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Inter-Faith Dialogue or Inter-Human Encounter?

ROGER BOWEN

1. Introduction

During the last hundred years the western Church has been thrown into turmoil by the sudden encounter with people of other faiths forced upon it by world-wide migration and the communications revolution. The presence of a Muslim community in Britain more numerous than Methodists and apparently more alive and 'evangelistic' than many main-line denominations, and proving effective moreover among men and working people, areas where our Churches are notoriously weak, has made Christians feel as deeply insecure as did the Darwin controversy of 1859. They tend either to retreat into an exclusivist ghetto or to see Christianity as just one way to God out of many possibilities. Certainly any minister proposing serious dialogue with, say, Muslims can expect to receive equally impassioned protests both from those who insist that Christ is 'the only way' (whatever that means) and from those who see all religions as variant yet valid expressions of the spiritual dimension of humanity (like the blind men who all have different perceptions of the one elephant). Not keen to put all his eggs into either basket, he will very likely concede that 'their' religion is an indication of people's basic bias towards God and can take them part of the way to him, but insist that only in Christianity is a sure knowledge of him available. Very roughly, these three positions correspond to the exclusivism, pluralism and inclusivism presented in the Board for Mission Unity report, *Towards a Theology for Inter-Faith Dialogue*.¹ The present paper first presents some of the hard questions in the form of stories, secondly proposes some principles for tackling the questions and thirdly focuses on some key features of the biblical witness to religion which are often ignored.

But an essential preliminary is to face the painful, even agonizing nature of the problem. In Christian England a hundred years ago you could escape it; in Uganda or Poland today the witness of the Church is so strong and relevant that it is not an issue. But if you are one of, say, 400 Moroccan Christians how do you even think about your 24 million fellow-Moroccans who cannot be anything but Muslims – and how do we think of the 90 per cent of our fellow-Britons to whom our Christian message seems irrelevant

1 Church of England, General Synod, CIO, London 1984.

and incomprehensible? Has God really limited his purposes of mercy for mankind by the inadequacies of his Church? And has he ever done so – in spite of what we have grown up to believe? And does it any longer mean anything to say 'extra ecclesia nulla salus'?

2. Questions

I have somehow encountered all the questions raised by the stories that follow and I cannot answer any of them, yet neither can I escape them. Every one calls into question my theology, and every one sends me back in greater perplexity and wonder to the God who lies – somewhere – behind the theology and – somewhere – out there in the world of the questions.

Last week a Muslim scholar from Birmingham told a group of Christian students, 'Well, I can accept that Jesus is the Way and that no one comes to God but by him. That is the witness of the Qur'an. After all, Muhammad acknowledged Jesus as his authentic predecessor, God's Messiah.' Malam Ibrahim, a teacher of the Holy Qur'an in Nigeria, taught that prayer should be made to God in the name of *Isa Masih* (Jesus the Messiah) because the Qur'an confers a unique dignity upon him. For this heretical teaching he was crucified in Kano market-place thirty years before Christ was proclaimed by Christians in that country.¹ His followers are still there, still Muslims, still praying through *Isa Masih*.

A chief, also in West Africa, dreamed that white people would bring to his village a message from the Creator God. He shared the dream and told his people to obey the message when it came, and it passed into village folk-lore. Many years later missionaries proclaimed Jesus. With one accord the villagers believed and were baptized. But the chief and his elders had long since died, not having heard of Jesus or been baptized into his name. In East Africa demon-possession is common. Witch-doctors, guardians of community welfare, deal with many of these 'cases'. Muslims, too, have their own remedies. But some demonic spirits seem particularly resistant to 'treatment'. 'Ah, then special power is needed to deal with your case; you can't be healed by anyone but Jesus – you'll have to go to the Christians,' say the Muslim elders, preaching Christ.

One day in 1969 a strange, prophetic-like figure walked into the villages of central Tanzania. Clothed in skins, with the smell of the bush still upon him, he could not speak Swahili (the national language) nor read or write at all. He had never met any Christians. But God had spoken to him in a series of dreams and told him to proclaim the message to everyone. So he stood up in the village and did so. He was taken into the village churches and it was in one of these that I heard him, by translation from his local dialect. Unmistakably, he was reciting (though not word for word) the visions of the Revelation of St. John, and telling people to repent and mend their ways – and was quite pointed about the details! The Gospel it was not, but it seemed authentic, and he had obeyed . . .

1 J. V. Taylor, *The Go-Between God*, SCM, London 1972, p 193.

'If God is God,' said J. V. Taylor, 'he is likely to be the most common of human experiences: people keep bumping into God all the time, but that is not what they call him . . .'¹ Many of these 'common experiences' are unquestionably to be encountered throughout the world both inside and outside the historic faiths. David Hay² finds that in Britain people are very reluctant to talk about them to others, for fear of appearing gullible and foolish. In particular, it often happened that Church leaders could not understand them. 'The Vicar didn't know what I was talking about.'

