



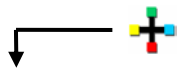
The Basis, Purpose And Manner Of Inter-Faith Dialogue¹

1977

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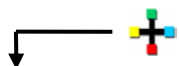


I

All intellectual activity implies some presuppositions. Thoughts can only be formulated in words and these words have been formed by the previous thought of the community whose language they are. Even the most radical scepticism can only be formulated in terms of presuppositions which are – for the moment – unquestioned. (See Michael Polanyi: *Personal Knowledge*, chap. 9, 'The Critique of Doubt', pp. 269-98.)

In dialogue between representatives of different faiths the participants are called upon to submit their most fundamental presuppositions, the very grammar and syntax of their thought, to critical questioning. It is therefore essential at the outset to lay bare the presuppositions of the undertaking. No one enters into a conversation without presuppositions, and it is essential that these should be brought into the open. No one can bring a totally open mind to a dialogue except an imbecile who has not yet learned to use human language.

1. Modern interest among Western Christians in the comparative study of religion is a product of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment. Looking back upon this period it is easy to identify the presuppositions which lay behind the study. All religions, including Christianity, were required to make good their claims at the bar of reason, and reason was understood



in terms of the tradition of thought which stemmed from Descartes. Lineal descendants of this type of thinking are the various theories of religion as illusion-theories which John Oman has classified under a threefold scheme : theories of a Hegelian type which see religion as a primitive, anthropomorphic science; theories of the Schleiermacher type which see religion as a product of human psychology; and theories of a Kantian type which see religion as the result of the moral pressure of the community upon the individual.¹ Theories of this kind are the logical development of the presupposition implicit in many studies in comparative religion-that there are criteria drawn from outside of the religious experience itself by which the religious experience can be evaluated.

2. A much more ancient model of inter-religious dialogue takes as its basic presupposition that there is a common core of reality within all the varieties of religious experience. The classic statement of this position is the famous voice from the Rig Veda, 'The real is one, though sages name it variously.' In the long history of Indian religion this faith has been pressed to its farthest limit. Its most eloquent modern exponent has been Dr S. Radhakrishnan.² More often it is present as an unexpressed and unexamined axiom. When W. Cantwell Smith (*The Meaning and End of Religion*), recommends that we should cease talking about different 'religions' and speak rather of the religiousness which is the human response to the one transcendent reality, and when John Hick (in *God and the Universe of Faith*) calls for a 'Copernican revolution' in our thought about religions so that we can see God as the one centre around which all the religions revolve, it is accepted as axiomatic that there is one reality behind or within all the forms of religion. Most frequently this has been identified with the mystical experience.

3. A third model for inter-religious dialogue is based on the practical need for political and social unity. One might find the classic example of this in the work of the Emperor Akbar (1556-1605), who encouraged representatives of different faiths to engage in dialogue and experimented with a universal religion designed to knit into one all the people of his empire.

India since 1947 has again witnessed the strong pressure of the need for national unity upon the thinking of responsible people in the various religious communities. This pressure can be understood in a superficial way which simply subordinates a concern for truth in religion to a concern for political unity. But it can also be understood in a more fundamental way. Outstanding Indian Christian thinkers such as Paul Devanandan and M. M. Thomas saw that both the renaissance of Hinduism and the growth of a concern for nation-building were part of the consequences of the impact of Christ upon Indian society.⁴ They therefore called their fellow-Christians to the work of inter-faith dialogue in the context of the quest for national unity with the conviction that this was part of the continuing work of Christ in Indian society. The basis of their call to dialogue was in their Christian faith. It is a different matter when the basis of dialogue is simply the demand for national (or global) unity, without any deeper understanding of the reality on which the unity can be grounded. When dialogue is conducted in this way, religious truth is being subordinated to something else.

4. A Christian who participates in dialogue with people of other faiths will do so on the basis of his faith. The presuppositions which shape his thinking will be those which he draws from the Gospel. This must be quite explicit. He cannot agree that the position of final authority can be taken by anything other than the Gospel-either by a philosophical system, or by mystical experience, or by the requirements of national and global unity. Confessing Christ-incarnate, crucified and risen-as the true light and the true life, he cannot accept any other alleged authority as having right of way over this. He cannot regard the revelation given in Jesus as one of a type, or as requiring to be interpreted by means of categories based on other ways of understanding the totality of experience. Jesus is-for the believer-the source from whom his understanding of the totality of experience is drawn and therefore the criterion by which other ways of understanding are judged.

