



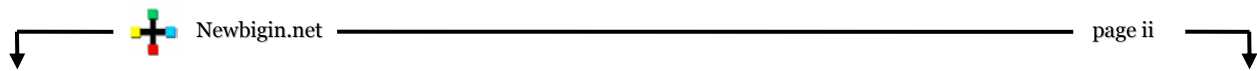
Christian Witness in a Plural Society

1977

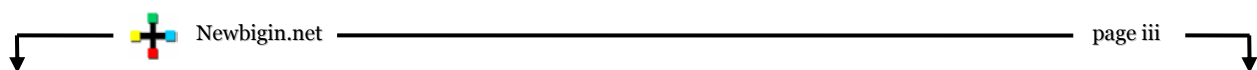
J.E. Lesslie Newbigin

(London: British Council of Churches, 1977)

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An article entitled "Interfaith Dialogue" by Bishop Newbigin, which looks at the same topic as this booklet, if from a somewhat different starting point, and which includes certain of the same paragraphs, is being published in the *Scottish Journal of Theology* Vol. 30 No. 3, June 1977. The British Council of Churches gratefully acknowledges the mutual agreement to include these passages in both publications.



PREFACE

The Churches in Great Britain and Ireland have become more and more strongly aware in recent years of the presence among us in these islands of substantial communities belonging to other world faiths.

In 1974, the British Council of Churches appointed an advisory group on the Presence of Islam in Britain, with the Bishop of Guildford as its chairman. One of its first pieces of work was to assist and encourage Bishop David Brown in preparing the booklet *A New Threshold*, which gave basic information about Islam and outlined a Christian approach to Muslims in this country. That booklet has been widely welcomed and discussed.

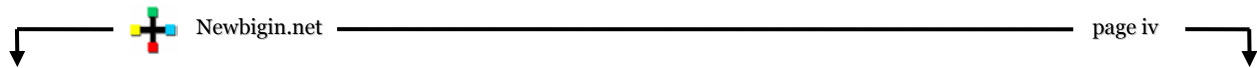
The purpose of the present booklet is to clarify the issues of faith which confront the Christian in determining his attitude towards those who do not acknowledge Jesus as Lord and Saviour. Bishop Newbigin's personal experience has been mainly with Hindus, and his paper gains much of its value from his experience as a pastor and bishop in the Church of South India. But his approach is intended to be helpful in envisaging Christian responsibility towards those of any faith or ideology.

In the debate for which this paper was originally written, the Assembly of the British Council of Churches welcomed most warmly the approach that Bishop Newbigin had taken, and encouraged the Council to take a new initiative in this field. The resolutions which were passed on that occasion are printed on the next page.

In making this study available for discussion and action throughout the Christian community, the Council records its warm thanks to Bishop Newbigin and looks forward to learning yet more through him and his ministry.

Harry Morton, General Secretary

May 1977



Resolutions passed by the Assembly of the British Council of Churches April 27th 1977

The Assembly of the British Council of Churches

believes the presence in Britain of significant numbers of people of faiths other than Christian to be within God's gracious purposes;

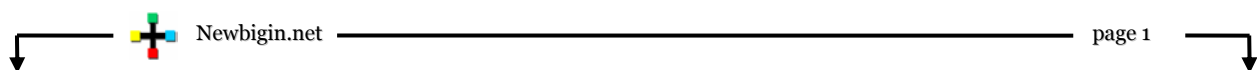
welcomes the new opportunities this presents to Christians both to learn from those of other faiths and to bear witness to their own faith;

affirms that there is much need and scope for Christians to work together with those of other faiths for the common good of mankind along the lines of the Code of Practice outlined in *A New Threshold* by the Rt. Revd. David Brown, Bishop of Guildford (BCC Publications);

instructs the Executive Committee of the BCC, in cooperation with the Conference of British Missionary Societies, to establish a means of helping the churches and their agencies

- (i) to increase awareness of the facts and the implications of the religiously plural character of the world community, and
- (ii) to promote creative Christian response;

asks that Bishop Lesslie Newbigin's paper to be published as soon as possible as a further contribution to the present discussions.



Christian Witness In A Plural Society

A Latin American friend who had recently spent six months in England, in reflecting on his experience of the Church in this country, told me that nothing had surprised him more than the perplexity and uncertainty which seemed to have been engendered among Church people by the presence in this country of large groups of Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs. He found it hard to understand why, in view of the long history of their involvement in overseas missions, Christians in this country seemed to be suddenly overcome by the conviction that to offer the Gospel to these fellow citizens would be – somehow – improper. I think that most readers of this paper will agree that there are, in fact, reasons for this uncertainty. Perhaps the best way of entering the subject will be to look at these reasons.

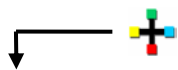
However faithful or unfaithful our practice may have been, in theory we have always believed that the Church had a Gospel to proclaim, and that the faithful proclaiming of it was our duty. Evangelism has been acknowledged to be an essential part of our business. But our

evangelism has been within a broadly Christian culture. The people we addressed had already a Christian background, furnished by the innumerable elements in the language, literature and institutions which we share as a people. The appeal of the evangelist was to come back to something the hearers in their heart of hearts already knew, but from which they had strayed.

Dialogue interrupted

Our life as churches is rooted in the long centuries during which Western Christendom was a small enclave confined by the power of Islam within the north-western corner of the Eurasian land-mass. In its first five centuries Christianity had been in continuous dialogue with other faiths—those of the Graeco-Roman world and those of Iran and the Middle East. But when the armies of Islam swept out of Arabia through the old heart-lands of the Church, across North Africa and northwards into Spain and Italy, the possibility of contact was lost. For five centuries Western Christendom was a semi-barbarian culture hemmed in and overshadowed by the higher and more powerful culture of Islam. The basic structures of our churchmanship were laid down during this period. 'Evangelism' could only mean preaching the Gospel to those who had already heard it; those who had not heard it were out of sight.

Islam was a theocratic empire in which religion, culture, politics and military power were fused into a single entity. When the reaction of Western Christendom began, it was shaped by that against which it reacted. The centre of the counter movement was the Iberian peninsula. It was a movement in which military conquest daring exploration, commerce and evangelism all went hand in hand. There was an enemy to be conquered and – if possible – converted. It was a kind of holy war.



Following the lead of Spain and Portugal the other nations of Western Europe joined in the movement. Western Christendom thus came into contact with the rest of the world as a crusading power. The alliance between the religious element in this movement on the one hand, and the military, commercial and political elements on the other, though gradually loosened, was not wholly dissolved until the whole movement had spent its force during the early part of this century. The enduring strength of this alliance is seen in the fact that some Christians still find it natural to use the word 'crusade' to describe the work of the evangelist, and even to speak of 'aggressive evangelism'.

