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often kindling more heat than light. It incites the militant Hindus to violence. Affirming that 'there is an amazingly persistent response of Hindus to Jesus Christ in spite of the avowed self-sufficiency of modern Hinduism', Samartha argues that it is possible in future that an attitude of commitment to Christ without conversion might become more significant in India's religiously pluralistic context.⁴⁵ He calls 'those inside the hedges of the traditional church' to affirm the presence of Christ in Hindu response to Christ, even when that response is not in a familiar pattern.⁴⁶ Such an ecumenical approach sounds noble, but will not bring out the sympathies of the evangelical community which certainly would expect a genuine response to Christ to mean a total obedience to the Christ who died outside the gate, by followers who will come outside their own safety circles. While we sympathize with the many 'secret believers and admirers' of Christ, we cannot ignore the remarkable fact that many who believe are being added into the Church which Jesus claims to be building, against whom the gates of hell shall not prevail.

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Inter-Religious Dialogue

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Tracing primarily the history of dialogue in WCC circles, Schrotenboer raises several key objections to it from an evangelical point of view. He stoutly defends the idea that the evangelical claim to know the truth, Jesus Christ, is not a sign of Christian arrogance, but 'an acknowledgement of grace' which 'should be made in humility yet with conviction'.

Editor

INTRODUCTION

The topic of this paper is inter-religious dialogue, not inter-confessional dialogue. The latter, which has become a very popular activity in recent decades, refers to discussions between or among different Christian traditions. The participants in such talks are presumably all committed to Jesus Christ in whom they find their fundamental identity in the fellowship of his people. The differences that exist among them are limited to the distinctions of the various confessional families, each with its own traditions and emphasis.

Inter-religious dialogue takes place between adherents of different religions, that is, between people whose fundamental commitments centre either in Jesus Christ or in some

⁴⁵ Samartha, *The Hindu Response*, p. 7.

⁴⁶ *ibid.* p. 4. Cf. Kaj Baago, *The Movement around Subba Rao: A Study of the Hindu—Christian movement around K. Subba Rao in Andhra Pradesh*, Madras: CLS (for CISRS), 1968, p. 32.

other person. This means that the differences in inter-religious dialogue are much deeper than those in inter-confessional dialogue where the participants all belong to the Christian family. The issues involved in inter-religious dialogue are many, are complicated and are fundamental to the ministry of the church.

DIALOGUE AND WITNESS

One basic issue involved in dialogue is its effect on Christian witness and we may well begin with it. As the term 'witness' is generally used in this connection, it is synonymous with 'confession' or 'testimony'. Witness, as is generally recognized, flows from our faith, our belonging to God's people, our being members of the one holy **P. 209** catholic and apostolic church. Because we believe, we therefore speak. Witness, bearing testimony, is not incidental to the Christian life; it is as essential as faith itself. Jesus warned those people who deny him before men that he would deny them before the angels of God ([Matt. 10:33](#)). He who believes in his heart that God raised Jesus Christ from the dead and confesses with his mouth that Jesus is Lord will be saved ([Romans 10:10](#)). Jesus' last words to his disciples before his ascension were, 'You shall be my witnesses' ([Acts 1:8](#)).

Dialogue, so it is claimed, if it is rightly construed, is a kind of witness, even a necessary kind of witness, or at least a prelude to witness; in no case should it be a substitute for witness. But dialogue today is widely understood by many to take the place of witness and that makes them perturbed. This observation reflects the conflict which the term has evoked and the disagreement which the practice of dialogue has caused.

The intense controversy concerning inter-religious dialogue manifests itself in suspicion and charges from two opposite sources. On the one hand many Christians suspect that dialogue is simply a technique that has arisen out of the study of comparative religions and derives from the conviction that all religions are fundamentally equal. Dialogue is, therefore, in the view of many, at least implicitly, a denial of the uniqueness of the Christian religion and the finality of Jesus Christ.

On the one hand adherents of other religions look upon the interreligious dialogue as an undercover effort on the part of Christians to proselytize them. Stanley J. Samartha asks the question, as put by a non-Christian participant: 'Is dialogue a subtle invitation to the heathen fly to come to the Christian spider's parlour?' (*Courage for Dialogue*, p. 44).

Is there a way in which dialogue can be undertaken in which the objections from both sides can be obviated? That is, can Christians in dialogue with adherents of other religions avoid substituting it for witness and refrain from all clandestine efforts to convert others to the Christian faith? As Samartha has put it, 'How do we state the relationship between dialogue, mission and witness in such a way as to allay the fears of Christians on the one hand and remove the suspicions of people of other faiths on the other?' (*Ibid.*).

