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An Evangelical Theology of Pluralism: A Personal View

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INTRODUCTION

We are in urgent need of a theology of pluralism. But for this we look in vain to the Fathers (or Mothers) of the church. Augustine's use of the text 'Compel them to come in' echoes down the centuries. Nor is the Dissenting tradition of much help in Britain. We are also, however, heirs to the Enlightenment, to a democratic humanism with all its differing effects. The worst of these may be the privatisation of religion which disables our city fathers and other legislators from considering religion seriously at all. I sat with others recently considering a paper on Equal Opportunities produced by a working party from a local education authority. This group of people had managed to handle the subject of preserving and promoting minority cultures in schools, and the issue of enabling children to feel proud of their inherited traditions, without once mentioning the subject of religion in a paper which was concerned with beliefs and values on every page. Many of our secular contemporaries find religious issues embarrassing and problematic to deal with. Consequently they are in danger of leaving us the victims of a crass materialism, a *pleonexia* ([Col. 3:5](#)) or 'ruthless greed which is nothing less than idolatry'. Yet this same humanist tradition can also be an invaluable counterweight to totalitarian forms of religion, and has probably preserved us from the fate of nations like Iran. What is more, Christianity, like some forms of Buddhism and Sikhism, has an inbuilt critique of religion which can contribute to a proper Christian humanism. This is something of the context in which RE. is taught, and why it has become the storm centre of the contemporary debate about Christianity and other faiths.

THE SCHOOL IS NOT THE CHURCH

In such a situation the school must be allowed to have its own integrity. The school is not the church, or even an extension of the **P. 79** church, but a secular institution, or at most (in the case of voluntary aided schools) a concern of the church in partnership with teachers, parents and the local authority. It follows that the responsibilities of the Christian school teacher are not the same as the responsibilities of the Christian minister, and what the latter is free and indeed obliged by his or her calling to do is at some points not open, in fact is prohibited, for the teacher to do. I have in mind the explicit use of the school classroom for open evangelism, and the attempt to secure the allegiance of children to a particular set of opinions and a faith community which is external to the community of the school, even though there may be overlap with it. If anyone is tempted to support such use of the classroom, let him simply imagine his reaction to the use of the classroom to recruit pupils to Marxism, Islam, or humanism. It is not in the long-term interest of the church to allow the school to become the battleground for competing ideological movements.

Of course, we have to recognize that this creates problems for the church school or indeed any other confessional schools. It may be that no school may be fully neutral in the sense of enshrining no set of universally accepted values, but equally one must surely agree that the school is not simply an extension of the church, the Mosque, or the political party. It has its own role and its own integrity. If this is not accepted, all education is put at risk. There must be preserved an area where children can examine and think for themselves, without undue pressure from mature minds, the status and significance of different religious beliefs.

It follows that the answer to the question 'is our ultimate aim in teaching religion to win people for Christ?' is rather complex. Our ultimate aim may indeed be that, but it is unlikely that the teacher, especially in the Primary school, will see the final outcome of his or her work. The teacher must be content to be part of a process, to be a link in the chain of accumulating probability. Any pressure, so easily applied without intention, may destroy the fragile freedom of the child. We have to be aware that what may be called evangelism can actually in fact be destructive of the true apprehension of the Gospel. Only the methods, and the sensitivity, of Christ himself are proper for the preaching of the Gospel which is centred on him.

BUT IS NEUTRALITY POSSIBLE?

This does not mean that the teacher is obliged to conceal his or her faith and to pretend to be neutral when he is not. When appropriate, and in accordance with the maturity of the children concerned, it will **P. 80** be entirely right for the teacher to declare his or her own personal allegiance to Christ, and the consequences which he perceives as flowing from that. In teaching older children, it may actually be necessary for the teacher to declare his own interest and commitment before embarking on the teaching of religious education or other topics which concern human values, so that children are aware from the outset of the particular angle from which he views such things. Nor need such statements be merely defensive, since everyone who comes to the position of a teacher in society must have some thought-out sense of values and some reasonably coherent understanding of how the world works and whether religious faith has a legitimate place in it, and if so what kind of religion is valid. It can only benefit children to be exposed to a straightforward statement of the standpoint of the one who is teaching them so that the

problems of 'objectivity' in all teaching can be exposed. There is ultimately no 'value-free' exposition of such subjects as history, literature, or philosophy.