This whole way of understanding evangelism is now recognised by most thinking Christians in this country as unacceptable. They wish to be agents not of aggression but of reconciliation. And their conviction that the previous way of understanding evangelism was wrong is strengthened by the experience of meeting considerable numbers of Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims as fellow-citizens. They discover that these are not enemies of the truth to be subdued, nor backward people to be civilized. They can very easily see that they are – on the whole and on an average – more devout, God-fearing and law-abiding than many of the natives of these islands. If they have the opportunity of more intimate friendship they will find much more: evidences of a level of devotion of commitment and of spiritual experience which make the average Christian aware of the shallowness of his own. Traditional concepts of evangelism do not fit this situation. These are not people who have lapsed from the faith and have to be recalled to it: they are in most cases devout adherents of another faith. Nor can they be seen as enemies of the Truth, to be subdued and converted. Nor can they be seen as backward peoples to be enlightened and civilised. None of these models fits. Surely the only possible thing to say is that they are fellow human beings and fellow citizens to be respected, welcomed and enjoyed as friends.

Learning to live together

The presence of people of other faiths in our midst is only one symptom of something more fundamental and far-reaching: the fact that we face in an unprecedented form the problem of

learning to live together on one planet. The accelerating explosion of world population is on such a stupendous scale that it is difficult for us to grasp its significance and to recognise that it creates a radically new situation for the human race. It is only a short time ago that we were like small tribes inhabiting a vast forest, so large that we only occasionally met for mutual trading or for inter-tribal skirmishing. Today we are more like the inhabitants of an overcrowded slum where several families have to share a single flat. We are already fighting among ourselves – even the wealthy nations of the West – for the diminishing stocks of food. The pictures which television brings us of the 'cod war' and its various sequels are grim reminders that we are at the beginning of a time when there will be an open struggle for scarce food supplies. The human race simply cannot

survive unless we can learn to live together at peace and with justice. We must learn the secret of unity, or we must perish. Conflict between different religions has been, and still is, an important cause of disunity. Surely – it is argued – the first duty of Christians, as of all people of good will, at such a time as this, is to work for mutual understanding between religions rather than to engage in the effort to promote one as against the others.

This argument is often reinforced by the recollection of what we have learned during the present century through the ecumenical movement. Churches which, 50 years ago, were happily occupied in the attempt to confute each other's claims and (in some cases) to win converts from each other's membership, have now renounced such enterprises as wrong. They have learned the arts of dialogue and co-operation, and are moving along the road to unity. Should we not (it is argued) extend this procedure into the world of inter-faith relations? Does not the hour require 'the larger ecumenism' which will forswear all attempts to win converts from one faith to another and learn to practise the arts of dialogue, mutual understanding and – perhaps ultimately – unity?

Perhaps if my Latin American friend had lived longer in this country, or had reflected more deeply on our situation, he might have been more understanding of our perplexity as we ask: 'What is our responsibility towards those of other faiths and ideologies?' Nevertheless the implied criticism in his comments is one that we cannot evade: we cannot, without abandoning the central Christian tradition, abandon our calling to be bearers of a Gospel for all mankind. The faithful fulfilment of that calling in the radically new historical situation of our country today will require profound re-examination of the substance of our faith, and – perhaps at some points – a recognition that we have been wrong in our understanding of it.

1. The Imperative of Unity

Let us begin with the need for unity among peoples of all faiths, ideologies and cultures. I have argued that this is urgent and imperative. The difficulty here is that 'unity' is a purely formal concept until one has begun to answer the question: 'Unity on what basis, or around what centre?' In the world of power politics we are accustomed to hear speeches about 'world peace' but we know that the actual meaning of the word 'peace' in each case depends upon whether it is spoken in Washington or Moscow. All imperialisms are programmes for unity. 'Unity' is an empty word until one knows what is to its content, and that means that something has to be said about the structure of unity, about the commitments which will hold it together. Andre Dumas in a brilliant paper on 'The Unity of the Church and the Unity of Mankind' (WCC: Study Encounter Vol. X No. 2, 1974, SE/61) has pointed out that in every case where a programme for unity is put forward without an explicit

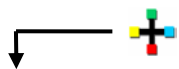
statement of the centre of the proposed unity, the proposer is in fact proposing himself as the centre. This is very familiar to us in all kinds of context. Your programme for unity is seen by me as a threat to my independence unless it is clear that the programme provides for a centre of authority to which we are both responsible.

In the case of the movement for unity among the churches this was clearly recognised from the beginning. The acceptance of the YMCA 'Paris Basis' – 'Jesus Christ, God and Saviour' – was crucial for the developments which led up to the formation of the World Council of Churches. The call to unity was not made on the basis of an agreed concept of what the form of that unity would be: that was left open. But it was on the basis of an agreed centre, on the basis that all parties accepted the final authority of Jesus, and that this acceptance committed them to seeking the unity which this required. This is why it is a serious confusion of language to speak of 'the larger ecumenism' in respect of a proposal for unity among the religions which implies the relativising of the claim that Jesus is Lord. A movement which seeks for unity on the basis of some other commitment than the commitment to Jesus as Lord is not an enlargement of the ecumenical movement, but the abandonment of it.

What basis for unity?

What would be the structure of unity between the religions? Around what centre could one conceive of their being united? What would be the commitments which would hold their adherents together with a loyalty which transcended their loyalties to their several faiths?

There have always been, of course, those whose advocacy of unity among the religions rests on commitments which are not themselves religious. There have been and are many systems of science and philosophy which claim to be able to point in terms drawn from psychology or sociology. From their points of view the differences which divide the adherents of the religions arise from factors which can be rationally explained, and when this is done there is no reason left for conflict. There are also, as there have always been, people whose primary commitment is to some political or social order, and who therefore judge religions in terms of their positive or negative influence in maintaining order, unity and stability in society. One form of this is the widespread belief that 'religion' is good for maintaining moral standards; these standards are usually understood in conservative terms, and religion becomes a valued support for the existing form of society. Both the nationalist and the political-moral programmes for unity among the religions were nicely caricatured by Gibbon when he wrote that, in the Roman Empire, all religions were regarded by the people as equally true, by the philosophers as equally false, and by the authorities as equally useful.



Here we are dealing with proposals for unity among the religions which arise from outside religion itself. In the one case unity, is sought on the basis of a view of reality drawn from science or philosophy. in the other on the basis of a programme for political and social order. Like all programmes for human unity, therefore, these will necessarily be divisive, because not all men will accept either the proposed scientific understanding of reality or the proposed political and social order. The scientist, the statesman and the moralist will have to defend their claims that their proposals offer a basis for human unity against those who deny this.