The above examples are of people who had an inadequate understanding of Christ, or worse, but there are similar instances in the Bible. Abraham is perhaps the chief example. (see 4.4 below). The Magi received from their astrology some part of intimation about what God was doing in the house of Judah and responded. Fortunately for our Christmas sermons, they were rich enough to be able to travel long distances and offer costly gifts. But was it only when they bowed before the infant that they qualified for admission to the household of faith? In any case, the infant they adored was very different from him who is in our minds when we do so. Their response of faith to what they saw as God's message is the crucial point – and is likely to be reproduced in countless similar instances of which history records nothing. The fugitive Jonah, sleeping whilst pagan sailors were praying, was made by them to reconsider his duty to the Lord. On hearing of the Lord, the sailors 'are converted, but it can hardly be said that Jonah is.'² On reaching Nineveh, the reluctant preacher is dismayed to find the Ninevites also are converted. 'Is there no end to God's absurd generosity? Has he no discrimination? How can he expect me to be happy in the Church if he insists on filling it with riff-raff?' It is the Ninevites who compel Jonah to recall that supreme Hebrew revelation of God which he found so uncomfortable that he had pushed it to the back of his mind. 'I knew that you are a gracious God and patient, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and repenting of evil' (Jonah 4:2; cf. Exod. 34:6). Like Jonah, Peter too was converted by God's actions through one who was outside the household of faith, Cornelius, and came to realize that the scope of God's saving activity was far wider than his own theology (though God-given – Acts 10:14, 28) had ever allowed.

But to positive stories like these which suggest God is at work beyond the witness of the Church must be added negative ones which remind us that at times the Church's witness has been so distorted that God cannot have been in it. The obvious example is the story of the Crusades, so shameful that the very word should be excised from Christian vocabulary. What response should Saladin and his Muslim armies have made to the

1 In G. Priestland, *Priestland's Progress*, BBC, London 1981, p 47.

2 D. Hay, *Exploring Inner Space*, Penguin, Harmondsworth 1982, pp 158ff.

3 C. Lamb and K. Cracknell, *Theology on Full Alert*, BCC, London 1986, p 128, where Lamb is discussing J. Magonet's *Form and Meaning*, Almond Press, 1983.

Christ whom they saw then? Surely conversion to *that* Christ would have been an act of disobedience to God? One contemporary, the Franciscan Ramon Lull, certainly had his doubts:

Many knights do I see who go to the Holy Land thinking to conquer it by force of arms. But . . . it appears to me, Lord, that the conquest of that sacred land will not be achieved save by love and prayer and the shedding of tears as well as blood . . . Let the knights become religious . . . let them be filled with the grace of the Holy Spirit, and let them go among the infidels to preach the truth concerning thy passion.¹

In 1505 the Portuguese explorer d'Almeida arrived at Kilwa, a Muslim trading city famed for its culture and civilizing influences on the East African coast.

As soon as the town had been taken without opposition, the Vicar-General and some of the Franciscan fathers came ashore carrying two crosses in procession and singing the *Te Deum*. They went to the palace and the Grand Captain prayed. Then everyone started to plunder the town of all its merchandise and provisions. Two days later d'Almeida fired it, destroying the greater part of this city of abomination.²

The city never recovered its former prosperity; the good news had become bad news for Kilwa. This is why for Kenneth Cragg 'the call of the minaret must seem . . . a call to retrieval . . ., the restoration to Muslims of the Christ whom they have missed'³ largely because we have hidden him from them. An English woman recently turned to Islam because, she said, 'the Church always made me feel so guilty,' whereas in Islam she was accepted as she was, without always needing to compete. Even today, it appears, we Christians often distort the only Gospel there is of God's unconditional acceptance of people on the basis of infinite cost to himself.

I believe we need stories like these to pose difficult, yet inescapable questions. They jolt us out of our complacent self-confidence and compel us to begin to listen – surely the only way to start fruitful encounter.

1 E. A. Peers, *Ramon Lull*, SPCK, London 1929, pp 30f.

2 G. S. P. Freeman-Grenville, *The East African Coast*, OUP, Oxford 1962, p 105. It is important to document such instances for two reasons, first, because Christians have the mistaken impression that it is Muslim propaganda activities rather than their own which have been characterized by aggression (cf. the Arabic concept of *jihad*, much misunderstood by Christians), and secondly, because aggression is totally inappropriate for Christians because it is a denial of the way of the cross – it might at least be a more logical policy for Muslims who take as their model Muhammad's way of the Hijra, ie, the option for political and military power in Medina rather than persecution in Mecca.

