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The B.M.U. Report: ‘Towards a Theology for Inter-Faith Dialogue’

A Personal Response

COLIN CHAPMAN

Two significant critiques of the B.M.U. Report by evangelical writers have already been published: by Chris. Wright of Union Biblical Seminary, Pune in India (in *Anvil*, Vol. 1, No. 3, 1984), and by Chris. Sugden, Registrar of the Oxford Centre for Mission Studies (‘Christ’s Exclusive Claims and Inter-Faith Dialogue’, *Grove Pastoral Series*, no.22, 1985). Since I find myself in sympathy with the substance of their criticisms, this response takes a somewhat different direction. And for reasons which may sooner or later become apparent, I fear I must begin by saying something about my own background, if only to make the point that I believe in dialogue and attempt to practise it.

When I first went to Egypt with C.M.S. in 1968, I had high hopes of learning more about Islam and mixing freely with Muslims, but very soon found that my work at the Anglican Cathedral and at the Evangelical Seminary made me almost a prisoner in a Christian ghetto. The only two Muslims with whom I had anything resembling ‘dialogue’ during five years were people I had first got to know in Edinburgh as a part-time Chaplain to overseas students.

During a second spell, based in Beirut and working with university students in different countries of the Middle East, I spent many hours talking with a few Muslim enquirers and converts. This experience made me aware of how hard most Christians in the Muslim world find it to share their faith with Muslims, and I therefore devoted a considerable amount of time to preparing study material to help Christians to relate to their Muslim neighbours with greater openness.

I now find myself in an Anglican Theological College, teaching the Study of Mission and the Study of Religion, and having to wrestle with the ignorance, fear and prejudice which colour our attitudes as British Christians to people of other faiths.

I. The aim of the report

With this background I can honestly say that I am completely in sympathy with the ultimate aim of the Report, which seems to be to encourage Christians to have a more positive attitude to people of other faiths, and to take initiatives in relating to them in the situation in which we find ourselves in Britain today. I have no problems at all with the idea that true dialogue will have the marks described in the Report: sincere respect for the beliefs and traditions of others; openness which expects that 'God will speak to us through the sensitivities and experiences of devout men and women of other faiths'; and vulnerability which makes us open to pain and expects that our own faith will be 'challenged, refined and at times judged' (para. 84, p.35).

Dialogue begins when people meet each other.

Dialogue depends upon mutual understanding and mutual trust.

Dialogue makes it possible to share in service to the community.

Dialogue becomes the medium of authentic witness.

As one of my students remarked in an essay, it is a sad reflection on the state of the Church that it has been felt necessary to spell out something as obvious and basic as this!

My only slight reservation concerns the use of the word 'the' in the fourth guideline. If dialogue is to be seen as '*the* medium' and not '*a* medium of authentic witness', 'dialogue' becomes a kind of litmus paper test by which we judge everything in our relations with people of other faiths. This would mean that if there is no dialogue in any particular activity, it cannot be regarded as authentic witness. Would this not rule out the distribution of Scriptures in Muslim communities or Christian broadcasting from Monte Carlo or F.E.B.A. Seychelles?

My own problems with the Report, however, do not spring from any reluctance to practise dialogue or to commend it to others. They spring rather from an uneasiness about the way in which a theology is developed to provide a foundation and framework for the whole enterprise.

II. The Methodology of the Report

1. Classifying Christian Attitudes to Other Faiths

The Report's classification of the 'broad spectrum of views' conjures up in my mind the image of a straight line. At the far left (and out of the main picture) is the extreme view 'that would not allow for any

dialogue' (para. 15, p.7). Then come the three main views—Exclusivism, Inclusivism and Pluralism. At the far right (and again out of the picture) is the view 'which sees no need for mission and evangelism' (para. 15, p.7). It is assumed, therefore, that every Christian's attitude can be plotted as a position somewhere along the line, provided we recognize that 'few of us think only within one category but move between them', (para. 15, p.7) and 'many of us tend to move from one emphasis to another within ourselves.' (para.22, p.10).

There is something very attractive about having all the possible views summed up in three words all ending in '-ism'. But my immediate reaction is to feel suspicious about a classification which is so neat and tidy. I could no doubt overcome my suspicions in time if I could be convinced that this classification provides an accurate and helpful way of describing the different attitudes which Christians adopt, and if I knew exactly where to place myself along the spectrum. I suspect, however, that even the writers of the Report may have difficulty in plotting their position (as individuals and as a group) along the line.

At the beginning of the Report we are asked to 'acknowledge at this juncture in the Church's history that there is no agreed consensus about how to proceed in relation to other religions' (para.22, p.10). By the end, however, the writers are able to say: 'For our part we have found a consensus. It can be described as being inclusivist with an exclusivist loyalty to Jesus Christ' (para.84, p.35). The wording suggests that they identify with some aspects of the Exclusivist position, and with some of the Inclusivist. But if this is a genuine consensus, where does it place them along their own spectrum?

