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Evangelistic Dialogue: Reflections on a Personal Encounter

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ABSTRACT: How should evangelical Christians within a plural society engage in interreligious dialogue with non-Christian religious adherents? This paper uses a case study of the author's personal conversation with a Sufi Muslim to argue that interreligious dialogue is necessary for faithful gospel communication and to explore biblical methods for such dialogue. After briefly examining various voices in the recent history of interreligious dialogue, it tests principles of interreligious dialogue by examining them in view of the author's personal discussion. The practical application of philosophical principles in real life experience also outlines biblical methods for such dialogue. The author concludes with a few observations about the elenctic nature of interreligious dialogue.

KEY WORDS: interreligious dialogue, theology of religions, Islam and Christianity, elenctics, evangelism, gospel communication

Several years ago, I engaged in interreligious dialogue with a Sufi Muslim. The encounter took place in Bandung, a city near Jakarta in the western region of Indonesia's most populated island. A personal e-mail sent home to family shortly after relates my experience:

Several weeks ago when biking through a mountain village near my house, I met an Indonesian soldier – there is a barracks close by and the army was practicing in that area. We talked casually for a bit. He asked for my name and address and said he would visit some time – a normal friendly exchange. So I was surprised when

later that morning he knocked on my door. I had just gotten home, showered, and started studying! I invited him into my room (what else can you do when a soldier in military uniform stands at the door) and we talked for three hours. He wasted no time getting to the subject of religion (I have a collection of Bibles and religious books on my desk). Since he asked about religion, I could legally answer. It was rather strange, though, sharing the gospel with an Indonesian soldier in my bedroom. His name is Asep and he is a Sufi Muslim – the mystical faction of Islam that is often rejected by traditional factions like the Shiite and the Sunni.

A few particulars need to be noted as background to this account. First, Indonesia is a country of religious and ethnic diversity. Home to about 247 million people, it has five official religions: Islam, Christianity (not Catholic), Roman Catholicism, Hinduism, and Buddhism.¹ The Indonesian *Pancasila* – the five most basic principles of national ideology – requires faith in one God; therefore, all citizens are required to choose one of these religions. Though there is a large Muslim majority on Java and other islands in western Indonesia, it is officially not an Islamic country. Indonesia has more than 700 languages, eighteen of which are spoken by more than a million people (Johnstone & Mandryk 2001:338).

The city of Bandung is home to almost three million people of mostly Sundanese and Javanese ethnicity. Formerly a centre of the Dutch colonial government, it is now one of the centres of secular and Islamic learning. Foreigners staying in Bandung typically live in the northern section of the city where the Dutch had lived; I was studying the Indonesian language and culture, living in the northern part. The southern part of the city is known as a stronghold for many fundamentalist Muslim groups. The situation at that time was not too dangerous for foreigners, but it was wise for me to avoid certain places especially in the southern section.

Being a pluralistic society with complex ethnic and religious diversity, Indonesia has strict rules about proselytizing. The government limits all uninvited religious discussion. Methods of evangelism common in western countries are strictly forbidden, and foreigners are often denied renewed visas if suspected or accused of proselytizing.² In my interaction with Asep the Sufi, I do not recall being worried for my safety. But I knew that I must be careful about what I said. As I wrote later, “If it ever came down to his word against mine there would be no contest.”

¹ A sixth religion is permitted that is associated with Chinese religions. Operation World (Johnstone & Mandryk 2001) reports the following religious population statistics: Muslims: 80%; non-Protestant (Catholic, Pentecostal, marginal, etc.): 9%; Protestant: 7% (Evangelical: 4%); Hindu: 2%; and smaller groups.

² I had entered the country on a student visa and was planning to return in the future on an education visa. Many people had cautioned me not to do anything that might create suspicion or accusation.

A final particular, important to the focus of this essay, is that in many ways Asep and I were equals: He held a minority religious view within Islam; I was associated with Christianity, also a minority religion in Indonesia. He was a soldier and so of higher status in society; likewise, I was a foreigner which also distinguished me from the average person. He and I were about the same age and we both were religious scholars in our own right (I recall Asep being impressed with my small collection of religious books). Additionally, we both were motivated to share our own religious beliefs with others.

Now, with this experience in mind, allow me to ask a few questions. Should I have opened the door to this Sufi Muslim? When Asep stood at my door desiring to dialogue with me about religion, should I have welcomed him into my room? The answer to this question is not as easy as it may at first appear. Here is a deeper question that will serve as the central query of this essay: Can I – an Evangelical Christian – dialogue with my new Sufi Muslim friend without compromising my principles? Before responding to this query, we will reflect in depth on my personal encounter with Asep and grapple with difficult questions that are raised by this experience. But first, it is necessary to consider definitions and the Evangelical discussion that has already taken place concerning interreligious dialogue.

I. Background: The Evangelical Discussion about Interreligious Dialogue

The dictionary defines dialogue as “a conversation between two or more persons; an exchange of ideas and opinions; a more nuanced definition, however, also includes a motive: a discussion between representatives of parties to a conflict that is aimed at resolution.” In many ways, the Evangelical discussion about dialogue – both among themselves and with non-Evangelicals – is centred on definitions and motives. Because these definitions and motives are complex and usually opinionated, the historical context must also be considered briefly.

Ecumenical Developments

Though there has always been dialogue between Christians and non-Christians (Netland 2001:251–260), a review of the Evangelical discussion starts at the beginning of the twentieth century. In 1910, the first World Missionary Conference met in Edinburgh, where they “predicted the imminent collapse of the non-Christian religions” (Stott 1975:64). The mood was much different at the second missionary conference at Jerusalem in 1928. In this time between the World Wars, there was a desire to form a common religious front against growing challenges. At the third missionary conference at Tambaram in 1938, the relationship between Christianity and the non-Christian religions was centre focus. Among other factors, the Hocking Report (Hocking *et al.* 1932) and R.N. Farquhar’s *The Crown of Hinduism* (1913) had

popularized the notion that Christ is the fulfilment of non-Christian religions. Hendrick Kraemer's book, *The Christian Message in a non-Christian World* (1938), written for the conference, "stressed that there was a fundamental 'discontinuity' between the religions of man and the revelation of God" (Stott 1975:64).