3 K. Cragg, *The Call of the Minaret*, OUP, New York 1956, p 246.

3. Principles

3.1. *Encounter Is a Better Word than Dialogue*

Dialogue is usually a discussion about religion (often in an idealized rather than popular form) by experts. This is one of the least promising of activities (see 4.3 below). God is unlikely to meet us on the level of our theoretical religious experiments (eg visiting a Gurdwara or mosque or having an inter-faith service), but very likely to do so when our meeting is in the context of shared, real, human needs.¹ This is true of all Christian witness. When the Church Missionary Society began to train some of their mission partners in a redundant vicarage in Sparkbrook under the supervision of Verghese Kattapuram, the breakthrough with the mixed community of local residents (involving first communicating, then friendship, then making Christ visible) came when they went out to clear up the rubbish, put the lids back on the dustbins and smartened up the squalid environment. Their witness to Christ has now grown into something open and effective, for the barriers on both sides have been taken down. In another UPA, one Christian group made no progress in outreach to the local community until they went in to decorate flats of single-parent families. In one of the *favelas* near Recife, Brazil, the Anglican Church found the breakthrough came when, at Christmas, they took a food parcel to the poorest shanty in the area. In the recent African famine, food distribution by Christians amongst Muslims living in the northern deserts of Kenya transformed the Muslim attitude to the Gospel.² In Nuneaton, spasmodic meetings between Muslims, Christians and Hindus took on new significance when they met to pray the night after Mrs. Gandhi's assassination and, in the sense of need born of desperation, God was felt to be present in a new way. 'We meet,' writes Lesslie Newbigin, 'in a shared context of things, . . . It must be insisted that truly personal relationships develop in the context of impersonal realities . . . The Christian in dialogue rejoices to share with his partners the one common world which is the gift to both from the one God.'³ Many western Christians are ill at ease with this point of view, preferring to look for progress in the discussion of 'religious' matters. Yet the Church is currently growing in those regions of the world, Africa and Latin America, where the great significance of our common humanity is a fundamental

- 1 'Dialogue should proceed in terms of people of other faiths rather than of theoretical impersonal systems' (part of Principle 1 in *Guidelines on Dialogue with People of Other Faiths*, BCC, London 1981).
- 2 A cautionary word is in order here that we need to hear the sharp Muslim criticism of 'the misused *diakonia* activities of Christian churches and religious organisations in the world of Islam', referring to the bestowal of education, medicine and aid by wealthy Christians upon impoverished Muslims, and so persuading them illegitimately to conversion. Cf. *Christian Mission and Islamic Da'wah: Proceedings of the Chambèsy Dialogue Consultation*, The Islamic Foundation, Leicester 1982, and the *International Review of Mission* 65, October 1976. Whilst *diakonia* must be an inescapable duty of those who follow Christ the servant, are Muslims here reminding us that Christ first emptied himself and identified himself with those he came to serve?
- 3 L. Newbigin, *The Open Secret*, SPCK, London 1978, p 207.

theme which is found both in contemporary evangelism and discovered in the biblical witness. In this way a bond is forged based on the created order, which takes the threat out of evangelism and makes it a natural dimension of life.

3.2 *Why Religion of All Things?*

Some of the worst crimes in history have been perpetrated in the name of religion, for the world of religion is the world not only of God but also of the demonic. 'The Gospel confronts the claim of every religion with a radical negation'.¹ This includes the Christian religion. We look below at the biblical foundations for this, yet most of the discussions on 'inter-faith' insist on identifying religion as the thing that moves man in a God-ward direction – yet much of the evidence, including the biblical evidence, indicates otherwise. Religion is not the answer to the problem, but part of the problem, part of humanity as we are, universally and incorrigibly religious. This appears, not only in the way people respond to God's general revelation, 'holding down the truth in unrighteousness' (Rom. 1:18ff.), but, in its ultimate form in the way in which Israel, possessing the most developed religious genius of all time, 'because of their stubborn refusal to submit to their law and their insistence on trying instead to exploit it for the satisfaction of their own egotism, rejected God's Messiah and handed him over to the pagans to be crucified.'² In contrasting religion with the Gospel of Christ, Barth describes it as 'unbelief' and 'the affair of the godless man!'.³

I find it increasingly difficult to discuss the question of inter-faith dialogue without bringing up this basic biblical critique of religion, which is perhaps even more clearly reflected in the Gospels than in Paul. The situation gets even worse when Christians (like everyone else!) interpret the aberrations of other faiths as if they were their norms, and interpret their own faith in terms of ideals which are scarcely ever true to the realities of the Church as seen from outside.⁴ But it is essential that the critique be not selective, exempting our own faith, but be allowed to speak to ourselves as much as others (as did the prophetic witness within Israel).

