## In the World but not of it? A Serious Distortion of New Testament Theology?
Neil Richardson


For many years I have heard Christians described as 'in the world, but not of it'. Indeed, I have used the expression myself, vaguely assuming that it expressed, in summary form, a dimension of Johannine theology. In this paper I want to suggest that this description of Christian existence in the world represents not only a misreading of John's gospel, but also a one-sided view of New Testament theology in general. I shall attempt to show that the argument has important implications for Christian existence and the life of the Church in 'the world'.


1. <u>A Statement of the Problem</u>

At first sight 'in the world but not of it' has a certain plausibility. It appears to reflect the ambivalent relationship of Christians to 'the world', with all the tensions and ethical dilemmas which follow from that relationship. We are 'in the world'; that fact can hardly be disputed. The summary continues: '*but* not of it*' – the adversative here is significant. It indicates a tension or conflict between the two halves of the description. Again, there is a *prima facie* case for saying 'That is just how it is'. But what does 'not being of the world' mean? And *how* does our 'not being of the world' affect our being *in* the world?

Not being 'of the world' is the over-literal rendering – in, most influentially,  the English Authorized Version of 1611 -  of the Greek phrase *ek tou kosmou*  in, e.g. John 17.16. Modern versions variously render this phrase 'strangers in the world' (e.g. the REB), or 'they do not belong to this world' (e.g. the NRSV). However, it is the AV rendering 'not of the world' which has remained in popular parlance in English, and, in particular, remained in the widely used description of Christians as 'in the world, but not of it'. Admittedly, it is an odd use of English. But if we were to say of someone 'So- and-so lives in this city, but is not of this city', what would it imply? It would certainly mean that he/she did not come from, or originate in this city. But it might also suggest that they live in the city, but their real loyalty lies elsewhere. If so, that would be analogous with Christian existence in the world. But our hypothetical sentence might imply more: to say 'he lives in the city but is not of it' might be understood to mean: 'he lives in the city, but is not as committed to it as others'. Is *that* also true of Christian existence in the world?

If we were to use a similar description of the Hebrew exiles in Babylon in Old Testament times, 'they were in Babylon, but not of Babylon', it would seem quite correct: their origins, their loyalty, their hearts did indeed lie elsewhere. Jeremiah, of course, had some down-to-earth advice for the exiles, including 'Seek the welfare of the city' (Jer. 29.5-7). It is not difficult to see parallels in the New Testament: Christians were in Rome, but not of Rome, but they were to pay their taxes (Rom. 13.7), just as, in a later situation, they were to pray 'for kings and all who are in high positions' (1 Tim 2.1-2). So far, 'in the world, but not of it' seems to represent at least a strand of Biblical

theology. But the question of *commitment* – to the welfare of Babylon, Rome etc – remains.

Is the argument affected if we replace specific, localized places (city, village, Babylon, Rome), by 'the world'? At this point we need to acknowledge the ambiguity of the word *kosmos* in John's Gospel. It occurs 80 times in this gospel. Of these 80 occurrences, many, especially in the earlier chapters of the gospel, are neutral in their meaning; *kosmos* simply means 'the created world, the world that constitutes humanity's environment, and that includes humanity itself'(1). But *kosmos* also denotes, especially in the later sections of the gospel, 'the world of humanity that by its response reveals its devastating plight of having become alienated from and hostile to the Light/Word that sustains it' (2).

The Johannine writings account for about half of the total occurrences of *kosmos* in the New Testament, but  the same ambiguity can be found in other writings.(3). This is true also of 1 John, though in this letter we find one of the most negative passages about 'the world' in the entire New Testament:

'Do not love the world or the things in the world. The love of the Father is not in those who love the world; for all that is in the world – the desire of the flesh, the desire of the eyes, the pride in riches – comes not from the Father but from the world. And the world and its desires are passing away, but those who do the will of God live for ever' (1 Jn 2.15-18)(4).