There are also, as there have always been, those whose advocacy of unity among the religions arises from within the religious commitment itself. In fact all the great world religions, claiming to offer to their adherents an ultimate commitment which will guide them through all experience, necessarily include an interpretation of the other religions within the single worldview which they provide. Each of these is a programme for the unity of religions, but it is – as every programme must be – a programme which is built round a definite centre. Islam gives a very important place to Abraham, Moses and Jesus as messengers who were sent to remind men of the

truth which was finally and decisively revealed to Muhammad. But Islam could not accept the view that Muhammad is merely one among the messengers without destroying itself. Hinduism recognises and welcomes a vast variety of different religions, both those which have come to birth within India and those which have entered from outside, but it sees them as all within the eternal order – the sanatanadharmā – as Indian sages have interpreted it. A programme for human unity which treated the sanatanadharmā as merely one of the possible ways of viewing reality could not be conceived within the Hindu world-view.

But the struggle for human unity has prompted men again and again to seek within all the religions for that which is the essence of them all, that which all could accept in common as being the essential truth to which they were committed. Some examples of this search have left their mark on subsequent history—such as Manicheism, created in the 2nd century by drawing together insights from Buddhism, Judaism and Christianity, or Theosophy in the 19th century. The problem—as these examples remind us—is that the putting together of truths from different religions does not enable the believer to escape from the fundamental human predicament, namely that the result is still only one proposal which has to be defended against others. A variety of relative truths do not become absolute by being combined.

A Copernican revolution?

A good example of the problem, and of its intractability, is provided in the proposal of Professor John Hick for what he calls a Copernican revolution in our understanding of the religions. Ptolemaic astronomy, believing that the



earth was the centre of the stellar system, had more and more difficulty in explaining the observed movements of planets and stars. More and more ellipses were postulated to explain the phenomena without abandoning the pattern. The problem was solved when Copernicus proposed a totally different pattern in which the earth was displaced from the centre and the sun took its place. All the paraphernalia of ellipses were declared redundant, and all was clear. In like manner, says Professor Hick, we have been living in a Ptolemaic world, imagining that Christianity was the centre of the universe of faiths, and that the other religions circled at varying distances around it. As the realities of other religions have become better known, more and more elaborate and unconvincing theories have been developed to account for the phenomena without abandoning the pattern. The time has now come for a Copernican revolution. We must recognise that God is the only centre, and that all the religions, including our own, are the planets that circle round him. To do this will be to relieve ourselves of a vast and unnecessary elaboration of theory and to see the facts as they really are.

About this proposal I would venture three comments which – *mutatis mutandis* – apply to the many other similar attempts to establish the unity of all religions from within the religious perspective.

(a) With great respect I venture to think that there is a logical fallacy. The sun, the planets and the earth are all objects capable of investigation by the same methods of observation; they are equally objects of sense-perception. God and the religions are not objects in the same class. If the analogy of the Copernican revolution is to be applied to the relation of Christianity and the other religions without logical fallacy, then like must be compared with like. God is not accessible to observation in the same sense in which the world religions are, and we have no frame of reference within which we can compare 'God as he really is' with 'God as conceived in the world religions'. The two realities which are accessible and comparable are: 'God as I conceive him' and 'God as the world religions conceive him'. What claims to be a model for the unity of religions turns out in fact to be the claim that one theologian's conception of God is the reality which is the central essence of all religions. This is the trap into which every programme for the unity of the religions

is bound to fall. What any theologian propounds as the essence of religion is in fact his religion. Believing it to be true he is right to proclaim it, but he is not delivered from the particularity and relativity which belong to every human programme. He is not delivered from the necessity of explaining why this conception of God is true as against the conception of Allah in the Qur'an, or against Hindu conceptions of the ultimate reality. This proposal is still only one among the various proposals about the nature of God. It may claim to be the ultimate truth which relativises all the other claims to truth in the world religions, but this is exactly what each of the world religions claims to do in respect of the other claims.

(b) Moreover, since we are talking about the unity of mankind, and not just about unity among religious people, we have to ask how this proposal

can be validated against the view – now the official view of about half of the human race – that the whole of this world of religions is simply false and that a scientific understanding of history will liberate the human race from these illusions and open the way for the true unity of a classless world. From a Marxist point of view it is not difficult to detect the ideological character of a proposal for the unity of religions, as distinct from the unity of mankind as a whole, nor to see that this represents part of the defensive strategy of a social order under attack by the victims of its injustices.

(c) This latter point leads immediately to a third. Airgen Moltmann in *The Crucified God* (S.C.M. Press) has argued powerfully that modern atheism is the rejection not of the Christian Gospel but of a sort of generalised theism which has been substituted for it during most of our recent history. The vague idea of 'God' which most people in our society imagine to be the central point of concern in all the religions, has been produced by the flowing together of streams from the Bible, Greek philosophy and Muslim theology (which played a decisive part in the birth of modern western theology in the 13th century). This is something very different from the Christian understanding which has always at its centre the figure not of a sovereign potentate but of a crucified man, and which is adequately set forth only in the fully Trinitarian teaching of the early centuries. When the Christians of the early centuries faced the task of saying who Jesus is in terms of the 'lords many and gods many' of the classical world, they could only do it by means of the Trinitarian model. It is significant that when the word 'God' is spoken in discussions such as the present, few Christians think immediately of the Trinity. The operative model is not trinitarian but unitarian. If the word 'God' really means 'Father, Son and Holy Spirit', then Professor Hick's Copernican revolution will not be acceptable to people of other faiths. If it does not mean that, it will have to be rejected by Christians who-at this point-will join the atheists.

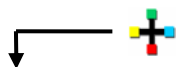
The point of this discussion is simply to illustrate the truth of Andre Dumas' thesis, that when a proposal for unity is made, if the proposer does not explicitly indicate the centre around which the proposed unity is to be structured, then he is in fact proposing his own religion. Obviously we must all agree that the centre of all things is God-God as he truly is. Certainly the centre is not Christianity, which is a highly ambiguous and vastly diversified and constantly changing historical phenomenon. The Christian faith is that it is Jesus Christ who, being part of history and therefore part of the world accessible to our knowledge, is 'God as he truly is'. Therefore Jesus Christ is the centre, and all the phenomena of religion (including Christianity) and all the phenomena of irreligion and anti-religion are to be judged and valued by their relation to him.