The same honesty and openness which characterises the teacher's explanation of his or her own religious standpoint, or lack of it, should characterise his or her treatment of religion in general. We should note here that this is not confined to the RE classroom, but will overflow into history, literature, and geography in particular. No one can teach Milton or Blake without some understanding of Christian faith. No one can teach about the Crusades, the Reformation, or the Holocaust without dealing with the subject of religion, and this treatment must be coherent, and as far as possible, objective, based on well-established facts. In particular it is of the utmost importance that a proper distinction is made and consistently maintained between examining the behaviour of religious people, and examining the doctrines which they hold. Far too often Christians have compared the ideals of the Christian Gospel with the worst behaviour of others, ignoring evidence which did not suit their argument. It has to be recognised, without any qualification, that 'there is none that is righteous, no not one' and that Christians, no less than anyone else, have been seduced by the 'myth of innocence'. If we examine the record of the Western Christian Church we find it is, in places, truly appalling. I need instance only the treatment of Jews and of alleged 'witches', the discrimination against Christian dissent, and in more recent days the rebuff given to Afro-Caribbean Christians migrating to this country, which ensured that most of them formed their own churches instead of joining the mainstream established churches. Nor, of course, are other religious groups free from similar faults. The contemporary conflict between Jew and Muslim in the Middle East, between Hindu and Sikh in North p. 81 India, and between Hindu and Buddhist in Sri Lanka, are equally reprehensible and closely paralleled by Catholic/Protestant hostilities in Northern Ireland.

However, that very reference immediately provokes the comment that 'such a conflict is not really about religion at all, and it is not in fact between religious people. People are just using religion as a means of dividing society, and promoting their own ends'. Precisely. Religion has been, and will continue to be, corrupted by its followers. What we should examine in the school setting is both the behaviour of religious people, which is a continuous theme in history, and also the convictions which have been held by religious people, and which continue to inspire not only some of the most heroic and admirable acts in our world, but also some of the worst.

TRUTH ELSEWHERE?

If you ask the question 'is there truth in other religions?', the answer to me is quite straightforwardly: Yes. If this were not so there would be no possibility of communicating Christian truths to people of other faiths and religious traditions, since there would be no prior understanding, no vocabulary even, in which you could express the Christian faith itself. Consider the problems of translation. As soon as you begin to translate the New Testament into a language like Urdu you are instantly aware that the only words available to you for such central concepts as 'God', 'Spirit', 'Faith', etc are words which are Arabic and Islamic. They are saturated in Islamic meaning and yet there is no alternative to using them. The same is true of course of translations into Hindu, Chinese and many other languages. Once you have moved away from the languages in which Christianity has traditionally been expressed, (and of course they were once 'pagan' languages too), you are always and everywhere faced with the problem of finding common ground in the vocabulary and expressions which you use in order to convey the meaning of the Christian faith. To say therefore, as Karl Barth did once to the Sri Lankan Methodist D. T. Niles, that 'Hinduism is unbelief', and that he knew it was so *a priori*, is simply nonsense. Karl Barth

regarded himself as at liberty to pass judgment on Hinduism without ever examining it. He might equally well, without examining it, have concluded that there must be at least an understanding of the nature of faith within Hinduism, or else the translation of the New Testament and the Christian message into the languages of Hinduism would simply be impossible. His purpose, it is true, was an attack on all religion as a series of human attempts to control God, including the [P.82](#) Christian attempt, but the Christian inclusion is easily forgotten, even by Barth himself.