William Loader, in his Epworth commentary writes: 'The world is pictured as a value system…. To recognize this need not reflect a ghetto or sectarian mentality' (5).  That is true. But *it often does*. The ambiguity of *kosmos* invites misunderstanding.  Many years ago Kasemann suggested that the Gospel of John was Docetic, and though few scholars have followed him in this view, its Gnostic or Docetic *potential* is unmistakable in the double meaning of  *kosmos,* which is, understandably, rendered 'the world' in English translations. In the phrase we are considering, which meaning does 'the world' have: its neutral meaning, or its negative one?  It is not difficult to see that 'the world' changes in meaning from its neutral sense, (Christians are) 'in the world', to its negative one, 'but (they are) not of the world'.

Not surprisingly, given the twofold meaning of 'the world', both in the phrase under discussion and in John's gospel,  we can see how easily such an expression, where the same word 'the world' is used both neutrally and negatively, can take us in the direction of a Gnostic or semi-Gnostic faith. Is a Christian who is 'not of the world' somehow compromised or tainted by being in the world? It would seem so, and there is a strand of New Testament theology which seems to lend some support to such a view. Both Hebrews and 1 Peter give expression to what we might call a 'strangers and pilgrims' theology; Christians travel through this world, but most assuredly do not belong here (6).

Certain passages in the Pauline corpus seem to point in the same direction, notably 1 Corinthians 7.29ff:

'… the appointed time has grown short; from now on, let even those who have wives be as though they had none…. For the present form of this world is passing away'.
The same may be said of one of the most overtly political texts in the New Testament:

'Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's' (Mark 12.17 and par.).

Does all of this therefore mean that Christian existence in the world is less whole-hearted, less full-blooded, as it were, because our real loyalty lies elsewhere? Or does this

express only one aspect of New Testament theology? It is time to look more closely at the Gospel of John.

2. <u>A Re-Reading of the Gospel of John</u>:
       Chapter 17 of this gospel seems to be the origin of our expression 'in the world, but not of the world'. Verse 11 reads:
  'And now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you'.
Verse 16 reads:
  'They do not belong to the world, as I do not belong to the world'.
  But is this the whole picture?  The  'I' in both verses is crucial; Jesus is the model, or trailblazer, for the disciples: they are in the world, as he was, they do not belong to the world, as he did not. But if we are to do justice to John's christology, and to John's gospel as a whole, we need to go back to the Prologue, (1.1-18).
   There is general agreement amongst scholars that the Prologue provides a synopsis of the whole gospel. We may, therefore, expect its references to 'the world' to provide the key to our interpretation of subsequent references to the world in the body of the gospel. The first explicit reference to the *kosmos* comes in verse 9, (though we note the earlier claim, in v.3a,  that 'all things came into being' through the Word), where the movement implied by the preposition is significant:
  'the true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming *eis ton kosmon.*'
 The Prologue goes on to say, in a key expression of the irony which runs through much of the narrative,
   'He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him' (v.10).
 The irony is important, because as key studies have shown (7), the irony implies conflict.
   It may be questioned whether the author has successfully integrated all his subsequent material under the theological aegis provided by the Prologue. The question applies especially to the phrase in v.14 'the Word became flesh', which may have been added at a late stage in the composition of the Gospel precisely in order to minimise the Gospel's Gnostic potential. Nevertheless, the author has made a bold 'incarnational' statement which is intended, at least, to govern what follows.
   If, therefore, the Prologue, and in particular the incarnational emphasis of v.14, controls our understanding of the disciples' relationship with the *kosmos*, then we arrrive at a summary statement of the disciples' existence in the world of the Word incarnate, and of the disciples, which almost exactly reverses the more popular and well-known summary :
   *He ( sc.the Word/ the Son) was not of the world, but was sent into it.*
   *The disciples, like the Word, are not of this world, but, like the Word/Son, are sent into it.*
  ('Sending' language is not used in the Prologue of the incarnate Word, but is used many times in the body of the gospel of 'the Son').
   Stated like this, this christological summary of John's narrative is so obvious that it hardly needs elaboration. 'God sent his Son…' (3.16 etc), '.. the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man' (3.13), 'I am the bread of heaven which came down from heaven' (6.51). There can be no doubt that, whether we use 'pre-existence' language or

not, it is more correct to say of 'the Son' that his not being of the world 'preceded' his being in the world.