In this respect the Christian will be in the same position as his partners in dialogue. The Hindu, the Muslim, the Buddhist and the Marxist each has his distinctive interpretation of other religions, including Christianity; and for each of them his own faith provides the basis of his understanding

of the totality of experience, and therefore the criterion by which other ways of understanding – including that of the Christian – are judged.

The integrity and fruitfulness of the inter-faith dialogue depends in the first place upon the extent to which the different participants take seriously the full reality of their own faiths as sources for the understanding of the totality of experience.

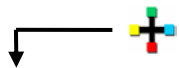
II

If this is the basis upon which the Christian participates in the dialogue, what understanding of other faiths does this imply? Many different answers have been given and are given to this question. Many volumes would be needed to state and examine them. The following is only a series of headings for the purpose of orientation.

1. Other religions and ideologies are wholly false and the Christian has nothing to learn from them. On this three things may be said:

(a) The sensitive Christian mind, enlightened by Christ, cannot fail to recognise and to rejoice in the abundant spiritual fruits to be seen in the lives of men and women of other faiths. Here we must simply appeal to the witness of Christians in all ages who have lived in friendship with those of other faiths.

(b) In almost all cases where the Bible has been translated into the languages of the non-Christian peoples of the world, the New Testament word *Theos* has been rendered by the name given by the non-Christian peoples to the one whom they worshipped as the supreme being. It is under this name, therefore, that the Christians who now use these languages worship the God and Father of Jesus Christ. The very few exceptions, where translators have sought to evade the issue by simply transliterating the Greek or Hebrew word, only serve to prove the point; for the converts have simply explained the foreign word in the text of their bibles by using the indigenous name for God. (I owe this piece of information to a conversation with Dr Eugene Nida.) The name of the God revealed in



Jesus Christ can only be known by using those names for God which have been developed within the non-Christian systems of belief and worship. It is therefore impossible to claim that there is a total discontinuity between the two.

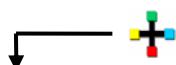
(c) St. John tells us that Jesus is the light that lightens every man. This text does not say anything about other *religions*, but it makes it impossible for the Christian to say that these outside the Church are totally devoid of the truth.

2. The non-Christian religions are the work of devils and their similarities to Christianity are the results of demonic cunning. This view is stated by Justin in his *Apology*, and is linked by him with the assertion that the Logos speaking through Socrates and others sought to lead men to the light and away from the work of demons-the Logos who was made man in Jesus Christ. A sharp distinction is here drawn between pagan religion (the work of demons) and pagan philosophy (in which the Logos was shedding his light). There are two points which should be made regarding this view.

(a) It would be wise to recognise an element of truth here: the sphere of religion is the battlefield par excellence of the demonic. New converts often surprise missionaries by the horror and fear with which they reject the forms of their old religion-forms which to the secularised westerner are interesting pieces of folklore and to the third-generation successors of the first converts may come to be prized as part of national culture. Religion – including the Christian religion – can be the sphere in which evil exhibits a power against which human reason and conscience are powerless. For religion is the sphere in which a man surrenders himself to something greater than himself.

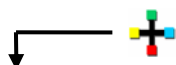
(b) Even the strange idea that the similarities to Christianity in the non-Christian religions are evidences of demonic cunning points to an important truth. It is precisely at points of highest ethical and spiritual achievement that the religious find themselves threatened by, and therefore ranged against, the Gospel. It was the guardians of God's revelation who crucified the Son of God. It is the noblest among the Hindus who most emphatically reject the Gospel. It is those who say, 'We see', who seek to blot out the light (John 9-41).

