The Scandal of Jesus: Christ in a Pluralist World

© Vinoth Ramachandra, Karl Reichelt Lecture, MHS, Norway, May 12 2005

1. The Scandal of the Cross

From the beginning, the Christian message has been distasteful, even offensive. In the Roman empire crucifixion, though widespread, was viewed with universal horror and disgust. It was cruel and degrading, the victim often flogged and tortured before being strung up on a cross on busy, crowded junctions as a deterrent to the masses. It was the most humiliating form of death in the ancient world: the penalty reserved for rebellious slaves and (what today would be called) ‘terrorists’ against the state. No Roman citizen could be crucified. Romans didn’t even discuss the subject, they pretended it never existed. The great senator and orator Cicero declared that ‘the very word “cross” should be far removed not only from the presence of a Roman citizen but from his thoughts, his eyes and his ears.’


Crucifixion was a way of wiping out not only the victim but also the memory of him. A crucified man had never existed. That’s why not a single ancient historian pays attention to crucifixion.

It is in a world such as this that we meet a group of men and women moving around the Roman Empire and announcing that among those forgotten, crucified ‘nobodies’, there had been one who was no less than the Son of God, the Saviour of the world.

I cannot over-emphasise the foolishness of such a message. If you wanted to convert the educated and pious people of the empire to your cause, whatever that cause may have been, the worst thing you could ever do would be to link that cause to a recently crucified man. To put it mildly, that would have been a public relations disaster. And to associate God, the source of all life, with this crucified criminal was to invite mockery and sheer incomprehension! This was indeed the experience of the first Christians.

This message, if it were true, also subverted the world of religion. For it claimed that if you wanted to know what God is like, and to learn God’s purposes for God’s world, you had to go not to the sages, the lofty speculations of the philosophers or to the countless religious temples and sacred groves that dotted the empire, but to a cross outside the walls of Jerusalem. The world of the first Christians was every bit as pluralistic, if not more so, than ours- culturally and religiously. But for the Jews a crucified Messiah/Saviour was a contradiction in terms, for it expressed not God’s power but God’s inability to liberate Israel from Roman rule. For pious Greeks and Romans, the idea that a god or son of a god should die as a state criminal, and that human salvation should depend on that particular historical event, was not only offensive, it was sheer madness.

This message, if it were true, also subverted the world of politics. It claimed that Rome’s own salvation would come from among those forgotten victims of state terror. Caesar himself would have to bow the knee to this crucified Jew. It implied that by crucifying the Lord of the universe, the much-vaunted civilization of Rome stood radically condemned. The Pax Romana was a sham peace. Like all imperial projects, it was built on the suffering of the many. And God had chosen to be found among the victims, not the empire-builders. Little
wonder that the Christians’ ‘Good News’ (‘Gospel’) was labelled a ‘dangerous superstition’ by educated Romans of the time.

Now, it is the madness of this ‘word of the cross’ that compels us to take it seriously. I am a Christian today because there is something so foolish, so absurd, so topsy-turvy about the Christian gospel that it gets under my skin: *it has the ring of truth about it*. No one can say that this was some pious invention, for it ran counter to all notions of piety. And nothing was gained by it. All who proclaimed it suffered as a result.

I suggest that the message of the Cross is as subversive today as it was in the first century world, and in this lecture I want, first of all, to look at the way this Gospel subversion operates in three areas:

(A) The story of the Cross subverts the stories of salvation that we find in the world religions. All these stories (especially the dominant schools of the traditional Asian religions) offer us liberation - understood as freedom from the shackles of our humanness. The way to ultimate transcendence lies in breaking free from our individuality, our physical embodiment, and from our entanglements in this meaningless world of historical existence, the ordinary, everyday world of work and home. Our humanness is what gets in the way of transcendence or of union with the divine.

But the Cross speaks of a God who is entangled with our world, who immerses himself in our tragic history, who embraces our humanity with all its vulnerability, pain and confusion, including our evil and our death. Here is a God who comes to us not as master but as a servant, who stoops to wash the feet of his disciples and to suffer brutalization and dehumanization at the hands of his creatures. In identifying with us in our humanity he draws the human into his own divine life. So what this means is that the closer we get to God, the more human we become, not less. Our created physical bodies have a future. In raising Jesus bodily from death, the Creator was affirming our humanity, that this historical, embodied existence has a future.

