

DIALOGUE:  
WITNESS OR TREASON

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*Dialogue might become the medium of authentic mission in the Church.*

“Dialogue is a Medium of Authentic Mission”

I would wish to affirm this statement. This principle offers us a new image of Christians and their conversation partners of other faiths as ‘fellow pilgrims’, not as ‘manipulators’. *The Guidelines* suggest that:

real dialogue rules out spurious forms of Mission, such as proselytisation, which violates the right of the human person to be free from external coercion in religious matters, from whatever does not conform to the ways of God who draws free persons to himself in response to his call to serve in spirit and in truth (p.7).

This passage is indicative of CRPOF’s commitment to a mission-based understanding of Dialogue.

NOTES

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Republished *Inter-religious Dialogue: A paradox? Zambuoanga City: Silsilah Publications, 1991 (ISBN 971-31-003-4) pp 173-179.*

CRPOF was the British Council of Churches Committee on Relations with People of Other Faiths.

Guidelines = Relations with People of Other Faiths: Guidelines on Dialogue in Britain (1981)

p. 178 – 8 lines from top, “confusedly” should be CONFESSEDLY.

Christians who advocate a dialogical approach to other faiths often, though not always, hold inclusivist theologies. They may or may not accept conversion as appropriate but they will almost certainly question traditional methods and techniques of missionary work. The aim of most missionary endeavour was and is 'Church planting' or 'Church growth', to add to the numerical size of the Christian community. The aim is to win converts, from disbelief to belief, or from another faith to Christian faith. We know, as a matter of fact that, Churches so created in countries where the Christian religion is neither the traditional nor the majority religion tend to be in the image of their founders. This is how, rightly or wrongly, the Muslim majority perceive the Bangladesh Church with which I worked for several years. They see it as exotic, as alien, as Western. Certainly, the style of worship was not very different at all to that of British Christians. I quickly felt as much at home there as I had in Australia, where I was brought up or in Britain where I trained for ministry.

The question that this experience prompted me to ask was - to what did Bangladesh Christians (or rather their forebears) actually convert? I don't doubt their faith in Christ, yet their faith seemed so alien in that context that I couldn't help questioning whether it could exist without the foreign apparatus which nurtures and supports it. Even if Churches are able to adapt to local cultures, they remain exotic transplants. Of course, historically, all Churches, even European Churches, were exotic intruders. They had to adapt to and perhaps even compromise with, local culture and beliefs to become what they are today. However, is it justifiable to compare what happened in Europe 16-17 hundred years ago, with missionary activity in Bangladesh and elsewhere in the last century? A fundamental difference of self-perception exists between an infant movement developing its forms and structures and a fully grown system moving into new and alien situations. The first is a situation of conscious process and growth, the second isn't.

Missionaries did not go to Africa and Asia prepared to adapt, to evolve, to develop or to change their understanding either of faith or of ecclesiology. They went to give what they already had - a complete fully grown system of practice and belief. Nineteenth century missionaries (excluding some remarkable and significant dissenters) established churches after the image of their home churches. Consequently, though small and surrounded by alien faiths and cultures, these churches regard themselves as fully grown. I realize this sounds rather judgmental. It is meant to be, not of mission-planted churches but of the churches who planted them. Many mission-planted churches are now valiantly struggling to discover new modes and models despite the more often than not disabling traditions they've inherited.

For the purpose of this paper, I am trying to backtrack to the beginning of the modern missionary movement and to speculate how a dialogue approach, applied at the beginning, may have produced different results. First, I shall offer rough and ready working definitions of 'dialogue' and of 'mission'. Then I shall suggest how 'Dialogue as Mission' might be understood. Firstly, what do I mean by 'dialogue' — I mean a particular mind-set in which we are prepared to really listen to the beliefs of our partners-rather than assuming that we already know what they believe. *A fundamental principle of dialogue is that of 'self-definition'.*

The object of a Christian speaking, say of Islam, should be as to describe Islam so that a Muslim will recognize his or her faith in the Christian's description of his or her religion. Historically, Christian missionaries who engaged in controversy or debate with Muslims made little or no effort to fulfill this principle. They depicted Muhammad as a lecherous reprobate. This hardly struck chords of sympathy or of recognition with the prophet whom Muslims honour and whose memory they cherish. The missionaries' aim was to discredit Muhammad by throwing him into Christ's shade, with the assumption that Muslims would then see the good

sense of believing in an obviously superior Jesus. Their aim, through debate, was to highlight Islam's deficiency against Christ's sufficiency. In contrast, a dialogical approach tries to avoid the imposition of value-judgments on other people's faith.