The Christian student, no less than other Christians, is called to witness and is confronted with the challenge of dialogue. How should he or she respond to this challenge? Should one engage in dialogue with non-Christian students? Should one discuss differences with other Christians? **p. 210**

If we had sought to discuss inter-religious dialogue a few decades ago, the reaction would probably have been that it was appropriate only for a small group of people, such as missionaries and missiologists, but not for average Western Christians. There was a time, even in the recent past, when we were accustomed to speak of our Western world as the Christian world and the rest of the world, the world out there, as non-Christian. We can no longer do that, for at least three reasons.

The first reason is that some of those lands, such as several in Africa, have been largely Christianized. As a result there is a larger percentage of Christians in certain countries in

sub-Saharan Africa than in Canada or the United States or Australia. Moreover the churches there are growing, whereas we in North America live on a continent of churches which by and large are shrinking, at least in terms of total population, and in many instances, even in actual membership.

A second reason why the distinction no longer holds is that a large number of people in so-called Christian lands have succumbed to secularism or atheistic communism. All of our lands in the West are living in what is in many respects a post-Christian era. In most of the nations of the East, the so-called Second World, Christians comprise a persecuted minority. In free and secular Europe, evangelical Christians comprise a small shrinking minority.

There was a time when some of the dominant motives of the North American continent were Christian. American society still bears many marks of Christian influence. But the faith has retreated more and more from the marketplace, industry and the classroom, especially the university. Secularism is for North Americans a greater danger than communism.

A third reason for the changed situation is the sizeable number of guest labourers, immigrants and refugees (estimated at about 8 million) now in the West from non-Christian lands. Those people are for the most part Muslim, Hindu and Buddhist. The people of the 'other living faiths' are now at our doorstep, especially if we live in a large city. There are more than a half million Muslims living in the USA and Canada today. Moreover, in many of these religions there is a renewed vigour and activity, and a missionary zeal. In the case of Islam, there are also the petro-dollars to fund massive campaigns to win converts.

The Christian student at a modern university must feel keenly the presence of people of other faiths, for his university is becoming more and more a microcosm of modern global society. Some Western students have become attracted to other faiths such as Islam and the Eastern mystic religions. I suspect that many more have simply [p.211](#) succumbed to the pull of secularism, or that, while not openly casting their religious affiliations overboard, they find themselves in a kind of limbo between the faith of the fathers and a life that is oriented to the secular, intellectual world. When their student days are over, they may drift into a no-man's land of no specific religious affiliation.

The movement of peoples has made the relation of the Christian faith to other faiths an increasingly urgent concern not only for missiologists and university students but for the entire Christian community. As religious pluralism becomes more and more a phenomenon in our world, the challenge of inter-religious dialogue presses with greater force upon the Christian community.

Before going further, we should state what 'dialogue' generally means. A number of references may be helpful at this point.

Philip Sharper in *The Dialogue; New Religious Meetinghouse* distinguishes dialogue from other forms of communication as follows:

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 expects 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 a dialogue.

Perhaps nowhere has dialogue in the inter-faith forum been advocated and practised as much in recent time as in the World Council of Churches. We select a passage from the Issue I Report of the WCC Sixth Assembly in Vancouver 1983:

Dialogue may be described as that encounter where people holding different claims about ultimate reality can meet and explore these claims in a context of mutual respect. From dialogue we expect to discern more about how God is active in our world, and to appreciate for their own sake the insights and experiences people of other faiths have of ultimate reality.

Dialogue is not a device for nor a denial of Christian witness. It is rather a mutual venture to bear witness to each other and the world, in relation to different perceptions of ultimate reality (*Gathered for Life*, Official Report, VI Assembly of WCC, p. 40).

In a similar vein Vinay Samuel and Chris Sugden, representing an evangelical approach, state that by dialogue they mean

being open to other religions, to recognize God's activity in them, and to see how they are related to God's unique revelation in Christ ... The goal of dialogue is to affirm the Lordship of Christ over all life in such a way that p. 212 people within their own context may recognize that Lordship in them and discover it for themselves (*Sharing Jesus in the Two Thirds World*, p. 22).

Prof. Dirk Mulder, former chairman of the WCC Department on Dialogue and Other Living Faiths and Ideologies, has said that dialogue

is an encounter between adherents of different religions in which they listen to each other with attention and respect and in which one tries to understand the other as he/she wants to be understood, in the deepest intentions and ideals ... Important is the attitude, the approach that hides behind it, the willingness to respect the person of another faith in his own integrity (*Evangelische Commentaar*, 1/6/84).

THE WORLD COUNCIL OF CHURCHES

To the World Council of Churches, more than to any other organization, must go the credit for having given attention to dialogue. Although at the Uppsala Assembly in 1968 only one paragraph of the official report was devoted to dialogue, since then this topic has assumed an ever broader and more influential role. At its meeting in Addis Ababa in 1971 the WCC Central Committee recognized dialogue as a major concern of the ecumenical movement and accepted an interim policy statement on dialogue, which was converted eight years later to definitive Guidelines on Dialogue.