So, our salvation lies not in release from this temporal and material world but in the transformation of it to reflect the will and glory of its Creator. The resurrection of Jesus is the Creator’s promise that death and corruption do not have the last word, whether in the lives of individuals or whole civilizations. The Bible ends with the vision not of our going off to heaven but of heaven -the New Jerusalem- coming down to earth, and to which all the nations bring their cultural treasures in worship. Everything good and true and beautiful in history is not lost for ever, but will be restored and directed to the worship of God. All our human activity (in the arts, sciences, in the worlds of economics and politics)-and even the non-human creation- will be brought to share in the liberating rule of God, and this grand vision centres on the cross of Jesus Christ. It is there that a vision of future hope opens up for the world. And you will not find any hope for the world in any of the religious systems or philosophies of mankind. The Biblical vision is unique. And that is why when some say that there is also salvation in other faiths, we need to ask them: *what* salvation are you talking about? No faith holds out a promise of salvation for the world the way the Cross and physical Resurrection of Jesus do.

Does this mean that disciples of Jesus have nothing to learn from others, or that the story that finds its centre in the cross and resurrection of Jesus cancels all other stories of the divine-human encounter? By no means. It is *this* story that enables us to discern signs of God’s new
order, inaugurated in Jesus, in all human struggles against fear, greed, violence, sickness, oppression and injustice. But it is this story, alone among all stories, which gives human beings the firm assurance, rooted in historical event, that their struggles are not ultimately futile. Why? Because death and evil have been overcome. Also, it has often been this story which, more than any other, that has historically motivated and guided such struggles in the East as well as in the West.

(B) The story of the Cross subverts the stories that have dominated the West for the past two hundred years-stories of human self-mastery, self-autonomy, self-realisation and human perfectibility. These have also been exported to the rest of the world in the name of capitalism or Marxism or unlimited faith in education or science and technology to solve all our problems and bring about a universal peace. What gets in the way of such dreams? It is the awkward and bitter fact of human sinfulness. Sin is our enslavement to self, a radical bent to our human nature. At the same time as we search for truth, we also run away from truth. And when we find what we call truth we often use it to assert our power over others. We also worship our human creations, turning them into idols behind which we hide from the living and true God.

Again it is at the foot of the Cross that we are given this different vision of ourselves and of our world. For God not only affirms our humanity but exposes and judges our human sin. This is how Lesslie Newbigin, who served for many years as a missionary Bishop in South India, puts it:

‘The same revelation in Jesus Christ, with its burning centre in the agony and death of Calvary, compels me to acknowledge that this world which God made and loves is in a state of alienation, rejection and rebellion against him. Calvary is the central unveiling of the infinite love of God and at the same time the unmasking of the dark horror of sin. Here not the dregs of humanity, not the scoundrels whom all good people condemn, but the revered leaders in church, state, and culture, combine in one murderous intent to destroy the holy one by whose mercy they exist and were created.’

Within this worldview, therefore, centred in the Cross, there is mounted a powerful critique of the status quo. The Cross reveals the true tragedy of the human condition. For, if the message of the Gospel is true, it calls into question the common assumption that it is in the ‘religions of the world’ that God is known and that it is, therefore, ‘religious’ people (or, at least, ‘civilized’ societies) to whom we must turn in our quest for God.

The message of the Cross is scandalous, for it tells us that it is not the ‘good Christian’ or the ‘sincere Hindu’ or the ‘devout Muslim’ or the ‘men and women of good will’ who are recipients of the vision of God. But, rather, that it is the bad Christian, the bad Hindu, the bad Buddhist-those who know themselves to be moral failures, it is these who may well be closer to the kingdom of God. This can be so simply because salvation is through grace- God’s unconditioned and unmerited gift of God’s self to us- mediated in the cross of Christ, received with open hands. I know of no statement more subversive of the ‘world of religions’ than Paul’s description in Romans 4:5 of the Father of the Lord Jesus Christ as ‘the God who justifies the ungodly’. Similarly, in the well-known parable of the Pharisee and the tax-collector, it is not the Pharisee who gives alms to the poor and prays five times a day and observes the law scrupulously who is justified before God, but the man who stands at the far corner of the temple, beats his breast and cries out to God for mercy.