3.3 *The Element of Surprise*

God reveals himself less in the expected areas (eg, religion) than in the ordinary experiences of life. He never ceases to take us by surprise, both in his generosity to the irreligious and his severity to the pious. Both alike are astonished (Matt. 25:31-46), and Jesus never tired of pointing this out in his

1 Ibid., p 200, cf. pp 193, 210.

2 C. E. B. Cranfield, *Romans*, ICC, T. and T. Clark, Edinburgh 1975, pp 293f.; cf. Newbigin, *op. cit.*, p 200.

3 K. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, T. and T. Clark, Edinburgh 1936-69, 1/2, 17.2, pp 299f.

4 'Dialogue helps us not to disfigure the image of our neighbours of different faiths and ideologies' (under Principle II, *Guidelines on Dialogue*, *loc. cit.*).

teaching, in ways in which all religious people cannot but find deeply disturbing (Luke 7:47; 15:11-35; Matt. 22:1-14). Nothing is more dangerous than to enter dialogue convinced that we can know in advance who have got their seats in heaven securely booked, and who haven't.¹ This assumption means not only that, like all religious experts, we talk instead of listening² but also that we are in danger of shutting ourselves off from the God who time and again reveals himself to us as the stranger, and surprises us by joy.

3.4 *The Need for Permission*

To explore these frontier areas is to jeopardize one's theology, one's fellowship, one's faith – everything. There are no guarantees that it is 'safe', but disciples of Jesus who risked all in his incarnation and crucifixion have no choice but to follow him into an alien world, trusting only in God who is discovered when we lose ourselves in mission, but is lost to us as long as we seek our own security in sheltered territory. Christians need 'permission' from God, that such excursions are not outside his will or beyond his love; from their fellow-Christians, that however strange their discoveries they will never be ostracized from Christ's body; and from themselves, that there truly is a legitimate framework of Christian thought which enables them both to be faithful to the pre-eminence of Christ and to be open to revelations of truth even where he is not confessed – or is confessed in different ways (see 4.4 below).

3.5 *The Danger of Dogma*

In a different context, John Austin Baker writes of the danger of erecting 'a high hurdle at the entrance to the Church'³ to fence it off against the entry of those who can't accept certain positions which we feel to be central to its existence. We have done this in our parish churches, and countless missions have done precisely this in their encounter with people of other faiths, resulting in colossal misunderstandings. For, seen in the context of Indian thought, or of the Qur'an, or of the contemporary secular world-view, many of our historically developed doctrines have little sense of relevance. And it seems extraordinary to require a Muslim to accept the divinity of Christ, or the Trinity, or even his crucifixion, when his first disciples

1 Newbigin, *op. cit.*, p 196.

2 Cf. K. Barth who, having described religion as man's attempt to assert his beliefs about God and thus an activity which contradicts God's revelation, goes on to say that religion stops man from believing. 'If he did (believe), he would listen; but in religion he talks. If he did, he would accept a gift; but in religion he takes something for himself. If he did, he would let God himself intercede for God; but in religion he ventures to grasp at God. Because it is a grasping, religion is the contradiction of revelation, the concentrated expression of human unbelief . . .' *op. cit.*, pp 302ff.

3 J. A. Baker, *The Foolishness of God*, DLT, London 1970, p 327.

agonized for years before they could either accept or formulate such revolutionary concepts. But we make them primary *conditions* for discipleship! Christopher Lamb asks whether we have 'wrongly "absolutized" the person of Jesus, making absolutely determinative for our understanding of God what was only intended as relative in God's work in Jesus.'¹ At the very least, we rob potential new disciples of the thrill of discovering for themselves who exactly this Jesus is – because we insist on *telling* them, as if we knew the half of it! Vincent Donovan, in his justly celebrated book on how he shared Jesus with the Masai people of Tanzania, describes how he told the Masai stories about Jesus, and stories which Jesus told.² They listened, and repeated the stories to one another, often in response to a request for the story about such-and-such. At first, Jesus was to them a man. Then they asked, 'This Jesus, was there ever one like him?' Then they began to see him as The Man, then that he showed them God. They still call him 'The Man Jesus', and why not? Their road to faith has been like that of the first disciples of Jesus.

3.6 Liberation through Inter-Faith Encounter

One of the perennial problems of us English is the inhibitions we feel about speaking with others about God and our experience of him. We protect our individual privacy and respect that of others – and our Post-Enlightenment culture has convinced us that there is no topic more private than religion.³ But others don't feel the same. When Donovan, at last, plucked up courage to speak to a Masai elder 'about something very important', ie God, the immediate reply was, 'Who can refuse to talk about God? . . . If that is why you came, why did you wait so long to tell us?'⁴ Anyone who has travelled on buses or trains with people of other faiths and cultures has had similar experiences. It may be that the influx to these islands of people of other faiths is God's providential way of helping us to shed our crippling inhibitions, so that we might be set free, first gladly to embrace them on the basis of our common humanity (far more significant than our theology has ever admitted; cf Acts 14:15ff; 17:24ff; Amos 9:7)⁵, and secondly to talk freely both amongst ourselves and with them about the meaning of our faith in Christ. But the second is scarcely possible except by way of the first, and we need *their* help in our liberation.

