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# Inter Faith Dialogue

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This article is an analysis of the report prepared by the Inter-Faith Consultative Group of the Board for Mission and Unity,<sup>1</sup> at the request of the General Synod in 1981. At that time the General Synod had accepted the four *Guidelines for Dialogue* prepared by the British Council of Churches, but requested a report on 'the theological aspects of dialogue'. This document, which incorporated those four guidelines, with further comment, is the result. It is intended 'to stimulate widespread reflection on the underlying theological issues', and after preliminary discussion in General Synod in July 1984, has been 'sent down' to the dioceses, deaneries and parishes for their study and response, in the hope that 'others will join us in reflecting upon what has been called elsewhere a wider ecumenism.'

What follows retains the order of the report in its sections and numbered paragraphs.

## **A Changed Context (5-13)**

The opening paragraphs sketch in the new situation in which British Christians have found themselves within a generation of the end of the Second World War. Previously other faiths were 'out there' in far off parts of the earth. Now, in Britain as in the rest of Western Europe and North America, people of all the major world faiths live and work in close proximity. The matter of forging relationships with such people thus takes on a practical and inescapable urgency. There can be no questioning the report's description of contemporary social reality in Britain, which Christians simply cannot ignore.

However, by making this empirical observation the lead-in to the theological discussion, the report immediately sets its whole subsequent discussion on a relativistic basis from which it never escapes, in spite of later affirmations about the 'supremacy' or 'normativeness' of Christ. So we are told, 'Christians share with those of other faiths an awareness of, and a search for, "the Other", "the ground of all being", though they use very different language, symbols and imagery to express it' (13). This classic 'common denominator' presupposition of the syncretist standpoint is here smuggled in at the end of a hitherto purely descriptive section as though it were self-evident. Similarly we are told that 'the contemporary experience of Christianity as one religion among others presents a new challenge for the church' (14).

Now this may be valid as an empirical observation of the socio-religious pluralism of our day, but if the phrase 'Christianity as one religion among others' is taken as a theological starting point, as it seems to be, then it is dangerously misleading. For once you reduce Christianity to one sub-category of a wider phenomenon, namely 'human religion', it becomes practically impossible to preserve any meaningful concept of its uniqueness or 'supremacy' (the word favoured by the report). The report struggles with this contradiction at crucial points, as we shall see. 'One religion among others' may be the objective observation of the 'neutral' descriptive discipline of 'comparative religions' but it is not at all the 'internal' self-understanding of the Christian faith as expressed in the Bible (which the report accepts as 'the primary authoritative source'). The writers have ignored the warning, given twenty years ago, by Visser't Hooft and have contributed, as he put it, to the 'syncretistic mood of our times'. He said:

Christianity understands itself not as one of several religions but as the adequate and definitive revelation of God in history. . . . Every time Christians use the word religion meaning something wider than Christianity but including Christianity, they contribute to the syncretistic mood of our times. . . . It is high time that Christians should rediscover that the very heart of their faith is that Jesus Christ did not come to make a contribution to the religious storehouses of mankind, but that in him God reconciled the world unto himself.<sup>2</sup>

### **Christian Response To Other Faiths (14-23)**

The next section seeks to present a survey of the 'variety of theories about how other religions accord with the Christian understanding of God', recognizing that these are not rigid categories. Three positions are outlined: exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism. Now it would have been helpful if, in a document intended for study and reflection, each of these had in fact been set forth clearly with some indication of the arguments in favour of, and the weaknesses or dangers of, each of them. But this is not done.

First of all, we are told that 'exclusivism' is 'at one end of the spectrum'. This implicitly brands it as some kind of extremism – something abhorrent to all good Anglicans! Inclusivism and pluralism, however, are not to be found at the other end of any spectrum. Rather, they are 'a more positive account' (18), which further implies that 'exclusivism' is negative; they are part of 'a Christian understanding of the universal love of God' (20), which, again by implication, must be a concept foreign to exclusivism. And to add to this already loaded language, the words 'exclusive' and 'exclusivism' are later used several times to refer to the narrow isolationism of post-exilic Judaism (30), which, of course, Jesus was against, so it must be a bad thing. Worst of all, the word is used of the Rabbinic concept of exclusion

from salvation of all but the Jews. 'Such exclusivist beliefs were powerful and hard to overturn. They have continued to echo within the Christian tradition' (35). Where is the 'echo'? Presumably in 'exclusivism', which is thus subtly changed from being a conviction concerning the uniqueness of God's revealing and saving work in Christ into a hostile, grudging personal attitude towards outsiders, which is quite unjust.

The paragraph on 'Exclusivism' runs on as follows. (The italics here and elsewhere in this article are mine).

The Christian exclusivist theory counts all religions other than Christianity as the product of *blindness* or even *sinful unbelief*. At the very extreme this is expressed by saying that they are *the work of Satan*. At best, other religions represent the fruit of *God's activity in nature and conscience*, which is distorted by *sin* or *human pride*. Consequently, they are either wholly in *error*, or simply *inadequate* for salvation, and reflect nothing of the real saving grace of God. On this understanding the doctrine of the Incarnation of Christ places Christianity in opposition to or discontinuous with the other religions. *Christ alone* is the Saviour who has revealed perfectly the heart and mind of the Father and the true way of discipleship. Those who do not acknowledge this word of truth therefore stand under *judgement*. Moreover this judgement applies equally to the Church, when it is seen to be acting without reliance on God's grace given in the Incarnation. For Exclusivism, then, the *absolute supremacy of Christ* is a given part of the data of Christian identity (16).

Now every one of the words and phrases in italics could be discussed and justified with unquestionable biblical support (and not just proof-texts either). Blindness and unbelief are found on the lips of Jesus, and that to describe the highest and best in the religion of his day! Few Christians would attribute every aspect of non-Christian religion to Satan, but nevertheless, to discern the work of Satan within human religion is not 'very extreme', but soberly biblical. Likewise God's gracious activity in nature and conscience, the distorting effects of human sin, pride and error, the inadequacy of all human religious systems, the uniqueness of Jesus as Saviour, and the reality of judgement, are all not only important biblical themes, but also the subject of serious contemporary theological and missiological debate and writing among many who would not readily accept the label 'exclusivist' as it is coloured in this report. The major criticism at this point is not just that these important themes have been put within a bracket of implicit disapproval, but that they are nowhere seriously discussed at all in the rest of the report. On divine judgement, for example, although there is a later section called 'The Saving and Judging God' (46-59), it actually has no positive discussion at all on the biblical doctrine of judgment, except to criticize those who do not share the report's view of 'inclusive salvation'.

'*Inclusivism*' is described as follows:

As a result of the realisation that a great spiritual depth is found in many of the religious traditions of the world and that they show all the signs of persisting in the future, many theologians are turning to a more positive account of the place of other religions within a Christian understanding of the activity of God. While holding firmly to the belief that God was supremely manifest in Jesus, inclusivist theories also affirm the universal presence of God's Spirit through the whole of Creation. God's saving power and presence is defined in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, but it is not confined to him. Through his Logos or his Spirit, God is operative beyond Christian culture, bringing salvation to other peoples and cultures who may not even know the name of Jesus (18).

This raises enormous questions which are scarcely faced. What does it mean to say that salvation is 'defined' by Christ, but not 'confined to him'? If someone is saved without knowing even the name of Jesus, how is his salvation defined by the historical Jesus (note, 'life, death and resurrection')? What is meant by 'Christian culture' and 'bringing salvation to other *cultures*'?

At this point, having virtually said that Christianity, even defined minimally as knowledge of Jesus Christ, is one way, but not the only way, to salvation, the report immediately faces the difficult task of asserting in the same paragraph the 'supremacy of the Christian way'.