This is the Christian proposal for the unity of mankind. It has been so from the beginning. Even when Christians were a tiny and insignificant minority, a marginal disturbance among the proletariat of the Roman Empire, they rejected any conception of themselves as one among the many ways of personal salvation. They did not accept the position (which would have enabled them to avoid trouble) of a *cultus privatus*, ministering to men's longing for personal salvation but making no wider claim. They never, as far as our records go, used for their assemblies the names used by the many religious groups dedicated to the search for personal salvation. They believed that the Jesus whom they knew as 'head of the Church' was equally head of the entire cosmos. In the end, they were bound to challenge the *cultus publicus* of the Empire and overthrow it. They looked for the final uniting of all things in Jesus, because they believed that he was already Lord of all.

We hesitate to use this kind of language now, because it has been so tarnished by association with the crusading spirit of the centuries just behind us. We are right to reject that spirit. The victory of Christ over the world to which the New Testament looks is won not by aggression and violence, but by suffering. It is the blood of the Lamb, and of those who follow the Lamb on the way of total sacrifice, that brings victory. But our shame and penitence as we remember the sins of arrogance and pride which have so often marked our witness in the past must not be allowed to mislead us into toying with any other conception of human unity than that which is promised and made available in the man Jesus Christ who alone is true man.

To make this claim is not arrogance. It is simply to acknowledge our human situation, namely that we have no standpoint which is above all standpoints. We can only testify to what we have seen and known. There is no proposal for human unity which is not a particular proposal, and therefore potentially divisive. The universe, if one may put it so, has not been furnished with a spectators' gallery from which one can look down on all the contending parties and see things from an impartial point of view. We are in the arena along with everyone else. But we have been chosen and called, through no merit of our own, to be witnesses of the one who is indeed above all-Jesus Christ. Our responsibility is to learn, with all other men and women, how to be agents of his purpose to draw all to himself.

'With all other men and women' – I repeat this phrase in order to respond to a difficulty which must already be in the reader's mind. Have we, it may be asked, escaped from the subjectivity of which I have been accusing others by speaking of 'Jesus Christ' rather than of 'God' as the true centre for human unity? Is it not notorious that there is an almost infinite variety among the portraits of Jesus which have been taken as the centre of attention down the centuries—from the Byzantine Pantocrator to the guerrilla Jesus of the



liberation theologians, from the black Christ to the ultra-white 'gentle Jesus' of liberal Protestantism? Even if we speak of Jesus as the centre, do we escape from the subjectivity and relativity that I have been criticising?

Learning from each other

I would reply that if we are serious about being 'with all other men and women' in learning from Jesus, then we are on the way to the knowledge of the true centre—on the way, but certainly not already there. My understanding of Jesus is conditioned by the whole of my culture – as is all my other knowledge. 'Jesus as I know him' is not the centre for the unity of mankind, but I am confirmed in my faith that 'Jesus as he really is' is that centre by the experience of the ecumenical movement. The enormous diversity of culturally conditioned understandings of who Jesus is has sometimes seemed such as to break the ecumenical fellowship into fragments. But it has not done so. On the contrary, when men and women of vastly different cultures and even of diametrically opposed political commitments have been willing to open themselves together to the original

testimony of Scripture they have found that there is one Jesus Christ who 'frees and unites' and they have learned-or begun to learn-how to say together who he is.

Yet even to say this is to say only the first part of what must be said. It is not just 'with all Christians' but 'with all other men and women' that we have to learn who Jesus is. Even the whole testimony of the Christian community as it now is, is not enough to say who Jesus is. The whole Church itself is only learning, and it has to learn through open and humble dialogue with men and women who do not acknowledge him. We see the beginnings of this learning in the New Testament itself. The encounter of Peter with a pagan Roman soldier at Caesarea was not only the occasion for the conversion of the soldier; it was also the occasion for a conversion of Peter and of the Church from a very limited to a much fuller understanding of who Jesus is. That learning has to go on until the day when 'every tongue confesses him' for only when 'all things have been summed up in him' (Eph. 1: 10) will we know in full what it means to call him 'Lord'.

The knowledge of 'God as he really is' in the man Jesus has this in common with all forms of knowledge: that it involves both the activity of a knowing subject and the reality of that which is to be known. We learn only by directing our attention to and opening all our faculties to that which we seek to know. The Christian confesses that he knows only in part, but he invites all men to direct their attention to, and to open all their faculties to Jesus in the faith that, together, we shall learn to know who he is. In this process the Christian is a learner, and expects to learn not only from his fellow Christian of another culture, but also from his fellow man or woman of another faith or ideology.



2. The Light that Shines on Every Man

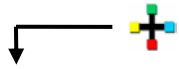
The statement that in Jesus we see 'God as he really is' carries with it the implication that every part of the whole created world, and every human being, is related to Jesus. St John expresses this by saying that Jesus is the Word through whom all things came to be, that he is the life of all that is and that he is the light that gives light to every man. To say this is to affirm that the presence and work of Jesus are not confined within the area where he is acknowledged. St John also says, in the same breath, that the light shines in the darkness and that the darkness has not mastered it. His whole gospel is the elucidation of that statement in terms of actual history. This is not a sort of Christ-monism: there is light and there is darkness. But light shines on in the darkness to the uttermost; there is no point at which light stops and darkness begins, unless the light has been put under a bushel. When the light shines freely one cannot draw a line and say 'Here light stops and darkness begins'. But one can and must say 'There is where the light shines; go towards it and your path will be clear; turn your back on it and you will go into deeper darkness'. One can and must do what John the Baptist did: one can and must 'bear witness to the light'.

The Christian proposal for the unity of mankind does not, therefore, involve any attempt to deny the reality of the work of God in the lives and thoughts and prayers of men and women outside the Christian Church. On the contrary it ought to involve an eager expectation of, looking for and rejoicing in the evidence of that work. There is something deeply wrong when Christians imagine that loyalty to Jesus requires them to belittle the manifest presence of the light in the lives of men and women who do not acknowledge him, to seek out points of weakness, to ferret out hidden sins and deceptions as a means of commending the Gospel. If we love the light and walk in the light we will also rejoice in the light wherever we find it-even the smallest gleams of it in the surrounding darkness.

Not only in religion

Here I am thinking, let it be clearly understood, not only of the evidences of light in the religious life of non-Christians, the steadfastness and costliness of the devotion which so often puts Christians to shame; I am thinking also of the no less manifest evidences of the shining of the

light in the lives of atheists, humanists, Marxists and others who have explicitly rejected the message and the fellowship of the Church. 'The light' is not to be identified with the religious life of men; religion is in fact too often the sphere of darkness, Christian religion not excluded. The parable of the Good Samaritan is a sharp and constantly needed reminder to the godly of all faiths that the boundary between religion and its absence is by no means to be construed as the boundary between light and darkness.

