EMBASSY, HOSPITALITY AND DIALOGUE:

CHRISTIANS AND PEOPLE OF OTHER FAITHS

Christian engagement with people of other faiths goes back to the very origins of Christianity. The Christian faith was born in a plural environment and had to relate not only to Judaism and to "classical" Graeco-Roman religion but also to the various "mystery" cults of the Mediterranean world as well as state religions such as Zoroastrianism in the Persian Empire.[1]

As an historial religion, Islam took its rise not only in the seventh century of the Christian era but in an environment heavily influenced by Judaism and Christianity. From the very beginning, there was considerable social and religious (even theological!) interaction with Christianty [2] In India, too, the Church has been present from the earliest centuries and Christians have had to find a place for themselves in a largely Hindu social and religious context.[3]

Chasms and Bridges in the Early Years

Not surprisingly, then, Christians have had to reflect on the place of other faiths and people of other faiths within the divine economy. We know that many early Christian writers were aware not only of the challenge posed by these religions but also of the possibility of building bridges between the followers of these religions and Christians so that Christians might share their good news in a way that made sense to their hearers. At the same time. Christianity came to be deeply influenced by the language, ethics and iconography of at least some of these other traditions.[4]

Bishop W. G. Young tells us of an early dialogue that the mystic Bardasian (Bardesanes) is supposed to have had with a Zoroastrian towards the end of the second-century. In classical theology, Bardasian is often regarded as a heretic, particularly because of his supposed belief in "astrological fatalism." Here, however, we see him defending human freedom as a gift from God! In whatever country of culture we may find them, Christians can be distinguished because of their behaviour which is a result of obeying the law of Christ.[5]

Several centuries later, John of Damascus was a great defender of Christian Orthodoxy within the Islamic world. His work, De Fide Orthodoxa, was not only a summing-up of

earlier patristic teaching; it was to become hugely influential in the development of both Western and Eastern theology. He is also supposed to have influenced the development of formal, or *Kalam*, theology in the Islamic world. John was the chief representative of the Christians in Damascus to the Caliph but was compelled, for reasons of his faith, to give up his office and to retire to a monastery near Jerusalem. His two dialogues with a Muslim interlocutor are well-known. In them John discusses with his Muslim partner the nature of God and of his Word. The dialogue is vigorous, at times even polemical, yet is also assumes a certain common basis from which the argument can be conducted. For instance, it is implicitly acknowledged that the partners in dialogue are talking about the same God, however differently they may understand him. Such a style of argument is characteristic of Christians within the Muslim world who do not display the hostility of Byzantium or, indeed, of the West [6]

Medieval Interaction

In the West, too, it is not too much of an exaggeration to say that Christian theology in the Middle Ages was largely shaped by the need to respond to the so-called Islamic philosophers who were re-interpreting both Neo-Platonism and Aristotle, on the one hand, and the Quran, on the other. It is to the great credit of St. Thomas Aquinas that he not only provided an apologetic against such tendencies in his Summa Contra Gentiles but that he was also able to learn from these philosophers and to express the Christian faith in terms of this "new learning".[7] In spite of the Crusades, both the Dominicans and the Franciscans were developing a peaceful approach to Islam and Judaism. The missionaries were expected to immerse themselves in the culture to which they were sent and to serve those in need. This "witness of life" provided a basis for preaching the Gospel. Francis of Assisi certainly set the tone of this new approach in his visit to the Sultan Al-Malik Al-Kamil at Damietta in Egypt. He was followed by many Franciscan missionaries, not all of whom had his wisdom. Raymond Lull was a layman who had been inspired by Francis and who sought to put his teaching into practice. He was able to persuade the Church to establish centres for missionary education and he himself undertook many missionary journeys. During the last of these he was beaten and expelled and probably died of his injuries. The Dominicans, too, had scholars like Raymond Marti who were well-acquainted with contemporary Judaism and Islam and who developed a Christian apologetic in relation to both.

It has to be acknowledged, however, that often this "peaceful" approach meant no more than a renunciation of armed combat. The polemical spirit was still there and the atmosphere was one of argument and counter-argument. Although these missionaries had often studied the languages of the people to whom they were sent, they lacked the sympathy and friendship which might have deepened their dialogue and enabled them to

get beyond mere controversy. The Roman Catholic scholar, Jean-Marie Gaudeul, remarks of Raymond Lull that he never seemed to have any Muslim friends, only interlocutors and opponents![8]

Reformation and Counter-Reformation

Curiously enough, the Reformation did not result in much cross-cultural missionary activity. The reasons for this are complex but have to do with the close relationship to the state which many churches of the Reformation enjoyed and with a curiously dispensationalist theology: God was sovereign and could reach people if that was his will - he did not need our co-operation in this! The Great Commission, moreover, had been fulfilled by the early Church and people who remained non-Christian did so because of heedlessness and ingratitude, not ignorance.[9]

The Counter-Reformation in the Roman Catholic Church, on the other hand, was very missionary minded. The newly acquired dominance of the sea-routes, wrested from the Arabs by Spain and Portugal, provided the spur to cross-cultural missionary work. The development, by the Jesuits, of the so-called Indian and Chinese "rites" was an attempt to contextualise the Gospel, not only in terms of Indian or Chinese culture but also in terms of religious terminology and symbolism. The failure of these experiments is a witness of the obduracy of Christian bureaucracies in the face of the missionary tack [10]