The story of the Cross subverts the fragmented stories and tribalisms of the postmodern world. ‘Postmodernism’ has come to mean many different things in different contexts, but one thing that is agreed on as part of a popular postmodern ‘sensibility’ is a suspicion of all overarching, universal frameworks of meaning. We no longer believe in History but only in histories, no longer in Story but in stories (because these big histories and big stories about the world have often been oppressive, suppressing different others). However, these little histories and little stories can be as oppressive as the big ones. For we are left with nothing outside of ourselves to judge our actions, let alone the actions of others; we are left to the tyranny of our own communities; we have no shared language or framework of understanding to make communication with others possible. The postmodern self implodes inwards: for I am now told that there is nothing given about me, I am left to my own devices to form my infinitely malleable identity.

For many people, not only the young, consumerism now becomes the way of constructing an identity. We shop for a self. Our clothing, our houses, and our cars tell the story of who we are trying to be. It is not by accident that the fashion world now calls itself an identity industry. Like a screen-saver on our computers, our postmodern selves are constantly changing into new configurations. For some, a self is pursued through violence or sexual promiscuity or experimenting with new religions or occult techniques. For others cyberspace and virtual reality are the means to self-creation and then we seek recognition for this self by joining virtual communities. Even on the Internet, no less in our physical neighbourhoods, we move towards others who are just like ourselves. If the modern autonomous self imposed a false and suffocating universalism on others, the postmodern self is cut off from those who are truly ‘other’. We may recognize them, even tolerate them, make public space for them, but we cannot communicate with them.

The message of the Cross tells us that God takes us as we are - with all our brokenness and fears, our failings and inadequacies. He takes us as part of our families, our cultures and our occupations. We don’t have to make ourselves or change ourselves to be loved by God. But even though God accepts us as we are, he doesn’t leave us where we are. He moves us on a journey, he gives our culture, our work, and our background (everything that makes me uniquely me, and you uniquely you) a new direction. He links us up with people with whom we would never associate, left to ourselves. Some of these people I may have disliked, or considered inferior, or been unable to talk with. The Cross brings us all down to the same level and raises us up as the children of God. The same act that reconciles me to God now reconciles me to my neighbour, even my enemy. So at the other side of the Cross there emerges a new human community, in which barriers are being broken down while diversity is honoured, and in which new identities are being formed as we interact together in the presence of the risen Jesus.

This is what Christian conversion means. It is thus radically different from religious proselytism (though much of what is called ‘Christian conversion’ seems to me indistinguishable from proselytism). In proselytism the old is replaced by the new. In conversion, however, the old is not replaced but given a new direction: towards the in-breaking and future kingdom of God. This re-direction of our lives means that everything is both accepted and transformed, including our religious and cultural past and our occupations. Christian conversion involves a new belonging - this new global family, the Body of Christ, takes precedence over our biological, ethnic and national loyalties. This is the political aspect of conversion: I am no longer defined primarily by these other identities (‘Norwegian’, ‘Sri
Lankan’, ‘American’, ‘Japanese’, etc). My basic loyalty is now to the risen Christ and his Church which is a sign and foretaste of the new humanity. Any group, less than humanity in its scope, that seeks to co-opt me to its agenda and programme is thus relativized. This is why conversion, rightly understood, is always a political act, and will be opposed by those dominant groups in society whose power-base is now threatened.

When illustrating what it means to belong to the kingdom of God, Jesus takes as his paradigmatic examples those who had least status in his contemporary society. In a world where children had no legal rights, economic possessions or no social standing, he makes them the model for those who receive the kingdom of God (Matt.18: 1-4; Mark 10: 13-16). When, on the eve of the crucifixion, he washes the feet of his disciples like a household slave, and requires them to do the same for each other (John 13:3-15), he makes slaves the paradigms for leadership in the kingdom of God. If the kingdom of God belongs to people such as slaves, the poor, and little children, then others can enter the kingdom only by accepting the same lack of status. The cross brings all human beings, men and women, rich and poor, religious and irreligious, to the same level before God. It is at the foot of the cross, that all human beings, without exception, are revealed as the objects of God’s forgiving and re-creating love. This is the egalitarian politics of grace.