In the Nairobi Assembly in 1975 an entire section in the official report was devoted to dialogue. Here dialogue was broadened to refer not only to witness (as in the section 'Confessing Christ Today') but also to the context of human community and ideological diversities. As Samarthu summarized the Nairobi debate on dialogue, four aspects of the WCC's perceived role in dialogue were emphasized:

- a. as an enabler or partner in dialogues with people of various faiths and ideologies. Attention should be focused on specific issues, such as spirituality, poverty, science and technology, education, the status and role of women, power, land, peace.
- b. as an enabler or partner in encouraging 'inner dialogue' where Christians come to terms with their own cultural loyalties or ideological presuppositions.
- c. as a catalyst in ecumenical thinking and action for theological reflections and for practical cooperation together with people of other faiths and ideologies.
- d. as a 'listening post' for the churches to enable them to see and hear themselves as others see and hear them (*Courage for Dialogue*, p. 62). p. 213

It may be observed that this summary gives very little attention to witness and therefore does not allay the fears of evangelicals that dialogue as practiced in the WCC

tends to give witness short shrift. But we should follow developments in the WCC since 1975 before passing judgment.

In 1977 the WCC organized a Theological Consultation on Dialogue in Community in Chiang Mai, Thailand, and issued a statement as a result. It is in our judgment better than anything that the WCC produced previously on the subject. A few references should give us an indication of what was said:

The Christian community with the human community has a common heritage and a distinctive message to share; it needs therefore to reflect on the nature of the community that we as Christians seek and on the relation of dialogue to the life of the churches, as they ask themselves how they can be communities of service and witness without diluting their faith or compromising their commitment to Christ. Such an enquiry needs to be informed both by a knowledge of different religions and societies and by insights gained through actual dialogues with neighbours.

In an age of worldwide struggle of humankind for survival and liberation, the religions have their important contributions to make, which can only be worked out in mutual dialogue. It is a responsibility of Christians to foster such dialogue in a spirit of reconciliation and hope granted to us by Jesus Christ. We came to see how easy it is to discuss religions and even ideologies as though they existed in some realm of calm quite separate from the sharp conflicts and sufferings of humankind (*The Ecumenical Review*, July 1977, pp. 254, 255).

This consultation saw dialogue as a form of service:

We see dialogue, therefore, as a fundamental part of our Christian service within community. In dialogue we actively respond to the command 'to love God and your neighbour as yourself'. As an expression of our love our engagement in dialogue testifies to the love we have experienced in Christ. It is our joyful affirmation of life against chaos, and our participation with all who are allies of life in seeking the provisional goals of a better human community. Thus we soundly reject any idea of 'dialogue in community' as a secret weapon in the armoury of an aggressive Christian militancy. We adopt it rather as a means of living out our faith in Christ in service of community with our neighbours.

In this sense we endorse dialogue as having a distinctive and rightful place within Christian life, in a manner directly comparable to other forms of service. But by 'distinctive' we do not mean totally different or separate. In dialogue we seek 'to speak the truth in a spirit of love', not naively 'to be tossed to and fro, and be carried about with every wind of doctrine' ([Eph. 4:14-15](#)). In giving our witness we recognize that in most p. 214 circumstances today the spirit of dialogue is necessary. For this reason we do not see dialogue and the giving of witness as standing in any contradiction to one another. Indeed, as we enter dialogue with our commitment to Jesus Christ, time and again the relationship of dialogue gives opportunity for authentic witness. Thus, to the member churches of the WCC we feel able with integrity to commend the way of dialogue as one in which Jesus Christ can be confessed in the world today; at the same time we feel able with integrity to assure our partners in dialogue that we come not as manipulators but as genuine fellow pilgrims, to speak with them of what we believe God to have done in Jesus Christ who has gone before us, but whom we seek to meet anew in dialogue (*Ibid.*, p. 261).

What we find in the official statements of the WCC are clear denials that dialogue replaces witness, denials also that syncretism is unacceptable, and affirmations of the church's historic confession in Jesus Christ.

At the same time there are more than a few references in the documents which seem to be at variance with these affirmations. There seems to be an unresolved tension on the one hand between their claims of the truth of the gospel and on the other the acknowledgment of redemptive truth in all religions. At New Delhi (1961), for instance, the WCC said that in conversations with people of other living faiths about Christ, 'Christ

addresses them through us and us through them' (*New Delhi Report*, p. 82). In the same vein the Chiang Mai statement speaks of meeting Jesus Christ anew in dialogue. This vague language is hardly reassuring.