The Modern Missionary Movement

It was not until the modern period of mission history, i.e. from the end of the eighteenth-century onwards, that missionaries from the West began to take an interest, once again, in the language, literature and beliefs of other peoples and religions. Many of the earliest translations of the sacred books of these religions into European languages were made for missionary reasons. Increased knowledge of and familiarity with these traditions, however, often forced a re-evaluation of their relationship to Christianity. Missionaries like Temple Gairdner in Egypt and W. D. P. Hill in India spent long periods of time learning about the culture of a particular people before they felt able to witness to them as Christians. Such exposure led them, sometimes, to acknowledge truth in other faiths as well as devotion and moral awareness. A question that arose then had to do with the way in which such truth was related to Christ and to Christianity. This question remains with us today and is answered differently by different people. Many nineteenth-century missionaries, however, began to see other faiths as a sort of *praeparatio evangelica* (a preparation for the Gospel) in the same way as the early fathers had seen not only Judaism but also aspects of classical

philosophy, poetry and religion. If other faiths are a preparation for the Gospel, then the latter is a fulfilment of the former. Missionaries such as J. N. Farquhar, summed up this attitude when they were able to discern themes and concerns in another faith which pointed to a fulfilment in Christ. Such thinking drew on the Irenaean tradition of *anakephalaiosis, or recapitulation, which sees all human history with its hopes and aspirations summed up in Christ (Ephesians 1:10).* [11]

The Oriental Experience

We should not forget, of course, that while Western missionaries were engaging with people of other faiths, perhaps for the first time, Christians of the Ancient Oriental, Orthodox and Eastern-rite Catholic Churches in the Middle-East, Central Asia, India and Ethiopia continued to be witnesses to the Gospel among their neighbours of other faiths. There is much to learn from their history.[12]

In the same way, many indigenous Christians from Churches founded by Western missions were also engaging with their compatriots of another faith. The long history of Indian Christian theologians and their approaches to Hinduism is a case in point. [13] *Another example is that of theologians from a Muslim background in North India and what is now Pakistan. Even though their approach was somewhat polemical, they were able to engage with Islam at a fairly deep level.* [14]

Ecumenical Consciousness and Interfaith Questions

The modern ecumenical movement began because there was a desire to bear a united witness to Christ in a world that was being recognised as increasingly plural. Since the first world missionary conference, which was also the first ecumenical conference of its kind, Edinburgh 1910, there has been a concern to relate the Christian message to people of other faiths. This concern has been expressed with increasing urgency throughout the twentieth century, not least because relations between the different religions are seen as crucial, not only to world peace but to peace regionally and even locally.[15] *Different conferences have called for a serious study of the world's religions, engagement with them while recognising the distinctive nature of Gospel and dialogue to promote mutual understanding and respect.*

The Second Vatican Council heralded the arrival of ecumenism in the Roman Catholic Church. The Council was aware, however, that its agenda could not be limited to the renewal of that Church and the beginning of dialogue with other Churches and ecclesial

bodies. A truly universal Church must recognise the presence of other faiths in the world. It appears that, at first, there were no plans to issue a document on non-Christian religions. Pope John XXIII was keen, however, to heal the wounds of antisemitism and wanted the Council to develop a more positive view of Jewish-Christian relations. It was realised very quickly, however, that it would be difficult to address Judaism without also relating to Islam. This led to the rewriting of the document in such a way that all the great religions of the world were included. Michael Barnes comments that the document. Nostra Aetate, appears to be rather brief with bland statements about the world s religions. According to him, nothing very remarkable is said. What is remarkable is that anything is said at all.

Such a judgement is, perhaps, too harsh. The document attempts to set out a history of salvation which certainly recognises God's acts among his Chosen People and, specifically, in Christ as central, but it also attempts to find a place for other religious traditions within such a scheme. God's saving design is revealed in Christ but extends to all. Other religions may display knowledge of God derived not only from creation and from conscience but also from their particular religious experienced. The Church should reject nothing which is true and holy in these religions. This truth and holiness are related to Christ as the Eternal Logos who is definitively revealed in Jesus of Nazareth but who also enlightens all human beings [16]

Regarding the Jewish people, the Council and succeeding documents are at pains to emphasise the organic relation to the Church to Judaism. The mystery of the Church involves the mystery of Israel. The scriptures, liturgy and history have all to be understood in the light of this relationship. The special relationship is symbolised by joining the Commission on Religious Relations with the Jews to the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity, and the hope is expressed that these relations will be strengthened in collaboration with other Christians.[17]

The Anglican Communion and People of Other Faiths

Within the Anglican Communion, too, Lambeth Conferences since 1897 have considered the question of relations with people of other faiths. Sometimes their concern has been the preparation of Churches for the fulfilment of their missionary obligations. At other times it has been to uphold some principle of freedom of religions or of access to holy places.[18] *In more recent years, the Conferences have given particular attention to the question of dialogue between people of different faiths. In 1988 the Conference not only agreed a resolution on inter-faith dialogue which reflected the concerns of various ecumenical statements on the subject, but also commended a document, Jews, Christians and Muslims: The Way of Dialogue, written during the Conference, for study and action in the Churches*

of the Anglican Communion.[19]

Preparations for the 1998 Conference have suggested so far that this is an issue for nearly every "cluster" of provinces which has met to highlight important elements in the agenda for the Conference. The reasons for this phenomenon are very complex and have to do with a world of increasing mobility as well as of many conflicts, local, regional and global in which religion plays a part.

The Need for Dialogue

In some parts of the world, Christian have lived "cheek by jowl" with people of other faiths for centuries. The need for greater national integration and harmony has, however, made the task of dialogue even more urgent. On the one hand, Christians have realised that they need to learn from people of other faiths if they are to express their faith, in terms of worship and witness, in ways that are authentic to the culture and the idiom in which they live. Jyoti Sahi is an Indian Christian artist who attempts to convey insights of the Gospel in ways which draw upon Indian (even Hindu) themes. In a book (with Paul Middleton), he has also provided a study of how "sacred space" is being understood by the churches in India in relation to the cultural and religious values of the people of India. In particular these have to do with holy places being, what Michael Ipgrave has called, "places of mystery, memory and meeting." It is interesting, in this connection, to note that the desire to "contextualise" in this way is not just a concern of those churches in India which have their origins in the Western tradition, but also of those which spring from an ancient oriental background. [20]