Grace and hope, then, are characteristics of the true Church. The Church has been entrusted with a Gospel, with good news. It is good news for the world because it is about the world, that this world has a future which God will bring into being in a new creation which encompasses and renews the present creation. When we privatise and individualise the Gospel (a message only about my needs and my future), we betray the Gospel. When the Church loses sight of its calling to be the bearer of the Gospel for the world, it turns into another religious club, simply looking after the needs and wants of its members. When the Church loses the good news of grace, she turns her message into a religion of duty, a moralistic legalism that identifies middle-class respectability and charitable deeds with being a Christian. When she forgets the message of hope, she ends up sanctioning the status quo, instead of subverting it. Instead of living today in the light of what is to come, she idolises the present, even identifying every oppressive system as not only necessary but God-given. This is the negative aspect of the legacy of Christendom from which so much of the older institutional churches are still struggling to break free, but which some of the newer churches are also in danger of following.

2. Some Further Biblical Reflections

Students of the Pentateuch know that the patriarchs, including Abraham, worshipped El, the high god of Mesopotamia. It is from El (usually with other epithets, such as El-Shaddai) that they received promises and commands directly, without the intervention of prophets; and they responded to El by building altars and offering sacrifices, as well as in obedience and trust. The writer of Genesis is careful to retain the name El in the dialogue sections of the book, especially where God is the speaker. But in the narrative sections, Yahweh is the name that is used. From the later faith-perspective of Israel, it was Yahweh who had addressed the patriarchs as El and entered into relationship with them (cf. Exod 6:3).

Now we cannot conclude from this observation that the Bible endorses the validity of the worship of El and his pantheon, leave alone the ugly mythology that went with it. The text does not assert that all who worshipped El were thereby brought into a personal relationship with the living and true God; nor does it say anything about the sincerity or otherwise of
Abraham’s worship. God’s speaking to Abraham and calling him into personal relationship is an act of grace, a divine initiative. God accommodates his self-disclosure to fit the religious framework of the patriarchs, including the religious rituals, customs and divine titles of their culture. But this is in preparation for an experience of his liberating acts, a deeper and fuller revelation of his character and purposes, one that will in the course of time take them beyond their ancestral religious framework and shatter its central assumptions. Once they have walked with Yahweh in the wilderness, there is no going back (cf. Josh 24:14f).

This is very instructive, and of contemporary relevance. It enables us to affirm that the pre-incarnate Son/Word of God has been addressing men and women of cultures and histories other than in Israel, and working with them under forms and names that Christians may find strange and even repellant (cf. Jn 1:1-3, 9; Heb 1:1). That, surely, is the self-humbling accommodation of God to our finite, as well as sinful, humanity. If God is to speak to humanity at all and be persuasive, he must speak within the particular constraints of specific social and cultural contexts. So we dare not deny a genuine knowledge of God among people untouched by the Gospel simply because their language and concepts are alien to our ears.

But this fact, far from obviating the need to proclaim the Gospel of Christ to all cultures, actually compels it. For if it is Christ who has been speaking to all human beings in their sin, it is in order to lead them out of what Paul calls (to the learned citizens of Athens) ‘the times of human ignorance’ (Acts 17:30) that they may understand and experience the freedom that he wrought for them through the cross. The Church is the bearer of the good news of freedom, and the Holy Spirit enables the Church to discern those ‘pointers’ to Christ in every human situation, so that the word of Christ may be articulated powerfully and relevantly in every age. As two British Old Testament scholars, Chris Wright and John Goldingay, put it:

‘The gospel is good news, not a good idea. It states that in the history of Israel and of Jesus, God has acted in love to restore humanity to God and to its destiny. On this understanding what is “deficient” about other religions is they cannot and do not focus on this story. ...We need redemption, not merely revelation... However much theological and spiritual insight other religions may have, then, by definition they cannot encompass the gospel, because they do not tell the gospel story. So, while one can honour them as starting points for people, one cannot in love view them as finishing points. There is no salvation in them, not because they are somehow inferior as religions to the religion of Christianity, but because they are not witnesses to the deeds of the God who saves.’ 3


3. Engaging with People of Other Faiths

How should we relate to people of other faiths and their faith-traditions? Our starting point must surely be to view them as what they are, men and women made in the image of God, and not primarily as followers of a particular religious path. Because the other is made in the image of God, he or she commands our respect. And respecting people involves taking their beliefs, fears and aspirations with utmost seriousness, even being prepared to be disturbed and challenged by them ourselves.

What a person really believes and treasures in life can only be discovered through personal engagement. Often many in Asia who are labelled Buddhists have more in common with primal religions than with the rationalism of Theravadin scholars or the mysticism of the
Mahayanists. Much urban Buddhism is centred on popular Hindu gurus and personal astrologers. Willingness to explore the sacred texts of the religious traditions of others is, of course, a necessary aspect of showing respect; but these can never be a substitute for the more costly demands of friendship. As an old Chinese proverb reminds us, ‘He who comes with the odour of enmity will invite the clash of weapons, he who comes with the fragrance of friendship will be loved like a brother’.