The supremacy of the Christian way is retained in one of two ways. First, Christ is held to be the indisputable author of salvation because this is a given part of Christian identity (this givenness of the person of Christ is similar to that in Exclusivism). The relationship between Christianity and the other religions is then analogous to the traditional Christian judgement on its own Jewish heritage. As Judaism became interpreted as a preparation for the greater light of the Gospel, so the other religions are seen as forerunners of the Gospel. Some inclusivists would wish to underline more strongly than others the special place of Judaism among the forerunners of the Gospel as witnessing to a special divine disclosure and redemptive activity. The revelation of God in Christ is the concrete, historical form of what remains hidden in the depths of other religions. A second way of asserting Christian supremacy is by speaking of the normativeness of Jesus and the Christian way when this is compared with other ways. Jesus is supremely the standard or correct measure by which other religious experience must be judged. This assertion of Christian supremacy is arrived at after an historical comparison of the truths and fruits of the religious experience of the major world faiths (18).

In response to this one might first of all point out the absence of any appeal to objective, unique revelation by God in the attempt to justify the supremacy of Christianity. The first point gets near it, but then slides off. Christ as author of salvation is held, not as a datum of divine revelation or as a biblical truth, but as part of 'Christian identity'. That is, it is what we happen to believe because we are Christians, not

something revealed by God and true whether or not we or others believe it. Indeed, uniqueness is effectively ruled out, because such revelation as is in Christ is only 'the concrete historical form of what remains hidden in the depths of other faiths'. This curious concept is derived by equating other religions, including their 'teachers, prophets, holy people and scriptures' (19) with the Jewish heritage of Christianity – namely, the Old Testament. Now this is an enormous theological step to take. It questions the normativeness of the canon of Scripture, including the Old Testament, the historical particularity of Jesus as the completion of *this* particular story and no other, and is fundamentally a-historical. That is, it shifts the focus of salvation from God's redemptive activity in the particular, once-for-all-ness of biblical history as a whole, to abstractions like 'hidden depths' and 'spiritual truths' which are found in all religions. Because such issues are at stake, this procedure of accepting the traditions or scriptures of other religions as forerunners of the Gospel equivalent to the Old Testament has been a deeply divisive matter of debate among theologians and missiologists in different continents. But here it is presented with little hint of its controversial implications, as though it were an obvious step. 'Inclusivist theory stresses how Christianity does in fact complete other forms of religion' (19). In fact?

The second way of 'asserting Christian supremacy' exemplifies the problem the report has of seeking to preserve Christ as 'normative' within a 'comparative religions' framework. We are told that Christ is the norm, the standard, the correct measure, but on what basis? Not on any objective or definitive revelation of God to that effect, but as the result of our own comparative study. But this is incredible and illogical. How can that which is the norm of comparison be the result of comparison? On this view, the normativeness of Christ is *not* the datum at the starting point, but the result at the end of, the process of comparing Christianity with other faiths. As such it differs little from the entirely subjective and relative assertion 'Our religion is best.' As such also it is obviously open to question from any other major world faith, whose own 'historical comparison' is unlikely to acquiesce in the assertion of 'Christian supremacy'.

In any case, this expression 'Christian supremacy' or 'the supremacy of the Christian way', is itself odd, but can be seen to be the result of avoiding concepts of objective biblical revelation or the uniqueness of Christ himself, preferring instead to keep the discussion on the level of Christianity as a religion among other religions. But the Bible is not concerned with 'the supremacy of the Christian religion', but with the sole personal Lordship of *Christ* over all other lords that claim people's allegiance. That is a very different claim. It is an *a priori* confession of faith, based on submission to an accepted self-revelation of God in the person of the historical Jesus, not an *a posteriori* conclusion at the end of historical comparison of major world faiths.

'Pluralism' is defined as the view 'that the differences between religions arise from the different human interpretations of the revelation of the one God according to cultural limitations'(20). This does not imply that 'all religions are ultimately the same or equally true', but it does give rise to the essential goal and hope of syncretism, that 'other religions might be brought into some kind of larger ecumenical relationship where the truths of each are seen as complementary to each other.' (It should be noted that the report does not favour the syncretistic approach in principle). It is recognized of course that such a view rules out the possibility of any one, final revelation of God and of his truth in history, so no attempt is made to argue for this position biblically – except for one very odd parenthesis: speaking of 'the incompleteness of any one revelation' the report adds '(the symbol for this in Christianity is the Second Coming)'. But the New Testament consistently regards the Incarnation as the completion of God's self-revelation, not the second Coming, which will be the climax of God's *redemptive* work.

The conclusion to this survey of the three views makes several good points:

Many would agree that relations with other faiths include witnessing to the Christian centrality of the work and person of Jesus, being prepared to let go of much of the cultural packaging of the Gospel as we strive to express the Christian revelation in other cultural forms, and a willingness to learn to some degree from other witnesses and religious traditions. But what is at issue is truth: what has to be retained at all costs and what can be surrendered for the sake of better, richer things and deeper understandings? (22).

One is grateful for the emphasis on the centrality of Christ, the place of witness and the concern for truth. But it is not clear whether 'cultural packaging' of the Gospel refers to its first century cultural expression in the New Testament or to its twentieth century western cultural forms.

The report then turns to its lengthy biblical section, which is in three parts: biblical authority, the biblical process, and biblical pointers.

### **The Bible as Source of Authoritative Guidance (24)**

While believing firmly in Scripture as the primary source of authority for the Christian community we cannot accept that an answer to this, or any other contemporary puzzle, is to be discovered in any single quotation or any one strand of biblical thought. We refuse to wrest any biblical quotation from its context and use it as a sole basis for determining our attitude towards those of other faiths. Any biblical quotation has to be understood against its own immediate context, and also against the burden of the entire biblical message.

This is well said and quite proper. The vital importance of taking any text in its context has always been a sound hermeneutical principle. Now, in my understanding, the purpose of this procedure is so that each individual text may be properly understood and accorded its own proper authority within the overall authority of the total canon. However, in this report, it turns out rather differently. The individual text is virtually gagged as a source of authority.

Once we have rejected the authority of any single text, whether from the Old Testament or New Testament, to guide us in developing a theology of inter-faith dialogue, we are left to discover how the Bible as a whole can act as the primary authoritative source.

But what does 'the Bible as a whole' mean, apart from careful examination of relevant *individual* texts on any subject, on the presupposition that each shares in the authority of the whole? Locating our authority in 'the Bible as a whole' in such a way that the authority of the single text, rather than being enhanced, is actually diminished, seems to me a very questionable hermeneutical procedure. It is a hermeneutical skid-pan, in which you aren't allowed to hold on to any fixed points. And as it turns out, the rest of the biblical section of the report can scarcely be regarded as even an outline of the teaching of the 'Bible as a whole' on other faiths. It has major omissions, some of which are mentioned at the end of the section of biblical pointers, and it is not immune to quoting proof-texts without due regard for context, as we shall see.

### **The Biblical Process (25–31)**

This section suggests that the very process by which the Bible came to be produced is significant for inter-faith dialogue. For the Bible did not just happen overnight, but was the result of a long process in which men and women of God, in both Testaments, wrestled with inherited traditions and also reacted to external religious and cultural patterns. Now again, this is both true and important. Understanding the humanity of the canonical process is a vital aspect in fully appreciating the divinely intended meaning of the text. The people of God in both Testaments, born into civilizations already ancient, were called to holiness in the midst of the nations, but not to isolationism. There is indeed abundant evidence of cultural inter-action, though it is surely straining language to describe Hosea as a case of 'openness to other traditions' because he chooses to speak of Yahweh's relation to Israel in terms of *marriage* as he attacks vitriolically the worship of Baal as literal and spiritual *prostitution!* Nevertheless, I have three problems with the general drift of this section.

First of all, it seems to make no distinction between the process by which the canon was formed on the one hand, and the interactions

between Christians and other faiths since the completion of the canon and the church's acceptance of its authority, on the other hand. The giving and receiving of revelation in biblical times was assuredly a 'process' and a 'pattern'. But did revelation ever reach a definitive and final stage? This report seems to think not, for it expects the ongoing 'openness to others' to be 'the way to new insights into the nature and being of God' (31). We are left with no clear assessment of the role of the completed canon of Scripture as distinct from the historical and human processes of its formation.

