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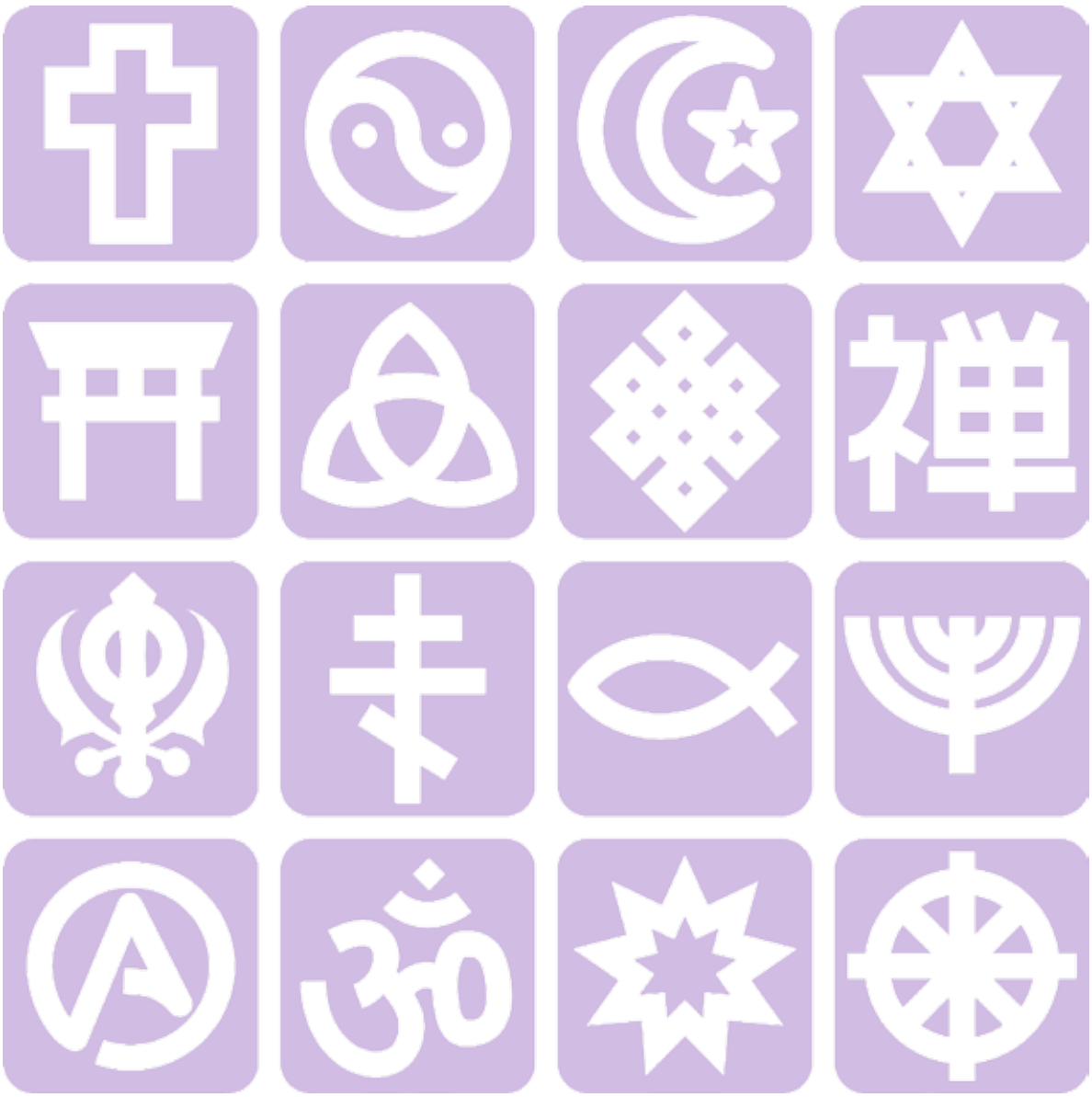
Faith and Society Files: Mission as Dialogue

Biblical and Theological Principles and the Practice of Interfaith Dialogue: 'Mission As Dialogue: Dialogue As Mission' - written and presented by Dr Nicholas J Wood to the Commission for Interfaith Dialogue at the BWA Annual Gathering, Vancouver, Canada in July 2016



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BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL PRINCIPLES AND THE PRACTICE OF INTERFAITH DIALOGUE: 'MISSION AS DIALOGUE: DIALOGUE AS MISSION' [1]

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Introduction

Over the last half century or so it has often been supposed by protagonists on both sides of the argument that Mission (especially Evangelism) and Dialogue (in this case especially inter-religious dialogue) are mutually incompatible. One is committed either to the historic mission of the Church, often presented predominantly, if not exclusively, in terms of 'proclamation' (which, it is implied, is essentially a monologue); or one can engage in dialogue in which prior commitments are to be set aside, or at least 'bracketed out' (in terms reminiscent of some phenomenological approaches to the study of religions), in favour of a common search for 'The Truth' which, it is assumed, always lies beyond the reach of any, and perhaps every, faith tradition.