Ecumenical conferences after the Second World War, however, did not heed Kraemer's warnings but rather continued to develop ideas of how Christ is already present in the non-Christian world.³ John Stott (1975) explains the effects of these ideas on Christian mission:

It is in their view presumptuous of the Christian missionary to talk of 'bringing' Christ with him into a situation; what he does is first to 'find' Christ already there and then maybe to 'unveil' him. Some go further still. They not only deny that missionaries take Christ with them, or can be the media of Christ's self-revelation to the non-Christian; they even suggest that it is the non-Christian who is the bearer of Christ's message to the Christian. (p. 66)

Evangelical Discussion

The Evangelical discussion about interreligious dialogue in the last three decades was largely an argument against the dialogue that replaces mission (cf. Glasser 1981; Marshall 1992; Nicholls 1992). Carl Henry (1969:31) argued that dialogue must not be seen as an end in itself but a means to an end: "Conversation is more and more replacing conversion as a Christian missionary objective."⁴ Evangelicals found unity among themselves at the Lausanne Missions Conference in 1974, agreeing to the following statement:

Our Christian presence in the world is indispensable to evangelism, and so is that kind of dialogue whose purpose is to listen sensitively in order to understand. But evangelism itself is the proclamation of the historical Biblical Christ as Savior and Lord, with a view to persuading people to come to him personally and to be reconciled to God. (p. 14)

³ David Bosch (1980) documents a striking change regarding dialogue and the theology of religions: "In 1963 reference was still being made to 'The witness of Christians to men of other faiths'. After three more years, it was 'Christians in *dialogue* with men of other faiths'. In all these instances the point of departure remained the *Christian's* witness, encounter, or dialogue. In 1970, however, it became 'Dialogue *between* men of living faiths'" (p. 88).

⁴ "The only alternative to dialogue that deletes the evangelical view is dialogue that expounds it. The late twentieth century is no time to shirk that dialogue." (Henry quoted by Muck 1993: 518–519.)

Those who rejected dialogue following Lausanne “tended to be those who remembered the dangers of dialogue if it is used as a replacement for conversion-oriented missions” (Muck 1991:519).

Most of the Evangelical discussion since Lausanne, however, has not focused as much on the relationship of Christianity and the non-Christian religions as on the salvation of those who never hear the gospel, usually categorized as exclusivism, inclusivism, or pluralism (cf. Conn 1991:207; Netland 2001:308).⁵ More recently, attention has been given to the uniqueness of Christ in the increasingly pluralistic world (Nicholls 1994). But the questions asked by Harvie Conn more than two decades ago about the place of dialogue and the underlying theology of religions remain unanswered (cf. Conn 1991).⁶ What does Scripture say about dialogue with adherents of other religions? More exegetical attention should be given to both Old and New Testaments. For this brief overview we will borrow from several Evangelical studies. Many have noted that the English word “dialogue” is similar to the Greek verb forms *dialegomai* and *dialogizomai* (cf. Acts 17:17, 19:8-9). The biblical meaning, however, should not be confused with classical philosophy: “In the New Testament there is no instance of the classical use of *dialegomai* in the philosophical sense. In the sphere of revelation there is no question of reaching the idea through dialectic” (Hesselgrave 2005:107–108). Paul’s dialogue was never truth-seeking but always truth-telling.⁷

In his exegetical study refuting ecumenical views of dialogue, Marshall (1992) concludes:

... dialogue was not the primary means of presentation of the gospel in the early [NT] church... we have found very little evidence indeed to suggest that the church’s own thinking was significantly influenced by dialogue with non-Christians, or indeed that dialogue

⁵ Conn (1991:207) wrote: “Sadly, the evangelical world seems almost silent on this crucial issue. Apart from a few exceptions like J.H. Bavinck and his exciting ‘possessio’ model, no extensive, systematic model has appeared in recent years.”

⁶ Conn (1991) asks: “1. Should Christianity be drawn in a continuous line with other religions? Or is there discontinuity? Or both? Where does the continuity lie? Does Christianity have anything positive to say about other religions? ... 5. How should Christianity best participate in dialogue? What are the presuppositions of dialogue? Are there different kinds of dialogue? What are the legitimate goals of dialogue?” (pp. 207–208).

⁷ Stott (1975) states: “The kind of dialogue which was included in Paul’s ministry was, however, very different from what is often meant by the word today. For Paul’s dialogue was clearly a part of his proclamation and subordinate to his proclamation. Moreover, the subject of his dialogue with the world was one which he always chose himself, namely Jesus Christ, and its object was always conversion to Jesus Christ. If this was still the position few who hesitate about dialogue would disagree with it. But often the modern dialogue of Christians with non-Christians seems to savor rather of unbelief, than of faith, of compromise than of proclamation” (p. 63).

within the church played a significant part in the development of doctrine. ... There is not the slightest suggestion that the church and the world conversed as equal partners in the search for truth. (p. 45; cf. also Schnabel 2004:1393-1394)⁸

Hesselgrave (1978) agrees:

In no way can New Testament dialogue be constructed as lacking in a concern for either truth or persons. In no way can it be constructed as militating against proclamation and conversion. Dialogue was a method; proclamation was its nature; and conversion was its goal. (p. 234)

This understanding of dialogue was continued in the early church as Michael Green (1970) states:

The early preachers did not enter into dialogue with the world, except to understand it and to present their life-changing message in terms comprehensible to their contemporaries. They believed they had got good news for their friends, and they knew that good news was embodied in Jesus Christ. Him they proclaimed. (p. 174)

Various Voices

Though most Evangelicals would agree that any opinion of interreligious dialogue must be consistent with Scripture, there is still a range of definitions and applications. The *Evangelical Dictionary of World Missions* (Moreau *et al.* 2000) notes three basic opinions regarding dialogue:

The position held by pluralists rejects traditional views on biblical revelation, proclaiming interreligious dialogue as a new epistemology; extreme conservatism calls for the rejection of dialogue in favor of proclamation; a more centrist view affirms dialogue as a means of understanding and communication without rejecting biblical revelation. (p. 274)

The first of these positions – held by John Hick, Paul Knitter, and Leonard Swidler – is clearly outside the Evangelical doctrine of revelation. Yet many Evangelicals are asking serious questions about truth in other religions

⁸Yet, says Marshall (1992): "... it still remains true that Christians must practice dialogue with non-Christians. On the one hand, only by means of dialogue can they come to an understanding of the situation of non-Christians and how the gospel answers their needs. On the other hand, as the examples in the Gospels show, Jesus responded to the questions raised by the people whom he met, and above all he sought to involve them in a personal encounter with the claims of God on their lives by bringing them in to a situation of dialogue in which they were invited to respond to his message" (p. 46).