Secondly, there is an ambiguity about the much used words 'open' and 'openness'. It is quite true, for example, that Paul and other New Testament writers were fully aware of the Greek and Roman cultural environment, and 'were eager to use their knowledge of current philosophies and to find whatever common ground they could with their audiences in order to share the Gospel message' (29). But it ought to have been made clearer that such openness was for the purpose of communicating the truth of the Gospel in a relevant and intelligible way, not for the purpose of receiving further revelation from such sources.

Thirdly, in stressing the creative aspects of Israel's 'engagements with other cultures and religions', which one can certainly endorse at many points, the report seriously underplays the degree of opposition to them, in the Old Testament. It concedes that the engagement was 'never without opposition, conflict and threat, as the prophets clearly show' (30), but immediately returns to the 'creative insights' motif. Now even by the report's own desire to see 'the burden of the entire biblical message', this is a seriously unbalanced presentation. For even when all the 'creative insights' have been assembled, even with stretches of imagination like Hosea's alleged 'openness', it could still be plausibly said that 'opposition, conflict and threat' form the dominant notes of Israel's relationship with external religion and culture, not a kind of parenthetical *leitmotif*. Repeated warnings in the law against mixing with other religions, repeated historical examples of the disastrous effects of doing so, more prophetic ink on this subject than probably any other: all this may not fit congenially with the 'inclusivist' view adopted in the report, and certainly it must be balanced with other crucial biblical themes and given its proper rationale in Israel's context. But it is unquestionably a major element in 'the biblical process' and merits more serious attention than a one line concession.

### **Biblical Pointers (32-59)**

This longest section of the report is sub-divided into themes which we shall discuss separately.

### 1 *The Creating God* (32)

Here the point is well made that all human beings share a common createdness and a common fallenness. God, as creator, has some relationship with all of his human creatures, whatever their religion as such, simply by their being human, made in the image of God. But at the same time, all human life has its dark side of alienation from God, sin and death and conflict. The effect of this duality of man's nature is not really followed up as regards human religion, however. It would at least have entailed some account of elements of unbelief, blindness, pride, error, etc. within human religious systems.

### 2 *The Covenanting God* (33)

This paragraph sets out to correct the false idea that the exclusive Sinai/Mosaic covenant between God and Israel was the prior or primary covenant in the Old Testament. It points out quite correctly that Adam, Noah and Abraham come first, and together they establish a universal framework for God's dealings in history. God is concerned with all mankind in the whole earth, and this is the wider perspective of all his dealings with Israel. This certainly needs to be clearly understood.

However, instead of preserving the biblical balance by seeing the Mosaic covenant and God's special relationship with Israel as the means of realizing this universal goal – i.e. holding together both the ultimate, inclusive, missiological, 'all nations' intention, and the interim exclusive relationship, 'through Israel' as the means – the report effectively substitutes one for the other and relegates what it calls 'the more exclusive view of things' to the position of a post-exilic degeneration. This is combined with some very shaky biblical quotations.

To understand the covenants with Adam, Noah and Abraham as primary rather than the Mosaic covenant, leads to a dramatically different reading of the Old Testament and points the direction of salvation history in a different way. It leads to the recognition that all humanity is the people of God and that the God of the Jewish and Christian revelation is the God of all peoples. This is further hinted at within the Old Testament. 'Have I not brought the Philistines from Caphtor and the Syrians from Kir?' (Amos 9:7). Moreover the Assyrians and Egyptians are not related to God indirectly through Israel, but directly (Isaiah 19:25). However the particular historical developments of the post-exilic period led Israel to a more exclusive view of things. The Mosaic covenant was interpreted in terms of the separation of the Holy People of God with little emphasis on Israel's vocation to the world.

This 'dramatically different reading of the Old Testament' is a dramatic obliteration of a primary Old Testament concept, namely the distinction between the people of God and other peoples within history, and the uniqueness of the covenant relationship. 'That all

humanity is the people of God' – if by that is meant, as it seems to be, 'people of God as Israel were' – is no recognition, but a distortion, in the present context. If it were true, there would have been no need of 'salvation history' in any 'direction'. Certainly such a view cannot be substantiated from biblical texts, not even at the level of 'hints'. Of the two verses referred to, one is rhetorical indictment, and the other is eschatological, and each of them has here been 'wrested from its context' in a way we were rightly told to avoid.

Amos 9:7 (which incidentally must strike the average man in the pew as rather meaningless, just quoted here without explanation), is a warning to Israel. It makes the point that Israel have no special claim on God's favour just because of their history of exodus *per se*, unless they fulfil the socio-ethical demands of the relationship established in the course of that history. At the level of human history and origins alone, other nations also had been moved around by Yahweh, the sovereign God of all mankind. He had been active in other histories than Israel's only. (This in itself was not a new thought. Even Israel's exodus itself had explicitly proved God's sovereignty in the histories of other nations). What the verse is saying is that the Israelites, by their blatant social disobedience (which has been Amos's prime accusation) have become no better in God's sight than any nation as foreign or as far away as they could think of (the Cushites), and that they needn't think their history in itself gives them some guaranteed immunity from God's judgement. It does *not* say that these other nations are in the same relationship to God as Israel, or that they are all 'the people of God'. (It does not say they are like Israel, but that Israel has become like them, which is very different). In fact, such an interpretation is excluded by the context of the rest of Amos, where the unique relationship between Yahweh and Israel is both implied in the recital of salvation history (2:10ff), and made unambiguously explicit in 3:2 – 'You only have I known (= covenant relationship) of all the nations of the earth.' This also is shockingly followed by the threat of punishment, on the very basis of the unique relationship between them. In other words, Amos 9:7, in its context, is a severe and radical challenge to theologically rationalized complacency and disobedience among God's covenant people. It is not a statement about the redeemed or covenant status of any other nation.

Isaiah 19:25 is one of many breathtaking Old Testament texts which envisage God bringing the nations, even including his erstwhile enemies, into the same relationship to himself as Israel currently enjoyed. But it is misleading to refer to it as if it were a statement of present reality at the time it was uttered ('are . . . related'). For it is quite clearly eschatological in itself ('In that day . . .', vv. 23, 24, is a standard prophetic way of indicating God's future redemptive intervention in the new age), and in its surrounding context (vv. 19ff.) It is quite clear that the verse does not describe Isaiah's assessment of

Egypt's current standing before God, since the very same chapter (Isa. 19) is mainly a comprehensive oracle of total judgement upon Egypt's culture and religion – her gods, idols, rulers, intellectuals, traders, etc. It is in fact this context of judgement which makes the eschatological vision of Egypt's salvation all the more remarkable. Nor is it accurate to speak of Egypt and Assyria being related to God directly and not indirectly through Israel, since the context describes Egypt turning to Yahweh (the covenant God of Israel), having an altar to Yahweh, knowing Yahweh, etc.

Likewise, in many other Old Testament contexts, the nations are envisaged as 'coming up to Zion', to hear God's law given through Israel (e.g. Isa. 2:3ff.), to adopt the name of God *and* of his people (Isa. 44:3–5), to celebrate Israel's redemptive history, in which they will come to share through worship and the acknowledgement of Yahweh's kingship (Ps. 47 and other 'kingship Psalms'). This inclusive vision therefore, is certainly present and fundamentally important, but it is both eschatological and at the same time linked to the special role of Israel as the present bearers of the redemptive covenant relationship and its attendant responsibility. The promise to Abraham was not just that 'all peoples shall be blessed', but precisely that this would happen *through* Israel, Abraham's seed, of whom God would say, 'they shall be my people and I shall be their God' – an expression common to *both* the Abrahamic and the Mosaic covenants. God's inclusive purpose would be pursued through an exclusive covenant relationship with this particular people. The tension of this paradox and polarity runs right through the Old Testament from Abraham onwards, and it is wrong therefore to regard the 'exclusive view of things' as merely a post-exilic development. The tension between history and eschatology in Scripture cannot so easily be disposed of.<sup>3</sup>

The paragraph continues:

This was dramatically overturned in the New Testament. By the life death and resurrection of Jesus all, Jew and Gentile, slave and free, women and men are brought potentially within the relationship of the new covenant. Chapter 2 of Ephesians explains this most clearly. The Gentiles, 'strangers to the covenants of promise' and 'far off' have been brought near in the blood of Christ. The Church is the new Israel, its membership open to all. Here is the reversal of the post-exilic process of exclusivism to that potentially inclusive relation inherent in creation. The goal of all history and of all peoples is set in the direction of a 'mended creation' and a restored relation between the Creator and all that he creates (33).