TYPES AND SHADOWS

This is not to say that there is no new thing in Christianity. Of course there is, and Christians are committed to the proposition that in Christ God has expressed himself perfectly, and that all things find their fulfilment in him. If this be so we should be looking for the things which need their fulfilment. We should, in the manner of the author to the Hebrews, be grasping for types and shadows which are perfectly fulfilled in the person of Christ. We should therefore treat other faiths as Judaism is treated in that letter, not as enemies of the Christian faith but as—however chronologically related to Christianity—forerunners of it.

This is not to say, as will be evident from some paragraphs above, that all religious viewpoints can be treated equally positively. To begin with, there are plain and obvious contradictions between many of the great faiths, and even where they appear to agree, further research reveals that the meaning of similar terms is in fact significantly different. It has been argued for example that different faiths actually set out to answer different questions, and are asymmetrical not merely in their social structure or their manner of worship, but even in the intellectual expression of their beliefs. In Judaism and also in Islam, for example, the word ‘theology’ is not a positive word but a deeply negative one in many quarters, simply because of its connection with philosophy. Theravada Buddhism rejects it because God has no place in that system. Apart from this, there are doctrines in different faiths which are plainly antithetical to Christianity, such as the finality of the prophet Muhammad in Islam, and the absolute inspiration of the Qur’an on which it rests; such as the doctrine of immortality in Hinduism; or the doctrine of the unreality of the person in Buddhism. However, this point has to be held in balance with the point above about common ground. All these doctrines would need to be carefully stated before their rebuttal by Christians would carry real weight. Nor are they always so absolutely inimical to Christian truth. There can be, for example, a partial rapprochement between the Buddhist concept of ‘anatta’ and the Christian understanding of the infusion of the Holy Spirit, as demonstrated by the Methodist scholar Lynn de Silva. In a similar way Kenneth Cragg is able to show that even the Muslim concept of Jesus is not so foreign to Christian thought as some have assumed. [p.83](#)

Very often the obvious and traditional Christian understandings of other faiths will prove to be at best caricatures of the religion concerned. For example the allegation that Hinduism is essentially idolatrous can be dealt with piecemeal in the following way:

- a) There is no such thing as Hinduism, but rather a collection of religious traditions characteristic of India owing allegiance to no central authority, and no single statement of faith.
- b) Idolatry is itself repudiated by many Hindus as an infantile stage of religious development.
- c) Idolatry is, arguably, a feature of all human life, not excluding Christianity, where the worship due to God may in practice be offered to the Virgin Mary, the Bible, some

charismatic Christian preacher, or even the Christian nation, to say nothing of more secular alternatives, like money, sex, violence, war etc.

d) If one argues that the use of physical images is particularly dangerous, it may be suggested that the obvious limitations of such representations of the divine are actually less misleading in the long run than the shibboleths of contemporary Christian discourse, which may seriously mislead by their very plausibility as expressions of the divine.

A MISSIONARY THEOLOGY

My own understanding is that our search should be for a missionary theology in tandem with our theology of pluralism. In the past we have attempted to create a Christian society and failed. No one can point to any period in the past and say 'that was a truly Christian time in our history'. At any period of history it is evident that deeply un-Christian things were going on. In this I do not exclude the Reformation, which saw Martin Luther writing vitriolic pamphlets against the Jews, and acquiescing in the savage suppression of radical political movements which took a Christian banner and Christian inspiration. But the Reformation was in no sense a missionary movement, and demonstrated no concern for the world outside Christian Europe. As I see it the fundamental question is whether we shall be an outward-looking church or a defensive church. A defensive church will be anxious to put up the barriers for the self-protection of those left within it. An outward-looking church will take on the entire world for Christ and learn to understand it so that so that it may bring all things under his sway. His sway, however, is not an imperialist one, and this is perhaps the fundamental issue at stake. How is the proper authority of the **P. 84** Christian Church to be exercised? Jesus spoke of his kingdom not being of this world, and of being its servant, giving his life as a ransom for many. If this is the characteristic Christian way then we will have to recast our ideas of how, whether as teachers or as others, we exercise power and control over the lives of other people. When Jesus said 'I am the way, the truth and the life, no one comes to the Father, except by me', he was not making a statement about other faiths but pointing out the path which had to be followed to the Father. 'The way' he talks about is surely the way of the cross, not merely the process of baptism and formal membership of the church, which may or may not produce lives characteristic of 'the way'. It is surely that way which matters in the end, and it will not be brought about by any kind of censorship, or any attempt to bend people into a particular Christian mould. Children, like adults, must be free to respond to the message and the person of Christ, for he can outshine every other light. Education must be so offered that children are free both to know and to respond to the Christian perception of reality without being coerced, manipulated or indoctrinated into any religious or philosophical viewpoint.