It must be acknowledged that the current interest in dialogue as a method of engagement has coincided with what some have termed the 'loss of confidence' within the (particularly Western) Church in the universal scope of the Gospel. So it is perhaps not surprising that it is sometimes assumed that the emphasis on dialogue reflects this apparent crisis of confidence. But it might also reflect the questions now being asked in a post-colonial world about the entanglements of the western churches with the colonial and subsequently imperial histories of western countries during the 'long nineteenth century'; which for our purposes might be dated to the formation of the Baptist Missionary Society in 1792 and the publication of Roland Allen's ground breaking work 'Missionary Methods: St Paul's or Ours' in 1912. [2] Many people now would agree that this era was characterised by over-confidence, indeed sometimes by a supreme arrogance, in its assumptions about the superiority of all things Western, including Christianity. [3] Certainly from a British perspective the one thing the Victorian Church did not lack was confidence!

However, my argument is that in fact dialogue and mission have always belonged together. The point of this paper is to question the supposed incompatibility of mission and dialogue and to see how far they might in fact share both a common methodology and a common aim. In addressing the topic of *Mission as Dialogue: Dialogue and Mission*, it struck me that (at the very least) both mission and dialogue presuppose two (or perhaps more) parties, each being willing to engage with the 'Other' in some way. So from the outset there is a recognition both of differences to be addressed together with the commitment that sufficient communication is possible whereby such differences may be tackled.

[1] This paper draws on extensive research and practice over the last 25 years. Earlier versions were given at the EBF Conference on Mission, Birmingham UK, in May 2015 and in the Oxford Centre for Christianity and Culture, Regent's Park College, Oxford, in June 2016.

[2] Roland Allen, *Missionary Methods: St Paul's or ours: a study of the church in the four provinces*, R. Scott, London 1912

[3] See Edward Said, *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient*, Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd, London 1978

It will therefore be apparent that I do not share that type of postmodern pessimism which sees human beings trapped in their own subjectivities. Rather I argue that although the differences are real, and they must be taken seriously, nevertheless genuine communication is possible across the cultural and religious barriers, and moreover through such engagement real community can be built.

A. Mission as Dialogue

Since the rediscovery of the notion of the *Missio Dei* during the twentieth century, there has been a growing awareness that mission belongs to the Church only because it is already a characteristic of God. As my former supervisor Professor Tim Gorringe so pithily expressed it, "God engages!" [4] What I want to argue here is that the *form* of this engagement, this divine mission to the world, is inherently and characteristically dialogical.

In developing the theology of the *Missio Dei* 20th century mission theologians, such as Lesslie Newbigin and Michael Nazir-Ali, trace the origins of this divine mission back to Creation itself. [5] In creation God not only brings the 'Other' into being, since God is the creator of the world and makes humanity in the divine image; but God also seeks relationship with this 'Other', especially with humanity. This is where the divine mission begins, and I suggest it begins in dialogue. From the outset God practices dialogue, engagement with the 'Other'.

In reflecting on the Biblical stories of Creation we see that in addressing the 'Other', God does not simply speak in the imperative (and perhaps impersonal) mood: "Let there be light!" (Genesis 1:3). But God also speaks in the interrogative (and therefore inevitably more personal) mode: "Where are you?" (Genesis 3:9). God goes in search of 'Adam' (humanity), and however much we may try to persuade ourselves that it is *we* who seek for *God*, when we finally encounter this God, we always discover that it is in fact *God* who has taken the initiative to search after *us* in humility and grace, seeking us out, to engage with us – in dialogue.

In many ways the narrative of the encounter between God and humanity in Genesis 3 stands as a paradigm for God's constant search for humankind which all too often, as with Adam, wishes to hide away in guilt and shame. The point of this search by God is the restoration of relationship. Despite Adam's disobedience, and notwithstanding the inevitable ongoing consequences of humanity's failing ('The Curse'), yet God remains in relationship with humankind, represented touchingly in this account by God personally making clothes for Adam and Eve (Genesis 3:21). God graciously provides for them, even in their brokenness, and gives them the means to cope with their shame and their guilt.

Throughout the Hebrew and Christian scriptures we see a similar pattern: God initiates the encounter with sinful people in order to rescue and redeem. So for example in Exodus 3, in the famous episode of the Burning Bush, we discover God initiating yet another dialogue, this time with the run-away murderer Moses, whom God graciously commissions to engage in dialogue with Pharaoh as the spokesman of YHWH, to negotiate the freedom of the children of Israel. This develops into a life-long dialogue between God and Moses out of which emerges the rescued nation of Israel. But we might also recall that the nation was originally formed out of God's lengthy conversations with Abraham and with Sarah (Genesis 12, 15, 17, 18 & 22), in which the first covenantal relationships were forged; and we may also remember Jacob's enigmatic wrestling with God (Genesis 32).