It would be more correct to say that Paul's exposition of the inclusive scope of the Gospel is, as he himself put it, a revelation of that which in the Old Testament was still a 'mystery' – namely *how* the declared inclusive intention of God for all nations could be fulfilled, rather than a reaction to post-exilic exclusivism (though it was that also, of

course). And his point is that the fulfilment of God's promise to the Gentiles through Abraham is now available precisely through the unique person and work of Jesus, the Messiah of the Old Testament hope. The inclusiveness of the church is still based on an 'exclusive' qualification – 'through the Messiah, Jesus'. Furthermore, Paul's great vision, so Old Testament in its features, of an ultimate mended creation, unified under Christ, did not obliterate for him, any more than for the Old Testament, the present historical distinction between the people of God and those who were not yet members of that body, either in his missionary practice or in his theological reflection and writing.

### 3 *The Electing God* (34–37)

This is a much more helpful section which counteracts somewhat the confusion of the previous paragraph. It makes clear that the election of Israel was for the purpose of holding the knowledge of God and his salvation in trust for the rest of the world – i.e. a stewardship. It refers to Israel's calling and mission. It stresses election to servanthood and obedience, not to power, pride or privileges. And it points out the essentially corporate nature of election in the New Testament also, i.e. God's purpose in history to call a people for himself out of all nations.

Thus both the themes of covenanting and electing could never in themselves lead to a position of Christian isolationism. Both point to an implicit relationship between the God of the old Israel and the new Israel and all peoples, and a longing and desire of that God to draw all into a relationship of kinship with himself. *Any special relationship with a chosen people is for the purpose of leading all to one God.* It is within this context that we must set relations with those of other faiths. There can be no room for superiority or pride, only for wonder and thanksgiving that we are called, marked, for service to others; to that pattern of service exemplified in the Isaianic Servant and perfected in Jesus Christ (37).

This is well said and must surely be heeded by all Christians. One might only wish to emphasize the italicized sentence by making clear that the purpose is indeed that of leading others to the one living God, revealed to and through his people, and not that of affirming the validity of other existing religions, or, as the report elsewhere suggests, that God is savingly at work in them. Furthermore, as an aside, I should have thought that the commendable stress on absence of superiority and an attitude rather of humility, is likely to be better served by those who accept the truth of the biblical revelation and the uniqueness of Christ as something given, an objective deposit of which they are merely stewards (though the report might deem them 'exclusivists'), rather than by those who claim to have arrived at the conclusion of 'Christian supremacy' after historico-comparative study of Christianity with other religions.

4 *The Incarnate God* (38–42)

An opening brief reference to the life of Jesus, already interpreted for us in the New Testament (38), leads quickly into two long paragraphs of discussion of 'Logos theology' (39–40). The whole section would be better called 'The Non-incarnate Christ', for only one paragraph (41) actually discusses the Incarnation, and that, not in terms of its objective significance for the uniqueness of Christ himself and the implications of that, but rather as a pattern for Christian discipleship (a very good paragraph in itself, but not the central implication of the Incarnation for inter-faith theology).

Our starter for 'Logos theology' is Justin Martyr, who, in the second century, argued that since Christ as the Logos has enlightened all men, those who live according to this light are to be considered 'Christians', even if they are pagans, or pre-Christians (the relevant passage from Justin<sup>4</sup> is quoted in paragraph 57). This view has found many adherents and is prominent in contemporary Roman Catholic thinking, especially through Karl Rahner's concept of the 'anonymous Christian'.

The development of Logos theology has implications for understanding God's activity in the world and is therefore important for any assessment of Christian relations with other faiths. While Logos theology understands the unique expression of God as being in Jesus Christ (there can be no surrendering of that belief), at the same time it takes seriously other manifestations of the Logos in other places and at other times. This suggests that in relations with those of other faiths Christians have to hold to that unique self-expressive activity of God in Jesus Christ, safe-guarded and passed down within the Christian Church. But equally Christians need to be open to recognize and respond to all manifestations of the Logos. The decisive revelation of God in Jesus has to be safe-guarded for that is the canon by which we are enabled to recognize all other manifestations. Furthermore in the encountering of those other revelations, new depths are discovered in that fullest revelation of God in Jesus Christ. Such reflection on the mystery of the person of Jesus in the Bible and Tradition points in the direction of an inclusivism in relation to those of other faiths, but with an unswerving loyalty to Jesus Christ (40).

My problems with this paragraph are logical, theological and biblical. Firstly, a matter of logic. The writers' commendable insistence on the 'uniqueness' of the manifestation of the Logos in the Incarnate, historical Jesus of Nazareth, is placed incongruously alongside the assumption of 'other manifestations'. But unique means unique. It means one only, once only, unprecedented, unparalleled, unrepeatable. It does not mean one of a kind, or even the best of a series. Or is that in fact all the report actually means by 'unique and decisive'?

The theological point is actually an absence of theology at this vital point. For if Jesus is to be the 'canon' for our assessment of all else, what is the exact *nature* of his uniqueness? In what respect is he unique

and decisive? We need to know what it is about Jesus that makes him the measure and standard of other 'revelations'. Is he unique in his person and nature (i.e. as *God* incarnate, such as no other ever has been or will be)? Or is he unique only by 'degree' (i.e. superior to 'other revelations' by being a better man, a better teacher, a better example, etc.)? If, on the former view, Jesus of Nazareth is the *only* true incarnation of the living God in history, then there is an inescapable exclusive claim involved in Christian incarnation theology, which has sometimes been called 'the scandal of particularity'. But if he is only the 'fullest' example of what is present in other faiths, we are back in the thicket of relativism again. As we noted earlier, 'superiority' can only be decided upon by comparison. But Jesus cannot be simultaneously the standard of comparison against which all else is to be measured (the meaning of 'canon'), and one of the candidates for comparison – even if he turns out to be the 'best'.

My biblical objection is that this 'development of Logos theology' seems to lose all touch with what John actually said in his Prologue. There is so much in this paragraph about 'other manifestations of the Logos in other places and at other times'<sup>5</sup> that a reader might take this as the self-evident gist of John's Logos theme. But it is decidedly not so. Two assertions are made about the universal role of the Logos in John's Prologue. One is his part in the creation of all things and all people. This fits in with strands of biblical theology elsewhere which attribute creation to the 'whole' Godhead, including the Son, Christ, or, as here, the Logos. It is an aspect of creation theology which in itself says nothing about the nature of the relationship between any particular human being, or group or nation, and God, for in the same context, some people reject while others receive a relationship with God through the Logos by whom they were created. The other aspect is that, as light, the Logos (understood) enlightens every human being (v. 9). This text is talking about the light which God has given to the whole human race – to 'every man'. It is not talking about distinguishable manifestations of the Logos to certain people in certain times and places, which we can then 'recognize' within other faiths. It is not talking about certain higher truths, or beliefs, or religious systems as such, but about *people*, about everybody, everywhere, in every age, all the time, *all* of whom have been given light by God. Then, against this background of the universal creating and universal enlightening roles of the Logos, John moves on to speak of the one and only actual *manifestation* proper of the Logos – namely the incarnation of the 'one and only' (*monogenés* = 'unique') Son of God: 'The Logos became flesh' (v.14). A unique, historical, particular, personally witnessed incarnation is the only mode of 'manifestation of the Logos' to be found in John's Prologue, so unless we are willing to postulate other alleged incarnations as parallels or analogous to Jesus, we should not use John to accredit the idea of 'other manifestations of the Logos', or

'other revelations'. Such ideas are simply not present here, still less that in being open to such other 'revelations' we might discover new depths in the fulness of Christ's revelation of the Father. This constitutes such a radical modification (if not logical contradiction) of the uniqueness of the Incarnation that one fears the report has failed to heed its own warning that 'no inter-faith dialogue can surrender this "jealousy" of Christian belief and remain faithful to the essentials of Christianity'(42).