The hardest step of all is to accept this as a possibility, as the way of God for us, for it seems to undermine all our self-confidence and to call in question the Gospel of Christ which we have experienced as saving power. It is as hard for us as it was for Peter to accept that God wanted to revolutionize

1 C. Lamb, *Jesus through Other Eyes*, Latimer, Oxford 1982, p 13.

2 V. Donovan, *Christianity Rediscovered*, SCM, London 1982, pp 66f; cf. Cracknell and Lamb, *op. cit.*, pp 112ff.

3 Cf. L. Newbigin, *The Other Side of 1984*, WCC, Geneva 1984, pp 23, 36.

4 Donovan, *op. cit.*, p 22.

5 This is developed by Newbigin, *The Other Side of 1984*, p 56.

his whole outlook through a Gentile called Cornelius; or for Jonah to see that pagan Ninevites could be as acceptable to God as Israelites; or for faithful churches to recognize that God's chief agents for mission today are the Black Churches in our UPAs¹ or the Independent Churches of Africa. This is the way the God of surprises has always worked, yet it seems to 'threaten the most sacred ground on which we stand. (Jesus) appears as the saboteur, the subverter . . .'² But when we have encountered him in the unlikely way he has chosen, we find there was nothing to fear after all, but there over the other side there is a new joy, freedom and openness which, so far from jeopardizing the Gospel actually rediscovers it for us, adding new light – which we so very nearly ran away from! And a new sharing becomes possible, both within and outside our Churches.³ Our God is much greater than we ever dream and will not be hedged about by our limitations.

There is a further aspect of liberation which emerges when people of differing faiths discover together what Kenneth Cragg has called 'The Human Vocation in Creaturehood'. Mankind, operating as God's *khalifa*, or vice-gerent, must protest against any absolutizing of science, technology, patriotism or politics in defiance of God. In such areas of secularization Islam and the Church, instead of colluding in the privatization of religion, can together recall mankind to a proper acknowledgment of accountability to God and his just requirements.

3.7 Implications for Theological Education

The trouble with theology is the more you learn it, the more you're in danger of thinking you know it. But since God will never allow us to 'know' with such self-confidence, we need to have disturbing experiences which call this 'knowledge' in question (see 3.3, above). We then see the difference between knowing about God and knowing him, as did the Muslim scholar and mystic, Muhammad Al-Ghazali (d. 1111) who, having been thrown into despair by years of theological scholarship and been rescued by a personal experience of God through the Sufi mystics, described the relationship between the two as comparable to that between infancy and adulthood.⁴ If this is not constantly recalled, theology will lead us away from God, as it did many of the opponents of Jesus. So we are warned against a theology that provides 'an induction into a fully recognised,

1 *Faith in the City*, CIO, London 1985, pp 34, 42f.

2 Newbigin, *The Open Secret*, p 200.

3 'Dialogue makes it possible to share in service to the community . . . It is a joyful affirmation of life against chaos' (under Principle III, *Guidelines on Dialogue*, op. cit.).

4 Cf. I Shah, *The Way of the Sufi*, Penguin, Harmondsworth 1974, p 28. Almost single-handed, Al-Ghazali, by integrating within himself both academic theology and mystical experience, rescued Islam from the barren and scholastic sterility into which it was in danger of sinking without trace.

secure and sheltered pattern of ministerial practice.¹ We must combine limitless confidence in the Gospel of Christ with total diffidence about both our grasp of it and our articulation of it. It always remains something for us to discover anew, for we never know exactly what it is in any new situation. Theology fails to serve the Church if it does not make room for such discoveries to take place – even though it is never possible to programme them into any curriculum – even if we did, we may be sure God would bypass them! The Church is never the possessor of salvation but only the witness to it. When the missionary came to the Masai, they asked him, ‘Has your tribe found God?’ To his surprise, he found himself replying in a small voice, ‘No, we have not. . . For us, too, he is the unknown God. But we are searching for him. I have come a long distance to invite you to search for him with us. . . Maybe, together, we will find him.’² Not only the Masai, but Donovan did, and the book tells how.³ But this journey is risky and appears to jettison all possibility of certainty and even to betray what has been entrusted to us. We need, then, a new framework of thinking which will give us permission to embark upon it, and to this we now turn.