3. Other religions are a preparation for Christ: the Gospel



fulfils them.⁵ This way of understanding the matter was strong in Protestant missionary circles in the early years of this century and is fully expressed in the volume of the Edinburgh Conference of 1910 on 'The Missionary Message'. The non-Christian religions can be seen as preparation for the Gospel either as the 'revelation of deep wants in the human spirit' (*loc. cit.*, p. 246), which the Gospel satisfies, or as partial insights which are corrected and completed by the Gospel. Obviously such a view can be discussed only on the basis of an intimate and detailed knowledge of mankind's religions. There is, indeed, a vast missionary literature, mainly written in the first half of this century, which studies the religions from this point of view. (One could wish that modern Roman Catholic writers who are now advocating something like the Preparation-Fulfilment view would study the earlier arguments.) Briefly one has to say that this view had to be abandoned because – in R. Otto's phrase – the different religions turn on different axes. The questions that Hinduism asks and answers are not the questions with which the Gospel is primarily concerned. One does not truly understand any of the religions by seeing it as a preparation for Christianity. Rather, each religion must be understood on its own terms and along the line of its own central axis.

4. A distinct but related view of the matter – the one dominant at the Jerusalem Conference of 1928 – seeks for 'values' in the religions and claims that while many values are indeed to be found in them, it is only in Christianity that all values are found in their proper balance and relationship. The final Statement of the Council lists such spiritual values as 'the sense of the Majesty of God' in Islam, 'the deep sympathy for the world's sorrow' in Buddhism, the 'desire for contact with ultimate reality' in Hinduism, 'the belief in a moral order of the universe' in Confucianism, and 'disinterested pursuit of truth and of human welfare' in secular civilisations as 'part of the one Truth' (Jerusalem Report I, p. 491). And yet, as the same statement goes on to say, Christ is not merely the continuation of human traditions: coming to him involves the surrender of the most precious traditions. The 'values' of

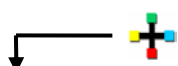


the religions do not together add up to him who alone is the Truth.

5. A different picture of the relation between Christianity and the other religions is given in the Papal Encyclical *Ecclesiam Suam* (1964).⁶ Here the world religions are seen as concentric circles having the Roman Catholic Church at the centre, and other Christians, Jews, Muslims, other theists, other religionists and atheists at progressively greater distances. In respect of this proposal one must repeat that the religions cannot be rightly understood by looking at them in terms of their distance from Christianity. They must be understood so to speak-from within, on their own terms. And one must add that this model particularly fails to do justice to the paradoxical fact-central to the whole issue – that it is precisely those who are (in one sense) closest to the truth who are (in another sense) the bitterest opponents of the Gospel. Shall we say, that the Priest and the Levite – guardians of God's true revelation – are nearer to the centre than the semi-pagan Samaritan?

6. Recent Roman Catholic writing affirms that the non-Christian religions are the means through which God's saving will reaches those who have not yet been reached by the Gospel. Karl Rahner (*Theological Investigations*, vol. 5, pp. 115-134) argues as follows. God purposes the salvation of all men. Therefore he communicates himself by grace to all men, 'and these influences can be presumed to be accepted in spite of the sinful state of men'. Since a saving religion must necessarily be social, it follows that the non-Christian religions have a positive salvific significance. In this respect they are parallel to the Judaism of the Old Testament, which – though it was a mixture of truth and error – was, until the coming of Christ, 'the lawful religion willed by God for them'. The adherent of a non-Christian religion is thus to be regarded as an anonymous Christian. But a Christian who is explicitly so, 'has a much greater chance of salvation than someone who is merely an anonymous Christian'.

This scheme is vulnerable at many points. The devout adherent of another religion will rightly say that to call him an anonymous Christian is to fail to take his faith seriously.



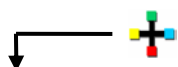
The argument from the universal saving purpose of God to the salvific efficiency of non-Christian religions, assumes, without proving, that it is religion among all the activities of the human spirit which is the sphere of God's saving action. The unique relation of the Old Testament to Jesus Christ is not adequately recognised.