When we find such diversity among Christian attitudes to other faiths, the chances are that the differences spring from radically different assumptions about *revelation* and *salvation*. I find it hard to believe, therefore, that all the possible views can be reduced to three (or five), and that they can be plotted as positions along a sliding scale. Would it not be more helpful to find a different classification which is less tidy, but recognizes the complexity of the problem and pinpoints the really crucial areas over which Christians differ in their thinking about other religions?

2. Putting Mission in the Context of Dialogue

Although the Report is about dialogue and not mission, it does make an attempt at the very end to relate dialogue to mission:

Inevitably people will ask what dialogue bearing these marks of openness and vulnerability has to do with the mission of the Church. Christians may never surrender a commitment to mission . . . Dialogue that bears authentic witness to Jesus Christ is a valid part of

the Church's multi-faceted task of mission. Mission and dialogue do belong together . . . And so we carry our mission into dialogue . . . Mission in the context of dialogue . . . creates the context in which the Holy Spirit can work (paras. 79–80, pp.33–34).

These two paragraphs, however, are very sketchy, and one wonders if they begin to do justice to a vast subject. The names of St. Francis, Charles de Foucauld, Temple Gairdner and Kenneth Cragg are given as examples of 'the dialogical way of mission'. But would any of them lend their weight to one of the concepts of mission in dialogue given here, that 'it will be sufficient that each partner in dialogue has fully and fairly borne witness to their faith so that each understands more about the commitment of the other' (para. 80, p.34)?

When the Report speaks of 'mission in the context of dialogue' (para. 80, p.34), it is clear what is meant, and no one would want to object. But I venture to suggest that this tell-tale phrase sums up a basic weakness in the methodology of the Report. To put the mission into the context of dialogue is to put the cart before the horse. Since the Report is all about the theology of dialogue and only at the very end touches on the theology of mission, the result of the whole process is that 'dialogue' in effect swallows up 'mission'. Any theology of mission which the writers wish to develop will have to be determined by their theology of dialogue. The tail is wagging the dog.

3. Using the Bible and Tradition

The writers of the Report recognize that 'there is much uncertainty and difference of opinion' about how to relate to people of other faiths (para.22, p.10). They seem confident, however, that the concept of dialogue enables us to break through this uncertainty: 'And so we turn to the biblical witness for guidance and to the insights of the Christian tradition to discover there pointers to determine what content we may give to the relatively new concept of 'dialogue' and to the four guidelines for dialogue . . .' (para. 23, p.10).

How then does the Report use the Bible and the Tradition of the Church? Without wishing in any way to be cynical, one gets the impression that in spite of what the Report actually says, the whole argument develops in the following three stages: First, we decide that 'dialogue' is the key not only in deciding how to relate to people of other faiths, but also in constructing a 'theology of religions'. (Perhaps this was already implied in the original W.C.C. and B.C.C. documents.) Secondly, we describe the marks of such dialogue: respect, openness and vulnerability, etc. Thirdly, we turn to the Bible and to the theology and experience of the Church in the hope that 'this interplay of Scripture, Tradition and experience' (para. 61, p.27)

will provide a basis for the concept of dialogue with which we began.

If this was the implicit methodology of the Report, it may explain why it lays so much emphasis on Israel's openness to its neighbours. 'It is when Israel is most open to others that she is most creative' (para.30, p.14). If this means simply that the challenge of Canaanite religion, for example, provided the context and the stimulus for the development of Israel's faith, no one would want to object. But this sentence and the whole drift of the argument about 'openness to others, not isolation' as 'the way to new insights into the nature and being of God' (para.31, p.14) seem to be claiming something more, namely, that God's revelation of himself actually came to the prophets—to some extent at least—in and through the religion of Israel's neighbours. The boldness (or is it the audacity?) of such a claim about the whole process of revelation reminds me of a dogmatic assertion made by Wilfred Cantwell Smith: 'It is a surprisingly modern aberration for anyone to think that Christianity is true . . . No classical Christian theologian, I have discovered, ever said that Christianity is true.' (*Questions of Religious Truth*, p.74)

Again, if this is how we are supposed to do our theology, it may explain the attraction of teaching about the Holy Spirit in the Orthodox Churches. '. . . there is no denying that this vision of tension and complementarity between the historically visible, "named", determinate presence and memory of God the Son and the more unpredictable, culturally and historically indeterminate witness of the Spirit provides a possibly fruitful vehicle for a "theology of religions"' (para. 45, pp.20–21). Is it too harsh a comment on this procedure to say that if you know what you are looking for, it will not be too hard to find some trace of it somewhere in the history of Christian thought?

I fully realize that the writers of the Report were simply doing what they were asked to do, which was to 'prepare a report on "the theological aspects of dialogue"' (para. 1, p.1), and to stimulate 'reflection on the underlying theological issues' in our relations with communities of other faiths in Britain today (para. 1, p.1). But if the whole exercise leads them to use the Bible and theology in this way, what they have done in effect is to latch on to one particular word describing an *activity* (which basically means 'a conversation between two or more people'); then to elevate it to the level of a *concept*; and finally to develop it into a full-blown *theology*.

We do indeed live today in 'a changed context'—and the Report has an excellent summary of its sociological, political and cultural dimensions. But if there is any validity in these reflections on the methodology of the Report, one of the most significant things that has changed is *the way we do our theology*.

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