(cf. McDermott 2000) and a similar, though more restrained, spectrum of opinions can be found among Evangelicals. There is no space in this review for a thorough study; instead, consider the following three representative views of Lloyd-Jones, Hesselgrave, and Muck.

The view of Martyn Lloyd-Jones has been chosen not because he speaks at length about dialogue, but rather because he represents the “extreme conservative” position in *Evangelical Dictionary of World Missions* and elsewhere (cf. Muck 1993:528; Stott 1975:528). In his published lectures, *Preaching and Preachers*, Lloyd-Jones (1971:45-63) stresses that preaching is the primary task of the church and minister. He (1971) then raises common objections to his assertion:

Cannot all this be done better by means of group discussions? Why must it be preaching? Why this particular form? Cannot this be replaced by a kind of ‘dialogue’, as it is now called, or exchange of views? Should we not rather encourage more questions at the end of sermons, and a dialogue between the minister and the people who have come to listen, all, of course, within the realm of the Church? (p. 45)

Lloyd-Jones (1971:46–47) rejects these modern substitutes for preaching. First, “God is not to be discussed or debated. God is not a subject for debate, because He is Who He is and What He is.”⁹ Second, the proclamation of God’s truth is a most serious matter: “It seems to me that these supposed discussions and dialogues on religion that we have on the television and radio are generally nothing but sheer entertainment.” (*ibid*:48) Additionally, Lloyd-Jones (1971) also finds reasons in the theology religions:

... there is no neutral point at which the Christian and the non-Christian can meet, there is no common starting point as it were. Our whole position as Christians is the very opposite and antithesis of the other ... what the natural man needs above everything else is to be humbled (p 49).

In his defence, Lloyd-Jones delivered these lectures in 1969 at the beginning of the Evangelical movement to use dialogue as an alternative to missions. Thus he is reacting against substitutes for proclamation, popular fascination with other religions, and theories about common ground. Yet, his clear assertions cannot be ignored:

⁹ Lloyd-Jones relates how he refused when asked to participate in a public debate with a renowned atheist. He felt it was the wrong approach, partly because it rarely succeeds in winning souls and usually just provides entertainment.

I reject all these modern substitutes for preaching therefore and say that there is only one way; it is the way that was adopted by the Apostle Paul himself in Athens. I have already quoted it: ‘Whom ye ignorantly worship, him declare I unto you.’ (Lloyd-Jones 1971:51)¹⁰

Second, we consider the views of David Hesselgrave for which there are two primary sources. The first is a paper presented in 1976 that cautiously considers valid types of Evangelical dialogue. After critiquing the interreligious dialogue of ecumenists and reviewing Scripture on the subject, Hesselgrave (1978:227-240) explains five areas where Evangelicals could engage in dialogue.¹¹ He challenges fellow Evangelicals to consider ways to benefit from this form of communication:

In a world of religious pluralism evangelical witness, preaching, and teaching should become increasingly dialogical – answering those questions and objections raised by non-Christian respondents rather than simply answering questions of the evangelical’s own devising. (*ibid*:238)

The second source, written almost thirty years later with a more conservative tone, is a chapter of *Paradigms in Conflict* on “Common ground and enemy territory” in which Hesselgrave (2005:81–115) reviews eight approaches for interactions with adherents of other faiths. He cautiously considers the possibility of interreligious dialogue. With less enthusiasm than in 1976, Hesselgrave (2005) recognizes the plausibility of dialogue:

Whereas among liberals interreligious dialogue is often proposed as a means of discovering common ground with non-Christians, among conservatives it should be regarded more as a means of disseminating the gospel. Whereas among liberals interreligious dialogue is proposed as a means of establishing commonality, among conservatives it should be recognized that authentic dialogue will often lead to controversy and disputation. (p. 107)¹²

¹⁰ It is interesting to note that he uses Paul’s example in Athens to support his final assertion when others have used this as support for dialogical communication.

¹¹ These include: (1) dialogue on the nature of interreligious dialogue – to influence non-Evangelicals; (2) dialogue that promotes freedom of worship and witness – to defend Christian rights; (3) dialogue concerned with meeting human need – to assist in society; (4) dialogue designed to break down barriers of distrust and hatred in the religious world; and (5) dialogue to understand conflicting truth claims.

¹² Yet even while rejecting dialogue in certain forms, Hesselgrave (2005) recognizes it as a powerful form of evangelistic communication: “From Scripture and history, it seems safe to conclude that interreligious dialogue is a questionable means of establishing common ground. On the other hand, it seems to be powerful for communi-

Terry Muck gives a final representative view of dialogue. He has written several articles on dialogue and is seriously engaged in Buddhist-Christian talks. Dialogue for Muck (1995) is seen differently than both New Testament and modern relativists' uses of the word:

Interreligious dialogue is a sustained conversation between parties who are not saying the same thing and who recognize and respect the contradictions and mutual exclusions between their various ways of thinking. (p. 8)

He distinguishes between dialogue and evangelism: "I believe both evangelism and interreligious dialogue are extremely important functions of all religious systems, and a place must be found for both in any religion that claims truth in this day and age" (Muck 1997:140).