Finally on this section, it struck me as theologically very odd that the *atonement* work of Christ only gets in as a final subordinate point under the section on Incarnation (42), with some technical language not readily intelligible to the wider readership the report hopes for ('Christus Victor', 're-capitulation in Christ'). And while it rightly describes Christ's work as a 'once for all event which lifts all creation towards perfect union with God and leads all towards re-capitulation in Christ', it provides no adequate theological comment as to the distinctiveness of Christian Atonement doctrine from the ways in which other religions deal with the problem of man's predicament.

#### 5 *God as Spirit* (43–45)

I found this the most difficult section to come to grips with. It contains virtually no biblical reference point at all, and instead takes us through the controversy between Western and Orthodox Christianity over the role of the Spirit. In the process it drops in the word 'Filioque' without translation or simple explanation. The language (especially the tortuous sentence at the beginning of paragraph 45) must surely leave many lay Christians gasping and is unlikely to stimulate 'widespread theological reflection' among those who are not already familiar with this particular controversy. In the end, it seems to state the truth that God's Spirit is not limited to the Church but is free to work throughout his created world, including other religions and cultures. The purpose of such work is not made clear. The report suggests that the Spirit will uncover to *Christians* 'in other faiths and cultures the deepest truths of their own Christian and human being'. Without denying this possibility, it seems odd that nothing is said about the Spirit uncovering to those of other faiths what the report elsewhere calls 'the supremacy' or the 'uniqueness' of Christ, in order to lead them to saving knowledge of God through Christ. Nor is there any reference to Jesus' own assessment of the work of the Spirit in the world – that of conviction of sin, of righteousness and of judgement.

#### 6 *The Saving and Judging God* (46–59)

This section opens with an attempt to broaden our concept of salvation to a more wholistic, biblical dimension, which certainly included present, tangible acts of deliverance as well as a future, other-worldly state beyond the final day of judgement. However,

again, rather than holding together the total biblical picture, the report appears to treat 'salvation after death' as something which 'became normative for Christian ideas of salvation very early on in the history of the Church. Salvation was understood as deliverance, through the work of Christ, from sin, condemnation, perdition, death and the wrath of God. The form of this present world was passing and would pass away, but some would be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus' (47). These phrases are undoubtedly part of the overall New Testament concept of salvation, but by putting them in the context of an 'early historical development', they are somewhat cut off from their New Testament roots. This is the same procedure as was adopted in the Old Testament where the 'exclusive' aspect was relegated to a post-exilic aberration (whereas in fact it is found as one dimension of the Old Testament story from the early period), so that the 'real' biblical picture could be presented as the congenially inclusive one. So here, the sharper edge of the *New Testament* doctrine of salvation (which explicitly presupposes the reality of condemnation, wrath of God, etc.) is treated as something which only later became normative. There is thus no adequate discussion of the 'already but not yet' tension of New Testament concepts of salvation, kingdom of God, judgement, etc. It seems, really, that the report has tried to cover too vast a subject in too short a space and its clarity has suffered badly.

Similarly, the following section (48) is too brief and tendentious to be helpful. The doctrine of 'outside the church, no salvation' has always had so many qualifications in Roman Catholic thought (and practice), that it is hard to give it precise substance. But it is still a powerful theological arguing point today, not just a medieval curiosity, which the fifteenth century quotation rather suggests. Further we are told that, stemming from the Reformation, it was the 'vivid sense of the lostness of the heathen that motivated the nineteenth century missionary movement' – supported by quotations from Hudson Taylor, two missionary hymns, and the more recent Lausanne Covenant. This is undoubtedly true. In fact it is an understatement: firstly inasmuch as the missionary movement got going much earlier than the nineteenth century (e.g. Roman Catholic missionaries were in India since the sixteenth century, and Danish Protestants in the early eighteenth); and secondly inasmuch as the lostness of the heathen was so much taken for granted by Western Christendom that the very possibility of their salvation was doubted in some quarters. The early missionaries struggled against much prejudice and ridicule, from the established churches. It was not the missionaries, but their complacent detractors who had turned the biblical statements concerning 'those who are perishing' without knowledge of Christ into a 'doctrine of exclusion from salvation' (48) and an excuse for leaving the heathen alone. It is thus quite misleading of the report to conclude this paragraph, which speaks of the missionary movement, with the

sentence, 'Such powerful statements of a doctrine of exclusion from salvation are taken by some to point in the direction of only the most distant of relations with those of other faiths'. On the contrary, the fact is that many outstanding missionaries made enormous sacrifices to achieve the closest possible relationship with and understanding of other faiths, in order to be able to relate Christ with respect and integrity to the culture, language and world-view of the people among whom they lived. The legendary Jesuit missionary Roberto de Nobili in the early seventeenth century was the first European to make a serious study of Sanskrit and be allowed to read the sacred Hindu scriptures. He adopted the strict and punishing lifestyle of a Brahmin ascetic, eventually ruining his own health, in order to bring upper caste Hindus to an intelligent understanding of the Christian faith (which, incidentally, he taught largely by a dialogue method). Hudson Taylor became virtually Chinese. William Carey learnt an incredible number of Indian languages and insisted on the study *and* translation of *Hindu* scriptures in order fully to understand Indian religion and culture. And in the later nineteenth century, although there certainly were missionaries who treated native religion and culture with blatant contempt, there were many serious voices advocating thorough knowledge of other faiths and what today would be called a 'contextual' approach to sharing Christ with their adherents.<sup>6</sup>

Returning to the Bible, the report tackles two verses which appear to assert the uniqueness of Christ as the way of salvation: Acts 4:12 and John 14:6.

And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved (Acts 4:12).

The report contextualizes this affirmation of Peter in terms of the healing miracle which gave rise to it, partly on the basis that the same Greek root verb is used for being healed and being saved. 'The story is about healing and the authority by which this takes place' (49). But in fact the story itself is about more than healing, for it includes, in Acts 3, Peter's powerful preaching of the Gospel and the name of Jesus, with the healing as tangible proof of his power. That message included teaching about Jesus as 'Servant of God' (v.13), the 'Holy and Righteous One' (v.14), 'the author of life' (15), 'raised from the dead' (15), the prophesied messiah (v.18), the one through whom the eschatological, Jubiliary restoration would come (v. 21), the fulfilment of the promises to Abraham (v. 25), the one through whom forgiveness of sins could be received, on the basis of moral repentance (vv. 19, 26). It was precisely this highly 'evangelistic' preaching of Jesus as Messiah and Saviour which caused the trial of Peter and John in ch. 4, at which Peter reaffirms the plain fact of the healing in the name of Jesus, and then *again* makes it the basis for going further and asserting

the messiahship of Jesus, using an acknowledged messianic text (v. 11 = Ps. 118:22, also used by Jesus). The report acknowledges this, yet still goes on doggedly to assert that the great affirmation of v. 11 is only about healing. 'Peter's reply is not intended to deny the existence of other healings . . . but to claim that all healing, all making whole, belong to Jesus. It is going beyond the text to interpret it as a statement about other faiths. The context, as Bishop John Robinson emphasises, is not one of comparative religion'(50).