[4] T. Gorringe in R. Morgan (ed) *The Religion of the Incarnation,* Classical Press, Bristol 1989, p158
[5] See L. Newbigin, *The Open Secret*, SPCK London, 1986 (Rev Ed 1995); M. Nazir-Ali, *From Everywhere to Everywhere,* Collins Glasgow, 1991

At the very least this experience suggests that dialogical engagement between God and humanity is no genteel 'ivory-tower' pursuit, but a deep, and sometimes bruising, grappling with serious issues. Dialogue is critical encounter.

Following the ministry of Moses we may recall the subsequent challenge of God to Joshua (Deuteronomy 31 and Joshua 1); or later still the self-revelation of God to the young Samuel, itself arising from his mother Hannah's dialogue with God (1 Samuel 1-3). We might go on, in the manner of Hebrews 11, to rehearse the history of David and all the prophets, or to reflect on the dialogue between God and Job, as he struggled to make sense of a life of unbearable suffering; a theme that is also frequently reflected in the work of the psalmists, who also engage in an often challenging dialogue with God. In all this we see that God is indeed a God who engages with the 'Other', especially with frail human beings in all the complexity of their lives, in their joys and in their sorrows, in their triumphs and in their disasters. All this leads David Bosch to comment that ultimately it is God who is the only real missionary in the Old Testament. [6] To which I would add that in all this this God's missionary method is fundamentally dialogue.

But for Christians the ultimate expression of this engagement of God with the world and with humanity is the Incarnation wherein God becomes a vulnerable human being in Jesus Christ and continues the dialogue on an 'equal footing' as it were. Few commentators have tended to look to the Fourth Gospel for models of mission, yet according to John Stott, the Johannine form of the Great Commission (John 20:21) is the most crucial, but also the most costly, and therefore the most neglected [7] expression of God's commission to the Church. Stott emphasises that it is crucial to interpret Jesus' commission, "as the Father sent me so I send you", in the light of John 1:14 "the Word became flesh and dwelt among us", (although for some commentators it is a moot point how far the rest of the Gospel actually offers a firmly embodied Christ). Yet, according to Stott, to be "sent" by Christ as he was "sent" by the Father means true engagement with the realities of human life. The Incarnation reveals that divine love constantly reaches out to humanity within the reality of the human situation. God is insistently, indeed daringly, dialogical.

To take human particularity seriously will always mean a proper critical engagement, a dialogue if you will, with the whole of human history, culture and religion. In the Johannine model such engagement is the pattern for all Christian mission. The risen Christ commissions his disciples "as the Father sent me, so I send you"; embracing all the risk and vulnerability implied by "the Word becoming flesh", since the risen Lord is identified still by the marks of crucifixion. In missiological terms it is therefore an incarnational model, often referred to as *inculturation* or *contextualization.* To be 'in the flesh' means to be caught up in the reality of the world as it is, a recognition of what the philosophers would call particularity and contingency. The Church must strike a balance between what Lesslie Newbigin calls a 'proper confidence' [8], which reflects its radical encounter with God in Christ, with what David Bosch terms a 'bold humility', which acknowledges the humble and gracious way in which that encounter is experienced.

This combination of confidence and humility drives the Church to confess its provisional nature, for its mission and the *Missio Dei* are not identical. The mission of the Church points beyond itself, not simply backwards to the Christ-event, but also to the Kingdom, the present and future reign of God, of which Christ is the definitive agent, symbol and sign.

[6] David Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, Orbis NY, 1990, p19
[7] John Stott, *Christian Mission in the Modern World*, Falcon/CPAS, Eastbourne, 1977, p23
[8] Lesslie Newbigin, *Proper Confidence: Faith, Doubt and Certainty in Christian Discipleship,* SPCK London 1995

The scope of the Church's mission is the whole world, for that is the scope of the divine mission, but we must always remember that it is not a world from which God is absent; God is already actively at work through the Spirit and through all the processes of history. Yet the Church does not move into a spiritual void. The 'Christ-event', to which the Church bears witness, does not reveal a God who is otherwise absent from the world, but rather identifies the God who is ever-present. This also suggests a basis for the mission of the Church in the character of the Triune God, which there is not scope to develop in this short paper. Such theological affirmations highlight the character of the Christian confession as *witness;* it speaks of what it knows through its experience of the saving love of God manifest in Jesus, and always points beyond itself to the reality of God-in-Christ. The problem is that the Church, like the people of God in the Old Testament, has too often confused means and ends. All too often in its history the Church became an end in itself rather than a means to the end of the Kingdom.