Using pragmatic communication theory, he argues that dialogue is a form of disclosure level communication and evangelism is a form of proclamation level communication, and that all the various levels of communication are of equal value. If all forms of communication are of relative importance (including Scripture?), then where do we find ultimate meaning? For Muck (1997), it comes

... from outside the realm of human existence, that is, some kind of transcendent principle. These are the religious principles of God, gods, and Ultimate Values. ... It must be this kind of God or transcendent principle that gives meaning to our three modes of discourse. (pp. 147-148)

With this theory of communication – and of God and His revelation – Muck sees dialogue as separate from evangelism.¹³

More discussion about Evangelicals and dialogue will follow in the next sections. At this point, I only note my disagreement with Terry Muck regarding not only his epistemology but also his defining dialogue and evangelism as two separate activities. He desires to engage other religious adherents in communication that does not seek to proclaim the gospel. Though other arguments were used to justify it, this is similar to ecumenical trends following the Second World War. As quoted above, Henry (1969) complained that "Conversation is more and more replacing conversion as a Christian mis-

cating the gospel and convincing hearers of gospel truth when undertaken at the risk of inviting debate and dissension" (p. 107).

¹³ Muck (1997) states: "Interreligious dialogue and evangelism are different modes of communication, both important, neither one more important than the other. In Christian terms, both are commanded by the teachings of the Bible. In my understanding, one cannot be a good Christian without demanding that the Christian church be dedicated to both dialogue and evangelism" (p. 140).

sonary objective.” (quoted by Muck 1993:518) More to the point, Charles Kraft observed, “Approaches to witness that consider mere ‘presence’ or ‘dialogue without persuasion’ as sufficient have not taken the ‘herald/ambassador’ analogy seriously” (quoted by Muck 1993:519).

Perhaps the best response to Muck’s theories, however, is that of John Stott in his book *Christian Mission in the Modern World*. His influential chapter on dialogue – quoted in most Evangelical literature on dialogue since 1975 – raises a vitally important subject: the place of elenctics in dialogue:

The very concept of ‘elenctics’ is out of accord with the diffident, tolerant mood of today. But no Christian who accepts the biblical view of the evil of idolatry on the one hand and of the finality of Jesus Christ on the other can escape it. Further, only those who see the need for elenctics can also see the need for dialogue and can understand its proper place. (p. 71)¹⁴

Dialogue and Elenctics

Though often seen as contradictory with dialogue, elenctics also deals other religions and, like dialogue, is directly influenced by one’s theology of religions. Jan Jongeneel (2002:349) notes that this term was first introduced in the seventeenth century by Gisbertus Voetius and revitalized in the twentieth century by Abraham Kuyper: as polemics is to heresy and apologetics is to non-Christian philosophy, so elenctics is to non-Christian religion. J. H. Bavinck (1960:221–272), following Kuyper, devoted an entire section of his missiology textbook to elenctics. Bavinck’s theology of religion seems to follow Kraemer in the main, though it is not influenced by Kraemer’s Barthian views (Visser 2003:90). In the last half-century, others have returned to Bavinck’s concept of elenctics (cf. Conn 1980:148 ff.; Hesselgrave 1983:461–483; 1991:573 ff.; 2005:183–197; Priest 1994:291–315). But few, if any, have continued Stott’s thought about the role of elenctics in dialogue.

What is elenctics and how does it interface with dialogue? The *Evangelical Dictionary of World Missions* defines it as “the science which is concerned with the conviction of sin. It is the science which unmasks to heathendom all false religions as sin against God, and it calls heathendom to acknowledge the only true God.” (Moreau *et al.* 2000:222–223). The term is a transliteration of a Greek word (*elengcho*) meaning “to bring to light, expose, set forth; to convict or convince; to reprove or correct” (Bauer *et al.* 1979:249). Elenctics means to expose, negatively, for the purpose of convicting or reproving (cf. Jude 15) or, positively, for the purpose of convincing or correcting (cf. Rev 3:19). Ultimately, only the Holy Spirit convinces the world of sin, righteousness, and judgement (Jn 16:8). The Spirit “awakens in

¹⁴ I am very appreciative of Stott’s valuable insights in this chapter, even though I cannot fully agree with everything Stott has written more recently (cf. Edwards & Stott 1988).

man that deeply hidden awareness of guilt. He convinces man of sin, even where previously no consciousness of sin was apparently present. The Holy Spirit uses the word of the preacher and touches the heart of the hearer, making it accessible to the word” (Bavinck 1960:229).

It is “the word of the preacher” and the person of the preacher that connects elenctics with dialogue. Bavinck (1960) argues that elenctics can only be done in living contact with the adherents of other religions:

In practice ... I am never in contact with Islam but with a Moslem and his Mohammedanism. If I seek to take a man by storm with general rules and norms derived from books, it is possible that I may miss the mark, and what I say may go over his head, because what he himself finds in his own religion, and the way in which he lives it, is something entirely different from what I had originally thought. (pp. 240–241)

Following Bavinck, Conn and Hesselgrave build a strong case for elenctics.¹⁵ Many view the concept of elenctics as too confrontational in a world of religious pluralism (Mulder quoted by Jongeneel 2002:349). Dialogue and elenctics are considered to be incompatible. But in missionary praxis, I believe, they become complimentary – even inseparable. As Stott (1975:71) has suggested, “only those who see the need for elenctics can also see the need for dialogue and can understand its proper place.” Hesselgrave (2005:107) hints at the same: dialogue “seems to be powerful for communicating the gospel and convincing hearers of gospel truth when undertaken at the risk of inviting debate and dissension.”

So can conservative Evangelicals engage in interreligious dialogue with non-Christians? Clearly the answer to this question is not as easy as it first seems. From this cursory review of the Evangelical literature in historical context, a place exists for a certain kind of dialogue. Whatever style of dialogue it may be, almost all Evangelicals will agree that it must be radically different than current ecumenical approaches. Understanding the relationship of Christianity with non-Christians and the place of elenctics in dialogue is important in answering our thesis question. But before making any conclusions, we should reflect on this subject in authentic missionary praxis. Asepe the Sufi Muslim is still standing patiently at the door. Should we not welcome him in as a test case for our discussion?

¹⁵ Harvie Conn’s has developed five characteristics of elenctics: (1) it is personal, approaching individuals in relationship; (2) it is holistic, approaching in deeds as well as words; (3) it is contextual, approaching people in their culture; (4) it is verdict-oriented with a goal of repentance and conversion; and (5) it is God-centred in seeking others to become reconciled to God (Moreau *et al.* 2000; cf. also Conn 1980:155; Hesselgrave 2005:183–197).