Its most serious weakness, however, is one which is shared in some degree by the other views we have examined: it assumes that our position as Christians entitles us to know and declare what is God's final judgment upon other people. On the question of the ultimate salvation of those who have never heard the Gospel, most contemporary Protestant writers are content to say that it is a matter to be left to the wise mercy of God. Some contemporary Roman Catholics (Hans Kung, for example), rebuke the attitude as a failure to do one's theological duty. On the basis of Luke 13.23f one might reply that those who claim to know in advance the limits of God's saving action are going beyond their authority. The basis of our meeting with people of other faiths cannot be in this kind of claim to know their ultimate standing before God. All such claims go beyond what is authorised. The basis of our meeting can only be the much more humble acknowledgement that we have been chosen by one greater than ourselves to be witnesses to him. It is in this direction that we have to look for the basis of dialogue.

III

1. The starting point for my meeting with those of other faiths is that I have been laid hold of by Jesus Christ to be his witness. This is an act of his pure grace, prior to my knowledge of it, which I can only confess and acknowledge in thankfulness and praise to him.

2. This acknowledgment and confession means that I acknowledge and confess in Jesus Christ, in his life and teaching, his death and passion, his resurrection and exaltation, the decisive turning point of human history, the centre from which alone the meaning of my own personal life, and the meaning of the public life of mankind, is disclosed. It means that I acknowledge and confess Jesus as the Saviour of the world; the meaning and effect of what he is and has done cannot apply to anything

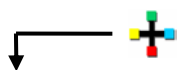


less than the totality of all that is. It is from this centre that I try to understand and participate in the common human history of which I am a part.

3. With this as my clue I expect to find and do find everywhere in the life of mankind signs of the kindness and justice of God which are manifested in Jesus. These signs are to be found

throughout the life of mankind, not only-not even primarily-in his religion. The same clue enables me to recognise the fact that precisely these signs of God's goodness can be and are used as means by which men think to establish their own standing before God. Patterns of piety, of belief and of conduct drawn from the experience of God's grace then become the basis for a claim against God. The classic model of this is the role of the religious leaders of Judaism in the passion and death of Jesus. The same thing is repeated again and again both in the history of religions and in the history of the Christian Church. Thus the Cross of the risen Jesus, which is the centre of the Christian Gospel, stands throughout history over against all the claims of religion including the claims of the Christian religion-to be the means of salvation. To put the matter in another way: the revelation of God's saving love and power in Jesus entitles and requires me to believe that God purposes the salvation of all men, but it does not entitle me to believe that this purpose is to be accomplished in any way which ignores or bypasses the historic event by which it was in fact revealed and effected.

4. The accomplishment of this saving purpose is to be by way of and through a real history – a history whose centre is defined by the events which took place 'under Pontius Pilate'. The end envisaged is the reconciliation of all things in heaven and earth in Christ (Col. 1.20), the 'summing up of all things in Christ' (Eph. 1. 10), the liberation of the entire creation from its bondage (Rom. 8. 19-21) . The salvation which is promised in Christ, and of which his bodily resurrection is the first-fruit, is not to be conceived simply as the fulfilment of the personal spiritual history of each individual human being. To speak in this way is to depart both from Scripture and from a true understanding of what it is to be a person. We are fully persons only with and through others, and in Christ we know



that our personal history is so rooted in Christ that there can be no final salvation for each of us until he has 'seen of the travail of his soul' and is satisfied (Isa. 53.11). The New Testament itself suggests at many points the need for the patience which this requires (e.g. Heb. 11.39-40, Rev. 6.9-11).

5. Because this salvation is a real consummation of universal history, and not simply the separate consummations of individual personal lives conceived as abstracted from the public life of which they are a part, it follows that an essential part of the history of salvation is the history of the bringing into obedience to Christ of the rich multiplicity of ethical, cultural spiritual treasures which God has lavished upon mankind. The way in which this is to be understood is shown in the well known verses from the Fourth Gospel.

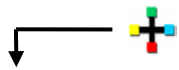
I have yet many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me for he will take what is mine and declare it to you. All that the Father has is mine; therefore I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you. (John 16.12-15)

We can spell out what is said here in a threefold form.

(a) What can be given to and grasped by this group of first-century Jews is limited by the time and place and circumstances of their lives. It is true knowledge of the only true God and in that sense it is the full revelation of God (John 17.3, 6). But it is not yet the fulness of all that is to be manifested.