It is not only Christians, however, who have felt the need to learn from others. Dr. M. M. Thomas, the doyen of Indian theologians, has drawn our attention to the acknowledged Christ of the Indian Renaissance. According to him, although this recognition is partial and inadequate, it is important, for the sake of the Church's mission, that it should be understood and evaluated. In his work he has tried to engage with leading Hindu reformers, such as Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Rabindranath Tagore and Mahatma Gandhi, especially in relation to their understanding of the meaning of Jesus Christ and of Christianity for religion and society in contemporary India. Dr. Thomas also discusses and points out that the course of Indian Christian theology has definitely been affected by this acknowledgement of Christ within Hinduism itself. [21]

The Situation in the West

People of other faiths, especially Jews and Muslims, have lived in Western countries for a long time. This presence has, in recent years, been significantly augmented by immigration, whether for economic or political reasons. The second, and, in some cases, third-generation descendants of immigrants have, moreover, been born in the West and share its values and outlook in a number of ways.

Christians in Western countries have faced, therefore, a two-pronged situation: on the one hand, they have experienced other faiths as part of the "strangeness" of their new neighbours. On the other, they are now experiencing it as the "difference" of their friend at school or colleague at work with whom they have a great deal in common.

Perhaps, more importantly, people identify culture with faith so that people belonging to a certain culture are also assumed to belong to a particular faith. The term "multicultural" often means "multi-faith" as well. The world-wide nature of the Christian Church and the fact that there are Christians of widely differing cultures often comes as a surprise.

In spite of such difficulties and confusions, however, Christians in the West have sought to relate to people of other faiths in a number of ways. There are several possible categories in which these different approaches can be classified. Bishop Kenneth Cragg has suggested that "embassy" and "hospitality" are two fundamental categories for thinking about mission. Hospitality has to do with welcoming people and meeting their needs. Embassy has to do with going out to them and sharing the Gospel with them.[22] Another way of thinking about mission has to do with witness, service and dialogue.

Christians in the West have tried to exercise a ministry of hospitality and service, for example, by opening up their homes and sharing skills needed in Western cultures with those of other faiths who have recently arrived in the country. Sometimes, they have made facilities, like church halls, available for social and educational purposes. The question of providing facilities for worship has been much more controversial and Christians have taken a range of positions on it. Some do not feel that any Christian premises should be made available for non-Christian worship, as, at the very least, it can confuse the wider community and make Christian identity less distinct. Others are willing for ancillary buildings, such as church halls, to be used for such worship and yet others will permit even the nave of a church to be used, but most of these would still not want the chancel and the sanctuary to be used.

The use of church buildings is a classic situation where Western Christians can learn from the history of Christianity elsewhere. In the early days of the expansion of Islam into the

Christian countries of the Middle-East, for example, the new rulers sometimes took over a part of a church for their worship, leaving the rest to the Christian community. In many cases, however, the whole building was eventually taken over. The second of the Righteous Caliphs, Umar, when invited by the Patriarch Sophronius to pray in the Holy Sepulchre, at the time of the capitulation of Jerusalem to the Muslims, refused to do so on the grounds that if he did so, his fellow Muslims would use this as a pretext for converting the church into a mosque! Continuing questions about the precise identity of Hagia Sophia indicate the difficulties inherent in people of different faiths using the same building for their worship.[23]

In India there are one or two examples where the site of an ancient church is now used for interfaith meeting and dialogue.[24] *There are other instances, however, of sites sacred to one faith being built upon by another which have caused hostility and even violence*

The history, then, is full of ambiguities and possible difficulties. Another issue has to do with the integrity of the Christian faith itself. Church buildings are often consecrated or dedicated for Christian worship and the canons or other rules of the Church require that nothing should be done in them which is contrary to the Christian faith or dishonouring to Christ.

If this rules out the regular use of a church building by another faith, what about the disposal of redundant churches to other faith-communities? If a building is surplus to requirements because the population has moved, or because there is ecumenical sharing, or because there are just too many buildings, is it permissible, or even preferable, to sell the building to another faith-community? Some denominations have clearly felt able to do this, sometimes on the grounds that this is better than seeing them turned into garages or warehouses. The Church of England, on the other hand, has been much more cautious. It has recognised, for example, the importance of "sacred space" for a community. A building used for Christian worship has a certain character. This may be the physical shape of the building (many churches are cruciform in shape - or it may be the atmosphere conveyed by art or furniture or arrangements for music. Places of worship are also important as places of memory, not only for the worshipping congregation, but often for the wider community also. The attachments of so many non-churchgoing folk to their parish church can only be explained if the church building is seen as focusing the collective memory of a community. The possibility that some churches are built on pre-Christian sties of worship only strengthens the argument about memory.

Many hold also the sale of a church building signals a retreat from often the neediest communities which are deprived of an important symbol of their community life. Nor are

such feelings of deprivation felt only locally. Internationally, too, there may be repercussions. Churches in minority situations, and, under pressure from another dominant religious tradition, may feel betrayed by Churches in the West when they hear or read about the sale of churches in this way. It is certainly true that some people are only too willing to use such situations for anti-Christian propaganda.