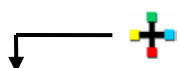


Christians, then, in their dealing with men and women who do not acknowledge Jesus as Lord, will meet them and share with them in a common life, not as strangers but as those who live by the same life-giving Word, and in whom the same life-giving light shines. They will recognise and rejoice in the evidences they find of a response to the same God from whom alone life and light come. They will join with their non-Christian neighbours in all that serves life against death and light against darkness. They will expect to learn as well as to teach, to receive as well as to give, in this common human enterprise of living and building up a common life. They will not be eager to have their particular contributions to the common human task separately labelled as 'Christian'. They will be happy if only what they do can serve the reign and righteousness of the Father of Jesus who loves all, gives life to all, and purposes the blessing of all.

But to have said this is not to have said everything. The same Evangelist who speaks of Jesus as the life and the light of men goes on to say: 'The Word became flesh and dwelt among us'. The Christian proposal for the unity of mankind is centred in a piece of concrete history, in events which took place in the Middle East 19 centuries ago. Do we have to go on speaking about this history? Can we not be content to acknowledge light as light and life as life wherever we find them, to rejoice in them, to build on them, to share together in all the life and light that we have in common? The story of Jesus is very precious to us. It is the place where we have received light and life. But for others it is foreign, an import from alien history. Do we have to insist that this piece of history is decisive for the unity of mankind'?

3. The Scandal of History

I have used the biblical word 'scandal'-stumbling block-because for millions of men and women nurtured in the religious traditions of Asia this is indeed the stumbling block. They are more than happy to acknowledge Jesus as among the supreme teachers and exemplars of the true light. They place him without hesitation alongside the Buddha and the sages to whom we owe the Upanishads and the Bhagavagita. With considerably less conviction they are willing to recognise in the Old Testament gleams of light which can be treasured as part of the patrimony of mankind. What seems to them scandalous is the intransigence with which Christians have traditionally refused to accept for Jesus a place as one among the teachers of mankind and have insisted that Jesus only is to be acknowledged as Lord and Saviour of all mankind, and that the history of Israel is to be acknowledged as the unique centre of God's saving purpose for the world. To very many of India's most generous and sensitive spirits this intransigence has seemed to be explicable only as part of the arrogance and blindness of western European man as India has known him.



Nor is this opinion confined to Asia. From the 'Age of Reason' in the 18th century until today there is an increasing number of men and women in the western world who find it impossible to believe that one particular series of events in the whole history of mankind can be regarded as having absolute significance. We have learned to look at all events as contingent. We see them all as part of one continuum, each the result of those which went before and the cause or

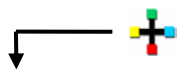
occasion of those which follow. We have learned to look at the Bible as a part of the history and literature of mankind, to examine it with the same critical tools which we use in any other piece of study, and to interpret it in terms of the view of history as a whole which is normal in our culture.

If one may put the point simply for the moment in terms of the school curriculum: in the history class the events recorded in the New Testament have their place only as a very small fragment of world history, rating perhaps a page in a textbook. In the RE class they are not treated as part of world history, but as sources of guidance for personal living. This is essentially the Hindu way of looking at them, and it has become normal also in our culture.

Our culture, since the 18th century, has in fact accepted other models for understanding world history, and has therefore found it necessary to search for a 'Jesus of history' distinct from the 'Christ of faith'. The faith of the first disciples was that the Jesus whom they knew was the clue for interpreting history. Their faith was a faith about the meaning of history. When another model for interpreting history is accepted (namely the idea that man is the bearer of his own history), then the 'Christ of faith' can no longer be the 'Jesus of history', for 'faith' is understood to be a matter concerning the personal religious life rather than the public political life of mankind.

What it means to be human

The issue, therefore, is one which concerns the very heart of what it means to be human. Indian spirituality has understood human life to be essentially spiritual, primarily concerned with that dimension of interiority which has been so daringly explored in the mystical tradition. From this point of view the external public life of man, his politics, economics and culture, can only have a secondary place. In the end they drop away and man's ultimate destiny is in a spiritual world which belongs to another level of existence. This view is also very general in the western world in so far as it is still religious. From this point of view particular events in history cannot have permanently decisive significance. They can be illustrative of eternal realities, but each man must in the end lay hold of these realities for himself. The enduring reality is the immortal soul, and the outward events of history can constitute no more than a 'vale of soul-making'.



In contrast to this, the Bible sees man as part of the whole created world of nature and as existing in and through relations of mutual responsibility. To be human is to be involved with all other men and women in responsibility towards nature and within a covenant which God has made with all the human race. There is no vision of a day when these relationships drop away and man is left as a naked spirit in the presence of the eternal Spirit. On the contrary, the final vision is of a city, the ultimate achievement of that effort of human co-operation which we call civilisation, but it is the vision of the city given to man as a sheer gift of God's grace. In this perspective the public life of man in history is seen as no less essentially an aspect of his full humanity than his interior life of prayer and obedience and love towards God. Man is as he is in both of these aspects.

Never a private matter

Religion, therefore, can never be a private matter: it is a vision of the meaning of human life as a whole resting upon God's prior action in establishing his covenant with mankind. Man's life is a unity, and to speak of a separate department of life called 'religion' is to speak of an unreal abstraction. In this perspective the events by which God's covenant with man has been established and renewed – which are actual events in recorded history – can never be relegated to the status of 'illustrations' of a timeless relation between God and the individual soul. History has a real structure, a structure given by God's covenant actions. Man fulfils his human calling by

participating in this history. The Church, as the community entrusted with the responsibility of witnessing to this covenant, cannot do other than point to those events through which the shape of history as a whole is made manifest.

But if we left the matter there we would be seriously misrepresenting the matter. The kind of religious tradition which is typical of India, and which is immensely powerful in the modern world, is not the only one with which we have to deal. The two (perhaps the only two) vigorously missionary movements in the modern world are Islam and Marxism. Both of these take the public history of mankind with the utmost seriousness. Both of them are indebted to the insights of the Bible for their fundamental orientation. Marxism and Islam in its popular forms both look towards a real triumph within history. Marxism has radically secularised the biblical vision of the future, eliminating from it the dimension of grace but the Marxist vision of a classless society is clearly a secularised version of the Christian vision of the City of God. Contemporary Marxists are anxious to recover a recognition of the personal elements in human nature (socialism with a human face) which have been forgotten in the anti-personalist polemics of Marxist propaganda. However great their differences from each other and from Christianity, here are two world faiths which, like Christianity take history seriously. For them it is not historical particularity which is the scandal: the scandal lies in

the fact that at the heart of the Christian message there is a picture not of historical triumph but of historical defeat. The stumbling block is the Cross.