It may indeed be 'going beyond the text' to make it a statement about other faiths. But it is certainly falling far short of the text to interpret it only as a statement about healing. And in any case, it *is* a text of comparative religion in the sense that the whole story is a conflict between emerging Christianity (not yet so called) and resistant Judaism – a conflict precisely over the identity of the messiah, and therefore over the true source of salvation, which in Judaism was bound up with the messianic hope. Peter and his hearers had in common the belief that *sôtéria* (healing, wholeness, deliverance, salvation) in its widest sense would constitute the mission and achievement of the coming messiah – hence the kind of language Peter uses in his sermon in Acts 3. The point was that by identifying *Jesus* of Nazareth, recently crucified and claimed to be risen, as the Messiah, Peter was claiming Jesus, *qua* Messiah as the unique source of salvation. He made use of the healing miracle through the name of Jesus as token and proof of his case, since such healing was accepted evidence of messiahship, as Jesus himself had pointed out to John the Baptist's disciples (Matt. 11:2–6).

Jesus said to him, 'I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no-one comes to the Father, but by me.' (John 14:6).

Concerning this verse, the report is content to argue that the first part of the saying need not be taken exclusively. That is, Jesus claims that in himself the disciples will find the same truth and life as belong to the Father, but 'there is no need to suppose that the text is claiming that apart from Jesus there is neither truth nor life. That is indeed too limiting an interpretation to fit in with the rest of John's Gospel' (51). But is it? Passages like John. 3:36, 5:24–26, 39f., 6:40–51, and 1 John 5:11f., seem to imply strongly that true life is to be found only in Jesus. The report has nothing to say at all about the second half of the statement, which could hardly be clearer as an expression of exclusive uniqueness from the lips of Jesus himself. Significantly, Jesus did not say that no-one *knows* God except through him. There is, as the Prologue said, and as is acknowledged in many parts of the Bible, a universal knowledge of God available to all mankind, and every human being is addressable by and accountable to the living Creator God. But the experience of *coming* to God as *Father*, 'the right to become children of God' (John. 1:12), with all that is involved in that

personal relationship, is here and elsewhere (e.g. in 1:12), exclusively linked to knowledge of and faith in Jesus the Son.

As against these 'hard sayings', the report goes on to point out other 'strands within the Bible, developed in Christian theology, which point clearly towards an inclusive understanding of salvific work.' (53). There is some confusion of terminology here. It is unquestionable that the Bible presents God's saving work as 'inclusive' in its scope. This is the express purpose of the covenant with Abraham, the very mission of Israel, the concern of the prophets and the celebration of the Psalmists' worship. The 'mystery' was *how* it could be accomplished. The New Testament answer lies first in the hints provided in Jesus' own ministry and teaching (the report notes Jesus' reference to the foreign widow of Zarephath and Naaman, and his visit to the Syro-Phoenician woman), which then cease to be hints and become fully expressed in the universal Gospel carried from Jerusalem in the Gentile mission, recorded in Acts and defended by Paul as the very essence of 'my Gospel'. The world-wide mission of the church presupposes an inclusive Gospel, available to all, through the Messiah, Jesus. But is this what the report means by 'inclusive understanding of salvific works? Expressions elsewhere such as: 'salvation to other peoples and cultures who may not even know the name of Jesus' (18); 'the recognition that all humanity is the people of God' (33); 'inclusivism in relation to those of other faiths' (40); 'the same God whose saving grace is at work outside the church as well as within it' (61); give the impression that salvation is to be found in other faiths independently of knowledge of Christ. Now although the report seeks a biblical basis, it has here made a serious shift of meaning, namely, from the definite biblical concept of an inclusive Gospel and universal mission of the Church, so that salvation is offered to the 'whoever' and all, in the name of Jesus, to the idea that salvation is inclusively present within other faiths apart from Jesus. Jesus' reference to the widow of Zarephath and Naaman was certainly intended to combat the narrow exclusiveness of his contemporaries in Nazareth and to indicate in advance the ultimate scope of his mission, but the point of both stories is that both of them, though foreigners, came to express faith in Yahweh, the saving name of the God of Israel (1Kgs. 17:24, 2 Kgs. 5:15-18).

Similarly, the story of Cornelius, with which the report closes its biblical section, reaches its climax with Cornelius hearing the good news about Jesus Christ through which he also received salvation. The story certainly shows 'the lack of partiality of God and his concern for the Gentiles' (54), but his concern is precisely to bring them to knowledge of Christ. The story also shows that God can and does relate to and address 'outsiders' within their own conscious frame of religious reference before their conscious knowledge of Christ. But such an awareness and relationship is not in itself salvific, for the story

clearly goes on to make the point that, good and pious man though he was, it was only through knowledge of Christ and repentance (11:18)<sup>7</sup> that Cornelius and his household received forgiveness of sins (10:43), the Holy Spirit (10:44ff.), baptism (10:48), salvation (11:14) and life (11:18). The report calls all this the 'something more' that Cornelius received. That is a somewhat weak description of the climax of the story!

What should be our view of the position of good and sincere 'heathen' who never hear of Christ? The story of Cornelius can hardly provide the answer in itself, since it primarily shows that God's desire is that they *should* hear about Christ. The report quotes from an interesting mixture of the Apocrypha, Justin Martyr, and Vatican II (56, 57), to support the view that 'those who nevertheless seek God with a sincere heart, and, moved by his grace, try in their actions to do his will as they know it through the dictates of their conscience – those too may achieve eternal salvation' (57)<sup>8</sup>. Apart from the concept of 'achieving eternal salvation', which locates salvation in sincerity and good works, rather than solely in the mercy of God, I personally feel that such a statement cannot be denied outright. It leaves the final decision where it rightly and exclusively belongs – in the hands of our Creator God whose mercy and justice alike are infinite and beyond reproach. However, whatever view we take of the ultimate status before God of those who never hear of Christ, however undogmatic we choose to be on the matter, the report rightly insists that we cannot use it to lessen the church's vocation to mission (57) or to regard 'Baptism into the Body of Christ as irrelevant or at most an optional extra' (58). It is good to see this clearly stated, and it is reinforced in the opening paragraph of the final section on Inter-faith Dialogue: 'What would be contrary to the biblical witness would be the abandonment of a defining loyalty to Jesus Christ as the one in whom God was reconciling the whole world to himself and any proposal that this message of reconciliation through Christ need no longer be offered to those of other faiths. The inclusive invitation of God goes now, as always, with the demand for an exclusive loyalty to his Anointed' (61). This continued acceptance of the imperative of evangelism is to be welcomed, since it is by no means the view of many who now adopt an inclusivist or a pluralist position.

Before turning to the final section, however, we should take note of some serious deficiencies in the biblical section, both Old and New Testaments.

In the Old Testament section I missed, firstly, any serious account of the *holiness* of Israel, the deliberate self-conscious distinctiveness of God's people, which was not just a bigoted exclusivism, but a vital preservation of the revelation and redemption entrusted to them for the ultimate blessing of all mankind. It is fine to say, 'it is when Israel is most open to others that she is most creative' (30). But it could

equally validly be said that when she was most open to others she was frequently most apostate, and thereby endangered the inclusive mission to mankind which was integrally bound up with her exclusive holiness. I would hasten to add that this does not mean that Christians should adopt an attitude of hostility or arrogance towards those of other faiths. The report's warnings on this are quite apposite and necessary. But, in the midst of a loving, respectful and informed approach, the Christian is bound to remember the distinctive identity of the people of God to whom, through Christ, he belongs. Actually, the report later does point out how the process of dialogue can strengthen Christians' personal commitment and unique identity, but this note was missing from the biblical material where it could have been more securely grounded.

A second, obviously related, omission is any reference to the widespread polemic against idolatry in the Old Testament. This may not be easy material to handle, or compatible with the report's inclusivist stance, but simply to ignore it casts doubt on the report's avowed desire to present 'the Bible as a whole'. The sight of man, made in the image of God, bowing down in worship to anything other than the living God himself (the question of whether they were regarded as gods or as representations of invisible deities and forces, is beside the point here), drew from Old Testament narrators, psalmists and prophets responses varying between incredulity, pity, contempt, indignation, satire, and judgement. (cf. 1 Kgs. 18, Pss. 96, 115, Isa. 40:19f., 41:7, 21f., 44:9-20, Jer. 10:1-16 etc.). Nor is this view of idolatry in any way diluted in the New Testament.