But can this also be said of the disciples? The parallels between them and Jesus are not exact, of course. In John's view the 'Word' is the only-begotten Son' (1.18), whereas the disciple is 'born of God' (1.13), or 'born again/from above' (3.3,7), through the Spirit given after the Resurrection (3.5f, 7.39, 20.22f). But accompanying this re-birth is a commission consequent upon, and parallel with, the mission of the Son:

'As the Father sent me, so I send you' (20.23).
Of course, the disciples were in the world before they were 'born again'. But this is what one might call 'the old order'; now there is a 'new creation'. Although the last expression is pauline, the theology is also John's. As one 'born again', and therefore 'not of the world', the disciple is sent into the world.

But is this sequence – the reverse of our usual understanding of Christian existence in the world – one to which John consistently adheres? The Last Discourses and Jesus' prayer in chapters 14 to 17 are the crucial section. In this section of the gospel most references to the world are negative, (14.17, 27, 15.18 etc), but a few are neutral (16.28, 17.5 and perhaps 17.21 and 23). The Last Discourses affirm several times that the disciples, like Jesus, are 'not of the world', for example,

'You are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world…' (15.19b, cf 17.14 and 16).
The development of thought moves, first, from Jesus' departure to the Father (especially 14.1-14), to the disciples' relationship with the Son and the Father, and the giving of the Spirit of truth ( 14.15-15.17) to their being in a hostile, uncomprehending world ( 15.18 – 16.11). Of course, these themes overlap and intertwine, as one would expect in an author much given to re-statement and re-capitulation. But the overall sequence is clear: the disciples are chosen out of the world, *and then* sent into it.

This is true also of chapter 17, to which I referred at the beginning of this paper. Despite the reference in v. 11 to the disciples' being 'in the world', and the later reference in v.16 to their not being 'of the world', these two verses do not contradict the fundamental Johannine pattern. In fact, their commissioning is made very clear from 17.18 onwards:

'As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world' (v.18). And the aim of the commission? Surprisingly, in view of the many negative references to the world, the aim is stated very clearly:

'…. that the world may believe that you sent me' (v.21d).
How much difference does reversing the usual order of this expression make? Is to say that Christians are 'not of the world, but sent into it' really the same as saying, in the more familiar phrase, they are 'in the world, but not of it'? I submit that there is a vital difference. In the more well-known formulation, the phrase 'in the world' lacks *both a christological and a missiological content*. One might say: this is Christian existence 'in survival mode'.To reverse this, and to say, 'not of the world, but sent into it', expresses Christian existence more christologically, (and pneumatologically), and so, also, more missiologically.But can this pattern 'born again and sent into the world' be found elsewhere in the New Testament?

Section 3 Christian existence in the world: survival or mission?

It seems, then, that there are two 'patterns' of Christian living in the world according to the New Testament: a christological and missiological one, ('not of the world, but sent into it') and what we might call a 'survival' mode ('in the world, but not of it'). These two modes of Christian existence are not necessarily in conflict with each other, nor can one always say that the missiological mode is superior to the survival mode. If Christians do not 'survive' in the world, then they cannot engage in mission. In certain situations where, for example, an authoritarian government imposes severe constraints on mission, as in the Communist countries of the last century, the survival mode will inevitably predominate. But 'survival' mode can be found in church life even when there are no serious external constraints. In such circumstances 'in the world, but not of it' may describe a church sect or ghetto whose life and outlook have been malformed by a serious misunderstanding of its relationship to 'the world'. In this section I aim to show that despite the prevalence at least in many English-speaking circles, of the phrase 'in the world, but not of it', it is, in fact, the christological and missiological pattern which is foundational for New Testament theology.

To preface our survey with a reference to the Old Testament, we are bound to conclude that Israel's existence in the world amongst 'the nations' does indeed seem to have been a question of survival. Would Yahwism be absorbed into Baalism? Would the exiles in Babylon forget Zion? Would Nehemiah and Ezra be able to maintain a distinctive community despite all the odds against? Of course, there are hints of a future worldwide mission, notably in deutero-Isaiah, (e.g. Isaiah 42.5-9, 49.6), and in the book of Jonah, but a christological, more overtly missiological paradigm, is hidden.