One of the architects for dialogue in the WCC is Stanley J. Samartha, former director of the WCC Unit on Dialogue with People Living Faiths and Ideologies. In his book *Courage for Dialogue*, referred to above, he affirms that the concern for dialogue is simply obedience to the Lord in accordance with the guidance of the Holy Spirit. He quotes with approval D. T. Niles: 'A pilgrim people must maintain their differentia as pilgrims, but they must belong to the society among whom their journey is set.' He explains the reasons for dialogue in these words:

There are at least three theological reasons why dialogue is and ought to be a continuing Christian concern. First, God in Jesus Christ has himself entered into relationship with persons of all faiths and all ages, offering the good news of salvation. The incarnation is God's dialogue with humanity. To be in dialogue is, therefore, to be part of God's continuing work among us and our fellow human beings. Second, the offer of a true community inherent in the gospel through forgiveness, reconciliation, and a new creation, and of which the church is a sign and a symbol, inevitably leads [p. 215](#) to dialogue. The freedom and love Christ offers constrain us to be in fellowship with strangers so that all may become fellow citizens in the household of God. Third, there is the promise of Jesus Christ that the Holy Spirit will lead us into all truth. Since truth in the biblical understanding is not propositional but relational, and is to be sought not in the isolation of lonely meditation but in living, personal confrontation between God and man, and people and people, dialogue becomes one of the means of the quest for truth. And, because Christians cannot claim to have a monopoly of truth, we need to meet persons of other faiths and ideologies as part of our trust in and obedience to the promise of Christ (p. 11).

OBJECTIONS TO DIALOGUE

One might well wonder, if this is what dialogue with other religions is about, why are there so many objections to it? Who will not rejoice that the age of disputations is over and the age of dialogue has begun? Nevertheless objections have been many and they have been persistent. We shall note three.

1. Dialogue is a way to truth

In modern times it was a Jew, the late Martin Buber, who did much to bring dialogue into vogue. In dialogue, he says, one enters a realm where the point of view no longer holds. Truth is not conceptual but personal. No system of thought can be erected but the truth is somehow a confluence of opposites, and the emphasis is horizontal. His ideas are best expressed in his book *I and Thou*.

These ideas strongly influenced Emil Brunner and Paul Tillich, to mention two, and did affect the ecumenical movement in early years. They appear to be reflected in the statement of the Mexico City Conference, 'Witness in Six Continents', in 1963:

On the relationship between God's action in and through the church and everything God is doing in the world apparently independently of the Christian community we were able to state thesis and antithesis in this debate, but we could not see our way through to the truth we feel lies beyond this dialectic. Yet we believe that all attempts to adapt the structures of the thinking of the Church to match the great changes that are taking place in the world will be doomed to paralysis until we can find the way through to a truer understanding of the relation between the world and the Church in the purpose of God (*Witness in Six Continents*, Ronald K. Orchard, editor, p. 157).

Key questions are, What topics can be subsumed under those on which we can come to a truer understanding by dialogue? Does p. 216 dialogue *replace* revelation or does it only *seek to understand it better*?

In more recent days John Hick has advocated the idea of dialogue as the way to truth. In *Truth and Dialogue in World Religions* (1974), he wrote, 'We must trust that continuing dialogue will prove to be dialogue into truth, and that in a fuller grasp of truth our present conflicting doctrines will ultimately be transcended' (p. 155). In a similar vein D. Dubarle, in 'Dialogue and its Philosophy', *Concurrence*, Spring 1969, wrote, 'The dialogue is a common quest for liberty, and, as a consequence of progress in the liberty of each, a common effort to advance in the direction of Truth.'

That dialogue is a way to truth would appear, at least in the view of Hick and Dubarle, to be not just a process of coming to a closer appreciation of authoritative truth given by revelation. It is rather a questioning of the validity of accepting the truth of revelation by faith, or an implicit denial that there is authoritative revealed truth.

2. Dialogue leads to relativism

We take a recent (1983) example. John Shelby Spong, Episcopal Bishop of Newark, wrote:

If Christian unity is to be achieved, Christian pluralism will have to be affirmed and the relativity of all Christian truth will have to be established. This reality makes us aware that every narrow definition of Christian doctrinal certainty will finally have to be abandoned; every claim by any branch of the Christian church to be the true church or the only church will ultimately have to be sacrificed; every doctrine of infallibility—whether of the papacy, or of the Scriptures, or of any sacred tradition, or of any individual experience—will inevitably have to be forgotten (*The Christian Century*, June 8–15, 1983).

Obviously if dialogue is understood to be a way of truth in the sense described and leads to the relativism of all religious claims, and to the sacrifice not only of sacred tradition but of the Scriptures as an infallible revelation, then the evangelical Christian will refuse to advocate it and will hesitate to enter the forum where dialogue takes place.