Let us change the image. We attempt to offer Christian hospitality, a hospitality of heart and mind. The contemporary situation of religious pluralism could tempt us into one of two wrong courses of action. We could close and barricade our doors, to protect those within our walls and to shield them from 'alien influences', and all the things which might disturb, upset, or corrupt them and their faith. But if we did so we would stifle and stagnate, and who would want to join us, or be able to do so, our doors being shut? Alternatively, we could move out of our own home and abandon any attempt to live there, joining the multitudes who drift to and fro. Then we would have nowhere that we ourselves were at home or where we could offer hospitality. Like so many of our own contemporaries, we would cease to know who we were. Our only feasible alternative is to stay at home but to keep 'open house', offering Christianity because we have nothing else to offer. Some will be very discontented with such a prescription, feeling perhaps that it

is unadventurous, or self-satisfied, or both. I have to confess that in my own explorations I have found nothing which tempts me to shift from a fundamental Christian allegiance and a fundamental commitment to seeing the world in the light of God made known in Christ. As David Jenkins says, 'God is as he is in Jesus; and therefore there is hope'. To the charge of self-satisfaction I have a different answer, which is simply that we seriously need to have an open house, an open heart and an open mind, in order that we may discover just what Christianity actually means. One of the continual p.85 surprises in our discipleship is the discovery, quite suddenly and even catastrophically, that we do not really understand what we believe and that its significance has escaped us yet again. We are like unmathematical, un-physics-trained people repeating the formula $E=MC^2$, correctly but without understanding. We are like children parroting Shakespeare. So much of our history proves that we do not know what our Gospel really means in daily life, and we are compelled to learn its meaning with those with whom we would share it.

The parable here is Jonah. Jonah was the accredited prophet of God who was eventually, reluctantly, compelled to preach to the Ninevites, but who is in every respect the moral and spiritual inferior of the pagan sailors and the people of Nineveh as portrayed in the book. Yet it is Jonah who is the vehicle of the word of God and its guardian. And it is God's word through Jonah which brings the Ninevites to repentance. There could hardly be a clearer statement in the Judeo-Christian scriptures of the significance of election. The question of election, of the vocation of God's people, is central in this whole debate, but election never meant that those chosen of God are better than others, but that they are chosen for the sake of others and entrusted, even burdened with the Christian Gospel for the sake of others. On this hinge, on this particularity, our whole understanding of ourselves as God's people ultimately turns, and with it our whole Christian understanding and practice of religious education.

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The Future of ICAA

Tite Tiénou

The year 1990 marks the beginning of the second decade of life for the International Council of Accrediting Agencies for evangelical theological education. This seems therefore an appropriate time for attending to the question of ICAA's future. I wish to explore this topic under three headings: celebration, challenge, and call to action.

CELEBRATION

It would be imprudent to consider ICAA's future without first taking account of its past. And in focussing on the past, I wish to speak in terms of celebration, because we have now reached an important milestone in ICAA's history, the completion of a decade of service. This is a fitting time for us to pause and celebrate God's goodness to us, for enabling ICAA