In the New Testament, the Synoptic Gospels provide clear examples of the disciples' participation in, or continuation of the mission of Jesus. They do so during his ministry, even though the historical accuracy of some of the details must be questioned, (Mark 3.13-15, 6.7-13, Matthew 10.1-14, Luke 9.1-6, 10.1-12). At several points, the parallelism with the mission of Jesus is particularly clear: for example, in Luke 10.9.11 their *kerygma*, the imminence of the Kingdom, is that of Jesus – although here the closest verbal parallel is with Mark 1.15. The disciples are also commissioned in the resurrection stories of Matthew 28.16-20 and Luke 24.44-53.

The writings of Paul, at first sight, suggest the predominance of the 'survival' theme. Small, new Christian communities struggle to survive in an often hostile environment, (1 Thessalonians), or are wracked by internal problems and divisions (1 Corinthians), or face a crisis of identity (Galatians). But here we must look not only at the Pauline communities, but at the apostle himself.

Paul writes frequently of a very personal mission, in which his survival is not the most important issue. In Philippians 1.21-6 he means this literally; he would rather be with Christ, but it is better for them if he lives on (v.4). Even his Christian survival – ie. his very salvation – seems to be of less consequence to him than the salvation of others, (Romans 9.1-5, and especially v.3). His passion for the salvation of others finds expression frequently (1 Cor.9.19-23, 1 Thess. 2.1-12, and (if pauline) Col.1.24-29). The christological foundation for this is strikingly revealed in the language of 2 Corinthians 4.7-12:, notably v.12:

'So death is at work in us, but life in you' (8).

Two questions arise from the Pauline material. First, does the apostle engage in this mission on behalf of, or instead of, other Christians? It may seem so. Yet the alternation between the first person singular and plural pronouns in Paul's writings is significant. And the 'we' can be ambiguous: sometimes Paul is speaking of himself and his fellow-apostles, and sometimes of both the apostles and the church he is addressing. So there are hints, to say the least, that the church community, too, is 'apostolic'. More important still, Paul's self-descriptions in the Corinthian correspondence ( 1 Cor.4. 8-13, 2 Cor. 4.7-12 and 6.3-10) are intended to point up the contrast between his own cruciform existence and what scholars often call the Corinthians' 'over-realized eschatology'. But there can be little doubt that this cruciform existence, arising out of mssion to the Gentile world, is not a Pauline idiosyncracy, but a paradigm for the whole Church. Paul's theology, and not least his understanding of his apostleship, demonstrates that his mission was, in principle and in fact, theirs as well.

This leads to our second question: Did Paul call his converts out of the world, or were they baptized in order to engage in mission to the world? We can easily be misled by the specific context of the letters and the specific issues which Paul was addressing. As we have said, constraints of their context pressed the early communities into what we are calling 'survival mode'.But there are many hints of an unobtrusive, yet ongoing mission. The apostle clearly presupposes that Christians will be rubbing shoulders with all kinds of people, including 'immoral, the greedy, robbers and idolaters' since to avoid them would involve leaving the world altogether (1 Cor.5.9-10). Elsewhere Paul (if Paul) reminds his converts of their missionary responsibilities – the likeliest meaning of Colossians 4.5:

'Conduct yourselves wisely to outsiders, making the most of the time' (9).

Time does not permit a detailed exploration of other New Testament writings. But, in the light of the gospels – both synoptic and John- and of Paul's writings, I conclude that 'in the world but not of it' is not the predominant paradigm of Christian existence in the New Testament. It *is* there, notably in the 'strangers and pilgrims' theology of Hebrews and of 1 Peter, and, we might add, in the Apocalypse, for obvious contextual reasons. But I submit that more important than the better-known 'in the world, but not of it' is the christological and missiological paradigm:

*not of the world*, (because crucified with Christ, baptized, born again ….), *but sent into it*.

In the next section we shall seek to relate these New Testment explorations more fully to our context, and particularly to issues of Christian formation today.

