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The Witnessing Church in Dialogue

Bruce J. Nicholls

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As in the previous article this author rejects dialogue as a dialectical method for reaching the Truth. But as a way of life and a missiological method to understand people of other faiths, to communicate faithfully and relevantly the gospel and to sharpen one's own understanding of the message, dialogue is fundamental to fulfilling Christ's mission in the world. The author argues that in dialogue the witnessing church expands the frontiers of the Church's holistic mission.

Editor

I am the pastor of a Hindi-speaking congregation of the Church of North India in the satellite town of Gurgaon, 35 kms from the centre of the capital city of New Delhi, a career missionary seconded by a mission agency to the Diocese of Delhi. I am appointed by the Bishop and I am accountable to him as is every other presbyter in the diocese. In our State of Haryana only 1 in 1000 of the population belongs to the Christian community and in some places only 1 in 10,000. Our local church of 70 families and the Roman Catholic Church of the same size are the only structured congregations in a town of perhaps 400,000 people. Thus the Christian community is a very small and insignificant community in the midst of a plurality of communities, some of whom are antagonistic to us. Our natural tendency is to retreat into our own ghetto, keeping to ourselves the limited benefits we possess and viewing with suspicion outsiders who want to join us. In such a context dialogue in the struggle for communal harmony and dialogue with other communities in our call to evangelism and church planting, are no academic issues for the Christian church. They are matters of life and death.¹ In the turbulent flow of our national life, the Church is either moving upstream in the struggle against principalities and powers or she is drifting downstream towards self-destruction. The question before the evangelical Christian is not whether our goals and methodologies are biblical, but

discussion is when he claims that Jesus identifies himself with people in their questionings: on the cross he calls out, 'My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?' and thus voices on behalf of mankind the most insistent question of all; at the same time it is Jesus who gives the true and final answer to God; 'Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit.' This cry was answered, and this prayer was ratified by God when he raised Jesus from the dead.

On this view the dialogue is not one in which Jesus comes to deeper understanding, but rather one in which the world does so. And yet in a paradoxical fashion Jesus takes mankind's questions upon himself as part of the burden which he has to bear. But, Torrance insists, the questions which Jesus asks are the right questions, questions which are capable of fruitful answers, whereas our human questions are the wrong questions and need to be refined and purified through encounter with Jesus.

¹ See James P. Alter & Herbert Jai Singh, *The Church in Delhi*, (Nagpur, NCC, 1961) pp. 81–115.

whether they are biblical enough or big enough to encompass the whole of biblical revelation. Do we as p. 49 churches have a biblical wholeness in our understanding of the gospel and the function of the Church in the world?

In the hermeneutical process of working through these issues, it is legitimate to begin at any point in the process, provided that in the dialogue between text and context we maintain the dynamics of working from an authoritative text to a relative and changing context. Dialogue is a two-way process of listening and speaking and speaking and listening. In this consideration we have chosen to begin our discussion with the context.²

I. DIALOGUE IN COMMUNITY

Communities are defined by the grouping of culturally identifiable people. They are integrated people's groups with a common worldview, common set of values and a common understanding of the functions of the institutions of society and they share common customs and behavioural patterns. The Christian community in North India is a small and fragmented community struggling for identity survival and yet called by God to witness to the plurality of communities who are ever attempting to absorb us. One of the most characteristic elements of Indian society over the past 5000 years is its capability to harmonise and absorb the ideologies, beliefs and life styles of any opposing community. The classic example is the reabsorption of Buddhism in the Hindu fold. To some degree the Muslim community has successfully resisted this eclecticism and to a lesser extent the Christians have done so. In the area where I work thousands of Christians reconverted to Hinduism after national Independence in 1947 through the evangelising efforts of reformed and militant Hindu communities and the subtle pressure of economic and educational benefits offered to those who declared themselves to be Hindu harijans and outcasts from which communities most of the Christian converts came.