Thirdly, I missed any awareness of the socio-ethical dimension of the religious struggle in the Old Testament. It is a common failing of the comparative religions approach that it tends to treat religions as systems of ideas, concepts and 'truths', without much regard for the social, economic, and cultural contexts of each religion.<sup>9</sup> The worship of Yahweh in the Old Testament was an integral part of a total community life system, consciously dedicated to equality, freedom, justice, love and brotherhood in every aspect of social, economic and political life. It contrasted vigorously and deliberately with contemporary surrounding cultures and their supporting religious values and practices. The battle for the true faith in the true God was also a battle for the truly human and humane. The stories of Elijah, Naboth and Jezebel clearly illustrate the integral link between idolatry (Baalism) and injustice and oppression - a link which persists unbroken in many parts of today's world. Jeremiah also exposes the socially impoverishing effects of idolatry (Jer. 3:24).<sup>10</sup> Now again, the report does come to the social dimension of religious commitment when discussing dialogue as a means of sharing in service to the community (73-75), and it acknowledges the different life-stances of different faiths. But a more thorough biblical analysis would have thrown up this issue of

conflicting socio-ethical presuppositions, goals and practices within different faiths, and the radical and distinctive ethical challenge of the biblical revelation with its twin models of Israel and the early church to all human ideologies and religio-cultural systems.

In the New Testament section there is, firstly, no adequate definition or discussion of the Kingdom of God – the central message of Jesus and the dynamic reality of his ministry – as to how its presence in the world relates to the rest of human history and the world outside the church. Secondly, the Apostle Paul is conspicuous by his absence, apart from the brief reference to his Athens speech and to Ephesians 2. This is surely a major omission since Paul more than any other New Testament figure actually engaged in inter-faith dialogue in practice and reflected on it theologically. He related both to the sophisticated scriptural faith of his own background – Rabbinic Judaism, and to Greek polytheism in both its developed philosophical form and its primitive paganism. In Acts we see him seeking to persuade Jews to see in Jesus their Messiah (e.g. 13:16–41), and to persuade Greeks to see in Jesus the Saviour appointed by their Creator (14:14–17), and their Judge (17:31). To all, he brought a demand for repentance from their present ways (13:38ff., 14:15, 14:15, 17:30), for, as he reflects in Romans 2 and 3, neither the best in Judaism with its written law nor among the Gentiles with their unwritten law of conscience can achieve righteousness before God. Both alike will be judged by Christ (2:16) and can be saved by Christ (3:21ff.). How would the report fit Paul's definition of his own mission into its 'inclusivist' framework, when in later life he says that his God-given task had been 'to open the Gentiles' eyes and turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in Christ' (Acts 26:18)? And why is there no mention of Romans 1:18–32, with its carefully worded description of the availability of the knowledge of God to all human beings, but the wilful suppression of that truth at the intellectual, moral *and* religious levels of all human life? Perhaps such reflections might have pushed Paul uncomfortably into the 'exclusivist' 'end of the spectrum'!

### **Implications for Inter-Faith Dialogue (60–80)**

Here the four guidelines on dialogue accepted by the General Synod in 1981 are reaffirmed:

- Dialogue begins when people meet each other
- Dialogue depends upon mutual understanding and mutual trust
- Dialogue makes it possible to share in service to the community
- Dialogue becomes the medium of authentic witness.

1 *Dialogue Begins when People Meet each Other* (62–65)

This section highlights the need for friendly, helpful neighbourliness between people of different faiths if any meaningful dialogue is to take place, and lays the responsibility for initiating such openness on the majority Christian community. It quite rightly stresses that such friendliness ought to be the natural outcome of our common created humanity.

(Dialogue) springs from an interest in others for their own sake and for God's sake and not from any motive to proselytise. What impels us to dialogue is the belief that we are all created in the image of God, share a common humanity and all live in the presence of God. It is the response to the command 'to love our neighbour as ourselves'.

'Proselytising' has to do with a 'scalp-counting' pressurized conversion from one religion to another. Evangelizing, on the other hand, in its natural biblical sense simply means sharing good news and it also happens naturally (or should do) 'when people meet each other', if some of the 'people' happen to be Christians. It too is a proper response to the command to 'love our neighbour as ourselves', since it involves sharing with our neighbour God's best gift. And certainly it cannot happen effectively without the sort of natural and deepening human involvement with each other which is rightly advocated here.

2 *Dialogue Depends on Mutual Understanding and Mutual Trust* (66–72)

This guideline says a number of very needful things about willingness to listen and understand the other person and his faith before attempting to contribute 'our own view of things'. It criticizes the shallow comparison of religions, (prevalent in schools), which quite falsely equates the roles of persons like Jesus, Muhammad, or Gotama Buddha, for their respective faiths, or the place of different scriptures, while overlooking the vastly different world-views, presuppositions and desired goals of each. True dialogue which seeks to understand such things is 'a process which can only be achieved by patience and understanding' (67).

If listening in dialogue makes its demands, so too does speaking. Contributing means understanding with as much clarity as possible our own inheritance and cultures, it means living more faithfully in the tradition we seek to explain and offer. For Christians commitment to inter-faith dialogue has to go hand in hand with deeper commitment to the Christian tradition (69).

The report notices Jesus' willingness to listen and understand in his arguments with the Jews. It might also have mentioned Paul's familiarity with several religions and cultures with which he engaged, at this point.

The final paragraph (72) also points out the uniqueness of each faith, and resists the syncretist's desire to reduce them all to a common

denominator (or even highest common factors!)

A part of that mutual understanding and trust which characterises dialogue involves acknowledging that there will be, on both sides, beliefs and positions that cannot be surrendered. Dialogue can never be seen as an easy way of overlooking the essential differences leading to a form of syncretism. . . . There are what have been called 'jealousies' that have to be protected. As we have certain beliefs that we have affirmed we may not surrender, so also those of other religions have beliefs they will not surrender and which cannot be reconciled with ours. There are contradictions in our religious positions (72).

Unfortunately the report does not go on to say what happens next, once this is realized, or this point reached. Do we fall back on the subjectivist, relativist view that 'A is true for you but not for me, while B is true for me but not for you', and then posit some higher, ultimate divine reality or truth, of which we both have incomplete and only apparently contradictory parts (the view of John Hick, for example)? Or do we ever actually assert that a particular belief is objectively true for all, because divinely revealed, and that other beliefs which contradict or deny it must ultimately be deemed *false*? Significantly again, the report uses language of 'beliefs, positions, jealousies, assertions', etc., but avoids the hard issue of objective truth and its corollary, the existence of falsehood and error, even though it has earlier said that truth is the vital issue.

### 3 *Dialogue Makes it Possible to Share in Service to the Community* (73-75)

Here we have another valuable and urgently relevant note. Christians are called to seek justice and peace on earth, to serve others, to meet the needs of the poor, the weak, the hungry, the sick, the oppressed, etc. - i.e. to fulfil inseparably the greatest commandment by loving God and loving one's neighbour. 'In all of this Christians must join wherever they can in common cause with all who seek to serve the human community' (73). At the same time, it is recognized that different faiths have different societal values and goals, which need to be understood, even when we feel compelled to challenge or criticize them.

### 4 *Dialogue Becomes the Medium of Authentic Witness* (76-80)

The report ends positively on the note that dialogue and mission belong together, because in dialogue we are able to give 'authentic witness . . . to what God has done in Jesus in reconciling the world to himself' (76). Dialogue also demands consistency of life and message (a point which is equally true of witness and evangelism). 'In dialogue authentic witness is not only given in the words we speak but in the manner and bearing of the life we live. Human frailty and sin mean

that Christians have always to struggle towards consistency between the message they proclaim and the image they present in life' (78). The final paragraph of this section concludes thus:

And so we carry our mission into dialogue as people who speak from faith to faith. All genuine dialogue has a dimension of mission. For some this will imply the eventual possibility that all will be converted to Christ; for others it will be sufficient that each participant in dialogue has fully and fairly borne witness to their faith so that each understands more about the commitment of the other. Mission in the context of dialogue, without coercion, acknowledging fully the integrity of the other above all, creates the context in which the Holy Spirit can work. It is the Holy Spirit, the principal agent for mission, who alone can convert. Women and men are instruments of and co-workers with the Triune God (80).