4. A Framework

4.1 *General Revelation and Religion*

The letter to the Romans begins with an account of the Gentile response to God’s revelation of himself in creation and conscience. Paul seems to have concluded from his observations at Corinth and at Athens that there is a universal knowledge about God and a universal perversion of that knowledge (Rom. 1:20f, 28). This issues first in idolatrous religion and secondly in moral degeneracy (1:23ff.). Therefore religion can be interpreted in terms of four factors: (a) God’s general revelation which has shown truths to man (Rom. 1:19f.); (b) Human sinfulness which has falsified this revelation (1:21ff.); (c) God’s common grace restraining people from being as sinful or as ignorant as they might be (2:14f.); (d) the diversity which reflects the diversities of human cultures.⁴ Therefore, although no true natural theology exists, nevertheless it is possible to appeal to truths which lie still within human knowledge, as Paul did in Acts 14:15-17 and 17:23-28, and argue from that contact-point to a recognition of human sin against God and of God’s special revelation in Christ (Acts 17.29f).

1 D. Forrester, ‘Divinity in Use and Practice’, *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 1980, 33, p 7.

2 Donovan, *op. cit.*, p 46.

3 ‘We assure our partners in dialogue that we come not as manipulators but as genuine fellow-pilgrims, to speak with them of what we believe God to have done in Jesus Christ’ (under Principle IV, *Guidelines on Dialogue*, *op. cit.*).

4 This position was taken by Abraham Kuyper, cf. G. C. Berkouwer, *General Revelation*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids 1955, pp 165ff.

But religion itself represents a decline from the truth rather than a witness to the truth and so leads away from God rather than to him, and offers no bridge which can be crossed to the knowledge of God. It is therefore futile to pin hopes on religion as the most promising aspect of human life so far as man's relationship to God is concerned.

4.2 *Revelation and the Jews*

With Israel, the starting-point is different, but the response is the same. The recipients of God's special and explicit revelation of himself have actually made that revelation, the law, into 'a charter of national privilege'¹ which gives them a claim upon God, so that they are complacent about the law's fundamental requirement of obedience (Rom. 2:13, 17ff.). Still less have they made the proper response of humble and penitent faith (9:32). More concerned with their law and their worship than with the Giver of that law and the Object of that worship, they became doers more than receivers, talkers more than listeners. No less than pagan Greeks, yet with more light and opportunity (3:2 and 9:4, important and relevant verses for the Church), they have replaced revelation with religion. Their religion, too, is under his judgment.

4.3 *The Gospel and the Church*

Upon this dark scene has broken the light of the Gospel of a personal relationship with God through Christ for all without distinction (Rom. 3:21ff.). But those who receive God's Gospel in Christ become the Church who, even in New Testament times, had constantly to be reminded of God's judgment upon it and of the need to recapture the Gospel in which it originated (1 Pet. 4:17; Rev. 3:18-20). Like pagans and Jews, Christians *always* represent a decline from what God has revealed to them and must therefore become *ecclesia semper reformanda*. They are likely to do this not so much by gaining ever more expertise in theology and spirituality, but rather in an ever-closer identification with their Lord whose glory was seen in service and ultimately in helpless crucifixion. But more frequently the Church has sought to progress through triumph, and has then proved to be as much of an end in itself, a dead end, leading nowhere, as any of its rival religions.

The diagram A may help to clarify the above. Notice that dialogue normally takes place amongst the religious professionals, who are often the most reluctant to abandon their religious security and go back to their roots at the point of God's revelation to them. As we have seen, Paul the evangelist appealed not to religion but to its roots in God's revelation; and similarly Jonah (4:2) and Peter (Acts 11:17) in their encounters with the Ninevites and Cornelius respectively were brought back to the roots of their faith in God's revelation of himself. So ultimately God's call to Chris-

1 N. T. Wright, 'The Paul of History', *Tyndale Bulletin* 29, 1978, p 65.

tians and to people of other faiths is the same – to return to the roots of God's revelation of himself – which means that Christians and non-Christians alike have a pilgrimage to make, and could even do it together.

Newbigin utilizes a different diagram (B) to express 'the central paradox of the human situation, that God comes to meet us at the bottom of our stairways, not at the top; our real ascent towards God's will for us takes us further away from the place where he actually meets us. "I came to call not the righteous but sinners."' ¹ Only those who can, like Jesus, empty themselves, can take part in fruitful dialogue. Those who are 'experts' in these matters are perhaps the most poorly equipped for fruitful inter-faith encounter. Maybe the witness of the Church will bear real fruit only when the truth dawns upon her again that her most effective witnesses are as they have always been, those who, maybe without sophisticated theology, are simply transformed by the wonder of God's indiscriminating and universal love (see Acts 11:20f.).