One should not hastily charge the WCC itself with relativism at this point. At least Willem Visser 't Hooft, the first general secretary, has pointed out that relativism 'would breed a race of spiritually spineless human beings who would live in the sort of night in which all cats are grey' ('Pluralism—Temptation or Opportunity?', *The Ecumenical Review*, April 1966, p. 129). Actually, in his book *No Other Name*, p. 217 Visser 't Hooft makes a strong plea for both the universality of Christ and the uniqueness of Christ.

3. Dialogue leads to syncretism

Syncretism usually means the incorporation of essential elements of other religions into one's understanding of one's own, thus significantly altering one's own, or forming a new religion. Visser 't Hooft describes syncretism as

the view that there is no unique revelation in history, that there are many different ways to reach the divine reality, that all formulations of religious truth or experience are by their very nature inadequate expressions of that truth and that it is necessary to harmonize as much as possible all religious ideas and experiences so as to create one universal religion for mankind (*No Other Name*, p. 11).

As Visser 't Hooft explains the modern wave of syncretism in the Christian era, which is the last of four, he notes the effort, on the basis of the study of comparative religions, the philosophy of Karl Jung, and the literary works of such people as D. H. Lawrence and Walt Whitman, to explain practically every aspect of the Christian faith in terms of

concepts and myths which are equally to be found in other religions. He vigorously opposes all attempts at syncretism.

It is obvious that if we have in mind a dialogue that is informed by the components of finding truth, relativism and syncretism, dialogue will become a substitute for witness and will mean the demise of witness. If it is done in the spirit of Prof. John Hick who tells us to move away from 'purely confessional dialogue' to the truth-seeking stance in dialogue, that the loss may be greater than the gain. At stake then is the veracity of the Christian faith.

Those who advocate dialogue usually stress the need for both commitment and openness (see Samarth, *op. cit.*, pp. 9, 43). As a rule of thumb one can say that evangelicals stress more the need for commitment and ecumenically oriented persons emphasize more the need for openness. Likewise evangelicals place greater stress on the normativity of Scripture and ecumenicals on the guidance of the Holy Spirit, which may mean only God in action today.

REACTIONS TO WCC DIALOGUE

It may be helpful at this point to note some of the varied reactions to the WCC document on dialogue adopted in Addis Ababa in 1971. From Thailand came a word of caution: **P. 218**

Our varied church bodies need seriously to struggle with the fundamentals of the biblical faith before our fellow Christians are engulfed in a dialogue for which they are not prepared intellectually or spiritually (*Courage for Dialogue*, p. 37).

From the United States came this expression of suspicion:

There have always been philosophers and religious thinkers who, lacking a full commitment to the beliefs they profess ... have filled the void in their lives with titillating experience of dialogue ... These men find an outlet for unused spiritual and intellectual energy by engaging in a dialogue with Marxists ... (However), the main concern of Jesus Christ was with the inner needs of men ... (*Ibid*).

From Hong Kong came an expression of concern to grapple with the question of truth:

Can we enter into a dialogue with others without having in our mind some criterion of truth which forms the basis of our judgment? ... Would our faith allow us to be content with the notion of the plurality of religious truth which inevitably suggests a limited validity of the Christian vision of truth? (39).

Behind some of these concerns is the demand for complete openness on the part of some proponents of dialogue. J. G. Davies, for example, speaks of the risk in dialogue:

Complete openness means that every time we enter into dialogue our faith is at stake—the Buddhist may come to accept Jesus as Lord, but I may come to accept the authority of the Buddha, or even both of us may end up as agnostics (*Dialogue with the World*, SCM, p. 55).

The fear here expressed, if viewed only against the background of the official WCC pronouncements, may seem to be largely unfounded. But before these fears are completely allayed, it will be well to note what the former director of the Unit on Dialogue, Stanley J. Samartha, and the present director, Wesley Ariarajah, have recently written on the subject.

Samartha in *Courage for Dialogue* holds to a kind of universalism that puts God's revelation in Jesus Christ in the larger framework of God's universal love for all mankind.

The lordship of Christ, as it relates to other lordships, he says, should be considered not in terms of rejection but in terms of relationships (97). As he sees it, we should recognize God alone as absolute and all religions as relative (97). 'There is no reason to claim that the religion developed in the Sinai is superior to that developed on the banks of the Ganga' (99). At the p. 219 same time he holds that the resurrection of Christ is the true *skandalon* of the gospel (94).

Taking a different approach from that of W. Visser 't Hooft, Samartha seeks to rehabilitate the idea of syncretism (23 ff.). He also holds that real conversion is not from one religion to another but from unbelief to God (32). (A similar effort to rehabilitate syncretism has been made by M. M. Thomas in 'The Absoluteness of Jesus Christ and Christ-Centered Syncretism', *The Ecumenical Review*, Oct, 1985.)