We agree with Paul Tillich that 'religion is the substance of culture and culture is the form of religion.'³ If we include ideologies which are generally substitutes for religion, then this dictum is abundantly evident across Asia. It is true of the mosaic of cultures and communities that make up the nation of India which until 40 years ago included the present Pakistan and Bangladesh. p. 50

The local church and plurality of communities

The local church which I pastor is itself a plurality of sub-religious cultures. Some of the members have a high church Anglican heritage, others come from Presbyterian or Methodist or Baptist communities, each with their own approaches to worship, witness and service in the world. In our local church worship we use Hindi, Urdu and English and we sing the Psalms in Punjabi. Most other religious communities in our town conduct worship in one language only and are generally homogeneous in life style.

In the eyes of the other communities in our town, the Christians are not just disciples of Jesus for many non-Christians also claim to follow Jesus alongside other gods and gurus that they accept. They are people who have been baptised and who have thereby separated themselves from other communities. In the eyes of the other communities baptism is the mark of belonging to the Christian community. Baptism is more than receiving Christ as Saviour and Lord. This may be an enormously disruptive step. It marks

² See Bruce J. Nicholls, *Contextualization: A Theology of Gospel and Culture*, (Downers Grove, IVP 1979) pp. 48-52.

³ Paul Tillich, *The Protestant Era*, (Chicago 1948) p. 57.

the transferring from one community to another. It has been stated that 7 out of 10 converts from Islam to Christianity in our sub-continent return to the faith of their fathers, embittered and disillusioned that the new community from which they hoped to receive so much support has not accepted them as full members nor been willing to share the benefits of their community with them.

In all Asian cultures the unit of the community is not so much the individual as the family and the kinship group. Decision-making is rarely a private affair. The community is all-important. Decision-making in marriage arrangements is primarily a negotiation between families. Love marriages are seen as threatening communal harmony. In this context it becomes painfully evident that hit-and-run evangelism by para-church groups with little accountability to the Church bears little lasting fruit and rarely leads to visible church growth. The ghetto mentality has to be broken from the inside.

Our local church in Gurgaon is thus one definable community living day by day in the midst of the majority and dominant Hindu communities and the minority communities of Sikhs and of Muslims, each with their own clearly definable worldviews, values, social institutions and customs. In addition to these religiously centred communities the families of our local church live in and mix with other types of communities. Some communities are work-orientated. Patterns of behaviour and relationship of those working in the factories surrounding our towns are very different from those of the people who [p. 51](#) serve in local schools and hospitals or in government offices. In our caste-controlled society few of our people own businesses or work in retail shops. None hold public offices in the municipality of our town. Economically, most of our Christians are lower middle class with their own homes, though a few are so poor that they are not able to afford an electric light connection.

Our town ranges from communities of rich families to slum dwellers and to a leper colony. Some families continue to live in a village lifestyle in a densely populated urban neighbourhood; others are urban born. However, none of the communities including the Christian community are static. Families are constantly moving up and down economically and socially as they move from one employment to another or to unemployment. A few are becoming very rich while perhaps half of the population are becoming noticeably poorer. Other factors facilitate rapid change, such as death in the family, natural disasters of floods and droughts and changes of ruling political parties in local and national politics. Our Christian community tend to vote conservatively in order to maintain the status quo.

The crisis of Christians in India, as elsewhere, is one of identity. Individuals, families and church communities are struggling with their identity as Christians in the midst of people of other faiths and with their identity as culturally Indian. While in all other communities religion and culture are harmonised Christians have little definable and distinct culture of their own. This is both a strength and a weakness. Our Christians are struggling with what it means to be unashamedly Christian and at the same time to be culturally Indian. 'Indianness' is an elusive concept. Many educated and observant Hindus continue to view Christianity as a foreign religion with foreign allegiances.