For all of these reasons, Church authorities should think very carefully before disposing of church buildings which they do not need. They should explore, first of all, continued Christian use of such buildings, whether ecumenically or by sale or lease to another Christian denomination. If this is not possible, some community use should be sought. It has to be acknowledged that, in some cases, a building may have to be demolished. Only when these other options have been explored should the authorities consider disposal to another faith-community, and then only after the widest consultations in the community.[25]

One of the ways in which some Christians have tried to welcome people of other faiths in their midst has been to attend their worship and to learn from it. Other have found that their friendship has led them naturally to pray with their friends, especially at times of great need or rejoicing. Such experiences have gradually led to the demand for "inter-faith" or "multi-faith" worship. In using these expressions, people often mean different things by them. An event like the one arranged by the Vatican at Assisi, for example, involved the different faith-communities praying in their own groups but at the same time and in the same location. It is possible also to meditate together in silence. Then there are the gatherings of a "serial" nature. In these each faith community offers a reading or a prayer. There may be a common concern or theme but no attempt is made to suggest a common activity. As Marcus Braybrooke has pointed out, "those present are in effect an audience listening to a religious anthology in which the distinctiveness of each tradition is clearly recognised".[26] *Finally, there are the services with a common order which has been agreed beforehand. Of necessity such services take place at the level of the lowest common denominator.*

There are Christians who believe that it is never right to pray with someone of another faith as they may be praying to "another god". This may be true on some occasions, but, equally, at other times there may be an awareness on all sides of the one divine being who has created the world and ourselves and who is concerned for us. This divine being may be understood in different ways by the different traditions but, in spite of the differences, there is agreement that we are referring to the same God who has not left himself without witness anywhere (Acts 14:17).

Because Christian worship is Christ-centred, multi-faith worship of any kind can never

become the regular, spiritual diet of Christians. It is possible, however, to pray with people of another faith at a critical moment in their lives. Indeed, sometimes they ask us to do this! In the same way, it may be possible to join people of another faith at times of national or local celebration or of crisis. National or local governments, embassies and voluntary organisations often organise such events (for example, on national days) and invite churches or individual Christians to participate. This is often an opportunity for witness and for dialogue. Should Christians agree to be present?

It is important that if Christians do take part in an event of this kind, they should be sure that nothing is done to dishonour Christ, or be contrary to the Christian faith. It is to be expected, of course, that representatives of other traditions will make sure that their beliefs are respected in a similar way.[27]

In many western countries, people of other faiths may still feel themselves at a distance from the centres of power and influence. At the time of writing, for example, there is not a single Muslim Member of Parliament or Peer in Britain, in spite of the fact that Muslims constitute the most numerous religious minority in the country. In a situation where people of other faiths may feel marginalised in national or local life, it is important for the Christian Churches to speak for them. Such a role of advocacy is even more necessary for a Church that is seen as a "national" or "established" Church. The Church of England, for instance, sees itself as an enabling agent for the greater participation of other churches and, indeed, other faiths in national life.

This may take place at a country-wide level by making sure that other churches and representatives of other faiths are consulted, for example, about legislation relating to education or the social services. It also takes place in institutions like hospitals and prisons and universities where Anglican chaplains often make sure that chaplains from other Churches and now from other faith-communities have access to their people in such institutions. The Church of England and other Christian Churches, are also making attempts to ensure that the other faith-communities are appropriately represented at civic events, both nationally and locally.[28]

While Churches in the West have been active in the "hospitality" aspects of mission, serving the needs of people of other faiths and encouraging dialogue with them, it has to be admitted that the "embassy" side of mission has not been greatly to the fore. There are some understandable reasons for this. Christians have often felt that they generally belonged to a privileged and affluent section of society and they should not be seen as "preying" on those who were weak and vulnerable. Some have felt, rather, that their faith obliged them to struggle with people of other faiths to make sure they had the same

freedoms and facilities which Christians themselves enjoyed. Others have wanted to learn more about the other traditions before they felt able to witness to them.[29]

The situation is changing, however, and many people of other faiths are now in influential positions in commerce, local government and the professions. Christians, also, have acquired some experience of what others believe. It is important, therefore, for the Church to make sure that, along with service and dialogue, the obligation to witness is not neglected. "Hospitality" needs to be kept side by side with "embassy". Churches and Christians need to be equipped to witness sensitively, but boldly, of what God has done for us in Christ. Naturally, such witness should be in the spiritual "idiom" of the one to whom we are witnessing. This requires patient listening and dialogue. Indeed, dialogue can be an occasion for authentic witness, and both service and dialogue need to take place alongside witness. It is important, however, to ensure that "service" is not seen as proselytisation by our partners and that dialogue is not an occasion for preaching at them. Each activity has its own integrity but in the total policy of a Church, local, national or regional, all three should have a place.[30]

Christians in other parts of the world are, sometimes, a mirror image of other faithcommunities in the Western world. In countries where Christians are a minority, they sometimes experience systematic discrimination in terms of education and employment. They are often marginalised from mainstream social and political life and, on occasions, they are even persecuted for their beliefs. Christians are not, of course, alone in facing such difficulties; other minority groups face them as well. It is here that the principle of "reciprocity" can be put forwards. It should be made clear straight away that this does not mean "tit for tat". Christians should not be saying that because people of other faiths have certain freedoms in the Western world, therefore Christians should have similar freedoms in countries where these other faiths are dominant.

It is, perhaps, natural to feel like that, but a more nuanced view is necessary. The principle of reciprocity should be seen as the commitment of each faith to fundamental human rights in every part of the world. Such a commitment should entail not just mental assent but active involvement in the promotion and defence of these rights. Respect for basic human freedoms and the rights of groups such as women and ethnic and religious minorities should be on the agenda of multilateral and bilateral dialogues.

Christian Faith in a Plural World

Awareness of the existence of faiths other than one's own has raised important questions about truth. Are all faiths a path to God? Do they all point to one transcendent reality even

though the language they use to describe it is determined by their particular historical, cultural and social context? Is there anything unique and of universal importance in the Christian faith? There are many, of course, in all the faiths who do believe that the different faiths all lead to the ultimate reality in their own way and that the path taken by a particular person or group is most suitable for them because of who they are, where they have been born and how they have been brought up. It has to be acknowledged that there are some who see in a religiously plural situation an opportunity to relativise all of them in such a way that none can make a personal, social or political impact. A multi-faith context is taken, then, as an excuse for marginalising all spiritual and moral perspectives. It can also become an objection to believing at all: there are so many faiths, which one should I believe?