Section 4:<u>Christian Formation Today</u>:
Down the centuries many factors have conspired to accentuate the survival mode of Christian discipleship. I must leave others to trace this process in more historical detail, but two factors, one early, the other more recent, may be mentioned. In the early centuries the question of whether Christians could serve as soldiers in the Roman army provides an interesting study. Until the end of the second century Christians condemned military service in the Romans army and refused to engage in it. But although attitudes changed (10), the growing influence of monasticism inevitably encouraged the idea that a person was more likely to be a better Christian if they were less, rather than more,

engaged with the world. In recent times, another far-reaching change has begun to occur. Until quite recently, limited life expectancy and harsh living conditions for the vast majority of people everywhere (a situation which still pertains in many parts of the world), directed people's thoughts more readily to life in the next world rather than the transformation of this one. But now more people, if humankind survives the very real threats of nuclear war, terrorist atrocities and climate change, are likely to live longer. Of course, the modern concept of progress musts be rigorously examined in the light of Christian scripture and tradition, but this life and this world inevitably feature more prominently in contemporary Christian thought and life than in earlier generations.

Aside from these and other factors, the ambiguity of 'the world' in Christian scripture and tradition has continued to exercise a less than healthy influence. The pervasive ambiguity of references to 'the world' in the New Testament, and particularly the Johannine literature, has spread into subsequent writings, and shaped Christian life and spirituality down the centuries.To cite just two immensely influential Christian 'classics', Thomas a Kempis begins Book Two ('Counsels on the Inner Life') in his *The Imitation of Christ* with this injunction to his readers: ' "The Kingdom of God is within you", says our Lord. Turn to the Lord with alll your heart, *forsake this sorry world*, and your soul shall find rest'. John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* begins thus: 'As I walked through *the wilderness* of this world' I lighted on certain place…'

The situation, therefore seems to be this: the New Testament, and especially the Johannine literature, has bequeathed to us a twofold meaning in the concept of 'the world': the *created* world and the *fallen* world. We speak of 'the world' in both Johannine senses, *but we do not distinguish clearly between the two*. The Gnostic potential of John's gospel lives on. Consequently, Christian perspectives can be distorted by a false antithesis between 'the Church' and 'the world'. That antithesis is not entirely absent from the 'Methodist Worship Book' of the British Methodist Church. The intercessions in the covenant liturgy bid us pray for 'the Church' and 'the world' (11), and at the end of the communion liturgy for 'Pentecost and Times of Renewal', the presiding minister announces that 'we go into the world' (12). The contrast is misleading, and, as a WCC report points out, 'Liturgy can malform the Church' (13). Popular hymns reinforce the misleading antithesis, as in the second verse of 'O Jesus I have promised': 'The world is ever near'.

Of course, the negative meaning of *kosmos* in John cannot be forgotten. That same WCC report contains a section entitled 'Moral Formation in and by the world' (14), in which its authors, whilst observing that Christians can learn from the world, also observe that 'the powers of worldly formation often impinge upon the church before the church has much chance to impinge upon them' (15). This is one major way in which Christian existence can be distorted or malformed. I shall return to this urgent issue in the final section of this paper.

But there is another way in which Christian existence can be distorted or malformed, and this has been the main focus of the argument so far. The negative meaning of 'the world' in scripture and in Christian discourse in general easily leads to a sectarian attitude in which the Christian does not seriously engage with the world in its unredeemed totality at all. If the Christian objective is to reach heaven unsullied by 'the world', then, one may readily conclude, the less we have to do with it the better. On this model of the Christian life, hard ethical choices are best avoided, because of their messy complexity. So politics

are perceived to be an unfortunate necessity. Similarly, whilst the world of economics cannot be a no-go area because we have to earn our living, we tend to tiptoe round it.

It is only too obvious that the prevalence of the 'survival' mode in individual Christian and corporate church life may have nothing to do with external constraints at all. It may derive from a misconception of the church's relation to 'the world', to a preoccupation with the church's survival in the world (despite the lack of external constraints, such as persecution), or with one's own personal salvation, and a concern to be uncontaminated by 'the world'.

What difference does a christological and missiological dimension make? Where this paradigm predominates, the disciple sets aside a primarily defensive attitude to the world, and – rather than enduring it, goes 'out' to embrace the world, committed to its conversion and transformation, (John 17.20,23). What is more, the disciple does so *in hope.* When the 'survival' paradigm predominates, hope is likely to be focussed primarily on life after death – sometimes, as when martyrdom is real possibility – with good reason. But a christologically-shaped mission broadens hope to embrace this world as well. As John 17 implies, and John 20.19-23, (cf also Mtt 28.16-20 and Lk 24.44-53), makes clear, it is the *risen* Christ who sends his disciples into the world, and, in so doing, encourages them with the assurance ' I have overcome the world' (John 16.33c). This, of course, does not amount to a promise of success. But it radically affects the way the Christian perceives life and the world.