Dialogue in Community as a starting point

Dialogue in community becomes our starting point for all other expressions of dialogue including evangelism. The theological consultation on Dialogue in Community held at Chiang Mai, Thailand, April 1977 brought together 85 Protestants, Orthodox and Roman Catholics theologians to reflect on some of the issues raised in situations such as I have

described.⁴ The Statement adopted by the consultation⁵ is p. 52 perhaps the most biblically conservative statement to come from this sub-unit. It gives valuable insights into the nature of dialogue between communities and a valuable critique of syncretism. The issue of the relation of God's universal action in creation to his redemptive action in Jesus Christ, the work of the Holy Spirit outside the church, the nature of God's self-disclosure to people of other faiths and biblical criteria for dialogue, were referred for further study. For evangelical Christians these issues are vital to our understanding of dialogue and cannot be postponed.

What then is the role of the Christian community in its day to day relationship with people of other communities? Christians have a unique opportunity to be peace makers in the midst of communal conflicts. Our failure to be so in Northern Ireland, the Middle East, Sri Lanka, South Africa, Nicaragua and elsewhere is one of the tragedies of our time. It is a denial of the gospel and a stumbling block to others coming to faith in Jesus Christ. Never has the need for peace makers been greater than it is today. In India communal riots are regular and predictable. Daily killings by terrorists in the Punjab show little sign of abating. For some engaged in dialogue peace is the negation of conflict, the inward withdrawal from involvement in the stress of daily life. But for us dialogue means reconciliation and working together in harmony for the good of all people. In the midst of the destruction of life and property that takes place in communal rioting Christians have a unique opportunity to be apostles of peace to all who suffer, through compassionate service and rebuking those who perpetrate injustice and oppression. In the carnage that followed the Hindu-Sikh riots in New Delhi following the assassination of Mrs. Gandhi in 1984, some local churches won the respect and confidence of the bereaved Sikh families by their sacrificial service. Dialogue must be a way of life for all men and women of good will. For the Christian partner, dialogue is taking up the cross daily and following Christ. This compelling dialogue of love and compassion must also characterise the Christian life style in times of natural disasters—floods, droughts and earthquakes. In the severe drought of 1987 Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi appealed to voluntary agencies to come forward and offer their help. Unfortunately, few churches responded.

Overcoming Misunderstandings

Dialogue in community is also a commitment to overcome the misunderstandings that have built up between our religious communities. Some misunderstandings relate to past colonial rule when p. 53 churches received state protection and some missionaries were imperialistic and insensitive to these values and customs which Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims cherish. At the same time the Church must rise above its own indigenous character and welcome partnership with other Christian communities worldwide. The Church then becomes a powerful witness to a caste and class ridden society which reflects the spirit of apartheid.

Other misunderstandings are theological and hermeneutical. The difficulty for Muslims overcoming their prejudices and understanding the Christian view of Jesus as the Son of God is a case in point. So far most local churches have failed to take the initiative in inviting dialogue with the people of the temple, the gurujdwara or the mosque. The way forward may be structured meetings of local and national religious

⁴ At this consultation sponsored by the sub-unit on Dialogue with People of Living Faiths and Ideologies of the World Council of Churches, the writer and a handful of other self-confessed evangelicals attended as full participants.

⁵ *Faith in the Midst of Faiths, Reflections on Dialogue in Community*, ed. S. J. Samartha (Geneva, WCC 1977), pp. 134–149.

leaders after the pattern of the round table conference initiated by the missionary evangelist Stanley Jones a generation ago.⁶ At the same time unstructured meetings in the round of daily work in the market place or at the level of the village *panchayat* (council) are to be encouraged. Christian involvement will be costly if progress in overcoming misunderstandings is to be achieved. Jesus urged his disciples to first be reconciled with those who held something against them and then come to offer their gifts ([Matthew 5:23f](#)). Participation in true dialogue begins for the Christian partner at the Cross.

Dialogue in community for communal harmony is a prerogative for every church. Those churches which limit their ministry to evangelism may reject this perspective on mission. Such churches may appear to experience rapid church growth but may equally quietly wither and die because they have no roots in the community and no identity with the sufferings and oppression of the people. They want the fruits of the cross without the demands of the incarnation. Their gospel does not include the Kingdom of God coming on earth. They love God without loving their neighbour.