So for missiology to recover a focus on the Kingdom, rather than the Church, is a way of maintaining a proper direction and methodology in its mission. Such a focus reminds God's chosen people, whether in Israel or in the Church, that they are elected for service rather than to status. They are to be a *saving* people rather than simply a *saved* people. If they have any dignity at all it is derivative: it does not belong to them but is derived solely from their being the servants of the Great King. In Newbigin's words:

> 'Mission is faith in action. It is the acting out by proclamation and by endurance, through all the events of history, of the faith that the kingdom of God has drawn near. It is the acting out of the central prayer that Jesus taught his disciples to use: "Father, hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come; thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven."' [9]

This is what I understand the *Missio Dei* to entail for the contemporary church. Although capable of triumphalist overtones, ('our mission is God's mission, i.e. God is on our side'!) this must be balanced by what I call (following Peter Cotterell [10]) "cruciform" missiology. In other words a mission that is shaped first and foremost by the mission of Christ himself, the Crucified and Risen One. It became traditional in church architecture for buildings to be built on a cross-shaped or "cruciform" plan. Surely this is symbolic of the shape of the people of God, who are true to their calling only in so far as they are themselves a cross-shaped people. Therefore, 'Mission activity is not so much the work of the Church as simply the Church at work'.[11] Indeed Bosch suggests that it has become impossible to talk about the Church without at the same time talking about mission. Nevertheless, the mission of the Church must not be assumed to be co-terminous with that of God, but rather understood as the sign, sacrament and instrument of God's mission to the world.[12]

A sign is that which points beyond itself to the end of the journey. It points people in the right way, but if people simply stop at the sign and fail to move on to that to which it points, then the sign itself has become an idol. Are we in danger of making Church an idol?

A sacrament is a physical manifestation of a divine or spiritual reality. The Church offers itself as a model or paradigm of what life in the Kingdom might look like. This is of course a highly dangerous thing to do! All too often the Church has looked too much the human institution that it undoubtedly is, and all too little resembled the divine reality which is also its character.

[9] Newbigin, *The Open Secret*, p39
[10] Peter Cotterell, *Mission and Meaninglessness*, SPCK 1990
[11] John Power, cited by Bosch, *Transforming Mission,* p372
[12] Bosch, *Transforming Mission,* p374

The Church needs constantly to be reminded that in its very life it embodies and anticipates the final reality of the Kingdom.

To be an instrument reminds us that the Church has a function or purpose, which is beyond itself; it is not an end in itself but it is God's crucial means to the end. This raises the interesting question to which we shall return of whether God might have other instruments at his disposal. If so what is the distinctive role of the Church? (If God does not have other such instruments what hope is there?!)

Here is another pointer for the Church in its engagement with the life of the world: it is in the *whole range* of human experience that we should expect to find evidence of the self-giving, self-revealing God. Within the ordinariness of everyday life, in the processes of history, in the rich variety of culture, and in the ambiguous complexities of the religions, the Spirit of God may be discerned. As Bishop John V. Taylor put it so clearly: 'The chief actor in the historic mission of the Christian church is the Holy Spirit.' [13] The crucial question is by what criteria is the presence of the Divine Spirit to be identified and discovered?

For me this must mean the centrality of Christology. Christians are those who claim that God has chosen to define Godself in Christ, as the One in whom is found that absolute and unconditional love, which is both the origin and goal of the universe. This love is revealed in its starkest form in the Cross of Christ, but it is characteristic of his whole life and ministry, and is, I suggest, normative for the Christian understanding of the divine nature as a whole. The significance of the Resurrection in this pattern can scarcely be over-estimated, since it is the event by which the appropriateness of such Christian affirmations is justified.

I agree with Bishop Newbigin that the Resurrection of Christ is the basis of the Christian position, the *a priori* act of faith behind which it is impossible to go. The Resurrection is at once the divine "yes" to all that Christ has said, done and achieved, and at the same time the place at which human faith, response and obedience are awakened. To borrow John Hick's terminology, the Resurrection is the place of 'eschatological verification', [14] where the ultimate nature of reality is proleptically revealed. There is no inherent reason why this should not happen in 'the middle of time' (in Hans Conzelmann's well-known phrase *Die Mitte der Zeit* [15]), rather than at the end.

The Church, however, must make this confession with due humility, an attitude which Bosch describes as "authentically Christian", for Christianity is a religion of grace and finds its centre in the cross. We might also add that, in the light of its history, the Church has much to be humble about! As I have argued elsewhere, such "authentic witness", must be characterized not simply by humility of language, but find expression in matters of life and lifestyle, a "dialogue of life" and not simply of words, in the manner of Jesus himself, who was "recognized as Lord and Messiah through his own willingness to suffer and to die, and not by an irresistible imposition of himself on other people". Such an approach is not to abandon the missionary imperative, but to rediscover the true nature of mission. As Newbigin has indicated, the Church must be missionary but cannot any longer be provincial, in the sense of a solely or predominantly European movement. It must shed its culturally bound provinciality whilst retaining the particularity that is its essence.