This means that we must be prepared to listen with attention to people, to listen as well as speak, indeed to listen well before we speak. This is the way of friendship and the cultivation of mutual trust and receptivity. It is only in relationships of mutual trust that we can understand each other and speak truthfully in love.

‘The idea of a dialogue... presupposes that we have two real persons seriously attempting serious communication on serious matters. If one does all the talking, it is a monologue. If one attempts only to admonish and instruct the other, it is a sermon. If both talk only to score points or to expose the other’s weaknesses, it is a debate. If neither takes the subject seriously, it is badinage. If neither takes the other person seriously, it is banter. If each takes seriously both the subject and the other person, it is dialogue.’

There are pragmatic, political reasons for inter-faith dialogue. Hans Küng expresses this somewhat dramatically: ‘No world peace without peace among the religions, no peace among the religions without dialogue between the religions, and no dialogue between the religions without accurate knowledge of one another.’ Conflict between religious communities is often provoked by insidious stereotyping and caricaturizing of the other’s practices, beliefs and goals. In this context, Anantanand Rambachan, a Hindu scholar from Trinidad who teaches at a Christian college in the United States, makes the interesting observation that ‘Communities where differences are real, but where they are minimized or downplayed, are more likely to suffer violence and traumatic upheavals when, in times of tension and conflict, such differences become prominent.’ He continues:

‘Communities, on the other hand, which engage each other in a deep search for mutual understanding and which honestly acknowledge differences and cultivate respect are less likely to explode in times of conflict. Such communities are less likely to cite difference as a basis for hostility towards the other. I often wonder about this matter when we witness neighbours, in many recent conflicts, suddenly turning upon each other with ferocity and violence, shattering the veneer of civility and harmony.’

Christians in the course of their daily lives interact and collaborate with non-Christians on social projects of various kinds, from a housing association committee to a government policy think-tank. This is the normal context in which opportunities for serious dialogue emerge. The idea of dialogue often conjures up images of religious dignitaries seated around

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a table in a set-piece consultation on some esoteric theological topic. While there is a place for such dialogue, especially where these dignitaries represent their respective religious communities, it would be unfortunate if this is taken to be the normal mode of dialogue. I myself have little faith in such set-piece formal events, and am more enthusiastic about informal gatherings of Christians with non-Christians to discuss issues that affect their common life in society. It is often in the course of such discussions that questions can be raised that take the discussion onto a more searching, personal level, where peoples’ worldviews are disclosed and the basic assumptions on which they conduct their lives open to scrutiny and loving critique.

‘Dialogue is a mood, a spirit, an attitude of love and respect towards the neighbours of other faiths. It regards partners as persons, not as statistics. Understood and practised as an intentional life-style, it goes far beyond a sterile co-existence or uncritical friendliness... It is not a gathering of porcupines; neither is it a get-together of jellyfishes.’

Dialogue has been viewed with suspicion by some evangelical leaders because of the way it has been used in some ‘ecumenical’ circles. In several publications emanating from the World Council of Churches, for instance, it is roundly asserted that unless we are willing to recognize the salvific validity of all religious traditions, our encounter with others is not authentic. As a representative example of this notion, let me quote from a statement on Christian-Hindu dialogue in a World Council of Churches’ publication, Current Dialogue:

‘Religions as they are manifested in history are complementary perceptions of the ineffable divine mystery, the God-beyond-God... We religious believers are co-pilgrims, who share intimate spiritual experiences and reflections with one another with concern and compassion, with genuine openness to truth and the freedom of spiritual seekers... Dialogue aimed at “converting” the other to one’s own religious faith and tradition is dishonest and unethical; it is not the way of harmony.’

This is essentially the neo-Vedanta (Hindu) worldview. Religion is one, grounded in ‘intimate spiritual experiences’. Thus the boundary-markers are already pre-defined. All those religious faiths which centre not on some impersonal Absolute, but on a personal God who speaks and reveals himself in historical events, are automatically ruled out of court. For that would challenge the assumption that we all start our quest for the divine Mystery from where we are, that every individual has equal access to Truth. Since the Christian Scriptures question the naive belief that we are all seekers after Truth, the Christian Scriptures -and those who take them seriously- become an embarrassment in this kind of dialogue. It seems, then, that all who participate in dialogue must give up the convictions of their own faiths and embrace this particular worldview as the condition for dialogue.