We have seen already that it is quite possible to acknowledge that God has revealed himself in the natural world (Acts 14:17), in people's consciences (Romans 2:15) and even in their religiosity, however far removed that may seem from a Judeo-Christian point of view (Acts 17:22-31). At the same time, it is also possible to hold that we can recognise God's revelation in these other ways precisely because he has revealed himself definitively in the call, the liberation and the history of his chosen people and, supremely, of course, in the living, the dying and the rising again of Jesus of Nazareth. This history of God's judgement, as well as of his salvation, is the canon or the touchstone by which we are able to recognise God's revelation in other ways. As Bishop John Robinson once put it, to say that God is best defined by Christ is not to say that he is confined to Christ.[31]

What Does the Bible Say?

The Bible, as a record of God's dealings with the people of Israel, is mainly concerned, of course, with the experience of God's judgement and salvation among that people. It also has, however, a unique sense of the universality of Israel's God. Here is not mere tribal deity. The God of Israel is the Creator of Heaven and Earth and all that there is in them. He is the Creator of all the nations upon earth and is the directing force in their destinies. The election of Israel means, therefore, that God's purposes for all are especially focused and highlighted in Israel. The world, not Israel alone, is the stage of God's action.

The Bible is a very complex and very diverse collection of documents which were originally composed for different reasons in a variety of contexts, cultures and languages. Although there is an underlying unity, there is also a great variety in the Bible's response to many questions, including that of relations with people of other faiths.[32]

Not all religion is good and in the Bible there is a negative response to bad religion. Those working on the sociology of the Bible tell us that early Israel as a "flat", non-hierarchical and egalitarian society. This was certainly because of their experience of God who had so dramatically freed them from slavery in Egypt, revealed his will for them in the desert and welded them into a nation during their years of wandering. When they entered Canaan, they encountered an oppressive and hierarchical society in which throne and temple collaborated. The defeat and destruction of the Canaanite city-states, at the time of the conquest, is seen as God's judgement on them. Equally, Israel is judged when she emulated their behaviour.[33]

Elijah's encounter with the prophets of Baal (1 Kings:18) is the climax of a long running hostility in the Bible to the sexually permissive, even licentious, cult of the god Baal (of whom there were many local variants). Once again, such a negative response was needed if the moral fibre of the nation was not to be completely destroyed. After the Exile, there is the example of Ezra and Nehemiah refusing help for the rebuilding of the temple from those they perceived to have compromised themselves and attempting to purify the nation. In both of these responses there is a fear of syncretism; that the pure worship of God would somehow be mingled with beliefs and practices which were not consonant with the revelation received by the Jewish people.

These negative responses are there in the biblical material. They may have arisen because of an encounter with inauthentic, destructive or tyrannical religion. They could also have come about because of misunderstandings, political and military rivalry and just plain greed for land.

There are, however, positive approaches to those of other faiths as well. Consider the Canaanites, for instance, on the one hand, there is the rejection of an oppressive system based on elitism; on the other, there is gradual assimilation of Canaanite and other cultures and, in particular, their religious symbolism. Any fair reading of the account of the building of Solomon's temple will show the extent of such influence (1 Kings:69). The very building of the temple, and the placing of the ark in it, indicated a significant shift in Israel from being desert nomads to being a settled people like their neighbours.

A more positive relationship with the Canaanites is anticipated already in the Patriarchial narratives, in the story of Melchisedek, King of Salem, encountering Abraham, father of all the faithful. The story, as it has come to us, has been reflected on and redacted. Yet what we have clearly is a Canaanite priest-king, a symbol of all that early Israel was concerned to reject, bringing bread and wine to Abraham. We are then told that Abraham makes him an offering in recognition of this priestly service! Von Rad captures the element of surprise very well when he says, "Melchisedek, in his veneration of 'God most High, maker of

heaven and earth,' came close to believing in the one God of the world, whom Israel alone knew. This is surely the sense of the passage ... Such a positive, tolerant evaluation of a Canaanite cult outside Israel is unparalleled in the Old Testament." He points out that the Melchisedek motif is related to the throne of David in Psalm 110. In the Christian tradition, this gives rise to reflection on the priesthood of Christ himself which is seen as being "according to the order of Melchisedek" (Hebrews 6:20 ff.)[34]

Then there is the strange story of Balaam, the Mesopotamian prophet who is made to prophesy for Israel in the presence of their enemies (Numbers 22-24). Was Balaam a saint or a sinner? In other parts of the Bible, he is shown in a very bad light and comes to a very sticky end (Numbers 31:8, Deuteronomy 23:4-5, 2 Peter 2:15, Jude 11, Revelation 2:14). Nothing can detract, however, from the fact that he was inspired by God's Spirit and prophesied in an authentic way.

In more political terms, there is Cyrus, who is called the Lord's anointed (or messiah!) to bring liberation to his people (Isaiah 45:1-6). In the Pentateuchal and Historical Books there are other incidents, such as the meeting between Elisha and Naaman (2 Kings:5), which suggests a certain amount of tolerance and friendly inter-action.

It is, however, in the writing of the Prophets that a more adequate theology of God's purposes for all people is being worked out. The Prophets tell us of how God has done this in the past, how he is doing it in the present and what he is to do in the future. Amos, for instance, declares that God has a purpose for and acts within the history of the various nations, both far and near. The language of the Exodus from Egypt is, moreover, used to describe God's "saving plan" for these peoples (Amos 9:7). From the very beginning, God has worked in this way even if people have been unaware of it.[35]

Malachi, on the other hand, speaks of the ways in which God is recognised and worshipped, however inadequately, among the nations. In some cases, in ways that are worthier than the worship of Israel itself (Malachi 1:11). From the earliest times, attempts have been made to understand the text as referring to the future (in the Early Church the verse was regarded as a prophecy of the Eucharist). Even some Bible translations try to translate the verse as future but the plain sense seems to be that the prophet is referring to events that are contemporaneous with his activity.[36] *In both Isaiah 19 and in the so-called Apocalypse of Isaiah (Chapters 24-27) there is a reference to a blessed community of nations. God's blessing no longer applies solely to Israel, the other nations are also blessed. Israel is the primary recipient of this blessing and also God's instrument in extending it to others. Otto Kaiser comments, "To the extent to which people of different nations and religions are forced to become acquainted with each other and to live*

together, human relationships are set up which cannot and ought not to be ignored by an understanding of faith which is honest with itself."[37] There is a reference here to the context in which the prophecy first arose, but there is also anticipation of a future which belongs to God.