All this is worthy, and is an answer to those who fear that dialogue is nothing more than a feeble compromise or a sell-out with no evangelistic possibility at all. Nevertheless there remains a basic but hidden ambiguity over the meaning of the term 'dialogue' itself in this context which needs to be recognized.

'Dialogue' can be used in two senses.<sup>10</sup> On the one hand it can mean 'dialogue as opposed to monologue', where monologue is unlistening, insensitive, arrogant or coercive. *That* kind of monologue is certainly to be rejected (though it is by no means the only kind of monologue: biblical precedent hardly allows us to jettison monologue altogether, provided it does not have the above character but has in fact listened and understood first). Attentive, tactful dialogue is surely to be welcomed and preferred to such unChristlike monologue. But on the other hand, dialogue can also mean (and in this report it explicitly does) a process in which parties representing different faiths not only listen, but also *learn from each other*.

In dialogue we listen and speak and search together, believing that each has something to communicate and that no one person, no single system is the depository of the whole truth (66)

In such dialogue we too may expect to have our view of God illuminated by the insights, sensitivities and religious experiences of members of other faiths (71).

We may be called to acknowledge the implications for our own faith of the spiritual experiences, sensitivities and traditions of those of other faiths. We may be called to acknowledge the light shining there that reveals to us a deeper and truer understanding of the Christ to whom we would bear authentic witness (77).

We should note carefully that this is not merely saying that in dialogue I may recognize deficiencies in my own life as a Christian. This is challengingly true. Most other religions and their adherents can challenge and rebuke us Christians at various points in the *expression and practice of our faith*: the prayer of Islam, the meditation of

Buddhism, the family faith of Judaism, etc. Rather, this concept of dialogue also presupposes *deficiency in the Christian faith as such*. It envisages other religions contributing something which is not inherently there in the fulness of the biblical revelation. Now it is one thing to accept that we are fallible and imperfect Christians who need rebuke and challenge, and to be willing to accept it from any quarter. It is quite another to envisage that in dialogue the revelation of God in Christ and the scriptures needs correction, improvement or addition. It is one thing to challenge *my* faith; another to challenge *the* faith.

Ultimately, such a view of dialogue does in fact lead in the direction of syncretism or pluralism, for it seems to expect to arrive, in common search, at some higher, deeper, truer, religious insights than even Christianity, if only other insights can be incorporated with the Christian revelation. To be fair, it must be repeated that this report does *not* wish to baptize syncretism, but its muddled thinking on this issue puts up no effective logical or theological barriers to the syncretist's arguments.

Actually, there is a New Testament concept and practice of 'dialogue' which we mentioned earlier in connection with Paul's missionary practice. The verb *dialegomai* is used several times in Acts to describe Paul's habitual practice of engaging in reasoned, multi-lateral argument, discussion and debate, both in relation to Jewish and Greek faiths. Examples of the verb include 17:2 (in the synagogue in Thessalonica), 17:17 (in Athens, with both Jews and Greek philosophers in the market place: the speech on the Areopagus – much favoured by the report – was actually a monologue! But it followed days of dialogue!), 19:8f. (in Ephesus, in a hired lecture hall, daily for two years!), 24:25 (in Jerusalem before Felix, which must necessarily have been polite and courteous). But if we look at the context of each of these 'dialogues' and the parallel verbs used to describe what Paul was doing, we see that Paul's concept of dialogue included what is called 'proclaiming Jesus', 'persuading boldly', 'preaching the Kingdom of God', etc. So while his was certainly not an unlistening, discourteous monologue (usually he was actually invited to speak), neither was it neutral dialogue on terms which Paul would have regarded as equal. We may certainly, as the report says, have no right to 'coerce' or adopt 'one-sided and harsh ways or proselytism, for that would be to violate the rights of every human being to freedom' (76). But for Paul, dialogue certainly aimed to convince, persuade and ultimately if possible convert, on the basis of historical facts, scriptural arguments, personal testimony and signs in the power of the Holy Spirit. Such at any rate seems to have been Paul's understanding of what the report well describes as 'exclusivist loyalty to Jesus Christ . . . and loyalty to the revelation of God in and through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth' (84).

'Christians may never surrender a commitment to mission' (79).

'All genuine dialogue has a dimension of mission' (80). Only if this is in fact the case, and only if 'mission' actually coincides with the great commission of the risen Jesus to 'go and make disciples of every nation, baptizing them . . .', can inter-faith dialogue be compatible with such express loyalty to Christ – a loyalty which the authors of this report, for all the shortcomings of the report itself, clearly and explicitly wish to uphold as their personal profession.

NOTES

- 1 Church of England, General Synod, Board for Mission and Unity, *Towards a Theology For Inter-Faith Dialogue*, GS 625, ClO, London 1984.
- 2 W.A. Visser't Hooft: *No Other Name: The Choice between Syncretism and Christian Universalism*, SCM, London 1963, pp 94ff.
- 3 The question of the relationship between the history of Israel and the histories of other peoples is discussed by Vinay Samuel and Chris Sugden, 'Tensions between History and Eschatology', in T. Sine, ed., *The Church in Response to Human Need*, Marc, Los Angeles 1983, pp 181–230.
- 4 It Cites I Apology, 46.
- 5 At least we are spared a reference to Hebrews 1:1, which is sometimes said to validate revelations of God in other religions, in other times and places; whereas the text itself, of course, explicitly refers to the revelation of God to Israel 'our fathers', through 'the prophets' – i.e. the OT scriptures.
- 6 The views of nineteenth century missionaries in India are very well documented by Graham Houghton: 'Late Nineteenth Century Protestant Christian Attitudes towards Hinduism', in Vinay Samuel and Chris Sugden, eds., *The Gospel among our Hindu Neighbours*, Partnership in Mission-Asia, Bangalore, 1983, pp 1–20.
- 7 There is a mistaken reference in paragraph 58. Acts 11:8 should be Acts 11:18.
- 8 Cited from 'Lumen Gentium' in Austin Flannery, ed., *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar Post-Conciliar Documents*, Dominican Publications, Dublin 1975, p 367.
- 9 I have discussed this issue more thoroughly in an article on this subject, 'The Christian and other Religions: The Biblical Evidence', *Themelios* 9, 1984, pp 4–15.
- 10 In 1981 a whole village in India, Meenakshipuram, converted corporately to Islam from Hinduism. One of the reasons given for their decision was the costliness of Hindu religious festivals and idolatry. (A newspaper report on the very day of writing this describes the profitable business of manufacturing the idols for the forthcoming annual festival of the popular god Ganesh, and how there will be an average 10% increase in the prices. Letters in the same paper during the past year, from non-Christians, have complained of the absurdly extravagant expense of some Hindu festivals as an added burden on the already impoverished devotees). Significantly, another reason given for the conversion to Islam rather than to Christianity was that they wished to escape from the caste oppression of neighbouring higher caste Hindu communities, but they

perceived the same caste prejudices within the Christian church. The villagers had not rejected the Gospel. They had not really seen it because of the failure of the church in the locality to demonstrate its social distinctiveness and to live out its 'inclusive' demands. They said they wanted a religion with only one God. That being equal as between Islam and Christianity, Islam appeared more socially attractive in the perceptions of the villagers than the Christianity they had experience of. The details of this remarkable story are given in, G. Raveendran and Jayakumar K.C., 'A Closer Look at the Causes, Effects and Implications of the Meenakshipuram Conversions', Samuel and Sugden, op cit., pp 168-180.

- 11 I owe the clarification of this distinction to Martin Goldsmith, to whose lectures at All Nations Christian College the following paragraphs are much indebted.

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