This is a very bizarre way to enter into a conversation. If we cannot be challenged where our most basic assumptions are concerned, then what we have is not dialogue but a monologue. That is why this kind of ecumenical dialogue becomes an exercise in mutual ‘back-scratching’ rather then genuine understanding. Far from being dishonest and unethical, the

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possibility of conversion is what makes dialogue real and exciting. As the Jesuit Michael Barnes puts it:

‘Like any human activity, conversation will include argument and misunderstanding but, if conducted with respect for the dignity and freedom of the individual, it will allow people to change themselves under the guidance of God’s Spirit rather than simply being manipulated by the louder voice or the more sophisticated argument.’

For the Christian, dialogue with another is an aspect of witness to the truth of Christ. For witness is the primary calling of the Church. Where there is a genuine longing for the other to come to ‘the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ’ (2 Cor 4:6), there will always be a posture of listening. For it is the desire to communicate that motivates us also to listen. ‘It is our life task to make bridges into their minds,’ writes Kenneth Cragg of our Muslim neighbours,’ This means being near enough to be heard.

Temple Gairdner (1873-1928) was an Anglican missionary who worked in Cairo for thirty-one years. He was a gifted linguist and understood Islam well enough to be able to debate publicly in Arabic with sheiks from the al-Azhar university. When he died, his colleague in Cairo, Yusef Effendi Tadras, commented; ‘Other teachers taught us how to refute Islam; he taught us how to love Muslims.’

But criticising people’s beliefs (though with sympathetic understanding and gentleness, not harshly) is also to take them seriously. To refuse to criticize the other, or to treat the other as just another version of myself, is to insult the other. (It is, ironically, a rejection of real pluralism!). For then we have also insulated ourselves from the possibility of being converted- either to their beliefs or to a deeper understanding of our own. To elevate the similarities and to belittle the fundamental differences between our beliefs and others is not to take them seriously at all. It is also to betray our own heritage.

Writing out of his long and profound engagement with Muslim peoples and Islamic cultures, Kenneth Cragg challenges Christians with a call to retrieval of the gospel by way of authentic dialogue:

‘If Christ is what Christ is, he must be uttered. If Islam is what Islam is, that ‘must’ is irresistible. Wherever there is misconception, witness must penetrate; wherever there is the obscuring of the beauty of the Cross, it must be unveiled; wherever persons have missed God in Christ, he must be brought to them again...In such a situation as Islam presents, the Church has no option but to present Christ.’

We engage in dialogue also to discover ourselves. We do not know what we really believe, let alone how far our lives conform with what we profess to believe, until we engage in dialogue with others, especially those who are profoundly different from us. Michael Barnes notes that:

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12 Constance Padwick, Temple Gairdner of Cairo (London: SPCK, 1929), p.302

13 Cragg, op.cit.pp.304-5
‘To be Christian or Hindu, Jew or Sikh, Muslim or Buddhist, is to learn to speak the language of an ancient tradition—a process of growth rather than a state of being. Dialogue is based on the principle that the other has a crucial role to play in the learning of that language for it is only when I have someone prepared to listen to me that I learn how to speak. And only when I learn how to speak do I know what it is that I have to say. The conversation helps both partners to articulate their experience, to become not “other” but truly self.'

Listening will lead, at times, to new appreciation; at other times, profound disagreement and vigorous debate. Sometime the differences we discover through dialogue may be less important than we thought, at other times the similarities we assumed to exist turn out on closer inspection to be very superficial.

All witness, and thus all true dialogue, is a risky undertaking. It leaves both parties to the conversation changed. That is perhaps why many of us hesitate to befriend and engage with those who are different, and much prefer the monologue of preaching at them for a distance. We are too busy with church programmes and so-called evangelistic meetings than with the business of building relationships across barriers of misunderstanding and mutual ignorance. But this is a betrayal of our calling in Christ, it is to say that we have nothing more to learn of him. Some words of the late Stephen Neill, the church historian and Anglican missionary to India, are worth pondering:

‘In so far as the Christian is convinced that Jesus Christ is the truth, that all secondary and partial truth is in some way related to him and that nothing which does not belong to the truth can survive in his presence, he is not called upon (as a condition for entering upon dialogue) to surrender any of these concerns. I am indeed concerned that Christ as the truth should appear, and should be seen to be the truth. But what my partner sees must be his Christ and not mine, his discovery and not my imposition upon him of my own limited and partial vision. Even as committed Christians, as we go forward in the Christian life, we are from time to time humiliated to discover how little we have really known of our Master. So if, when Christ appears, my partner sees in him things that I have never apprehended, and beholds a Christ in many ways different from the Christ to whom I have given my allegiance, this should be a cause for rejoicing rather than for dismay. It has always been our hope that, when the Hindu and the Buddhist turn to Christ, they will convey to us indispensable help in tracing out what Paul so sensibly calls the “unsearchable riches of Christ” (Eph.3:8). If his Christ differs in some ways from mine, that should be taken as evidence not of some subtle heresy, but of the authenticity of his vision.’

Thus Christians do not face the world with the claim ‘We have the truth’, but rather, ‘He is the truth.’ Such knowledge as we have is fragmentary, partial and open to the charge of being mere opinion. The truth about God, Jesus and ourselves awaits its public and outward demonstration. Until that day when all hostile powers are subject to Christ and we share in the resurrection of the dead (1 Cor 15:24-28), we see ‘in a mirror, dimly’ (1 Cor 13:12). I am simul justus et peccator (saint and sinner). I have been grasped by the truth as it is in Christ Jesus, yet am ever growing into the fullness of that truth. In this pilgrimage, even as I share the story of Jesus with others I find myself drawn deeper into the story and given fresh insights into it. It is humility that enables me to see the ways in which I may be prone to use my ‘Christianity’ to conceal inconvenient truths about God and myself or to bolster my own ego in self-justification. Evangelism, if authentic, changes the bearers as well as the recipients of the gospel.

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14 Barnes, op.cit.


In confessing that the risen Christ is universally active through the Holy Spirit, the Church claims that no part of God’s world is closed to his sustaining, renewing and transforming influence. Thus, the Church that is not attentive to both the religious and secular environments in which she is called to be the bearer of the gospel will be guilty of being inattentive to the promptings of the Spirit. We close ourselves to the leading of the Spirit into a deeper truth, beauty and holiness. Such lack of attention, an unwillingness to be surprised by God, is idolatry.

Questions such as the final destiny of people who, through no fault of their own, have never had a chance to hear the good news of Jesus Christ, can safely be left in the hands of a God whom the gospel reveals to be both just and gracious in his dealings with humankind. We are called to be witnesses, and not judges. To argue that all who do not make an explicit confession of faith in Jesus as Lord are eternally lost is not only to go beyond the biblical evidence, it is to deny salvation to the Old Testament People of God, the mentally handicapped and little children. Similarly, to argue that all men and women are saved, irrespective of Christ, is to contradict the entire biblical testimony. All we can say, humbly yet boldly, is that if anyone is saved it will not be through any religion or human attainment, but solely through the objective, atoning death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, whether consciously appropriated or not.

God may graciously give saving faith to men and women while they live in the context of a non-Christian religion, and even be at work in the transformations of religious traditions to reflect his purposes for the world. But this is not the same as claiming that the religions are vehicles of divine salvation and have been raised up with that intent. If men and women find God, it may be despite their religious practices and not through them.

So, we shall welcome and rejoice in every sign of God’s grace at work in the lives of all people of whatever background. Also, there are struggles for justice, peace and human dignity in which we can (and must) cooperate with those of other worldviews in order to achieve specific goals which conform to our vision of God’s kingdom. Obviously we shall differ on our respective visions of the ultimate meaning and goal of history, as well as in our motivations for the struggle. There will be points in our common journey with others where we shall discover that a parting of the ways is necessary. But such points of divergence are real opportunities for genuine dialogue and faithful witness.

‘The biblical story is not only critical of other stories but also hospitable to other stories. On its way to the kingdom of God it does not abolish all other stories, but brings them all into relationship to itself and its way to the kingdom. It becomes the story of all stories, taking with it into the kingdom all that can be positively related to the God of Israel and Jesus. The presence of so many little stories within the biblical metanarrative, so many fragments and glimpses of other stories, within Scripture itself, is surely a sign and an earnest of that. The universal that is the kingdom of God is no dreary uniformity or oppressive denial of difference, but the milieu in which every particular reaches its true destiny in relation to the God who is the God of all because he is the God of Jesus.’ 16