I submit that there is a searching agenda for the churches here. In a concluding section I shall highlight some implications of the argument I have tried to develop in this paper.


Section Five: <u>Some Concluding Reflections:</u>

1. *Ecclesiological*  When the predominant paradigm of a church's life becomes 'in the world', but not of it', it is likely to be for one of two reasons. Severe persecution or government oppression may sharply constrict that church's mission, and *in extremis* direct Christian hope even more fully than in less arduous contexts, to the next world rather than to this one. But a church may also be 'in the world, but not of it' simply because, as a church, it is improperly formed, or even malformed. Consciously or unconsciously, it has adopted a semi-gnostic stance towards the world, keeping itself aloof as far as possible, or using its mission to work  out  its own salvation or to ensure its own survival. Such a church fulfils neither part of the more demanding christological paradigm 'not of this world, but sent into, and immersed in the world'.  If, however, a church is neither theologically reflective nor spiritually vigilant,  it may be a church which is *both* worldly *and* semi-detached, *neither* counter-cultural *nor* enculturated.

How might such a church come to repentance  (*metanoia*)?  An obvious answer might be: through the hearing of Scripture. And to that question we now turn.
2. *Hermeneutical* It is obvious that, just as liturgy may malform the Church, so, too, may Scripture. (The debates between Christians about the slave trade in the nineteenth century provide one of many examples which could be given). Hearing the Scriptures is no guarantee at all of Christian formation – as the Scriptures themselves imply; ('they may

indeed listen but not understand', Mark 4.12b). *Much depends on how, or where the Church positions itself in the world.*

It may be said at once there is no single 'meaning' of a passage of Scripture which invalidates all other meanings. And the Bible itself reflects many lively debates, or differing viewpoints, between people of faith, (including biblical writers themselves) on a range of matters (16).  There are also passages, especially in Paul's letters (17),  where Christians who disagree passionately with each other, are urged to co-exist in peace. So there are good reasons for Christians simply agreeing to differ in their interpretation of Scripture.

Yet is this enough?  My earlier example of the debate about the slave trade, (and, of course, the Dutch Reformed Church's 'scriptural' support for apartheid in South Africa) shows that it is clearly not enough. Again, scripture itself provides examples of debates where the Church did *not* (eventually) conclude that one scriptural interpretation was as good as another (18).  Three crucial factors in the interpretation of Scripture must be mentioned, two of which concern the Church's position in, and relationship to the wider world.

Reading the Scriptures *in a certain way* is important. It is true, but insufficient and potentially misleading, to describe this way as 'prayerful'. Prayer can be self-serving and self-deluding, though the more immersed we are in the prayer of Jesus himself, the more selfless and honest our praying will be. But such a truly 'prayerful' approach to the Bible will lead us to *notice what the words are* (19*).* In the so- called 'developed' world, the proliferation of reading material and the prostitution of words in a market-led, consumerist culture do not make it easy to read a text attentively and reflectively. In any case, we cannot conclude that prayerful attention, by itself, is sufficient.

This is because, secondly, context can distort as well as enrich the reading of the Bible. A slave-owner is likely to read texts on slavery and slaves differently from a slave. Rich property-owners are likely to read texts referring to wealth and poverty differently from the poor and the dispossessed. We cannot, of course, always control, or change,  the contexts in which we read the Bible. That is why a third factor is important: listening to the interpretations of others – especially people *different – even alarmingly different from ourselves.*

3. *Christological* If the Bible is not read well – in the ways outlined here – we are likely to derive from it a wholly inadequate christology  (20) There is one particular christological corollary of the argument developed in this paper. It concerns our understanding of the divine holiness. I wish to suggest that, in the New Testament, the crucifixion of Jesus is the supreme revelation of that holiness. By that I do not mean that the death of Jesus 'satisfied' the holiness, or justice of God; I find no scriptural support for such an idea. Rather, in the life of Jesus, and particularly his mission to 'tax-collectors and sinners', and his healing of 'unclean' people, we find a new understanding of both purity and holiness. The divine holiness is neither contaminated nor compromised by such contact with the world. God did not need to 'protect' his holiness by avoiding such contact. It would be more correct to say that such contact is an *expression* of that holiness which, by embracing the sinful and the unclean, transforms them. The death of Jesus is the ultimate example of this, and the resurrrection affirms that, in the life and death of Jesus, the world has indeed encountered the transforming holiness of God (cf. John 12.31-2).