4.4 *The Gospel beyond the Church*

In section 2, above, we saw some stories of how God speaks to people in ways for which an 'orthodox' theology can find no room. Paul's Jewish opponents were confident of discrediting his new theories through the example of their forefather Abraham who 'was perfect in all his deeds with the Lord' and so had no need to repent and could boast (see Rom. 4:2) of 'the merit of his faith'.² They had domesticated Abraham to conform to their religion. Christians have done the same – he is now 'one of us', a Christian. But of course he was not. It is important to note both the differences and the similarities. Although without any revelation of Christ, he was given a special promise (Rom. 4:18-25) and responded to it, improbable though it was, by weighing up the circumstances, and putting into the other side of the scale the power and faithfulness of God. He who lived BC believed God's revealed promise apart from Jesus. It is impossible to distinguish in principle between his faith and that of others who have made a similar response, not to general revelation but to a specially revealed word from God. Some of them may never have heard of Christ, some only of the Qur'anic Isa, some of a distorted and grotesque parody of the Jesus of the Gospels, perhaps presented in nonsensical and irrelevant jargon, as we and the Church may often be doing even today. In principle, they are BC, like Abraham, and their faith may be as authentic as his – even though I am convinced God can only be truly known in his Son Jesus Christ, if only he could be truly proclaimed!

However, there are five dogmatic assertions to be made:

(1) Nobody is right with God by means of his/her own goodness, sincerity, religion, however impressive these may appear to be – Romans is clear

1 Newbigin, *The Open Secret*, pp 204f.

2 Jubilees 23:10; Prayer of Manasses 8; *Mekilta* on Exodus 14:31.

DIAGRAM A
(see § 4.3)

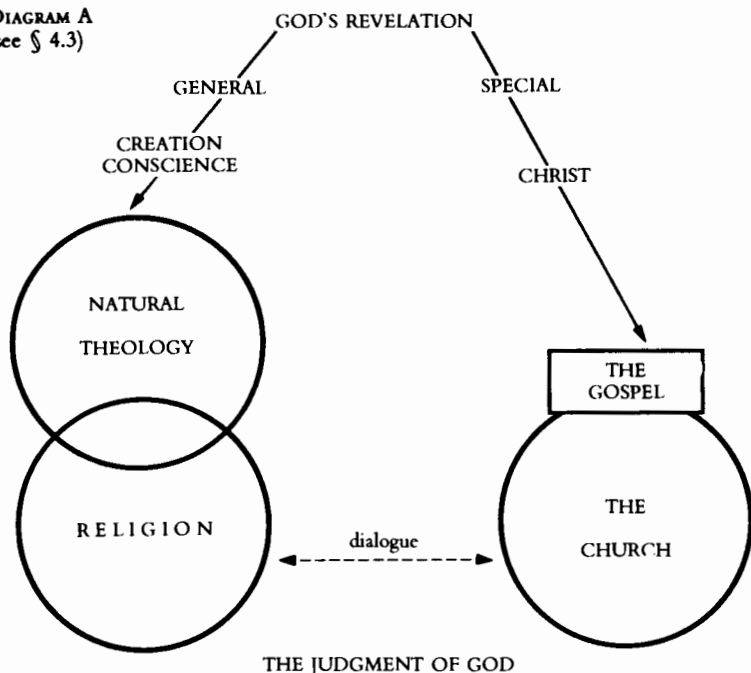
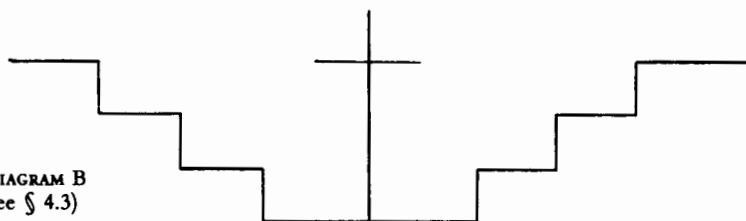


DIAGRAM B
(see § 4.3)



- enough about this. Salvation can rest only on the initiative and grace of God.
- (2) Christ is the only way of salvation in the sense of the only means of redemption. The sins of past believers like Abraham were passed over not because God was careless or had forgotten justice but because they were to be righteously dealt with in the death of his Son (Rom. 3:25f.). By analogy, the same might be said to apply to other 'believers' who are ignorant of Christ and so in effect BC like Abraham.
- (3) Christ could be said to be the only source of revelation as the light which enlightens every man (John 1:9), even though God may reveal himself in many ways of which Christ is not explicitly the content.
- (4) There are no circumstances in which we can count absolutely on

anyone, anywhere, clearly recognizing the love of God and responding to it in living faith, apart from through the proclamation of Jesus Christ, in whom alone that love can certainly be perceived. The existence of apparently exceptional cases (of which there may be thousands), so far from blunting our evangelism, should only increase our enthusiasm and optimism, for we may be sure, in the first place, that the Lord already has 'many people in this city' (Acts 18:9f.) to whom he is not a stranger, in the second place, that there can be no grounds for despair as we consider the immensity of the task and the paucity of our human resources and in the third place, that only through knowing Christ can people certainly come to a relationship with God that leads to salvation.

