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DIALOGUE AND EVANGELISM

Sometimes I find it difficult to understand why there is so much theological fuss in the church about dialogue with people of other living faiths. The matter is so obviously simple and straightforward. Plain commonsense requires that we live with other people in harmony and work for the common good. The same requires that we seek to understand the tenets and the spirituality of our neighbours and to learn each other's insights about life and the life hereafter. In the practical business of daily living, friendship is built, faiths shared and one begins walking closer with God.

Of course, it does not always happen. Certainly, it does not happen nearly often enough. Neighbours do not talk to one another. But this problem should not be given the dignity of theology. It is simply a matter of narrow-mindedness, bad manners, cultural chauvinism, class bias, racial bigotry, or just plain selfishness or laziness. Certainly, beneath it all is something that does have to do with theology - our alienation from God and from one another. As it is, the solution calls for a healthy dose of Christian repentance, not exhortations to dialogue with people of other faiths.

Such a dialogue of life, or dialogue in community, calls for honesty and openness towards each other. So if a Christian believes that Christians should want to see others become Christians too, then the Christian has no choice but to share the Gospel with his or her Buddhist, Muslim or Hindu neighbours. The requirement of dialogue compels the Christians to evangelize. Of course if another Christian body does not believe that Christians should want to see others become Christian, then the requirement of dialogue would compel the Christian not to evangelize.

So the debate whether Christians should or should not evangelize people of other living faiths has nothing to do with matters such as Christian respect for other religions or with our affirmation of the integrity of people of other faiths. If a Christian is committed to dialogue, he or she is committed to sharing what he or she believes in or does not believe in. The concern then is one not so much of theology as of maturity. If you are a mature person, you would know what to say to your neighbours, and when and how. You would also know when to shut up. You would know what to do and say in order to communicate, and to safeguard each other's pride.

The question whether Christians should or should not want others to become Christians is, of course, a very important question. But it is not important for dialogue. For if you are in dialogue, you have to be honest with your dialogue partner, and that means you have to communicate to them what you truly believe in, whatever it is. Or there is little dialogue. So if in dialoguing with my Buddhist, Hindu and Muslim neighbours, I wish to tell them the story of Jesus, I do so not because my neighbours want to follow Jesus. They may or they may not, today or a few years away or never. I do so because I believe in the story and in its importance. And if in your equal commitment to dialogue, you do not think you should tell your

neighbours the story of Jesus, it is so because you do not believe in it or in its importance. So to evangelize or not to evangelize is an important question for Christian doctrine and for Christian unity.

To sum up, if you believe that Jesus Christ is unique, and that except through him, there is no way for people to know God, and if you are truly committed to dialogue, then you have no option but to communicate your belief to your Hindu, Muslim or Buddhist neighbours. At this point, prayer, commonsense, in short, maturity takes over. Mediated through a mature person or a mature congregation, a theology which calls for activist evangelism may contentedly lead to a quiet, relaxed witness, and a theology emphatic on sacramental presence may well result in the proclamation 'Take up your cross and follow Jesus!'. Our neighbours' state of mind, the degree of their readiness and the maturity of mature ties are the determining factor.

Christians can make no claims on universal conversion to Jesus Christ. We can pray. We can hope. But we cannot lay claim to it by right or by theology as if it is a piece of weapon at our command. It is the exclusive domain of the Holy Spirit. What we can make our claim on is universal proclamation. That is a vocation that has already been passed on to us, one and all.

Some theologians have difficulties with Christians making certain biblical 'exclusive' assertions in a religiously pluralistic society. To make the claim that Jesus is the only Saviour in the face of a Muslim or a Hindu is tantamount to a declaration of war. I can imagine situations where this could happen, and has happened. Much depends on the circumstances of the word. The medium is the message. In the dialogue of life, in community, however, this need not and should not happen. For every Christian assertion is a confession of faith. When I say, 'Jesus is Lord', I am saying, 'I believe Jesus is Lord'. When I declare, 'There is no other name', I am declaring the conviction of a believer. I do not need to bring theology or philosophy into this. This is simply the way things are, how language works. I cannot say anything about God without the preface of 'I believe'. In so doing, I am doing no more than what my neighbours have told me about their religious convictions and their faith. This is sharing in depth, at its most proper.

So when I say, 'Jesus is the only Saviour', I am saying, 'I believe Jesus is the only Saviour'. Yet on the other hand, I am not saying something similar to what a little girl says when she claims that her father is the best daddy in the world. Mine is not a personal opinion of a particular moment. 'Jesus is the only Saviour' is my confession of faith. It is also the confession of the church all over the world, throughout the centuries. And what is more, it is a confession based on the Scriptures. This may not say much to my neighbours of other faiths, but surely and hopefully it should to my fellow Christians. The Christian confession of faith does not render slight the confessions of other faiths. Neither is itself rendered speechless in the pantheon of other spirits and deities.