II. Reflections: Questions about my personal interreligious encounter

In this section, I would like to test the ideas of interreligious dialogue and elenctics reviewed in the last section. Five questions will structure our discussion: With whom am I speaking? How should I understand his religiosity? What is the goal of interreligious communication? What method of communication should I use? and, How should I dialogue with Asep? But first, allow me to share the rest of the story from my email account ('Bandung News #3', e-mail communication to family and friends in North America 17 July 2003):

It was hard to determine Asep's motive. He started by trying to prove that Sufi Islam and Christianity are the same (I think he was being careful not to break the law). He believes that Allah (the Indonesian word for God) created Nur Mohammad before creating the world. Nur Mohammad is like the Holy Spirit and lives in the heart of each true Sufi believer uniting him with the divine. Interestingly, he believed in Allah (Eternal God), Nur Mohammad (not man, not God), and Adam – notice the triad. I used this opportunity to speak about Allah Tritunggal (the Trinity) and explained how Jesus Christ was fully God and became fully Man as the Mediator between God and man. ... He tried to find passages in the Qur'an to prove his beliefs – but Sufis are mystical (like extreme versions of mystical Christianity) so not necessarily based on the objective words of the Qur'an. His beliefs seemed to rely more on another Indonesian book titled "4 M." My goal was to present the Christian gospel to him with the hope that the Holy Spirit would use it for his salvation.

With whom am I speaking?

Here is a young Indonesian soldier in my small dorm room, talking about personal religion. From the outside, I knew only limited facts about his culture: Asep was living in a religiously and ethnically pluralistic society; he probably grew up with an awareness of several other religions. As a soldier, he probably had an education slightly above the average Indonesian, yet English was probably his third or fourth language. He was a young man in his upper twenties, maybe with a young family at home. Visiting with a foreigner, he was breaking social norms. But I was living with other Indonesian students, trying to learn the language and culture and thus was more approachable. Asep's passion, it appeared, was to talk about religion.

I must admit my knowledge of Sufi Islam at that time was limited. I had read several books on Islam and about Sufis,¹⁶ but this was my first encounter

¹⁶ The warm passion of Samuel Zwemer's intriguing chapters on "the way to the Muslim heart" and "Islam and Animism" (Zwemer 2002:55-65) were still fresh in my mind.

with a Sufi. Yet, as Bavinck notes, I was not dealing with Sufi Islam but rather with a sincerely religious man in a unique socio-cultural environment, who followed a certain Sufi teacher.¹⁷ Asep was an expert about his version of Sufi Islam, so I wasted no time gathering information about his culture and religion.

Through our discussion, I also learned more about Asep. He was passionate about his religion. As a Sufi, he had chosen to go against the majority view in Indonesia. In addition to the Qur'an, he brought with him a religious book which appeared to be written by one of a Sufi spiritual leader. He was impressed with the books on my desk; I still remember wondering about his impressions as he flipped through *Understanding Folk Religions*. He was also impressed when I read passages of Scripture from the Hebrew and Greek. He had tried several times to read and explain Arabic passages from the Qur'an.

What were Asep's motives? Why did he immediately find where I lived and start a dialogue about religion? He said he wanted to practice his English – a common desire of Indonesians – and this was probably part of his motivation. Was he also searching out who I was with evil intent? I had to be aware of this possibility, but nothing gave me that impression. Perhaps it was to gain the friendship of an American? Again, a possibility, but I don't remember getting that impression either. From what I could perceive, his driving motive was to proselytize his faith. He started with the similarities of Christianity and Sufi Islam. This was probably either to avoid breaking the national laws against proselytizing or to be as non-offensive and non-confrontational as possible. But Asep was very clear on the distinctives of his belief, and he was not afraid to disagree politely when I spoke about my beliefs. He was unmistakably sincere and passionate about his faith.

After only a few hours, I knew a lot about the person with whom I was speaking. Indeed, with more dialogue – and observation and additional research – I could begin to develop a more detailed ethnography describing Asep and his culture.

There were several details, however, that I knew about Asep the Sufi even before our earnest discussions began. From Scripture, I knew that Asep was created in the image of God (Gen 1:26, 9:6; Acts 17:28-29; 1 Cor 11:7; Jam 3:9). Asep and I were both created by God, in His image and likeness, for the purpose of bringing glory to God. Asep, therefore, had a living soul that was destined for eternity. I also knew that Asep had some knowledge about God

¹⁷ In practice Bavinck (1960) postulates: "I am never in contact with Islam but with a Moslem and his Mohammedanism. If I seek to take a man by storm with general rules and norms derived from books, it is possible that I may miss the mark, and what I say may go over his head, because what he himself finds in his own religion, and the way in which he lives it, is something entirely different from what I had originally thought" (pp. 240-241).

from intuition (Rom 1:18 ff.) and creation (Ps 19:1 ff.).¹⁸ He was also informed about a divine law and his conscience was either accusing or excusing him (Rom 2:14-15).

After some limited discussion with Asep, other details became clear. He was a sinner rebelling against God and seeking other means by which to deal with his guilt, shame, and fear. This was not a judgement that I passed upon my new friend; I could not put myself above him or claim any superior ability for myself. This was the Bible's judgement of Asep the Sufi; regardless of my own desires, I could only accept the inspired description as true.¹⁹ I knew that Asep was attempting to suppress God's truth in unrighteousness (Rom 1:18). Perhaps his passionate quest after Sufi teachings had already completely extinguished the faint glimmer of light he once had. Somewhere in Asep's heart was written the precepts of divine law – a law that he could not obey perfectly. As a result, Asep was experiencing some degree of personal guilt, shame, and fear.

How should I understand his religiosity?

Asep the Sufi was a sincerely religious man, passionately sharing his faith. His zeal was commendable. He appeared to be a decent citizen. He was pleasant to visit with and could no doubt become an interesting acquaintance with shared religious passion. But this raises several questions: How did his religiosity compare with mine? Was there continuity, discontinuity, or both? Even though I knew he was a sinner rebelling against God, was there anything I could learn from his religion? (cf. McDermott 2000). An important decision in answering these questions, I believe, concerns methodology. Here often lies a tension. Should I use tools provided by the social sciences to understand Asep's behaviour and the motivations for that behaviour, and then use Scripture to address any sinful motivation and behaviour? Or should I first seek to understand Asep's religiosity from God's perspective of reality, as found in Scripture, and then use Scripture and the social sciences to confront and correct any deviation from Scripture?