(5) There is no possibility of our determining what is and what is not either a genuine human response of faith, or an authentic revelation of God – apart from that given uniquely in Jesus Christ. (But if we do find what looks like evidence of an authentic knowledge of God and response to him in people who are the devotees of any particular religion or of none, we shall do well to ascribe this not to the merits of their religion [even the Christian religion], but to the unfathomable grace of God to them in Christ [whether or not he is explicitly confessed] as members of his beloved human family.) This means that fortunately we are absolved from the responsibility of having to find answers to the questions posed by the stories in section 2, and if that means that our theology is left that much more untidy and agnostic, well, at least we shall be that much more ready for any other surprises God may have in store for us.

5. A Common Humanity

There is one feature of Paul's letters which has a bearing on the way we approach people of other faiths – that is, his frequent insistence that God deals with people collectively, in terms of the group to which they belong, rather than individually. This seems to me to be almost entirely ignored – or at least soft-pedalled – in today's western individualistic culture, yet clearly it would present no problem at all to the West African villagers whose chief's dream became also their dream – which came true! nor to Donovan's Masai who demanded that he baptize either all, or none, of them and totally rejected his wish to select individuals on the basis of their 'worthiness' for the sacrament. And the idea pervades so much of Paul's thought that it can almost be said to be a principle of his theology.¹

The key word is probably *aparche*, firstfruits, but the idea occurs where the word is absent. For example, the most obvious passage is Romans 5:12-21, where the destinies of Adam and Christ are shared by 'all' who belong to the group of which they are the respective heads. Most of the baptisms recorded in the New Testament were not of individuals but of household or family groups. These in turn were 'firstfruits' of the harvest which was to

1 D. E. H. Whiteley, *The Theology of St. Paul*, Blackwell, Oxford 1964, pp 132ff.

be reaped throughout the province or region (Rom. 16:5; 1 Cor. 16:15). The implication of the term *aparthe* is not simply that these were the first to become Christians but that their conversion was a pledge of what God was about to do in the whole group. What God does begins with Jesus Christ, the one whom, above all, God has chosen, and his resurrection is the guarantee of that of all his people (1 Cor. 15:20-23). The Holy Spirit, too, is described as the 'first fruits', ie, the guarantee that 'the whole package' (in which he is the supreme element) of the blessings of the new age belong to us (Rom. 8:23). The existence of a believing 'remnant' of Israel is the pledge, literally firstfruits, guaranteeing that 'the whole lump' also belongs to God (Rom. 11:5, 16) and that 'all Israel will be saved' (11:26), which must refer to national Israel, the Jews, and can surely not, pace Calvin¹ and Andrew Kirk,² refer to 'the whole olive tree, Jew and Gentile', without making exegetical nonsense of the whole of chapters 9-11. Similarly, the faith of one partner to a marriage is a pledge of the consecration to the Lord of the unbelieving partner – it is inconceivable that God could call one without intending the inclusion of the other in his mercy (1 Cor. 7:14). It is also implied in Romans 8:19-23 that our sonship in Christ guarantees to the created order to which we belong its own liberation from frustration and decay, so that it will ultimately fulfil its destiny in accordance with the Creator's intention, which it has hitherto failed to do through its implication in our fall. By analogy, a guarantee similar to that given to Israel and the sub-human creation ought to apply equally to the mass of unbelieving mankind, adherents of many religious faiths, on the grounds of the mercy now experienced by many Jews and Gentiles. That mercy, the supreme characteristic and ultimate purpose of God (Rom. 9:15, 23ff), cannot be thwarted but will reach its final goal in the destiny of *all* mankind, of whom the believing minority are at present the visible firstfruits (Rom. 11:28-32, cf. also Jas. 1:18; Rev. 14:14).

But the significant point of this theological principle is clearly not the religious faiths people hold *but their humanity*, ie, the fact that they belong to a group to whom God is already reaching out in mercy, even though his purpose for the whole group is yet to be realized. And we have already noted that the significance of this common humanity is rarely appreciated in western Christendom, yet this, rather than religion, is the basis on which Christians ought to encounter people of other faiths, and this is the ground for hope that they, too, are not to be forever outside the scope of God's mercy in Jesus Christ.

Recently I received a letter from an Iranian Christian in Teheran, of which the following is an extract. He describes the effect of the Iraqi air raids on Christian and Muslim alike as they huddle together for shelter: 'All the routines of life are shattered . . . in this underground existence. People are thinking only of survival these days and share in everything – in

1 J. Calvin, *Commentary on Romans*, Oliver and Boyd, Edinburgh 1961, p.255.
2 'The Middle East Dilemma', *Anvil* 3, 1986. p 251.

suffering, terror, uncertainty. They have never been so close, and this is something very precious. We discover we all have something in common, and that's our humanity, and we can thank God for the revelation of these mysteries and rejoice. Shared suffering removes many barriers, and thus people learn to accept each other as they are. Even religious and ideological prejudices become worthless . . .'

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