Among the prophets there are different models of how God is fulfilling his purposes among the various people. There is, for example, the centripetal model where the nations all stream to Mount Zion to join in the Jewish cult (Isaiah 2: 1-4, Micah 4: 1-4). It has often been a temptation for the People of God, both Jewish and Christians, to think like that: God's purpose for the nations must be that they should become exactly like us! We have, however, seen already that God is working his purposes out in a variety of ways and that no one model is adequate in describing God's work.

Against the "exclusion" of Ezra and Nehemiah, we have the more "inclusive" approach of books such as Ruth. Jonah and Job. The ancient story of Ruth tells of how a Moabite woman became the ancestress of David and thus of the Messiah himself (Ruth 4:17-22, Matthew, 1:5, Luke 3:32). The Book of Job is not only located in the Arabian region but has many words of Arabic origin and Job himself is not, of course, a Jew but very probably an Arab. This echoes Jesus' reminder to the people of his home town that Elijah was sent to a widow in Zarephath, even though there were many widows in Israel, and that Elisha healed only Naaman the Syrian, even though there were many lepers in Israel at the time (Luke 4:24-27).

The universalism of the New Testament arises out of the response to the Gospel by the poor, the marginalised and the foreigners. We are told that the common people (ochlos) heard Jesus gladly (Mark 12:37). He keeps company with the sinners and outcasts of society (Matthew 9:10-13). Foreigners respond positively to the words and works of Jesus (Matthew 8:1-13, Mark 7:24-30, Luke 17:11-19, John 12:20-21). This is confirmed in the experience of the Early Church which is alerted to its world wide mission by the response of those either on the margins of the synagogue or outside it altogether (Acts 13:44-48).[38]

Criteria and Basis for Dialogue

Why should Christians engage in dialogue with people of other faiths? Both Scripture and our experience provide criteria that God is working in the cultures and histories of all people. In different ways, people respond to this divine impulse and the Bible, as the inspired record of God's saving acts, provides us with a means of discerning how God has been working in the history, the culture and the spirituality of a particular people.

Awareness of the divine need not be confined to the structures of institutional religion. Indeed, it may not be found there at all! It can be a very private affair and sometimes it may be found in counter-religious movements which set out to affirm human dignity and equality and which challenge oppressive social institutions.

The Trinity and Dialogue

Our basis for dialogue should be Trinitiarian. We enter into dialogue because we believe that all men and women have been made in God's image (Genesis 1:26-27). It is true that this image has been distorted by human sin and rebellion and stands in need of conversion (metanoia) but it has not been destroyed and it is possible for people to recall (anamnesis) something of God's intention for them and for the world even in this state. We may say that this possibility of discerning the signs of God in creation and conscience is the basis for natural theology.

In addition to this possibility, however, there is also general revelation God has not left human beings on their own in trying to interpret the universe. The Logos, the Eternal Word of God, who provides coherence to the universe (makes it a universe), and who is incarnate in Jesus of Nazareth, also enlightens the hearts and minds of all human beings (John 1:9). The early Christian apologists identified the Logos with the divine Reason which holds the universe together and which provides order and stability to human societies. Its illumination may be seen in the work of those philosophers who sought to understand the world in a rational way and who taught that it was part of human destiny to use reason as a way of participating in the divine work. Although the poets were seen as obsessed with falsehood, nevertheless there were "sparks of divine Reason" even among them, and the apologists follow Paul in trying to demonstrate the Christian God from the poetry of their time.

The morality of the Stoics and Platonists is also recognised as reflecting the light of the Eternal Word. Even the famed Sibylline Oracles are seen as witnessing to the truth revealed by Christ. This is not to say that these apologists were indifferent to the distinctiveness of the Christian faith or that they endorsed everything in Gentile religiosity. Far from it, in fact they were very critical of most popular and even philosophical religion. The apologists were, however, recognising the light of Christ wherever they saw it and used it to make their case.

The ubiquity of the Holy Spirit also makes dialogue possible. The Holy Spirit is not only the point of connection (Anknupfungspunkt) between God and the human being but is also

the medium in whom and through whom human beings can communicate with one another regarding matters of ultimate concern.[39]

The Johannine teaching that the Holy Spirit is in the world convincing it of sin, righteousness and judgement has been further developed in Orthodoxy. This is called the economy of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit is present everywhere and fills everything, inspiring people in their response to God and to Christ. For the Orthodox, this can include people of other faiths. The Spirit is leading all towards the final consummation, the recapitulation of all things in Christ.[40]

Reformed traditions, too, emphasise the prior work of the Holy Spirit in that renewal and recreation of the human personality which they understand as conversion. Such a view is based on the Pauline teaching that we can discern spiritual matters only because the Spirit is already at work in us (1 Corinthians 2:14-16,12:3; 2 Corinthians 3:4-6; Ephesians 1:17-20, 3:14-19). In dialogue we must assume then that the Spirit is working to convert people to God. Signs of the Spirit's work will be discerned in their consonance with the Gospel, its teaching and values, but also by the fruit of love, joy and peace. In the same way, all that makes for human flourishing will be seen as a response to the Spirit's impulse and guidance. All that makes for strife, hatred, intolerance and greed is clearly not of the Spirit (Galatians 5:16-24). In spite of such criteria for discerning the presence and work of the Spirit, Christians will be surprised at the way in which the Spirit can be manifest and at the places of such manifestation. The spirit blows in sovereignty and freedom. We may catch a glimpse of the work or hear the sound, but we do not fully understand the source (John 3 :8).