Following the first method helps to show how Asep's religiosity compares with my own and many other sincere religious adherents. Ninian Smart has identified six aspects of religion that can be used to analyze and organize the data from a phenomenological study of one religion in relation to others.²⁰ Using these dimensions as the framework, I could study Asep's religi-

¹⁸ Bavinck declares (1960): "There is deep in the heart of man, even among those who live and believe in non-Christian religions, a very vague awareness that man plays a game with God and that man is always secretly busy escaping from him" (pp. 227-228).

¹⁹ As Beyerhaus (1996:133) has noted, the "hamartiological diagnosis of the religious situation ... forms the negative presupposition for the apostolic concept of mission".

²⁰ Ninian Smart's (1996:3-8) dimensions of religion are: (1) the ritual and practical dimension; (2) the mythological and narrative dimension; (3) the doctrinal and philo-

osity and then compare it with others. In fact, I had already started this process almost unawares in the first question above. More work is required here. Indeed, this personal encounter has already caused me to read more about Sufi Islam and folk religion.

Starting with the social sciences is one method for gaining a deeper understanding of Asep's religiosity.²¹ The results, however, may be different – radically different – if I seek first to understand Asep's religiosity from God's perspective. Yet the tension between these methods is small when the value of both Scripture and the social sciences is recognized.²² Because the fear of the Lord is the beginning of all knowledge and wisdom (Prov 1:7, 9:10; cf. Col 3:2), it is always safest to recognize the priority of the biblical perspective and to allow God's truth to provide the initial foundation and framework. As noted by Harold Netland (2001):

A genuinely Christian theology of religions cannot be reduced to comparative religion or philosophy of religion. Methodologically, while drawing upon these ancillary disciplines, it must take as its point of departure the authoritative revelation of God in Scripture. (p. 313)

There is no space in this essay for a thorough analysis of Asep's religiosity.²³ However, the starting point in understanding – as Hesselgrave (2005:89) will not let us forget – is Paul's conclusion about everyone outside of Christ:

There is none righteous, no, not one; There is none who understands; There is none who seeks after God. They have all turned aside; They have together become unprofitable; There is none who does good, no, not one. (Rom 3:10-12).

sophical dimension; (4) the ethical or legal dimension; (5) the social or institutional dimension; and (6) the experiential or emotional dimension. (Cf. also Smart 2000:8-10.)

²¹ Timothy Tennent (2002) – in some ways echoing the fears of Lloyd-Jones – warns about the danger of relying solely on the social sciences: “The result is that anthropology quietly replaces theology as the focus of the dialogue. In order words, we are no longer speaking about a transcendent God: we are discussing equally valid individual experiences or a particular culture's religious projections that they identify as God or ultimate reality. The whole discussion is man-centered, not God-centered. Anthropology has trumped all theology before the first word of dialogue begins” (p. 15).

²² See Paul's Hiebert's excellent chapter (1996:184-213) on this subject.

²³ Evangelicals are still working to develop a theology of religions that is faithful to Scripture while also being phenomenologically accurate in describing other religions (cf. Conn 1991:207; Netland 2001:313; Rommen & Netland 1995:5).

Yet at the same time, neither should we forget that people “are created in the image of God, with a capacity for being addressed by God and responding to him” (Gen 1:26-27; Acts 17:27),²⁴ and that God in Christ is seeking the reconciliation of sinners (Gen 3:9 ff.; Luke 19:10; John 16:7-11; 2 Cor 5:18-21).

Asep’s version of Sufi Islam, likely influenced by Folk Islam and other accretions, must be understood as the product of many factors. Yet despite the vast diversity of influences from all aspects of his world, at the heart of his religion are several factors common to all people:²⁵ image of God (*imago Dei*, Gen 1:26-27), awareness of God (*sensus divinitas*, John 1:9; Acts 17:27), general revelation (cf. Ps 19:1), suppression of truth (Rom 1:18, 28), seeking false gods (Rom 1:25), internal awareness of broken law (Rom 2:14-15), broken relationship with God (Rom 5:12); inability to do good (total depravity, Rom 3:10-12), internal accusing or excusing conscious (Rom 2:15), and demonic powers (2 Cor 4:4).²⁶ These biblical truths must provide foundation and structure to how I understand Asep the Sufi.

What is the goal of interreligious communication?

Opening the door to a Muslim who wants to dialogue is not a common experience for most of us. This was certainly a new experience for me as well. I had spoken with a number of other Muslims about religion, but never with a Sufi and never with one who was so eager to dialogue. Yet the experience of interreligious communication is quickly losing its uniqueness, no longer limited to places like Indonesia or India where different religions have coexisted for centuries. With globalization and other world trends, interactions with adherents from other religions are increasingly possible, often on a daily basis. Religious pluralism is no longer a novelty; it is now the norm.

Why did I dialogue with Asep? What were my motives? I must admit that there was a measure of excitement in the uniqueness of the encounter, in the back-and-forth of the discussion, in the testing of my limited knowledge of the Indonesian language and my ability to understand him through his broken English. It was an intriguing experience, a delightful challenge. But this is not an acceptable motive for engaging in interreligious dialogue. Two other motives were more acceptable: First, I had an earnest desire to know more

²⁴ Netland (2001) summarizes this paradox: “On the one hand, persons are created in the image of God and thus long for a proper relationship of the creature to the Creator. On the other hand, they are rebels and sinners and thus try desperately to hide from God. While religion can be a way of reaching out to God, it can also be a means of hiding from him” (pp. 334-335).

²⁵ Bavinck (1960) states: “One discovers the same processes, the same phenomena of deterioration over the entire world; humanity appears, in spite of all the profound differences, to be a unity, in a much deeper sense than we generally think” (p. 238).