[13] John V. Taylor, *The Go-Between God*, SCM Press London, 1972, p3
[14] John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, Macmillan London, 1989
[15] Hans Conzelmann, *Die Mitte der Zeit*, Tubingen 1954, ET *The Theology of St Luke,* Harper & Row London, 1961

The "enfleshment" of the Logos as Jesus of Nazareth led in the end to the cross. The cross of Christ stands over against all comfortable notions of continuity and progress. But it should not be assumed that only the recipients of the Christian proclamation would feel the discomfort and challenge of such a "cruciform missiology"; the first requirement is that it is deeply marked within the Christian self-consciousness. Simon Barrington-Ward, former Anglican bishop of the multi-cultural and multi-religious city of Coventry in the English Midlands, has expressed it well:

> "The Christian task now is to let the Cross of Christ through the action of the Spirit be planted deep within the consciousness of all faiths. But the only way to do this is to plant the Cross again in the heart of the consciousness of Christians themselves. We need a more far-reaching repentance and a self-criticism, a deeper humility, a costlier readiness for long-term loving. We need to learn what it means to take up the Cross and follow, to be 'crucified with Christ' as we are 'plunged into the life' of worlds in crisis. To such a witness (martyria) these worlds are open." [16]

Once again we must remind ourselves that those who claim the name of Jesus must act in a Christ-like manner. In other words these reflections of the *theological basis* of mission have some very profound implications for the *practice* of mission. The manner and method of Christian mission is derived from the character of the Christ-like God. As various ecumenical documents of the recent past have put it, the Church must do mission 'in the way of Christ'.

B. Dialogue as Mission

The Inter-Faith Movement is now over a century old, [17] and over the last fifty or so years especially, the Church has developed a form of critical engagement with the other world religions in the form of *dialogue.* [18] Its apparent novelty is the cause of suspicion for some, although scholars as theologically diverse as Kenneth Cracknell and John Stott have recognised its presence in the New Testament itself. [19] Stott's definition of dialogue is taken from that framed at the National Evangelical Anglican Congress held in Keele in 1967:

> "Dialogue is a conversation in which each party is serious in his (sic) approach both to the subject and to the other person, and desires to listen and learn as well as to speak and instruct." (Paragraph 83) [20]

Following initial discussion on dialogue at the World Council's New Delhi Assembly in 1961 and further debate at Uppsala in 1968, at the World Council of Churches Fifth Assembly in Nairobi in 1975, five people of other faiths were invited to take part in discussions about seeking community where inter-faith dialogue was to be debated. Fears were aired that any concession to people of other faiths would lead to syncretism, against which the 1928 Jerusalem meeting first warned. It was also noted that dialogue could mean compromise of the faith and of the uniqueness of Christ and that it may threaten the very heart of the Church's mission.

It was perhaps not surprising to find that it was Asian voices in particular that promoted dialogue (as they had done in Tambaram in 1938) arguing that this was the only way forward in the pluralistic world that the Church now inhabits, and of which the Asian churches had long experience.

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[16] S. Barrington-Ward, in D. Hardy & P. Sedgwick (ed) *The Weight of Glory,* T & T Clark Edinburgh 1991, p263
[17] See M. Braybrooke, *Pilgrimage of Hope*, SCM Press London, 1993.
[18] The process is helpfully outlined in C. Hallencreutz, *Dialogue and Community*, WCC Geneva, 1977.
[19] K. Cracknell, *Towards a New Relationship*, Epworth Press Leicester, 1986, ch. 2 & J. Stott, *Christian Mission in the Modern World* ch.3.
[20] Stott, p60.

The 1975 WCC Assembly identified the need for clarification regarding the nature, purpose and limits of interfaith dialogue, with special reference being made to the issues of syncretism, indigenisation, culture and mission. In 1977 a meeting entitled "Dialogue in Community" was held in Chiang Mai, Thailand, to clarify the Christian basis for seeking community with others. "The Chiang Mai consultation affirmed that dialogue is neither a betrayal of mission nor a 'secret weapon' of proselytism, but a way 'in which Jesus Christ can be confessed in the world today'." [21] It was the Chiang Mai meeting which led to the formulation of the 'Guidelines on Dialogue' adopted by the WCC Central Committee in 1979, and subsequently condensed by the then British Council of Churches into the 'four principles of dialogue' [22] discussed below.

Christianity, like Buddhism and Islam, has always been a missionary faith and so the contemporary meeting of faiths takes place within a history and context of missionary encounter. Over recent centuries this missionary encounter has been predominantly, but not exclusively, in the context of western colonialism and imperialism. [23] This history has complicated relationships and often clouded the issues at stake between faith communities. It is has led some Christians, and others like Rabbi Jonathan Romain, [24] to suggest a moratorium on mission, especially evangelism. In this context some other faith communities are suspicious that the recent Christian interest in dialogue is a subterfuge for evangelism: a 'deceitful dialogue' as Romain has characterised it. Conversely, some Christians see the current interest in dialogue as symptomatic of a post-colonial crisis of confidence in mission and as a betrayal of the missionary commission of the Church.

Christians from both Asia [25] and Africa [26] have defended the language of mission even in a post-colonial world, but some would still argue that, nevertheless, Christians must make a choice as to whether they are committed to dialogue on the one hand or to mission and evangelism on the other; or at the very least to make it clear which activity they are about in any given moment. [27] The implication is clear that even if mission and evangelism remain part of the contemporary agenda of the Church they must be clearly distinguished from the altogether different activity of dialogue. But is this really the case or is it rather a false dichotomy? Kenneth Cracknell, drawing on the approach of the Indian Christian theologian Thomas Thangaraj, outlines a 'missiology for the twenty-first century' which suggests that dialogue and witness are not incompatible, but rather illustrate David Bosch's aspiration for a 'mission in bold humility'. [28] For our purposes today we need to explore further what we think such a dialogical witness might be.