How Does Dialogue Happen?

Dialogue happens when people who are neighbours or colleagues begin to talk to each other about their beliefs and spiritual experience. It can happen when people join together to struggle for freedom or human rights and discover that they are doing so because of their faith. Sometimes it comes about because people of different faiths are concerned about the moral and spiritual values influencing the communities in which they live. They discover that their different faiths both unite and divide them on a number of issues. From time to time people will want just to share spiritual experience with one another. This is yet another form of dialogue.

Representatives of various faiths will sometimes arrange more formal dialogues between the leaders of the different communities or between scholars belonging to these

communities. On occasions such dialogues will be limited to a specific issue or a cluster of issues. At other times they may be called to review the whole range of relations between two or more faiths. Dialogue may be bilateral, between representatives of two faith-communities, or multilateral, involving people from a number of such communities. The dialogue of specialists or scholars is very important, as crucial areas of agreement or difference can be clarified in this way. People can discover that their histories and beliefs are not as far apart as they thought and, even if they are, they begin to understand the reasons for the differences a little better. For this to happen, it is vitally important that scholars should share the results of their meetings with the people of their respective communities.[41]

Through careful listening to one another, people begin to understand the cherished beliefs of each side, even if they cannot agree with them. They begin to appreciate the spiritual well-springs which motivate people's actions, even if they cannot endorse them. The German theologian, Hans Kung, in his project on The Religious Situation of Our Time has pointed out that without peace between the religions, there will be war between nations and civilisations and even within nations and civilisations. Peace between religions will only come about as a result of a dialogue between religions and this must be based on a thorough investigation of the foundations of the religions Indeed, we might say that such an investigation must be part of the dialogue.[42]

In Christian circles an important question that has arisen has to do with the appropriateness of witness in the context of dialogue. Some Christians have shied away from witnessing in a dialogical relationship because of fear that the partner may regard this as an abuse of dialogue and a covert way of proselytising. It is true that dialogue can be abused in this way by Christians as well as people of other faiths. At the same time, it has to be recognised that dialogue would not be authentic if people did not give an account of how their faith sustains and motivates them, how it comforts them at times of trial or sorrow and how it encourages them and gives them hope. Christians will want to listen respectfully and attentively to their partners' witness, but they will also want to witness to what God has done for them in Jesus Christ. It is, perhaps worth quoting at length a statement from the World Council of Churches' Guidelines on Dialogue:

"...We do not see dialogue and the giving of witness as standing in any contradiction to one another. Indeed, as Christians enter dialogue with their commitment to Jesus Christ, time and again the relationship of dialogue gives opportunity for authentic witness. Thus, to the member Churches of the WCC we feel able, with integrity, to commend the way of dialogue as one in which Jesus Christ can be confessed in the world today; at the same time, we feel able, with integrity, to assure our partners in dialogue that we come not as manipulators but as fellow pilgrims, to speak with them of what we believe God to have

done in Jesus Christ who has gone before us, but whom we seek to meet anew in dialogue."[43]

Fundamentalism, Religion and Ideology

There are circumstances, of course, when dialogue is not possible or appropriate. Like other aspects of human life, religion can and does go wrong. Because of its importance to human culture and societies, such pathological religion can influence important areas of individual and social behaviour. Indeed, it can affect relations between communities and nations: one aspect of such behaviour, in recent times, has been the role of religion in resurgent ethnic or national chauvinism. Religions have been made part of, even basic to, ethnic or national identity from which others are excluded. This seems to be the case, for example, with those extremist Hindu organisations which want to identify being Indian with being Hindu, thus excluding large numbers of Muslims, Christians and others from participation in national life. Many of the ethnic conflicts in Eastern Europe or the Caucasus, for example, have a religious component. In many cases, both the oppressors and the oppressed understand themselves with reference to a religious tradition.

Often, chauvinistic manifestations of religion are confused with fundamentalism. It is true that there are some similarities. Both, for example, can function as ideologies for communal programmes and both share in some of the characteristics which Martyn Percy claims define fundamentalism. These include what he calls "back-ward"-looking legitimation' of present practices or experience by an appeal to specific elements in the tradition. counter-cultural rather than culture-affirmine attitudes and tendencies. or habits of mind, which tend to impose beliefs and values rather than share them with others.[44]

Fundamentalism, in the narrower sense, is, however, quite often a movement among "people of the book." Elsewhere, I have described it "as a literal understanding of the primary documents of a faith and a desire to apply their moral, cultural and legal demands in their entirety without sufficient attention to the contexts in which believers have to live."[45] *It is interesting, in this connection, to observe that Judaism, Christianity and Islam all emerge as faiths which are experiencing a surge of fundamentalism at this time. In Christianity, fundamentalist movements have often emphasised personal piety and ethical behaviour in the light of what has been seen as biblical teaching. In some cases this has extended to social concern, but movements like "the moral majority" in the United States of America and R. J. Rushdoony's "reconstructionism" which have produced detailed political and legal programme are comparatively rare and recent.*[46] *In Judaism, too, fundamentalists have concentrated on instruction and observance within the community and in families and individuals. In the State of Israel, however, fundamentalist attitudes have led to detailed political and social programmes. It is in Islam, though, that movements have emerged which have developed ideologies which are not only*

comprehensive but even coercive.

Such ideologies have either a conservative or a revolutionary basis. In some cases they legitimise an existing social and political order. In other cases they struggle against an allegedly corrupt or oppressive system. These ideologies not only see Islam as influencing every area of personal and social behaviour (other faiths also claim to do this), but they also seek to provide detailed legislation for such behaviour. This often results in the restriction of choice and the loss of flexibility for society as a whole and it seriously affects the freedom of groups such as women and religious minorities.