My own opinion is that dialogue has no end or aim, it is a methodology, a commitment to a particular open mind-set that abrogates any will to impose one's own opinion on others. If it were possible to back-track to the beginning of the modern missionary movement, we might imagine those pioneer missionaries going overseas with totally open or even empty minds — regarding the outcome of their engagement with people of other faiths, including the structure or form of any Christian community which may or may not have developed and wonder what the result would have been. Radically different, probably, to the legacy of today. But to proceed to my definition of 'mission' and then to relate it to my concept of 'dialogue'.

Mission, I believe, is sharing God's love, with individuals, with communities, with institutions, in short with the whole family of humankind and beyond, taking on board the WCC's call for Justice, Peace and the Integrity of creation - to the whole created order, to the 'cosmos' for which the Christ of John (3:16) died. My concept of mission embraces, too, 'diakonia' or 'service' - including the many service activities associated with missionary endeavor, hospitals and schools, development and aid programmes. All these are ways of sharing God's love but to be genuine such service must be offered with no strings attached. It must not be a carrot to attract people to convert to Christianity. It must be an expression, an incarnation, of God's selfless, self-giving love, the love manifested in Christ in the *'kenosis'* (self-emptying) of Phil. 3:7. As God became a slave (*'doulos'*) for us, so must we be slaves for others.

True mission, like real dialogue, has no end in view apart from loving people for who and what they are. As objects of God's love, incarnated by Christians through

Mission, in dialogue and in witness, people of other faiths must be free to choose their own response. Conversion may or may not be their response just as Christians may or may not choose to convert to the faith of their dialogue partner. Thus, the purpose of mission does not lie in achieving any particular result, such as church planting, but in the act of the mission itself, in the sharing of God's love. Obviously, some Christians will argue that since God's love is supremely expressed in Jesus, what God most requires of people is to know Jesus as Saviour. Without commenting on my personal view, I suggest that this does not prejudice my thesis that Mission has no end or aim but is an end in itself. Apart from those who believe in predestination, the majority of Christians, whether exclusivist or pluralist in their attitude towards other faiths, to cite the paradigms described in 'Towards a Theology for Inter-Faith Dialogue' (1984) believe that people have freedom of choice, that God wants people to choose Him for themselves. The aim of mission may possibly be to create an environment in which a genuinely free choice can be made but such choice must be unaccompanied by prejudice. If my definitions are accepted, my premise that dialogue and mission are compatible is, I submit, sustained, since both are methods with inbuilt commitments to non-determined, open-ended results. Their purpose lies not in achieving preconceived goals but in the very acts that are themselves acts of dialogue and of mission.

In terms of Christian obedience, of faithfulness to Christ's command to bear witness to Him, we fulfill our God-given duty through dialogue, through mission and trust God to oversee the result. I suspect that if such an approach had governed early missionary work, the results would have been very different. Conversions would probably have occurred, but converts may have developed Christologies, forms of worship, forms of church order or government quite different from the European forms now practised throughout the world. Others would probably have drawn aspects of

Christian faith into their own faith, as Hindus in particular have undoubtedly done. The relationship, too, between missionaries and converts may have been radically different, much less a leader-led, teacher-pupil, master-disciple, adult-child relationship, much more the equal partnership of fellow-pilgrims.

The approach to other faiths that undergirds my own dialogue-theology is, confusedly, inclusivist. I do not believe that all people must, in this life, confess Christ with their lips in order to enter God's eternal presence. I believe that those who do God's will, who trust in His goodness, who are aware of their own failings but who yet succeed by a grace beyond themselves, consciously or unconsciously, in living Christ-like lives, will find favour in the sight of the one who said 'Not all those who call me "Lord, Lord" will enter the Kingdom of God, but those who do the will of my Father'. (Matt. 7:21) To ground, for a moment, this approach in personal experience — in my relationships with Muslim friends, I never speak of conversion. I witness to my faith in Christ but I leave the impact of my witness to God.

This paper is offered as a discussion starter. My own working definition of Mission has been criticised as lacking specificity. Some wish to preserve a 'sentness' within their definitions, the concept of movement, of crossing frontiers, whether geographical, cultural, class or prejudicial. Mission, too, is more than dialogue but includes it. Others wish to retain a prophetic element - evil must be challenged wherever found. To pursue this theme would be to start another paper but my own conviction is that God favours right action more than right believing. Certainly, the Old Testament prophets teach us many lessons here:

What does the Lord require of you, O man, but to do justice, to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God (Micah 6:8).

Perhaps we could do no better than to quote Micah as a definition of Mission.

\* This paper, based on a recent lecture to students in the Mission Department of the Selly Oak Colleges, represents a preliminary attempt to develop thinking on dialogue as a mission. This article is an excerpt reprinted from *Current Dialogue*: WCC, Geneva, June, 1988.