²⁶ Netland (2001:330–338) groups these factors under three headings: creation and revelation, sin, and the demonic influence (cf. Bavinck 1960:227-233).

about his religion. Having recently read Zweamer and other books,²⁷ I was intrigued by the challenge of Islam. I was also interested in Asep's version of Islam; I must confess that I had never heard at that time about Nur Mohammed or about Mohammed's mystical journey to Jerusalem and into heaven. In three hours of dialogue with Asep, I learned much more about Sufi Islam in living dimension than I could have learned by reading a number of books. Second, I also desired to share the gospel with Asep. As stated in my email account (June 2003) of this experience: "My goal was to present the Christian gospel to him with the hope that the Holy Spirit would use it for his salvation."²⁸

Indeed, when considering the communication of Christians with non-Christians in the New Testament, the dominant theme is an impelling desire to declare the gospel of Jesus Christ. As noted above in the first section of this essay, dialogue (*dialogomai*) is used as a valid form of communication. But even when this form is used, the focus and motivation is evangelistic. This, I believe, is what lies behind Stott's (1975:71) decisive statement about dialogue: "only those who see the need for elenctics can also see the need for dialogue and can understand its proper place." While engaging in interreligious dialogue, there is an intense desire on the part of the Christian that the other person will come to realize how he or she is suppressing God's truth, will be awakened to God's demand for repentance, and will come to know God's promise of reconciliation in Jesus Christ. The goal of dialogue must be elenctic.²⁹

So while I see Asep the Sufi as an object of God's wrath whose false religion is only a rebellion against God, I must also see him as a candidate for God's mercy whose religious longings can only be fulfilled by God. My ultimate motivation when relating with Asep, therefore, is evangelistic. How can I communicate the gospel to him in a way that confronts his religiosity as rebellion against God that requires radical repentance, while at the same time declaring the message of reconciliation in Christ, all in a way that resonates

²⁷ For books on Muslim evangelism in addition to those by Samuel Zwemer, I can recommend Kenneth Cragg's books and others, including Geisler and Saleeb (1993) and Saal (1991).

²⁸ Author states in "Bandung News #3", an *update* personal email to family, sent 28 June 2003: "I know that I'll never be able to prove my faith to him to make him believe. Faith comes by hearing and hearing by the Word of God ... so if he reads the Word of God ... maybe the Holy Spirit will use it for his salvation. It seems like I got no where with him ... but you never know. I did learn a lot about Sufi Islam and also about how to discuss religion with a Muslim."

²⁹ Bavinck (1960) declares: "It is the Holy Spirit himself who creates a basis [standpoint, starting point]. He awakens in man that deeply hidden awareness of guilt. He convinces man of sin, even where previously no consciousness of sin was apparently present. The Holy Spirit uses the word of the preacher and touches the heart of the hearer, making it accessible to the word" (p. 29).

with his internal conscience and misguided religious longings? Bavinck (1960) warns:

As long as I laugh at his foolish superstition, I look down upon him; I have not yet found the key to his soul. ... As soon as I actually stand next to him, I can in the name of Christ stand in opposition to him and convince him of sin, as Christ did with me and still does each day. (p. 242-243)

This raises our fourth question.

What method of communication should I use?

How can I confront Asep with the gospel? What form of communication is mostly likely – humanly speaking – to break through his suppression, distortion, and rebellion? My goal is to co-labour with the Holy Spirit in convicting of sin, in directing to Christ, in opening up the mystery of the gospel. When I consider Asep in scriptural terms, I cannot laugh at his attempts to deal with his religious strife. Nor can I reject his desire to dialogue and waste a wonderful opportunity to point him to Christ. I want him to reject his idolatry and find true mystical experience through union with the Triune God in Christ and with all sincere believers.

How should I have responded to Asep? Should I have encouraged him to listen to a sermon or given him an evangelistic tract about his need to be made right with God? Should I have tried to convince him of his foolishness using some form of rational apologetics? Should I have invited him to study the Bible with me or to witness the fellowship of a loving church community? Or should I dialogue with him about my religion and about how he was responding to God – which is what he wanted? These are all valid approaches for sharing the gospel.

In hindsight, as I stated in my ‘Bandung News #3’ e-mail to my friends in 2003, I should not have “tried some of the traditional arguments against Islam”. Bavinck (1960) writes:

We can never employ philosophical argumentation to build a bridge from a non-Christian religion to the Christian faith, a bridge which would make an inner change unnecessary, and would thus make superfluous the call to repentance. (p. 230)³⁰

Rather than trying to refute his religion with philosophical arguments, I should have spent more time listening to him in order to learn how he was responding to God’s revelation: “the concern is always with the all-important

³⁰ “You do not then need to begin with endless rational argumentation in order to break the webs of his thoughts. In the grace of Jesus Christ you possess a more powerful means.” (Bavinck 1960:229)

question: ‘What have you done with God?’” (Bavinck 1960:223).³¹ Or perhaps, if he would have been open to the idea, I could have started some type of Bible study with him. Whatever I did, however, needed to start with two-way communication. He came to me desiring to dialogue. He was convinced about his own beliefs and was not as likely to spend much time studying mine – unless my personal words somehow resonated with his condition.

How should I dialogue with Asep the Sufi?

From our brief survey of dialogue, the major difficulty is clearly regarding the kind of dialogue. This is a valid concern, if we believe with J.I. Packer that the content of the gospel must always control the method of its communication,³² and with Beyerhaus (1996:140) that “both the purpose and the form of such dialogue are fully determined by the theological evaluation of the nature of non-Christian religion in general”. So how should I engage in dialogical communication with Asep? The underlying issue here is about definition: How should I define dialogue?

Many Evangelicals have referred to the classification of Eric Sharpe who describes four kinds of dialogue.³³ But most – if not all – of these kinds of dialogue must be rejected. Netland makes a useful distinction between formal and informal dialogue and suggests the latter is essential for effective proclamation of the gospel.³⁴ Using this distinction, my discussion with Asep would be considered informal dialogue.

As explained in my email account, Asep and I instinctively found a way to dialogue that does not compromise revealed truth. We shared with each

³¹ This is not to minimize the value of Christian apologetics. But in many non-Christian encounters, like mine with Asep, apologetics was not the best method.

³² “In the last analysis, there is only one *method* of evangelism: namely, the faithful explanation and application of the gospel message. From which it follows... that the test for any proposed strategy, or technique, or style, of evangelistic action must be this: will it in fact serve the word?” (Packer 1980:97, 100; cf. also Lloyd-Jones 1959:38).

