according to the greatness of the love which was set aside.'²⁰ Consequently, the status of Sonship must be essentially identical with that of the Father, for the Son to reveal the greatness of the Father's grace and love. Only an eternal and essential generation of the Son from the Father establishes a divine status and meaning to the source of grace. Irving does not allow for a *natural* theology. In a later sermon, 'The Theology of the Natural Man', Irving argues against the Romantic notion of an intelligent Creator or Superior Being derived from scientific observations of creation. This 'primary founder' which Irving talks of is not to be identified with the idea of God as power or sovereignty, for such talk is insufficient to the notion of a personal God. No provision is made in his theology for a notion of a *vestigium trinitatis*.

Now, supposing them to have made this step from the visible creation to an intelligent Creator, and that they did habitually, upon; beholding nature, connect her forms and changes with a superior Being, they are still remote from any apprehension of the Christian's God, and incapable of those affections which we feel towards the God who is revealed in the Holy Scriptures. They have evidences of immeasurable power; but power doth not beget love... Whoever fastens upon God's attribute of sovereignty of power, and placeth that chiefly before his eyes, becomes a timorous devotee, a superstitious, feeble slave.²¹

Irving's is a clear response against any notion of deism. More importantly, whilst he precedes Darwin by a mere decade, his own christology can be understood as a response to the *Zeitgeist* which gave birth to the theory of evolution and of which Ward's goal for convergent pluralism is but a fruit. If God is to be known as love it will be through his personal accommodation to us through the Son.

5. Conclusion

Part of the concern of this paper has been the relationship between language and meaning within a culture that dismisses the ability to match the two. It is a form of cynicism which we have noted in Rorty and best summed up by Cupitt, where he boldly announces that:

There is no Meaning out there and no Truth out there. Meaning and truth belong only within language, and language is only human, an

²⁰ *Collected Writings*, 4:262.

²¹ *Collected Writings*, 4:509.

historically-evolving and changing thing... Meanings are not timeless essences. A meaning is like a footpath defined by an unspoken popular consensus, worn in to its present course by many anonymous feet and in response to contingent practical needs, and therefore just a local, relative and changeable thing.²²

Such is the present state of affairs. As Stromberg comments, 'Western culture has lost its nerve. It no longer has any confidence in the capacity to know Reality, and therefore we can only speak of what is true of me, and what is true for you.'²³

The Enlightenment project ultimately fails to deliver the goods: the notion of 'Saviour' ultimately crumbles in the nihilism expounded by Cupitt. There is no scratch for the itch! Ultimately we are left with the notion of a silent scream: no Transcendent Other hears our cry. As R.S. Thomas puts it:

A pen appeared, and the god said: 'Write what it is to be man.' And my hand hovered long over the bare page,

until there, like footprints of the lost traveller, letters took shape on the page's blankness, and I spelled out

the word, 'lonely'. And my hand moved to erase it; but the voices of all those waiting at life's window cried out loud: 'It is true.'²⁴

For Irving, the uniqueness of Christ lies in the intimate relation he perceived necessary between our soteriology and the kind of God who saves. For God to be love, Jesus Christ must be both uniquely divine and Son. Whilst it may ultimately be the lot of the Christian theologian to take an exclusivist stance in order to maintain the particularity of the Christian gospel, for Irving, this position is due not to the fact that Christians have become so thoroughly socialised within their own sub-culture as to devalue alternative theologies as implausible. It is not for social reasons he takes this stance. Rather, if there is to be a message of salvation that can actually deliver the goods, it must rest, for Irving, on the fact that in Christ *God really does come to us and that we can really know this to be so*. This may well smack

22 Don Cupitt, *Radicals and the Future of the Church* (London: SCM, 1989), 11.

23 J. Stromberg, 'Christian Witness in a Pluralistic World', *IRM* (1988), 417.

24 R.S. Thomas, 'The Word', *Later Poems, 1972-1982* (London: Papermac, 1984), 50.

to the very roots of exclusivism. It is doubtful that Irving would be perturbed by such a charge. Irving's Christ *is* unique, for he alone is able truly to extend to us the love and grace of God. The Christ of Irving calls us to a journey of belief within a society of unbelief. It is a call to be a community of resident aliens within a society whose content of belief has been slowly and often silently eroded, until it is finally left with the mere mirage of its own self-preservation and self-expression.