<u>What is Dialogue?</u>

Problematically, dialogue means different things to different people as the World Council of Churches acknowledged:

> "Some see dialogue primarily as a new and creative relationship within which one can learn about the respect others but also can give authentic witness to one's own faith. Others see it as an important historical moment in the development of religious traditions, in which each of the faith

[21] WCC website.
[22] *Guidelines on Dialogue with People of Living Faiths*, WCC 1979; *In Good Faith: The Four Principles of Inter-Faith Dialogue*, CTBI, 1992 (earlier versions in 1981/83).
[23] As Brian Stanley has demonstrated it should not be too readily assumed that mission was always at the service of the colonising powers; in not a few examples Christian mission was a restraining and even a subversive element in the process. See B. Stanley, *The Bible and the Flag*, Apollos Leicester, 1990.
[24] J. Romain, *Your God shall be my God* SCM Press, 2003; see also his address at the Baptist Assembly in 2004.
[25] E.g. Thomas Thangaraj, *The Common Task: A Theology of Christian Mission*, Abingdon Press 1999
[26] E.g. Lamin Sanneh, *Whose Religion is Christianity?* Eerdmans 2003
[27] See K. Cracknell, *In Good and Generous Faith*, Epworth 2005, p144.
[28] Bosch, *Transforming Mission,* p489

traditions in dialogue is challenged and transformed by the encounter with others. Still others view dialogue as a common pilgrimage towards the truth, within which each tradition shares with the others the way it has come to perceive and respond to that truth." [29]

All these understandings at the very least imply a recognition that God is the God of the whole world and all its peoples. Bishop Michael Nazir-Ali reminds us that in the Bible, God is spoken of as a universal God:

> "The God of the whole world … the God of every nation, of every people … God, if he is the God of the whole world, of every people, must be working in the histories of those people." [30]

This suggests that that through encounter, engagement and dialogue it might be possible to discern the ways of God in the histories of all people everywhere.

There have been various attempts to delineate the scope of such dialogue, many of them variations on the influential typology of Eric Sharpe. As a religious studies scholar Sharpe [31] identified four distinct types of dialogue, each with its own goals:

1. Discursive dialogue - deliberate meeting for intellectual enquiry. This recognises that faith traditions often have distinctive worldviews, which are frequently underpinned by sophisticated philosophical systems. This sort of dialogue then requires a certain technical expertise in at least one's own tradition and is likely to be mainly the sphere of the expert or the religious professional. It will also mean deliberate or 'set-piece' meetings, which are likely to have agreed agendas and procedures. Through intellectual discussion of beliefs a clearer picture can emerge both of distinctives and of those things which might be held in common between traditions.
2. Human dialogue - which arises from encounter in ordinary relationships. This recognises that religion is frequently not so much about belief but about practice and this is as much the concern of the ordinary believer as it is of the expert. Such dialogue is about the ordinary and everyday and occurs not in deliberate meetings of experts but in the accidental encounters of people in the meetings of everyday life. It may be that 'encounter' is really a better word than 'dialogue' here, since the latter does seem to suggest a degree of planning and purpose. But out of such encounter there should be no doubt that genuine relationships can be formed and searching dialogue can take place.
3. Secular dialogue - in which people of different traditions co-operate in matters of common concern. It is widely agreed that because of the territorial problems that the meeting of faiths can produce, the neutral realm of the secular world can often provide the forum for constructive meeting of different faith communities. There are often matters of concern within a community, which may involve people of all faiths and none. Such things might be co-operation over events or facilities, sharing in the life of a school or community association, local politics and so forth. Sharing a common purpose is a strong base for building good relationships and offers the possibility of building trust which enables the discussion of faith questions at the appropriate time.
4. Interior dialogue - this focuses on the spiritual elements within various traditions. This approach to dialogue recognises the centrality of the spiritual quest in many traditions, and offers the possibility of a depth of encounter to the devout practitioner of faith, whether expert or professional in the formal sense, or simply a devout believer.

[29] WCC website.
[30] M. Nazir-Ali, *Mission and Dialogue*, SPCK 1989 p78.
[31] E. Sharpe, The Goals of Inter-Religious Dialogue in *Truth and Dialogue*, (ed) J. Hick, Sheldon Press London 1974, pp77-95.

> Inevitably this may also impinge on the vexed question of worship which for many traditions is the obvious expression of their spirituality. Experiencing a religious tradition in its worship is often a way to understand the heart of a tradition in a very immediate way, but there are important questions about integrity and authenticity which need to be considered by all parties involved.