(b) It will be the work of the Holy Spirit to lead this little community, limited as it now is within the narrow confines of a single time and place and culture, into 'the truth as a whole' and specifically into an understanding of 'the things that are to come'-the world history that is still to be enacted.

(c) This does not mean, however, that they will be lead beyond or away from Jesus. Jesus is the Word made flesh, the Word by which all that is came to be and is sustained in being. Consequently all the gifts which the Father has lavished

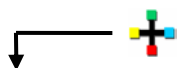


on mankind belong in fact to Jesus, and it will be the work of the Spirit to restore them to their true owner. All these gifts will be truly received and understood when the Holy Spirit takes them and declares their true meaning and use to the Church.

We have here the outline of the way in which we are to understand the witness of the Church in relation to all the gifts which God has bestowed upon mankind. It does not suggest that the Church goes into the world as the body with nothing to receive and everything to give, quite the contrary. The Church has yet much to learn. This passage suggests a trinitarian model which will guide our thinking as we proceed. The Father is the giver of all things. They all belong rightly to the Son. It will be the work of the Spirit to guide the Church through the course of history into the truth as a whole by taking all God's manifold gifts given to all mankind and declaring their true meaning to the Church as that which belongs to the Son.

As we look back upon the story of the Church and trace its encounter first with the rich culture of the Hellenic world and then with one after another of the cultures of mankind, we can see, with many distractions and perversions and misunderstandings, the beginnings of the fulfilment of this promise.

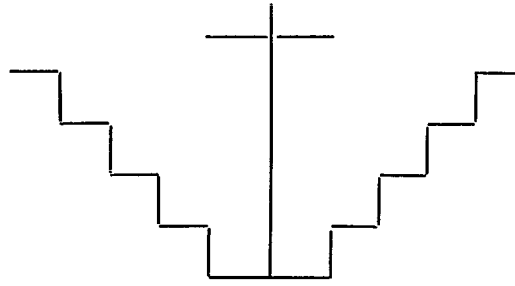
6. The Church, therefore, as it is in via, faces the world not as the exclusive possessor of salvation, not as the fulness of what others have in part, not as the answer to the questions they ask, and not as the open revelation of what they are anonymously. The Church faces the world rather as arrabon of that salvation, as sign, first-fruit, token, witness of that salvation which God purposes for the whole. It can do so only because it lives by the Word and Sacraments of the Gospel by which it is again and again brought to judgment at the foot of the Cross. And the bearer of that judgment may well be, often is, a man or woman of another faith (cf. Luke 11.3 I f). The Church is in the world as the place where Jesus – in whom all the fulness of the godhead dwells – is present, but it is not itself that fulness. It is the place where the filling is taking place (Eph. 1.23). It must therefore live always in dialogue with the world – bearing its witness to Christ but always in such a way that it is open to receive the riches of God which belong



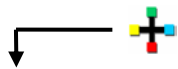
properly to Christ but have to be brought to him. This dialogue, this life of continuous exchange with the world, means that the Church itself is changing. It must change if 'all that the Father has' is to be given to it as Christ's own possession (John 16.14f). It does change. Very obviously the Church of the Hellenic world in the fourth century was different from the Church which met in the upper room in Jerusalem. It will continue to change as it meets ever new cultures and lives in faithful dialogue with them.

7. One may sum up – or at least indicate the direction of – this part of the paper by means of a picture. We have looked at and rejected a series of models which could be expressed in pictures. We will suggest (following Walter Freytag) a simple sketch which may serve to indicate the true basis for dialogue between Christians and those of other faiths.⁷

It will be something like this:



The staircases represent the many ways by which man learns to rise up towards the fulfilment of God's purpose. They include all the ethical and religious achievements which so richly adorn the cultures of mankind. But in the middle of them is placed a symbol which represents something of a different kind – a historic deed, in which God exposed himself in a total vulnerability to all man's purposes, and in that meeting exposed mankind as the beloved of God who is – even in his highest religion – the enemy of God. The picture expresses the central paradox of the human situation, that God comes to meet us at the bottom of our stairways, not at the top; that our (real and genuine) ascent towards God's will for us takes us farther away from the place where he actually meets



us. 'I came to call not the righteous, but sinners.' Our meeting, therefore, with those of other faiths, takes place at the bottom of the stairway, not at the top. For 'Christianity' as it develops in history, takes on the form of one of these stairways. The Christian also has to come down to the bottom of his stairway to meet the man of another faith. There has to be a *kenosis*, a self-emptying. The Christian does not meet his partner in dialogue as one who possesses the truth and the holiness of God, but as one who bears witness to a truth and holiness which are God's judgment on him, and who is ready to hear that judgment spoken through the lips and life of his partner of another faith.