³³ These four types are: discursive dialogue – mutual respect and discussion for learning; human dialogue – personal knowledge; secular dialogue – social, political, and economic concerns; and interior dialogue – mutual experience (cf. Netland 1991:285-290; and Hesselgrave 1978:228).

³⁴ Formal dialogue “consists of an organized gathering of representatives from two or more religious traditions in which well-defined procedures are followed in the pursuit of agreed-upon objectives”; Informal dialogue “occurs whenever two or more followers of different religious traditions discuss together, in an informal setting, certain issues pertaining to their respective religious commitments” (Netland 1991:295-296). It is interesting to note that in a later book, Netland (2001:249-283) does not refer to dialogue and uses the term *positive apologetics* when discussing interreligious encounters.

other what we believed to be truth.³⁵ God has already given us His Word of truth; we cannot engage in truth-seeking dialogue with others who reject His revelation. Rather, with uncompromised affirmation of the inherent and infallible Word, we must engage in truth-telling dialogue, communicating God's message of reconciliation (2 Cor 5:19). Truth-telling communication is not limited only to one-way monologue forms.

Is not this the communication form used by God Himself in Genesis 3? Adam and Eve had separated themselves from God by willful rebellion, hiding from Him and inventing ways to disguise their guilt, shame, and fear. But God still came to His garden; He called out to sinners running from Him; He approached the place where they were hiding. Consider how the Triune God condescends even to the point of dialogical communication with sinners: Adam, where are you (Gen 3:9)? What have you done with my revelation? Why are you hiding from Me?³⁶ Even then, God does not pronounce the curse; He first probes their motivations so that they will plainly see their own rebellion. Then, following the dreadful curse on all creation, He declares the first instalment of the glorious gospel of reconciliation in Christ.

This historical account of God's gracious actions in Genesis 3 is a helpful model for truth-telling dialogue. Using this model, many other examples of elenctic dialogue³⁷ can be found in Scripture: the book of Job; numerous accounts in the Old Testament prophetic literature; and accounts of Jesus' interactions with the religious leaders of His day. Other biblical examples are also found where communication was not between holy God and sinful humanity but between two ontically-equal humans – for example, Phillip and the Ethiopian official (Acts 8:26 ff.) or Paul and the Athenians (Acts 17:16 ff.). These examples only echo the first elenctic dialogue in the sin-darkened garden (2 Cor 5:20-21). Can our earnest encounters with sinners be any different? My manner and goal with Asep was the proclamation of the gospel (*euangelidzo*) with the hope that the Holy Spirit would convict (*elengcho*) him of heart-rebellion, while the form of communication was dialogue (*dialegomai*) with the hope that his heart-rebellion would be unmasked and that he would respond to God in repentance and faith.

³⁵ “So we communicated with an Alkitab (Indonesian Bible) and the Qur’an. I would think of a passage appropriate to our discussion (Gen 1, John 1, Col 1, Heb 1, 2 Pet 1, Rev 22, etc.), find it in the Alkitab and have him read it. He tried to find passages in the Qur’an to prove his beliefs ... His beliefs seemed to rely more on another Indonesian book titled ‘4 M.’” (Author wrote in his email message to friends and family in 2003.)

³⁶ Is this not what Bavinck (1960:223) had in mind when he describes the essence of elenctics: “the concern is always with the all-important question: ‘What have you done with God?’”

³⁷ Jongeneel (2002:350-354) uses the term *missionary dialogue* but agrees with Dirk C. Mulder who regards God as being present and at work in other religions. (This definition, however, fails to heed Stott's crucial caution in 1975 that dialogue and elenctics cannot be separated. Interreligious dialogue must be evangelistic, seeking not only faith in Christ but also repentance before God.)

III. Implications: The possibility of interreligious elenctic dialogue

We are now ready to answer the initial thesis question: Can an Evangelical Christian dialogue with a non-Christian religious adherent without compromising his or her principles? An affirmative answer to the question is necessary, but it should also be clear that dialogue must be properly defined. While there are other instances in a pluralistic society where people of all religions interact politically and economically, I would argue that the only biblically valid method of interreligious dialogue is elenctic dialogue.³⁸

Were there more space, a review of the principles of elenctic dialogue and a consideration of Christian's attitude in this would be possible. Allow me only to conclude with several general implications from my personal encounter with Asep the Sufi. First, I believe that it is unwise to engage in any interreligious dialogue unless our lives are first characterized by the humility of Job before his Creator (Job 40:3-5; 42:5-6). This is part of Lloyd-Jones's concern (1971:47) when he writes, "God is not a subject for debate ... God is always to be approached 'with reverence and with godly fear'."

Second, elenctic dialogue does not minimize the need for a careful analysis of false religions. Rather, it highlights the importance of such studies; it requires a

... precise and calm knowledge of the nature of the religion with which it is concerned ... What does it actually think about God? ... What does this religion mean to its followers ... It is especially necessary to go to the sources, to its sacred traditions or books ... elenctics makes thankful use of the data provided by the science of religion and by the history of religion. (Bavinck 1960:241-242)

All this is necessary to enter the sinner's heart and see how he or she is actually playing a game with God.

Third, elenctic dialogue will not discover any new truths not already found in Scripture (Col 2:3). It might, however, help us become more effective communicators of the gospel.³⁹ Our dialogue might also challenge us to examine ourselves and seek a closer relationship with God in Christ (Beyerhaus 1996:145). Indeed, while highlighting areas for personal improvement in Christian faith and practice, it might also remind us afresh of the wonder

³⁸ Hesselgrave (1978) proclaims: "In no way can New Testament dialogue be constructed as lacking in a concern for either truth or persons. In no way can it be constructed as militating against proclamation and conversion. Dialogue was a method; proclamation was its nature; and conversion was its goal" (p. 234).

³⁹ "In a world of religious pluralism evangelical witness, preaching, and teaching should become increasingly dialogical – answering those questions and objections raised by non-Christian respondents rather than simply answering questions of the evangelical's own devising." (Hesselgrave 1978:238).

of the gospel, the treasures of God's Word, and the delight of our mystical union with Christ.

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