How then do Christians understand God's presence and work

among people of other faiths? The answers will bear strongly on how we communicate our faith, even on our self-understanding. But the answers, whatever they are, will not fundamentally affect our commitment to share the Good News of Jesus Christ with our neighbours. A strong affirmation of the experience of people of another faith, indeed even a strong recognition of the theological significance of that same faith, does not contradict the Christian imperative to evangelize.

To take an obvious example, let's refer to Jesus' encounter with Nicodemus, recorded in John 3.1-21. Surely, there can be little doubt, in the Jewish faith God is present. Surely, God has worked creatively and redemptively in the history of the Jewish people. Yet even then, to Nicodemus, a Pharisee, Jesus declared 'unless a person is born again, he cannot see the Kingdom of God'. To this 'teacher of Israel', Jesus in the same breath issued an invitation to 'believe in God's one and only Son'. If, from the Christian perspective, the need for conversion, for faith in God's only Son, applies to persons of the Jewish faith, in which Christians see God as already present and at work, surely the same, if not much more, applies to persons of other living faiths. This conviction does not give Christians the right to make judgments on the destiny of others. It makes urgent our obligation to share our faith. Theological exploration of other living faiths is important and important in its own right. It is, however, irrelevant to the Christian imperative to evangelize.

I for one find it difficult to hold that God is absent in other religions. The fullness of our Triune God - Creator, Redeemer, Comforter - makes such a view difficult. The same fullness also compels us to want to proclaim his name. It does not follow, however, that since God is present and at work in living faiths, God is necessarily present and at work in the life and practice of a particular religion as we know it today. Or, for that matter, of a particular church, even a Christian church. This is something we cannot come at only by theologizing. Neither, in my opinion, should we try. To seek to find where God is at work in others leads to humility and wisdom. To seek to find out where God is not at work is arrogant and spiritually perilous.

The fundamental Christian perspective on other living faiths, indeed all constructs on earth, is that humanity happens to live on a rebel planet. For reason of our address, and more often than not by choice as well, humanity and all of its constructs take part in this rebellion. The fundamental problem of a rebel is not moral behaviour (there are moral rebels and immoral rebels), not intellectual integrity (there are rebels of integrity and of no integrity), not philosophical enlightenment (there are progressive rebels and reactionary rebels), and not religious commitment (there are religious rebels and secular rebels). The fundamental problem of a rebel is that he or she, and all their constructs, is in a state of rebellion. And it is to this one problem that evangelism attempts to speak to people of other faiths. To illustrate, the prayer that Jesus taught us to pray, by all intent and purpose, can be taken as an Islamic prayer. We find corresponding expressions in Islamic holy writ. Except for the first phrase, 'Our Father'.

As it is, evangelism among neighbours of other living faiths has nothing to do with the question of superiority of any kind. It has everything to do with inviting rebels to lay down their arms, to change their course. To change allegiance.

To change allegiance is costly under any circumstances, particularly to our neighbours of other faiths. Christians have no right to be frivolous. We should never forget that for a person of another living faith to become a Christian is to put at risk an essential part of that person which makes up his or her very identity as a human person. So the Christian response to the call to evangelize among our neighbours of other faiths must be one of dialogue of life, in which close personal, family and community ties are forged.

Given the cost involved, and the risk and challenge to their very identity, our neighbours of other living faiths can lay justifiable claim to a specific clear and personal invitation from Jesus Christ, or from whoever purports to speak in his name. No general Christian witness will suffice. Nor a general-issued invitation. The invitation has to be specific. It is not enough that Christians show what the Kingdom of God is like. It is not enough that Christians strive to 'witness to our faith'. Evangelism among neighbours of other living faiths requires eventually that Christians invite, by name, people to come in, to come to the table, to partake of the bread and the wine, to be partners in the King's business.

Finally, the concern boils down to whether and how we have the kind of Christian community which will do justice to our neighbours and to their faith, and to the vision of dialogue of life through which the Gospel is articulated and shared. The doctrine of the church will be the key element in the concern for world evangelization, which has to take into account evangelization among people of other living faiths. Among the millions of Buddhists, Muslims and Hindus in their natural territorial and cultural habitats, as different from migrants to the west, I seriously doubt if the present denominational understanding, structure and forms of the Christian Church will be found adequate. I cannot imagine how a Baptist congregation, or any Protestant structure, as we know it today even at its best, can fit into the environ of, say, the Muslim Middle East, or Taoist rural China as a credible, inviting and sustainable witness. A totally new understanding and structure of the Christian community is called for. I do not refer to items commonly associated with congregational renewal such as improving Sunday services, prayer meetings, mission outreach, etc. I refer to fundamentals such as matters of full-time paid clergy, of church membership, of Christians gathering on Sundays or once a week, of missionary and pastoral activism. If we are to share the Gospel meaningfully with the masses of people of other living faiths in all parts of the world, a new understanding and a new structure of the Christian community is necessary. Perhaps, to a lesser extent and in a less obviously radical way, the same is required of the churches in the west in an increasingly religiously pluralistic society.

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