This might all suggest, as others like Hick seem also to imply, that dialogue is fundamentally about moving towards *agreement*, whereas in the experience of some it is equally as significant for its recognition of *difference*. Thus Bishop John V. Taylor in an essay on "The Theological Basis of Inter-Faith Dialogue" suggests that:

> "Dialogue is a sustained conversation between parties who are not saying the same thing and who recognise and respect the differences, the contradictions and the mutual exclusions between their various ways of thinking. The object of this dialogue is understanding and appreciation, leading to further reflection about the implications for one's own position on the convictions and sensitivities of other faith traditions." [32]

Alan Race expresses the tension between agreement and distinctiveness helpfully when he writes:

> "Dialogue assumes neither harmony between religions nor isolationist self-sufficiency, but mutual accountability. In this sense, the space between the assumption that 'we're all the same' and the insistence that 'we're all different' is where dialogue flourishes." [33]

This 'space between' is perhaps what Michael Barnes calls 'living in the middle'. [34] However, John Stott, while accepting the importance of dialogue with other faith traditions, also suggests that there is need for 'encounter' with them, and even for 'confrontation': "In which we seek both to disclose the inadequacies and falsities of non-Christian religion and to demonstrate the adequacy and truth, absoluteness and finality of the Lord Jesus Christ." [35] Nazir-Ali agrees, but recognises that this is a mutual process of witness: "I cannot see dialogue in its fullness without the opportunity for *both sides* to witness to their faith in trust that the partners recognise each other's integrity" (my emphasis), but he continues, "we must be committed to let the light of Christ shine through our conversation and reflection, without that dialogue remains unfulfilled for the Christian." [36] Such dialogue is clearly not in Nazir-Ali's or in Stott's minds incompatible with their commitment to Christian witness, but is this an adequate understanding of the nature of dialogue?

The Four Principles of Dialogue

In response to the WCC Guidelines on Dialogue noted above, in 1981 the then British Council of Churches' Committee on Relations with People of Other Faiths published four 'Principles of Dialogue', which were reissued with a commentary in 1991 as 'In Good Faith'. In brief the four principles are:

1. Dialogue begins when people meet each other. Although apparently self-evident, this first principle is an important reminder that for too many people dialogue can seem a remote and academic exercise rather than an encounter between 'people who live in houses not books'. [37]

[32] In J. Hick & B. Hebblethwaite (ed), *Christianity and Other Religions*, Fount/Collins Glasgow, 1980, p212.
[33] A. Race, Interfaith Dialogue: Religious accountability between Strangeness and Resonance in *Christian Approaches to Other Faiths* (ed) A. Race & P. Hedges SCM Press London, 2008 p156.
[34] M. Barnes, *Theology and the Dialogue of Religions* CUP Cambridge, 2002 p232.
[35] Stott, *Christian Mission in the Modern World*, p69.
[36] M. Nazir-Ali, *Mission and Dialogue*, p83.
[37] *In Good Faith*, para 1.1 p1.

Too much of the discussion has been without genuine encounter and real meeting with actual people of faith. In genuine encounter stereotypes are undermined, common humanity is discovered, and actual particularities are exposed.

2. Dialogue depends upon mutual understanding and trust. This of course requires a willingness to listen and hear what others are really saying. 'Partners in dialogue should be free to define themselves. Dialogue should allow participants to describe and witness to their faith in their own terms.'[38] It is interesting that 'witness' occurs at this point in relation to all participants in the dialogue. It is a recognition that dialogue, if it is to be meaningful, is about the sharing of convictions and not the suspension of belief.
3. Dialogue makes it possible to share in service to the community. Actually, as the Baptist response to this principle points out, often the dynamic works the other way: "Our discussion ... leads us to reflect on whether dialogue leads to service, or rather in reality, common action in the community leads to dialogue." [39] This confirms the point made above in relation to Sharpe's typology as 'secular dialogue', but recognises that even where the secular world provides the space or opportunity for mutual co-operation, religious communities will be motivated by the ideals and demands of their own particular faith commitments in relation to 'justice, compassion and peace'. [40]
4. Dialogue becomes the medium of authentic witness. Where encounter has led to trust, whether through common action or simply by neighbourly involvement there may come a point where, according to 'In Good Faith', we cannot "honestly avoid witnessing to our faith. The complaint of some critics that dialogue replaces evangelism is unfounded" [41]. This will clearly avoid any sense of coercion, and a recognition of the mutuality of dialogue which involves receiving as well as giving. But in the end: "Dialogue assumes the freedom of a person of any faith including the Christian to be convinced by the faith of another ... Christians will wish both to be sensitive to their partners' religious integrity and also to witness to Christ as Lord of all". [42]

In the context of our discussion on the relationship of dialogue and mission, it is this final principle which requires some further consideration.

<u>Dialogue and Witness</u>

The British churches' 'Fourth Principle of Inter-faith Dialogue' is that dialogue becomes the medium of 'authentic witness'. What might this mean? First, there must be a clear repudiation of power relationships and any use of force or coercion. Sadly this has been the experience of all too many people in the mission history of the church during the colonial era:

> "Interreligious dialogue cannot shy away from recognising the effects of uneven power relations and the impact of mutual perceptions, no matter how distorted they are." [43]

This is a complex process in the present British, and perhaps the wider European, context since members of minority religions often believe the Christian community to be more powerful and influential than it feels itself to be.