4. The Scandal of the Cross

As against the type of spirituality characteristic of Indian religion and of some modern Christian piety I have asserted that in the biblical perspective Christian faith is an interpretation of the public history of mankind as well as of his personal spiritual history and that to separate these two is to do violence to the real nature of man. It would be, and it has been fatally easy to translate this assertion into a programme of worldly 'success' for Christianity. The true insight of the early Church, that Jesus who is the slain Lamb is also the conquering lion of the tribe of Judah could – after the conversion of the Empire – be translated with fatal ease into the false picture of Jesus seen as the heavenly counterpart of the earthly rulers of the Byzantine empire. It could be translated into the tragic disaster of the Crusades. It can be – and still is – translated into programmes for aggressive evangelism' by which it is anticipated that eventually all, or nearly all, of the world's peoples will have been Christianised. Against all of these misinterpretations there stands forever at the heart of the Christian tradition the fact that Jesus, who came to proclaim and to be in his own person the reign of God died on a cross as a defeated, condemned and excommunicated man, and that among his last words was the terrible cry: 'My God, why have you forsaken me?' It is this Jesus whom the Church proclaims as the risen and victorious Lord and King. The crucified is Lord, the Lord is the crucified.

Small wonder that this message was rejected with horror or ridicule. Small wonder, also that the Church, which in days of weakness had triumphed over persecution in the strength of this message, could not for long hold to it without corruption in the days of power. For it is the total reversal of everything that men normally accept as the truth about God and about history. Put simply, it forever excludes the conception of the shape of history as the triumph of one of the 'causes' within history, even the cause of 'Christianity' if by that is meant that 'Christianity' becomes a dominant world power. It does so, because it exposes the fact that man, made in God's image and as God's covenant partner, is the enemy who has turned against his partner, and that nevertheless-God has refused to leave hold of his partner, but has accepted the betrayal and borne its pain himself. It is thus, as Paul expresses it, the establishment in the midst of history of a concrete 'mercy-seat', a place where man's radical sinfulness is exposed, accepted and forgiven. It

is thus the offer of a concrete centre for the unity of mankind. For disunity is fundamentally the result of the separate egotisms, personal and corporate, which cause us to make ourselves the hidden centres of our proposals for human unity. The deepest cause of our disunity is that each of us makes himself the centre of his world. Unity can only come to us as a gift, and its centre can only be an act of forgiveness by which we are



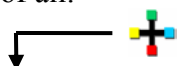
delivered from our attempts at self-justification and enabled to forgive one another the wrongs we do to each other.

A radical discontinuity

It is at this point that we encounter the radical discontinuity between the message we have to deliver and the religious and ethical experience of mankind. That there is a fundamental continuity I have already asserted: the light that lightens every man is not another light but the one light there is whom we confess as Jesus Christ. The terrible paradox of the human situation is that the light we have received is turned into darkness by being shut off from its source. In the light of the highest of human standards of truth and righteousness, Jesus appears as a subverter, as he did to the spiritual heirs of Moses, and as he does for the noblest and most sensitive among the adherents of other faiths and ideologies. It is only after the total overturning of the traditional world of values that he is seen as the fulfiller, not the destroyer, of what went before.

Very specially for those who share the biblical understanding of man's life in terms of his total public history – namely Jews, Muslims and Marxists – this message of the Cross comes as a terrible denial of what they are bound to hold as supremely important. Viewed from within any of these faiths, the preaching of a crucified Messiah can only be seen as subversive of the highest goal to which man is called. The Jew must reject the claim that Jesus is the Messiah. The Muslim must deny that he did in fact die. And the Marxist must denounce the preaching of the Cross as treason against the just rights of the oppressed of the earth to rise against their oppressors. Yet – and here Paul is our guide – for those who have accepted that total reversal of direction which the Bible calls 'conversion', this same message of the Cross is seen as the power of God to accomplish those things which the Jew, the Muslim and the Marxist rightly seek – the justice of God in the life of society.

It is important to include Marxism in this discussion, not only because it is one of the two contemporary missionary faiths, and not only because it commands the obedience of a large part of the human race, but because its challenge reminds us of the real context of our question. Our question is not how to achieve unity among the religions; it is about how to achieve a just unity among all peoples. The heart of the problem lies in the juxtaposition of 'justice' and 'unity'. Unity without justice is another name for tyranny. But when justice is sought as an end in itself without recognising the claim of unity, it is only another name for endless warfare of each against all, for no one is competent to be judge of what is just in his own case. Each of us claims for himself more than is just in relation to the claims of all. 'Justice' can only be a meaningful word in the context of some kind of unity within which we agree to moderate the claim of each in the interests of all.



Marxism develops in its adherents an unlimited self-righteousness in which 'justice' is pursued in absolutist terms which allow no place for the concept of forgiveness. The message of the Cross is central to the search for a just unity because, on the one hand, it condemns both the self-righteousness which identifies my cause with God's righteousness and the blindness which hides from me the reality of my sin against my neighbour, and because, on the other hand, it

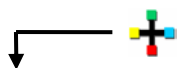
offers the gift of peace with God and therefore with my neighbour. It makes possible a struggle for justice without self-righteous fanaticism, and a mutual forgiveness within which there can be unity without tyranny. Not just for the personal lives of individuals, but for the ordering of the public life of mankind, the Cross is the place where 'righteousness and peace have kissed each other'-the unique place, to which we are in duty bound to direct men's steps.

But in that sense is the Cross 'a place' which is accessible now to people of the 20th century'? How is the unique work of Christ made accessible to the world now'? To answer this question we have to speak about the Christian community, about the Church.

5. The Church as Bearer of the Gospel

Jesus went to the Cross alone. He told even his closest friends that they could not come with him – then; he added that they would follow afterwards. At the point when he left them he gave them a command which would give substance to this promise. By the words and actions of the Last Supper he told them that they were to be partners in his death, and that by doing what he had commanded them they would be united to him in this action. And when he came to them again as the risen and victorious Lord, he showed them the marks of his passion and sent them out to carry forward what he had been sent to do. They were to be the bearers through history of his death and resurrection. At the heart of their shared life there would be this action in which they were united with him in his dying and thereby in his victory over death. And because of his presence with them in the power of the Spirit they would be witnesses of this victory to all nations. It is not promised to them that they will be successful in converting all peoples to their faith; rather it is promised that they will be a suffering minority, sharing through him in the tribulation which must mark the conflict between the reign of God and the power of evil. The final victory is wholly his; they are witnesses of it, but it is his victory. They share in it only as they suffer with him for it. What is promised (and it is a promise, not a command) is that through their suffering the Spirit will bear his own witness to Christ.

We have therefore to answer the question: 'How is the unique work of Christ made accessible to the world now?' by the affirmation that it is made accessible through the life and witness of the Church. About this statement, because it is often misunderstood, we have now to make the following observations and clarifications.