This means that it is wholly misleading to think of the Incarnation as an isolated incident in the life of an otherwise uninvolved God (21) Thus understood, christology becomes a paradigm for a church engaging in 'outreach', rather than serious engagement with the wider world (22).

4. *A Christian Understanding of the World* Much more could be said about the scriptural foundations for a more positive attitude to the world. Suffice to mention here the implications of Paul's rhetorical question: 'Is God God of the Jews only?' (Rom. 3.28). It means, not the marginalization of the Old Testament, still less its supersession; rather, all the Old Testament's declarations of Yahweh's passionate love for Israel must be understood to apply to the whole world – as indeed John 3.16 implies. But we need to say even more than that.

In an essay entitled 'God and the Form of Society', the Anglican theologian Dan Hardy explores how Christian societies and churches have marginalized God, particularly with reference to social structures. We have done so, he concludes, 'by revising – or domesticating – the conception of God so that he is seen to be marginal, one who is by nature disinvolved from social structures and human relationships'. He goes on to suggest that the disengagement of states and churches from their obligation to promote true society 'reflects the supposition that God *is* disengaged from the world'(23). For this defective theology Hardy blames the 'natural religion prevalent in the West since the eighteeenth century in which God is only extrinsically related to the natural world, not defined by his relation to it any more than it is defined by its relation to him' (24).

A well-known aphorism of Samuel Coleridge runs as follows: 'He who begins by loving Christianity better than truth, will proceed by loving his own sect or church better than Christianity, and end in loving himself better than all'. In the light of our discussion of 'the world' in New Testament theology, I venture an alternative rendering of Coleridge:

'They who begin *by loving the Church more than the world*, will proceed by loving their own sect or church better than the Church, and end in loving themselves better than all'.

Is this as true as Coleridge's original aphorism? I submit that it is. It need hardly be said that there is an enormous theological, moral and spiritual challenge in avoiding the twin dangers of being malformed by 'the world' and of not seriously engaging with it. But it is possible seriously to misread the New Testament on this matter, and this is why defensive, negative, and censorious attitudes to 'the world' easily invade the Church, and seriously malform Christian life and spirituality. More positively, we may note a recent reference to Bonhoeffer's vision of the Christian life as 'a polyphonic living, where all one can do is fling oneself into the whole of life; but what sustains it is the depth of worship, the knowledge of God's faithfulness, and above all the fact that a Christian vocation is made possible by the meeting of the ultimate with the penultimate in every moment' (25).

*Conclusion. A Commitment to the Wellbeing of the World.* Many Christians across the world are so committed. Others are more committed to the well-being of the Church, or of their own church, over against, or in preference to the world. It is a false contrast. How can a community, called to be 'a sign, instrument and foretaste' (26) of God's new creation either privilege or contrast its own well-being with that of the world? Such a

commitment to the world's well-being in a century in which the world's self-destruction seems ever more likely is surely a Christian imperative (27).

The origins of the Methodist tradition as a mission movement within and alongside the Church of England mean that it has a particular contribution to make. I refer to its understanding of Christian holiness as perfect love. That is the formative influence *par excellence* in shaping Christian attitudes to the world for which Christ died.