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[38] *In Good Faith*, para 2.3 p3.
[39] N.J. Wood (ed) *A Baptist Perspective on InterFaith Dialogue*, Alcester 1992, p12f. (Now available on BUGB Website)
[40] *In Good Faith*, para 3.3, p5.
[41] *In Good Faith*, para 4.1, p6.
[42] *In Good Faith*, para 4.6, p7
[43] See WCC Website

Equally Christians often attribute to other faith communities, especially to Muslims, an influence they do not themselves feel. Authentic witness will mean jettisoning the 'baggage' of this recent past and the repudiation of 'colonial' stereotypes, which still influence the mutual perceptions of both western Christians and members of other faith communities. Further, such witness will not stop at mere recognition but must also involve repentance for past (and sadly sometimes still present) racial, ethnic and religious prejudice and discrimination. This approach also recognises the need for a genuine appreciation of cultural diversity, which extends beyond the widespread but superficial taste for curry, [44] and might include for example acceptance of diverse patterns of social and family life and unfamiliar religious observance.

This suggests an openness and humility, a readiness for vulnerability and risk, which is entailed in genuine encounter. Such genuine engagement might lead us beyond mere tolerance to mutual appreciation. As the WCC guidelines on interreligious dialogue outline, it will also involve the recognition that Christians do not have the only experience of God's revelation, but that others, of other faith traditions and of none, might also be recipients of God's wisdom and truth. Personally I would argue that given the sort of God whom Christians claim to encounter in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, we should positively expect such a God to be experienced and encountered by people in all cultures and throughout human history. To appreciate this will mean Christian people opening themselves to the reality that God speaks 2in many and various ways to his people in many times and places", (Hebrews 1:1-2) and that the experiences embodied in various scriptures, traditions and cultural practices, are to be interpreted, and yes interrogated, by the whole community of God's people, as they listen carefully to each other.

This does of course require that people are willing to share the convictions that lie at the heart of their respective traditions, confident that they will be heard with respect, even where there may still be disagreement. Therefore 'authentic witness', like all other aspects of dialogue, will be characterised not only by deep conviction but also by humility, integrity and sensitivity. Michael Nazir-Ali comments:

> "There can be no authentic witness without prior dialogue. Unless we understand people's beliefs, their culture, the idiom of that culture, their thought forms, the intellectual tradition, the artistic tradition, the faith tradition, unless we understand these we will not be able to witness to people authentically as Christians." [45]

Does this approach exemplify Jonathan Romain's so-called deceitful dialogue? I don't believe so, provided that all parties share this expectation to give and to receive the witness of others. This is not the same as using dialogue as a subterfuge for an evangelism which simply instrumentalises dialogue. Rather it recognises mutual witness as an inherent element in the dialogical process. In other words there must be mutuality, or what Alan Race calls 'mutual accountability'. In my experience people of other faiths often feel cheated by Christians who are too inhibited to share the heart of their faith tradition or discuss their spiritual practice. There must be a willingness by all sides to be faithful to the tradition which has nurtured and formed them.

I suggest that in Christian thought such faithfulness is represented not so much by attempts to impose a particular worldview through argumentation, but rather by our testimony to a powerful and transformative encounter with the reality of God in the person of Jesus Christ, yet this witness nevertheless retains the openness and vulnerability which I believe is characteristic of the Christ of the New Testament.

[44] A recent poll named Chicken Tikka Masala as Britain's favourite dish, interestingly a hybrid of eastern and western tastes!

[45] M. Nazir-Ali, *Mission and Dialogue*, p82f.

'Witness' in the Hellenistic Greek of the New Testament is of course *martyria*, from which the word 'martyr' is derived and which encapsulates the commitment to gracious and sacrificial service to others so distinctive of Christ himself, but which is perhaps all too rarely discerned in some of his more strident disciples. Dialogue at its best is characterised by the faithful, gracious and open testimony of all parties. Such mutual witness, far from being inimical to dialogue, is I believe its most crucial component.

Thus I conclude that authentic witness in dialogue for the Christian must be Christ-like in character as well as Christological in substance; attributes which I believe are identical to the basic precepts for all Christian mission. For me then Christian mission must be dialogical, and such dialogue can never exclude that testimony to the grace of God in Christ which is at the heart of the Christian experience. In this way Mission is always dialogical in nature, and Dialogue is a means of authentic witness. Such Dialogue *is* Mission, and such Mission *is* Dialogue.

Further Reading:

BUGB Resources: http://www.baptist.org.uk/Groups/220648/Inter_Faith_Engagement.aspx

Nicholas J. Wood, (ed) *A Baptist Perspective on Interfaith Dialogue* Joppa Publications, Alcester 1992
Download available: http://www.baptist.org.uk/Articles/396616/A_Baptist_Perspective.aspx

Nicholas J. Wood, *Confessing Christ in a Plural World* Whitley Publications, Oxford 2002

Nicholas J. Wood, *Faiths and Faithfulness: Pluralism, Dialogue and Mission in the Work of Kenneth Cragg and Lesslie Newbigin* Paternoster, Milton Keynes 2009

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