IV

On the basis which has been laid down one can speak briefly of the purpose with which the Christian enters into dialogue with people of other faiths. This purpose can only be obedient witness to Jesus Christ. Any other purpose, any goal which subordinates the honour of Jesus Christ to some purpose derived from another source, is impossible for the Christian. To accept such another purpose would involve a denial of the total lordship of Jesus Christ. A Christian cannot try to evade the accusation that, for him, dialogue is part of his obedient witness to Jesus Christ.

But this does not mean that the purpose of dialogue is to persuade the non-Christian partner to accept the Christianity of the Christian partner. Its purpose is not that Christianity should acquire one more recruit. On the contrary *obedient* witness to Christ means that whenever we come with another person (Christian or not) into the presence of the Cross, we are prepared to receive judgment and correction, to find that our Christianity hides within its appearance of obedience the reality of disobedience. Each meeting with a non-Christian partner in dialogue therefore puts my own Christianity at risk.

The classic biblical example of this is the meeting of Peter with the Gentile Cornelius at Caesarea. We often speak of this as the conversion of Cornelius, but it was equally the conversion of Peter. In that encounter the Holy Spirit shattered Peter's own deeply cherished image of himself as an obedient member of the household of God. ('No, Lord; for I have

never eaten anything that is common or unclean.') It is true that Cornelius was converted, but it is also true that 'Christianity' was changed. One decisive step was taken on the long road from the incarnation of the Word of God as a Jew of the first-century Palestine to the summing up of *all things* in him.

The purpose of dialogue for the Christian is obedient witness to Jesus Christ who is not the property of the Church but the Lord of the Church and of all men, and who is glorified as the living Holy Spirit takes all that the Father has given to man – all men of every creed and culture – and declares it to the Church as that which belongs to Christ as Lord. In this encounter the Church is changed and the world is changed and Christ is glorified.

V

What is to be said, on the basis of the preceding discussion, of the *manner* of inter-faith dialogue? We have already suggested that it is the doctrine of the Trinity which provides us with the true grammar of dialogue and we shall proceed accordingly.

1. We participate in dialogue with men of other faiths believing that we and they share a common nature as those who have been created by the one God who is the Father of all, that we live by his kindness, that we are both responsible to him and that he purposes the same blessing for us all. We meet as children of one Father, whether or not our partners have accepted their sonship.

This has at least three implications.

(a) We are eager to receive from our partners what God has given them, to hear what God has shown them. In Karl Barth's words, we must have ears to hear the voice of the Good Shepherd in the world at large.

Eagerness to listen, to learn, to receive even what is new and strange will be the mark of one who knows the word of Jesus: 'All that the Father has is mine.' In our meeting with men of other faiths we are learning to share in our common patrimony as human beings made by the one God in his own image.

(b) We meet in a shared context of things, of non-personal

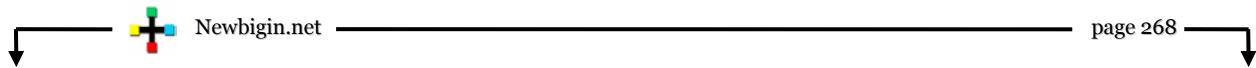
entities. The importance of this becomes clear if one recalls the distortion which arises when dialogue is conceived as the encounter of pure naked spirits. For those who regard the mystical experience of undifferentiated unity with pure Being as the core of religion, it will be natural to conceive dialogue as being directed towards a meeting of persons at a level 'deeper' than that which can be conceptualised. But, while *fully* acknowledging that there may be in such a personal meeting more than either of the partners can put into words, it must be insisted that truly personal relationships develop in the context of impersonal realities. We do not become more *fully* persons by trying to abstract ourselves from the world of things. The Christian in dialogue with men of other faiths rejoices to share with his partners the one common world which is the gift to both of the one God.