There are many complex reasons for the emergence of this phenomenon in the world of Islam at this time. They include a very large young population in many Muslim communities which is alienated from the mainstream in terms of education, employment and business opportunities. There is a continuing reaction to the experience of colonialism and neo-colonialism. The emergence of the state of Israel and the subsequent conflict with neighbouring peoples and countries are also factors, as are super-power politics in particular regions (e.g. in Central and South Asia). The failure of both "command" and "free-market" economies to deliver prosperous societies and accountable governments has contributed to the search for another, authentically Islamic, way. In countries where Muslims are a minority, they have often experienced marginalisation and even discrimination.

This has sometimes had the effect of radicalising their politics in a fundamentalist direction. This has especially been the case with the young people who have lost confidence in existing systems and structures. Fundamentalist movements offer them community, hope and the possibility of a struggle to bring about change. They can also isolate them and make it more difficult for them to relate to the wider society around them.

It is often the case that dialogue, of a limited kind, can take place even with representatives of such movements. Christians will, however, need to relate to them in other ways as well. It may be possible, for example, for Christians or churches to act as mediators in the resolution of conflicts where such movements are a party to conflict. In some cases it has been shown that people in such movements have a certain respect for others with a religious commitment of their own. Christians may also find that they are advocates either for members of such movements, if their fundamental rights are being violated, or against these movements if they are violating the fundamental rights of others. It is important, also, to encourage people of all faiths to put their texts and traditions in historical and cultural contexts, while continuing to recognised them as authoritative. Legal and judicial traditions, similarly, should be seen as capable of reform and development in the light of

authoritative texts. Failure to appreciate the need for this can result in great suffering for many. If a political, social or economic system is the cause of significant oppression, Christians should be prepared to bring this to the attention of local, national and international organisations, whatever the ideological basis of such a system. We have seen then that the Church has a long history of relating to people of other faiths and that there are significant resources for such work. The history has both positive and negative aspects to it and critical reflection is necessary if it is to assist us in our task today. We have considered especially the witness of the Scriptures and of the Early Church and have sought to develop criteria and a basis for dialogue from these witnesses. The practice of dialogue and its appropriateness in various situations has also been discussed and we have ended with some reflection on religion as ideology. We have sought to rehearse briefly the theological and historical factors affecting the encounter between people of different faiths, but we have tried also to reflect a little on the programme aspects of this encounter.

+Michael Nazir-Ali

Bishop of Rochester
Easter, 1997

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[3] *Alexander Mar Thoma, The Mar Thoma Church Heritage and Mission Tiruvalla, Ashram Press, 1985.*

[4] *R. D. Sider, The Gospel and its Proclamation Message of the Fathers of the Church Wimington, Delaware, Glazier, 1983.*

[5] *Young, op cit, PP. 15 f.*

[6] *Daniel J. Sahas, John of Damascus on Islam Leiden, Brill, 1972, M. S Seale, Muslim Theology London, 1964, and M. Nazir-Ali, Frontiers in Muslim-Christian Encounter Oxford, Regnum, 1987, PP. 17 f, 49.*

[7] *See further, Marty T. Clark (ed.), An Aquinas Reader London, Hodder, 1972, PP 15 ff.*

[8] In Encounters and Clashes Rome, Pontifical Institute for the Study of Arabic and Islamics, 1984, PP. 161.

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[14] Avril Powell, Muslims and Missionaries in Pre-Mutiny India Richmond, Surrey, Curzon Press, 1993.

[15] Hans Kung (ed.), Christianity and the World Religions London, SCM, 1986.

[16] Nostra AetateA. Flannery (ed.), Documents of Vatican II New York, Costello, 1987, PP. 738 ff.; cf. M. Barnes, Religions in Conversation op cit, PP 50 ff.

[17] Guidelines on Religious Relations with the Jews CRRJ, 1974.

[18] R. Coleman (ed.), Resolutions of the Twelve Lambeth Conferences Toronto, Anglican Book Centre, 1992.

[19] See further, The Truth Shall Make You Free The Lambeth Conference. 1998. London, ACC, 1988, Resolutions 20 and 21 and Appendix 6. Also, the World Council of Churches, Guidelines on Dialogue Geneva, 1979, and Council of Churches for Britain and Ireland, Christian Identity. Witness and Interfaith Dialogue London, 1991.

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[21] M. M. Thomas. The Acknowledged Christ of the Indian Renaissance London, SCM, 1969.

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[23] See the present writer's Islam: A Christian Perspective Exeter, Paternoster, 1983, PP. 37, 86.

[24] *See Alexander Mar Thoma, The Mar Thoma Church: Heritage and Mission op cit, PP. 2 f.*

[25] *See further Communities and Buildings op cit.*

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[38] *J. Stambaugh and D. Balch, The Social World of the First Christians op cit, PP. 54 ff.*

[39] *J. V. Taylor, The Go-Between God London, SCM, 1987, PP. 42 f. and 127 f.*

[40] *G. Khodr, Christianity in a Pluralistic World - The Economy of the Holy Spirit in The Orthodox Church in the Ecumenical Movement (C. G. Patelos, ed.) Geneva, WCC, PP. 297 ff.*

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[42] H. Kung (ed.) Christianity and the World Religions London, SCM, 1993, PP. 440 ff, and also his Lambeth Interfaith Lecture, World Politics and World Ethics as a Challenge to the Churches November, 1994.

[43] Geneva WCC, 1979, PP. 11. Such thinking is widespread in ecumenical documents and has, more recently, been reaffirmed by the Committee for Relations with People of Other Faiths of the Council of Churches for Britain and Ireland in Christian Identity - Witness and Interfaith Dialogue London, CCBI, 1991.

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[45] M. Nazir-Ali, Mission and Dialogue London, SPCK, 1995, PP. 85.

[46] eg. R. J. Rushdoony, The Institutes of Biblical Law Phillipsburg, NJ, Presbyterian and Reformed 1973. For a critique see G. R. Fackre, Ecumenical Faith in Evangelical Perspective, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1993.

-- Go to Reports Page
-- Go to Lambeth Conference Home Page