(a) The sole reason why this statement can be made is that God has chosen those who are called Christians to be the bearers of this witness. They are a sinful company, sometimes more sinful than the world around them. From the very beginning they have been a company that both confesses Christ and denies him. Peter, the Rock, was also called Satan.

(b) The Church is the bearer of the work of Christ through history, but not the exclusive beneficiary. God purposes the salvation of all. For this purpose he has chosen a people. Because that people have over and over again fallen into the sin of supposing that they have a claim upon God which other men do not have, they have over and over again been punished and humiliated and have had to hear the word of God spoken to them from others. There is no distinction between Jew and Greek-and, we may add, between Christian and pagan; the same God is rich in mercy towards all. Whenever the Church has imagined that it had a claim upon God which others did not have, it has already fallen away from grace. The Church is servant and not master. It is appointed to a stewardship on behalf of all, not to a privilege from which others are excluded. The grave words which the New Testament uses again and again about the possibility of eternal loss, of being cut off from God's blessing, are addressed primarily to those who have been called to this stewardship and have proved unfaithful.

(c) It is promised to the Church that, in and through her tribulations in the world, the Holy Spirit will bear witness to Christ. This is a gracious promise and it has been fulfilled and is

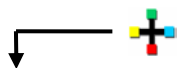
constantly being fulfilled in the experience of the Church. This witness is often given in ways of which the Christians concerned were unaware. It has over and over again been most powerfully given precisely in those situations where the Church was – humanly speaking – powerless, but yet remained faithful.

(d) This faithfulness will include at least the following:

(i) a life of worship and celebration worthy of the grace and holiness of God; (ii) a shared fellowship of mutual acceptance, forgiveness and strengthening, always open to anyone who comes; (iii) commitment to involvement in the situations where God's love and justice are contradicted, and to bearing the pain which this entails; (iv) readiness for frank and searching discussion, both with other Christians of different cultures and traditions, and with those outside the Church; (v) eagerness, as opportunity offers, to tell others the good news of Jesus, of the victory over sin and death which he has won on behalf of all.

(e) In these and other ways we are called to be faithful stewards of that which has been entrusted to us. We are not to be anxious about our 'success' or otherwise in winning men and women to the faith. That is not in our hands. We are rather to be believing and hopeful because we trust the promise given to us.

It is, I think, very important to insist that all these different elements worship, congregational fellowship, costly involvement in the life of society, dialogue and evangelism – should be so held together that they are seen to



be different aspects of one reality. Not that every Christian is to be involved in all of them. There are different gifts. But what is essential is that the different gifts and the differing tasks which go with them are exercised in the mutual solidarity of the one fellowship. In this way they illuminate and validate one another. It is to the whole body that the promise of the Spirit is given. When one member claims pre-eminence, the witness of all is compromised.

6. Faithful Dialogue

Among the elements in a faithful stewardship of what is entrusted to the Church I have included 'readiness for frank and searching discussion' with those outside the Church. It is fashionable to call this dialogue' but perhaps the use of this word may distort our vision. There is, of course, an important place for meetings in which scholars of the different faiths meet in formal way for 'dialogue'. But even the fact that we have to arrange such meetings may be a symptom of the fact that we are failing in the more elementary matter of day-to-day conversation with our neighbours of other faiths. Our relationship with them-as with all other neighbours and fellow-citizens should be that we share with them in a greater variety of common concerns, as neighbours, as citizens, as workers; as people who care about music or sport or politics. In these normal human relationships there will be opportunity for conversation in which we share each other's experiences and hopes and fears and fundamental beliefs.

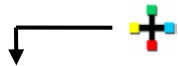
This kind of natural human conversation presupposes that we are ready to listen as well as to talk, to learn as well as to teach. But – at the deepest level – are we ready to learn? I find that some Christians are shocked by the suggestion that we have anything to learn from a Hindu or a Muslim at the deepest level of faith. Do we not have it all in Jesus? At this level do we not have to teach, to proclaim, to bear witness?

Yes indeed; but also to listen and to learn. It is indeed all there, in Jesus all the fullness of God' as Paul says. That is why I must continue to point all men to him as the one true centre around whom the human family can be made one. But do not yet possess all this fullness. I know in part, but not in full. Even the whole Church does not yet know in full. It has continually to press on towards the fullness of the knowledge of God in Jesus Christ. It can only be at the end,

when every tongue confesses him Lord, and when all things have been 'summed up in him' (Eph. 1: 10) that we shall know the fullness of all that he is.

A growing and developing movement

That is why 'Christianity' as a historical movement is and must be a growing and developing thing. It grows and develops not merely by extending the circle of its membership, but because in the encounter of the Gospel with new cultures, new aspects of the fullness of God in Christ are



brought to light. We have seen this illustrated in the encounter of Peter with Cornelius. The result of that encounter, and of the full meeting of the Gospel with the world of classical culture, was that Christianity could no longer be a sect of Judaism but began to be a world religion. The Christianity of the 4th century was not the same as that of the first, and the Christianity of the 20th is not the same as either. It ought not to be the same, for it is on its missionary way to all the nations and cultures of mankind. It is through the meeting with all these cultures that the Church learns more of Jesus and is thereby more fitted to be the home of all mankind.

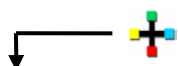
This is foreshadowed in the words attributed to Jesus in St John's account of the discourses on the night of his passion.

'I have 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 fullness 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 led 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 people. 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 persons 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 humanity, we can see, with many distractions and perversions and misunderstandings, the beginning of the fulfilment of this promise.

The first fruit of what is intended for all

The Church, therefore, as if is in via, faces the world not as the exclusive possessor of salvation, not as the fullness 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: 31f.). The Church is in the world as the place where Jesus, in whom all the fullness of the godhead dwells, is present, but it is not itself that fullness. 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.

The passage quoted from John suggests a trinitarian model to guide us in our conversation with those of other faiths and ideologies. Let us develop this in a little more detail.

God the Father of all

(1) We engage in conversation and discussion with those of other faiths knowing that we share with them a common human nature which we have by the gift of God who is the Father of all, that we live by his kindness, that we have a common responsibility to him and that he purposes the same blessing for us all. We meet as children of our 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. If we are receptive we shall receive rich gifts, matured through centuries of devotion and learning. 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 persons of other faiths we are learning to share

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- (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 meet and enter into conversation as real persons when we meet in the context of our common responsibilities in the life of the world. We do not become more fully persons by trying to abstract ourselves from the world of things. The

Christian in dialogue with persons 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 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.

The body of Christ sent into the world

(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 defence 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



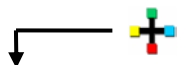
has not felt in one's own soul the power of it. Jesus was exposed to all the power of religions and ideological passion, to the point where he could cry, 'My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?'" and yet to remain wholly bound to his Father and to commit his spirit into his Father's hands. The true disciple will be exposed without defence in his dialogue with persons of other faiths and yet will remain bound to Jesus.