Footnotes:
(1) Andrew T. Lincoln, *The Gospel According to St John, (* Black's New Testament Commentaries, Continuum 2005), p.102.
(2) Ibid.
(3) In Paul's letters the negative meaning of 'fallen world' tends to predominate, notably in 1 Corinthians (e.g. 1.20ff), although the neutral meaning of 'creation' or 'the whole world' is also present in his writings (e.g. Rom.1.8,20, 2 Cor. 5.19). By contrast, *kosmos* occurs infrequently in the LXX, outside the Apocryphal writings, and mostly with the meaning of 'glory' or 'ornament').
(4) All quotations from the Bible are taken from the NRSV.
(5) William Loader, *The Johannine Epistles,* (Epworth 2005), pp.24-5.
(6) See especially Hebrews 11 and 13.14, and 1 Peter 1.1 and 2.11
(7) Notably P.Duke, *Irony in the Fourth Gospel,* (Atlanta, John Knox, 1985).
(8) There is an eschatological corollary to this. The presence of his churches at the final judgement will be, for Paul, *the* test and vindication of his mission. That is not the motivation for his mission, but it is another striking expression of what matters most to him:
'For what is our hope or joy or crown of boasting before our Lord Jesus at his coming ? Is it not you?' (1Thess. 2.19, cf Philipp. 1.9-11).
(9) Several commentators think that the author (whether Paul or an interpreter of Paul), had missionary responsibilities in view, (e.g. P.T. O'Brien *Word Biblical Commetnary, Colossians, Philemon,* (Word Inc. 1982), p.241.
(10) Since the excavation of the Roman military settlement on at Dura Europos on the Euphrates, which revealed the remains of a Christian building, it is clear that soldiers during the third century played a part in disseminating Christianity throughout the empire**. (**This detail is taken from an unpublished paper of mine, 'Could St Paul have been an army chaplain?').
**(**11) *The Methodist Worship Book* (Methodist Publishing House, Peterborough, England 1999), p.290. Cf. pp.176 and 188.
(12) Op. cit. p.184.
(13) *Ecclesiology and Ethics.* (eds Thomas F. Best and Martin Robra), (WCC Geneva 1997), p.68.
(14) Op. cit. pp.58f.
(15) Op. cit. p.59.
(16) Even if we accept, with the majority of scholars, that Paul and James do not contradict each other on faith and works, it is clear that there was a lively debate in the early Christian communities about whether Christians should continue to observe the law of Moses. Amongst many passages which could be cited, see, for example, Galatians 2.

and Acts 15, and Matthew's redaction of Mark 7 (Mark 7.1-23, Matthew 15.1-20), together with Matthew 5.17-20.

(17) Romans 14.1-15.7 and 1 Corinthians 8-10.

(18) We have only Paul's side of the argument in the Judaizing controversy, but it is likely that the Judaizers themselves argued from Scripture, as Paul himself did, (in, for example, Galatians 3), but their views have not, unlike Paul's received canonical status.

(19) Charles Williams, the novelist and friend of C.S. Lewis, observed that 'Some people believe the Bible, some people do not; either way, nobody *notices what the words are'*.

(20) I take the Chalcedonian definition to be the classical, normative expression of christological adequacy: a Christ fully human and fully divine, (though such an understanding always has to be contextualized in language, interpretation and practice).

(21) On this, see a book still worth reading, *God in Christian Thought and Experience,* by W.R. Matthews, (Nisbet, London, 1930), pp.248-9.

(22) When Christians use the word 'outreach': *from where to where* are we 'reaching out'? Is the same questionable antithesis between 'the Church' and 'the world' discernible here?

(23) *God's Ways with the World, Thinking and Practising Christian Faith,* (T& T Clark, Edinburgh, 1996), p.183. Dan Hardy addresses some of our theological difficulties and shortcomings in understanding God's relationship with and engagement with the world.

(24) Ibid.

(25) Peter Sedgwick, 'The Vocation of the Christian in the World of Work: A Theological Basis for Vocation', in *Through the Eye of a Needle, eds J. Atherton and H. Skinner*(Epworth 2007), p.220.

(26) 'Sign, instrument and foretaste of the Kingdom' is a definition of the Church usually attributed to Bishop Lesslie Newbigin.

(27) It would be a mistake to regard the witness of 2 Peter as normative in its prediction of a final world conflagration, (3.5-7). With reference to this passage I note the comment of a recent interpreter who observes that there are 'serious hermeneutical difficulties for the modern reader'. But he goes on to say 'the forces of nature retain the appalling potential to interrupt and obliterate human history', (R.J. Bauckham, *Word Biblical Commentary, Jude, 2 Peter* (Word Inc. 1983), p.302..