Samartha openly rejects the idea of salvation history. He quotes with approval the opinion of Bertil Albrektson that 'the Old Testament has no real claim to a special kind of history that is in any way distinct from its environment' (p.70). He wonders whether the idea of salvation history, as distinct from ordinary history, is really relevant to Christians in our inescapably multi-religious and multi-cultural societies struggling with the question of how to live together in peace (p. 71). He questions whether Mecca is 'outside the orbit of God's Spirit' (p. 69). The activity of God, he says, is for the salvation for all humanity (p. 79). If God is love, he cannot be partial. If God is free, how can his freedom to act at all times in history be limited to a 'once-for-allness'? (p. 150).

All religions, says Samartha, are relative. Only God is absolute (p. 97). How can we deny 'that Christ is at work wherever people are struggling for freedom and renewal, seeking for fulness of life, peace and joy?' (p. 86). All religions, including Christianity, have an interim character. This enforces the idea of their relativity in relation to God who alone is eternal (p. 103).

Wesley Ariarajah, in *The Bible and People of Other Faiths*, claims, in line with the *Gemeinde Theologie* school, that the early church moulded the New Testament. The New Testament is therefore to be understood as a book of faith. The Bible is 'based on the self-understanding of the Jewish people as the people of God' (p. 8). It is true for Christians as it is true for a young girl to say that her father is the best daddy in the world (p. 25). But the girl next door can make the same claim. The Bible deals not with absolute truths but with the language of faith and love (p. 26). 'Revelation itself is part of the faith-claim and its validity also has to do with the faith of the community' (p. 28).

In my encounter with others, I should believe that 'the other person is as much a child of God as I am and that should form the basis of our relationship with our neighbours' (p. 32). He deplores that Christians tend to shape their attitude to people of other faiths by dwelling mainly on the exclusive texts of the Bible (no other way, no other name, no p. 220 other Mediator) and not on the Bible's central message, namely, that the God whom Jesus called Father, rules over all and is in all (p. 33).

Ariarajah holds that dialogue does not exclude witness, but that our witness today should not take as its pattern the straightforward proclamation found in the Book of Acts. 'In the Acts we meet people who have an entirely different background. They see and understand the human predicament in very different ways from contemporary Muslims or Hindus' (p. 44). 'It would be totally misleading ... to argue that our relationship and witness today with people of other faiths should be modelled on the Acts of the Apostles' (p. 47).

Not only is the Apostles' way not our way, but the General Commission, Ariarajah suggests, derives not from Jesus, but from the early church (p. 49). Moreover, 'witness to the Hindus can never be based on any prior claims about Christ'. The preacher may say that Christ is the only way, but the Hindus would argue that such a statement has no

validity outside the preacher's own experience and conviction (p. 53). In Hinduism 'there is an undeniable experiencing of God's grace and love' (p. 54) and so 'the Hindu is not an object for conversion. He or she is a fellow-pilgrim with whom we share the decisive impact Christ has had on our lives' (p. 56).

As we carry the brief survey on WCC leadership thinking on dialogue one step further, we note the discussion on dialogue in two official October 1985 publications of the WCC, *The Ecumenical Review* and *International Review of Mission*. The simultaneous appearance of the two WCC periodicals on the same topic clearly demonstrates the importance attached currently to the discussion on dialogue in the WCC.

In *The Ecumenical Review*, M. M. Thomas pleads for a Christcentred syncretism. Jan van Butselaar, presenting his contribution as a member of a Reformed church, finds that in the tension between dialogue and witness the converging factors are stronger than those that tend to diverge. Diana L. Eck pleads for dialogue as a means to build the 'world house' of humanity; for her, dialogue is a Christian ecumenical concern.

Bishop Per Lønning sees dialogue as a question about 'religiology', the study of religion. He draws on the writings of John Hick, John Cobb, Hans Küng and George Lindbeck to show the unresolved nature of the debate on the exclusivity of Jesus and universal salvation. We note the following summary statement:

Limiting salvation to those who in this life accepted the Christ of the creeds, would make of God not only the biggest despot but also the biggest loser in p. 221 history. To accept ways of salvation in addition to the sending of Christ will make the cross something less than the focal event of history, or even something superfluous. To suggest that there is some presence of Christ, even where his name is not known, will tend to reduce the living Lord into some universal principle. To make the decisive confrontation with Christ an event after, or at the final edge of life, will relativize our existence here and now. *Apokatastasis*, some final indiscriminate divine acceptance of us all, tends to make robots rather than persons of human beings (*The Ecumenical Review*, Oct. 1985, p. 428).