- (b) There is thus a kind of humbling, a self-emptying which is entailed in the meeting. But this will not surprise a Christian who knows that it is at the foot of the Cross that he meets his Lord. It is not as one who is full but as one who is empty that he bears witness to Jesus. 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 worship, teachings, sacraments and fellowship. The world of the religions is a world in which a man may very easily come under powers too strong for his own strength. To enter into deep intercourse with the convinced adherents of another powerful faith without being oneself deeply and actively involved in the exercise of one's own faith, is both frivolous and dangerous. It is only by being deeply rooted in Christ that one can enter into complete self-emptying and with complete exposure into the world of another faith in order to bear faithful witness to Christ.

The Holy Spirit uses dialogue to do his work

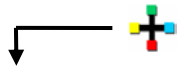
(3) We participate in the dialogue believing and expecting that the Holy Spirit can and will use this dialogue to do his own sovereign work, to glorify Jesus by converting to him both the partners in the dialogue.

(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' (Hindu and Christian in Vrindaban, S.C.M. Press). The Holy Spirit, who convicts the world of sin, of righteousness 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. A distinguished Hindu writer on religion and philosophical questions, Dr. R. Sundara 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 other, 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.' 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: 14 f.). The work of the Spirit is the confession of Jesus (1 John 4: 2 f.; 1 Cor. 12: 3). The Spirit is not in the possession of the Church but is Lord over the Church, guiding it from its limited, partial and distorted understanding of and embodiment of the truth into the fullness 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 to the Church as the possession of Jesus.



It is relevant to recall here Jesus' parable of the man who thought he could keep his Lord's treasure safe by burying it in the ground, and thus avoiding all risk of loss. Christians have often been tempted to take this apparently safe way. We are indeed stewards entrusted with the precious treasure of the secret of God's kingdom, and we have to be faithful stewards. But faithfulness does not consist simply in holding fast to the tradition we have received. It has been entrusted to us for a purpose, namely that it should be put into the commerce of the world so that it may grow. This does entail risk, but it is a risk which must be taken if we are to be faithful.

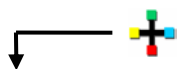
7. The End of the Matter

When all this has been said about the responsibility of Christians towards those of other faiths, I think that there is still an unanswered question which remains to trouble the conscience of the sincere believer. Let me put it in a very crude way. Most of us who have been brought up in the Western Christian tradition have grown up believing that, because Jesus is the one saviour of the world, those who do not acknowledge him are lost. So long as the great multitudes of 'the heathen' were far away out of sight, one could discharge one's obligation to them by supporting foreign missions, praying and hoping for the best-in much the same way that good Christians try to discharge their obligation to the hungry Third World by supporting Christian Aid or Oxfam. Now 'the heathen' are our next-door neighbours. If we approach them in the way suggested in this paper, are we really implying that it does not matter very much whether they are converted to Christ or not? Are we really saying in effect that their religion is as good as ours? And if this is the case, does our faith in Jesus really matter all that much to us'?

I am putting in crude but familiar terms something which we have to face. The New Testament certainly shows us Jesus as the unique Lord and Saviour of the world by reference to whom all men are finally judged. He is the light, and those who reject that light go into darkness. No one can excise from the pages of the New Testament the terribly grave warnings about the possibility of eternal loss. And yet on the other hand the same New Testament has many passages which speak of God's purpose and power to save all. Jesus who is the unique saviour, is also the universal saviour. The object of his saving love is not a few but the whole world.

An inescapable tension

There is an enduring tension between these two aspects of God's work in Christ which must always be – I think – at the heart of Christian discipleship. We are always tempted to relieve the tension in one or other of two opposite ways. The first is universalism – the dogmatic belief that the possibility of eternal loss is excluded, that all roads must in the end lead to the same goal, as all rivers flow into the sea. I think this has to be rejected. It involves ignoring a great part of the witness of Scripture. It robs human life

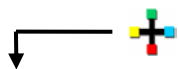


of its real seriousness by denying the reality of human responsibility. The other way of escaping the tension is to adopt some (often unacknowledged) opinion about who are to be finally saved and who finally lost. Traditionally the line has been drawn between the baptised and the unbaptised, or between believers and unbelievers. In recent writing the tendency is to draw it around 'those who sincerely follow the light of their own conscience' or 'the sincere adherents of all religions' or in some similarly moralistic way. This too is to be rejected. It contradicts the central emphasis of the New Testament teaching about final judgment, which is that judgment

will always be surprising and that it will be those who are sure they belong inside who find themselves outside.

The basic error of both these solutions is that they do precisely what they set out to do: they cut the tension. They aim to have 'the Last Things' securely programmed in advance. They claim to offer a 'safe' world where we know where we are. In contrast, the Bible offers us always an open world where we can only live by daily renewed acts of faith and repentance and trust towards our living Lord. We cannot and must not try to know in advance what the final judgment is going to be. What we can and must do is to walk in daily trust and obedience towards him who is the judge. The judgment is absolutely in his hands: it is enough for us to know and trust and obey him. The question about the salvation of other people, the question 'Are there few that be saved?' is one that seems to fascinate us all. But the reply which Jesus gives does not do anything to satisfy our curiosity; it is simply a sharp summons to faith and obedience. 'Strive to enter the narrow door.' The real issue here is between the quest for a kind of assurance which has the future securely programmed in advance, and the summons to a kind of faith which trusts everything to the living Lord.

Are we then tempted to ask: 'Then what is the good of being a Christian if we are really in this position?' Surely we are! I referred earlier to Paul's argument about the Jews, in which he insists that the Jew has no claim upon God which the pagan does not have. In the course of his argument he asks: 'What advantage, then, has the Jew?' It is the obvious question. His answer is: 'They were entrusted with the oracles of God'. It is the same answer which has to be given to the question that a Christian is tempted to ask. We have been entrusted with a commission. We are not better than others, more competent than others, more enlightened than others. We have been chosen for this task, that is all. God could have chosen others, but he has chosen us. We cannot say why. But we know the wherefore: he has chosen us to be the bearers of his promise of blessing of all mankind. 'If I preach the gospel that gives me no ground for boasting. Necessity is laid upon me. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel. For if I do this of my own will I have a reward, but if not of my own will, I am entrusted with a commission.' (1 Cor. 9: 16 f.)



This commission, as Paul constantly insists, means that we are not wiser or stronger or more able than others; rather it is discharged in what seems the weakness and foolishness of the small and insignificant. But we have been given a commission. We are responsible to him who entrusted us with it. That is enough for us.

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