(c) Moreover, in the dialogue we meet at a particular place in time in the ongoing history of the world, a history which we believe to be under the providence and rule of God. We do not meet as academics studying dead traditions from the past, but as men and women of faith struggling to meet the demands and opportunities of *this* moment in the life of our city, our nation, our world. To recognise this will prevent us from simply shooting at each other from old fortresses. We shall meet in the open country where all of us, of whatever faith, are being called upon to bring our faith to the test of decision and action in new and often unprecedented situations. It is in this open

encounter in the field of contemporary decision that true dialogue takes place. This dialogue may, and often should, lead into common action on many matters of public life.

2. We participate in the dialogue as members in the body of Christ – that body which is sent into the world by the Father to continue the mission of Jesus. This has three consequences for the manner of the dialogue.

(a) It means that we are vulnerable. We are exposed to temptation. We have no defences of our own. We do not possess the truth in an unassailable form. A real meeting with a partner of another faith must mean being so open to him that his way of looking at the world becomes a real possibility for me. One has not really heard the message of one of the



great religions that have moved millions of people for centuries if one has not been really moved by it, if one has not felt in one's soul the power of it. Jesus was exposed to all the power of men's religious and ideological passion, to the point where he could cry, 'My God, my God, why did you forsake me?' and yet remain wholly bound to his Father and commit his spirit into his Father's hands. The true disciple will be exposed without defence in his dialogue with men of other faiths and yet will remain bound to Jesus.

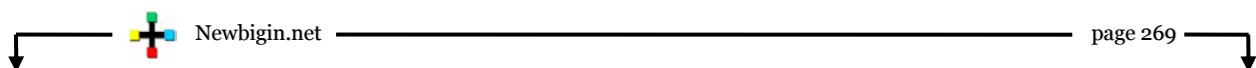
(b) One may put this point in the form of the model sketched on page 264. The Christian has to come down to the bottom of his stairway to meet his partner. Much of his 'Christianity' may have to be left behind in this meeting. Much of the intellectual construction, the piety, the practice in which his discipleship of Christ has been expressed may have to be called in question. The meeting place is at the Cross, at the place where he bears witness to Jesus as the judge and Saviour both of the Christian and of his partner.

(c) The implication of this is that the Christian who engages in dialogue must be firmly rooted in the life of the Church – its liturgy, teachings, sacraments and fellowship. The world of the religions is the world of the demonic. It is only by being deeply rooted in Christ that one can enter in complete self-emptying and with complete exposure into this world in order to bear faithful witness to Christ.

3. We participate in the dialogue believing and expecting that the Holy Spirit can and will use this dialogue to do his own sovereign work, to glorify Jesus by converting to him both the partners in the dialogue.

(a) The Christian partner must recognise that the result of the dialogue may be a profound change in himself. We have referred to the story of the meeting of Peter and Cornelius, which is the story of radical conversion both for the apostle and for the pagan Roman soldier. Klaus Klostermeier writes as follows of his experience of dialogue with Hindus: 'Never did I feel more inadequate, shattered and helpless before God ... all of a sudden the need for *a metanoia* in depth became irrepressibly urgent.'⁸

The Holy Spirit who convicts the world of sin, of righteous-



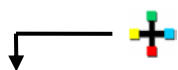
ness and of judgment, may use the non-Christian partner in dialogue to convict the Church. Dialogue means exposure to the shattering and upbuilding power of God the Spirit.

(b) The Christian will also believe and expect that the Holy Spirit can use the dialogue as the occasion for the conversion of his partner, to faith in Jesus. To exclude this belief and expectation is to reduce dialogue to something much less than its proper importance. What we have said about the 'conversion of Peter' in the encounter at Caesarea must not be used to overshadow the conversion of Cornelius, without which there would have been no conversion of Peter. A distinguished Hindu writer on religious and philosophical questions, Dr R. Sundarara

Rajan of Madras, has recently commented on the current developments in the field of Hindu-Christian dialogue. He points out that the emphasis upon a self-critical attitude, the demand that each party should try to see things from within the mind of the other, and the disavowal of any attempt by either side to question the faith of the others, can easily mean that dialogue is simply an exercise in the mutual confirmation of different beliefs with all the really critical questions excluded. 'If it is impossible to lose one's faith as a result of an encounter with another faith, then I feel that the dialogue has been made safe from all possible risks.'⁹

A dialogue which is safe from all possible risks is no true dialogue. The Christian will go into dialogue believing that the sovereign power of the Spirit can use the occasion for the radical conversion of his partner as well as of himself.