We welcome the openness and clarity of this statement by Per Lønning and agree with him when he says that inter-religious dialogue requires intra-religious dialogue. That is, dialogue within the Christian community, for central teachings of the Christian faith on which agreement is lacking are directly involved.

It would be fair to say that the concern in the circles of the WCC is surely not limited to the relation of dialogue and witness. Actually, the context is shifting steadily away from concern for witness to that for human community. The emphasis is that all human beings share a common future (S. J. Samartha). We all live in one 'world house' (Diana L. Eck), dialogue is needed for nation building (M. M. Thomas) and for development (Devananda and Fernando). The trend in dialogue has been more and more away from verbal proclamation to social involvement for social change.

EVANGELICALS ON DIALOGUE

Statements on dialogue by evangelicals are more difficult to find than statements by those who promote the ecumenical movement. Evangelicals have been generally critical of dialogue as it has been advocated and practised in the ecumenical movement. Interesting in this regard is a comment made by the Roman Catholic observer at Nairobi, Dr. Samuel Ryan:

Opposition to dialogue, often strongly expressed by the Evangelicals from Scandinavia, Western Germany, and England, rested on reasoning like the following. Christ is only in the church and nowhere outside. He is present only in the Word and Sacraments. In the

world he may be present as Creator, not as Redeemer. Otherwise why did he become incarnate and teach and die on the cross? Therefore, only sociological dialogue, not theological, can be had with people of other religions. We cannot worship with them, we may not pray together with them; a community of prayer with them is impossible. We have the full truth in the church because Christ is the fulness of truth. Any dialogue with people of other faiths can have only one purpose: to know them in order to evangelize them. Dialogue will p. 222 lead to illegitimate syncretism. We are for community with all people but a community built on Jesus Christ, and not on the shifting sands of uncertainty.

Asian and African participants and theologians who saw their point of view were surprised and shocked at the summary way in which some of their deepest Christian experiences were dismissed and discarded on very flimsy theological grounds. They asked themselves: is every Christian experience and every theological initiative which is not North Atlantic invalid, inadmissible, and unworthy of a hearing? Or is it that the extensive syncretism of the Bible and of Western Christianity is entirely in order while all syncretism elsewhere is to be ruled out *a priori* as illegitimate? Or are the Evangelicals deeply influenced by fear of the unfamiliar and the unknown? Or is it Christian smugness and overconfidence in armchair theologies? One must surely appreciate all honest enthusiasm for evangelism and obedience to the Great Commission. But one must be clear in one's mind that the Great Commission and command is love for people lived concretely in respect and service and sharing. This precisely is the dimension which, in the history of evangelism, has often been lacking. How far it has been present or not is best judged by those of us who have been the objects and victims of evangelism of a sort. What is most distressing, however, is the limited, clannish conception of God and Christ implicit in the refusal of religious and theological dialogue of community of prayer (*International Review of Mission*, Jan. 1976).

Not every evangelical response to dialogue has been negative, however, and one of the most positive but restrained statements is from the Lausanne Covenant (1974):

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 Saviour and Lord, with a view to persuading people to come to him personally and so be reconciled to God (The Lausanne Covenant, par. 4, in *Let the Earth Hear His Voice*, p. 4).

In their chapter in *Sharing Jesus in the Two Thirds World*, Vinay Samuel and Chris Sugden explain why evangelicals have not generally been involved in dialogue. The evangelical reluctance, in their view, is a fear of syncretism, a fear of being misunderstood, and a fear that dialogue will result in lukewarmness about evangelism. These fears must be seen against the evangelical involvement in mission among many so-called primitive cultures where they have achieved considerable success. Rather than a community approach of ecumenical dialogue, many non-conciliar evangelicals stress a 'free market' understanding of missions. This understanding, as expressed at the p. 223 1966 Berlin Congress on Evangelism, affirms that 'verbal proclamation is the sum total of mission' (p. 127).

Samuel and Sugden see a crisis of identity among evangelicals today in regard to the subject of inter-religious dialogue (p. 131). In their opinion the time has come for evangelicals, especially evangelicals in Asia, to become dialogically involved.

Just as evangelicals working in Latin America have brought the issue of social change to the fore, evangelicals from Asia in the context of plurality of religions need to bring this issue of inter-religious dialogue to the fore. For in countries where the plurality of religions is the dominant reality, social change on its own is an inadequate way of applying the gospel. The plurality of religions must also be addressed.

In the context of religious pluralism, no social change can take place without a religious reality that promotes this change. Where religion is part of the whole worldview of a people, any Christian claim to bring the truth about life must be related to their worldview if it is to have any meaning and stimulate any change (p. 129).

AGENDA FOR DIALOGUE

Samuel and Sugden propose an agenda on dialogue for evangelicals which will include a study of man, of the nature of the common ground between religions, of the question where 'God is at work' in other religions and the decisiveness of the Christ-event for the world of religions (pp. 136–139). One may conclude that since their view of mission differs much from the 'free market' view of the Berlin Congress, there will be a need for intraevangelical dialogue in which evangelicals themselves discuss together where they stand in regard to dialogue.

The same would apply with equal force to the international family of evangelical Reformed churches; namely, dialogue should also be on their agenda for there also opinions vary greatly (cf. *RES Mission Bulletin*, Vol. II. No. 2, September 1982). What we need is a biblical rationale for dialogue, one that honours the central themes of creation, fall into sin and redemption by faith in Jesus Christ; one that does justice to the cosmic scope of Christ's redemption, and does not sell short the exclusive claims of Jesus and his apostles.

We do a disservice to all if, in the interest of reaching common understanding with adherents of other religions, we rob the gospel of its *skandalon* character. It is a *skandalon* to human beings generally that salvation is by God's grace alone, and that he has given us only one way in the one name of the one Mediator whose one sacrifice was [p. 224](#) sufficient for all and in whose name salvation must be offered to all who believe.

On the evangelicals' agenda for dialogue should be placed the issues that press to the fore in the recent discussions:

1. Is the Bible essentially an expression of the faith of the early church which has meaning for us mainly because it was the initial first-hand witness? Or is it fundamentally a revelation, once-for-all in its kind, which God gave to his people and which the early church and believers of every age acknowledge in faith as from God?
2. Is revelation basically saving revelation? Or must we (continue to) distinguish between the Word that saves when it is accepted in faith and the Word that leaves people in their lostness when they suppress the truth in unrighteousness? ([Romans 1:18](#)). Is the traditional distinction between revelation in creation and saving revelation in Jesus Christ to whom the Scriptures witness still valid?
3. In what way is God present and active with his Spirit in other religions?
4. Is the aim of promoting human community, peace and justice among adherents of various religions a valid reason for Christians to engage in inter-religious dialogue? If it is, should evangelicals not be involved? If they should, on what basis should such dialogue take place?
5. How can we untangle the curious web of current thought regarding the question of how the many opposing theories of truth relate to the truth claim of the Bible? We suggest the following as a beginning:
(a) A biblically directed approach requires that we test the various current theories of truth (epistemological, ontological, existential) by the biblical non-theoretical idea of truth. We cannot reverse the order or put them all on the same

plane without doing violence to the idea that God's Word if received in faith is the truth that saves from error as well as from destruction.

(b) The biblical idea of truth includes as essential aspect the two components of *trustworthiness* and of *normativity*. The truth therefore is not only something to rely on, but also that which must be obeyed. It is this last component of obedience that is very largely overlooked in the recent discussions on interreligious dialogue. Truth, it may be said, is that which God does (he is faithful) and which man must do (he must stand in the truth).

(c) To say that the Christian faith is true for me even as the [p. 225](#) Buddhist faith is true for someone else, only sidesteps the question of truth as a norm that holds for all. This norm asks for a response in faith from all who hear.

(d) The truth issue cannot be reduced to opposing truth claims, each having at the outset equal validity, for the basic truth claim is not that of one person against another but that of Jesus Christ who said that he was the Truth ([John 14:6](#)) and that God's word is truth ([John 17:17](#)). If Jesus, as he claims, will one day judge all the nations ([Matt. 25:32](#)) then this truth claim affects all people including those with conflicting truth claims. If this truth claim of Jesus, inasmuch as its scope is universal, does not hold for all, how can it hold for any?

(e) The truth about which evangelicals speak in final analysis is not the result of a quest on their part but of a search by God that has found them.

(f) The truth issue in dialogue will not be settled so long as we continue to view it on the plane of a human quest. There is indeed a human search for truth, but that is never the prime action; the human quest for truth is never more than secondary, a re-action. The divine truth that is embodied personally in Jesus Christ and searches and finds is of a different order from man's search for truth, and stands prior to it. In this truth we must continue to stand, as well in speaking with adherents of other faiths as in our worship of God in the community of his people.

(g) The evangelicals' claim to know Jesus, the Truth, is not a sign of arrogance but an acknowledgment of grace and should be made in humility, yet with conviction. It *would* be arrogance to claim that the truth we proclaim is the product of our achievement, or to assume that our understanding of the truth is of the same order as revelation itself.

(h) At stake therefore is not whether Christians have perfect knowledge, but whether their faith knowledge is sure. The issue is not absolute truth but saving truth.

(i) It is not triumphalism to say that there is no other way than faith in Jesus Christ. If it is done in the spirit of love, it is an expression of humility, as one beggar tells another where to find bread.

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Divine Revelation