(c) When we speak of the Holy Spirit we are speaking of the one who glorifies Christ by taking all the gifts of God and showing them to the Church as the treasury of Christ (John 16.40). The work of the Spirit is the confession of Christ (1 John 4.2f; 1 Cor. 12.3). The Spirit is not in the possession of the Church but is Lord over the Church, guiding the Church from its limited, partial and distorted understanding of and embodiment of the truth into the fulness of the truth in Jesus who is the one in whom all things consist (Col. 1.17). Not every spirit is the Holy Spirit. Not every form of vitality is his work. There is need for the gift of discernment. Peter



at Caesarea, and later the congregation in Jerusalem, had need of this discernment to recognise that this strange and (at first) shocking reversal of deeply held religious beliefs was the work of the Holy Spirit and not of the antichrist (Acts 11.1-18).

There is no substitute for the gift of discernment, no set of rules or institutional provisions by which we can be relieved of the responsibility for discernment. Dialogue cannot be 'made safe from all possible risks'. The Christian who enters into dialogue with people of other faiths and ideologies is accepting the risk. But to put *my* Christianity at risk is precisely the way by which I can confess Jesus Christ as Lord – Lord over all worlds and Lord over my faith. It is only as the Church accepts the risk that the promise is fulfilled that the Holy Spirit will take all the treasures of Christ, scattered by the Father's bounty over all the peoples and cultures of mankind, and declare them as the possession of Jesus to the Church.

The mystery of God's reign can only be made safe against all risk by being buried in the ground. It can only earn its proper profits if those to whom it is entrusted are willing to risk it in the commerce of mankind.

¹ This is a draft originally prepared at the request of the Lutheran Church in America, Division for World Mission and Evangelism. In addition to the books mentioned, the following brief selection may be of use: H. Kraemer, *The Christian Message in a non-Christian World* (1938), *Religion and the Christian Faith* (1956), *World Religions and World Cultures* (1960); Nicol Macnicol, *Is Christianity Unique?* (1936); Carl Hallencreutz, *New Approaches to Men of Other Faiths* (1970); Stanley Samartha (ed.), *Living Faiths and the Ecumenical Movement* (1971), *World Community* (1975). Indian publications: David G. Moses, *Religious Truth and the Relation between Religions* (1950); P. D. Devanandan, *Christian Concern in Hinduism* (1961), *Preparation for Dialogue* (1964); Herbert Jai Singh, *Inter-religious Dialogue* (1967); Swami Abhishiktanandan, *Hindu-Christian Meeting Point within the Cave of the Heart* (1968); Nirmal Minz, *Mahatma Gandhi and Hindu-Christian Dialogue* (1970); Raymond Panikkar, *The Trinity and World Religions* (1970); Klaus Klostermaier, *Hindu and Christian in Vrindaban* (1969).

² John Oman, *The Natural and the Supernatural* (1931), pp. 29-46.

³ E.g. S. Radhakrishnan, *Eastern Religion and Western Thought* (1939).

4 E.g. Devanandan and M. M. Thomas (eds.), *Christian Participation in Nation-building*
5 (1960); M. M. Thomas, *The Acknowledged Christ of the Indian Renaissance* (1970)
6 Perhaps the best-known example is J. N. Farquhar, *The Crown of Hinduism* (1913).
7 Loc. cit., chapter III, 'The Dialogue'.
8 W. Freytag, *The Gospel and the Religions* (1958), p. 21.
9 In *Inter-religious Dialogue*, ed. H. Jai Singh (Bangalore, 1967).
'Negations: an article on dialogue among religions', by R. Sundarara Rajan, *Religion and Society* (Bangalore), XXI (4), p. 74.

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