A missionary dimension and a missionary intention

A more biblical understanding of mission will include the search for good neighbourliness and communal harmony as well as evangelistic activity and the planting of new churches. These ministries though distinct, belong together, they belong to the gospel of the Kingdom of God. David Bosch in his discussion on the centrality of mission takes up H. W. Gensichen's distinction that everything the church is and **p. 54** does must have a missionary *dimension* but not everything has a missionary *intention*.⁷ Since mission belongs to the very nature of the Church, all the church's ministries must have a missionary dimension. Worship and the ministry of the sacraments have a powerful evangelistic effect though this may not be their intention. Often Hindus will attend our church services because they want to see if the Christians are really in communion with the living God. Likewise, the church's ministry to be peace makers in the midst of communal terrorism has enormous evangelistic potential though this is not their primary intention. The missionary dimension of the church is the base for its missionary intention.

Much of the contemporary debate on the primacy of evangelism over social service misunderstands the relationship of the intention and dimension of the Church's mission. It reduces theology to ideology and the church as the community of the people of God to the individualism of salvation for life after death. True dialogue in community calls the Church neither to manipulate or deceive their partners in dialogue with a hidden agenda nor to hide the truth of the Gospel and its evangelistic intent for fear of giving offence. My own experience in such dialogues with representatives of other religious communities is that openness and integrity in declaring our missionary intention is the only acceptable basis for the mutual respect of each others values and human dignity.

If dialogue in community is a way of life, then central to the Christian's participation in dialogue is the ongoing renewal of the Church. Integrity, authenticity and accountability, three essentials of any meaningful dialogue, can only flow from a church living according to its nature and mission. The 16th century reformers spoke of the *ecclesia reformata semper reformanda*—the reformed Church continually being reformed. Renewal is a call for continuous reforming of doctrine, worship and ethical behaviour according to the Scriptures and the purifying and empowering of the Church for mission

⁶ See E. Stanley Jones, *Christ at the Round Table*, (London, H&S, 1928).

⁷ David J. Bosch, *Witness to the World*, (Atlanta, John Knox Press, 1980) pp. 198–201.

in the world by the Holy Spirit. Only a renewed Church can withstand the deceitful attacks of the devil and effectively relate dialogue to the totality of the Church's ministry.

Christ calls his Church to be both a model of the new messianic community and his agent to change the world. He calls his Church to be in the world but not of the world. He calls her to be both light and salt, witnessing to the Gospel and yet penetrating the whole of society [p. 55](#) with divine goodness. Only a Church that is sanctified by the truth and protected from the evil one can be faithful in dialogue with other religious communities. True dialogue is the life style of the Church.

II. DIALOGUE IN THE BIBLICAL AND THE ECUMENICAL CONTEXTS

Dialogue in the Bible

John Stott reminds us that 'the living God of the biblical revelation himself enters into a dialogue with man. He not only speaks but also listens. He asks questions and waits for the answers.'⁸ God respects the human dignity and freedom of the men and women he created in his own image, despite their wilful sinfulness and rejection of the law. 'Come now, let us reason together,' says the Lord ([Isaiah 1:18](#)). God's incredible patience with his people suggests the dialogue lies at the very heart of God. It is significant that in his preaching and teaching Jesus Christ gave central place to question and response, whether in dealing with individual enquirers like Nicodemus or the woman at the well, or with his critics, the lawyers and Pharisees, or in his use of the parabolic method. He always invited discussion. The one exception was his confrontation with demonic powers. He rebuked Satan and commanded the evil spirits to depart from those possessed by them; he never reasoned with Satan. Christ's encounter with seeker and critic is a model for the Christian dialogue with people of other faiths. The early Church followed the same patterns. Paul engaged in dialogue in the synagogues ([Acts 17:2, 17; 18:4, 19](#)), in the market place in Athens ([Acts 17:17](#)) and daily for two years in the lecture hall of Tyrannus ([Acts 19:9](#)). In each case *dialogomai* means to discuss or reason with a view to persuade. The proclamation of the gospel and conversion to Christ was always explicitly or implicitly the goal of Paul's dialogue with Jew or Gentile.

In classical and hellenistic Greek the noun *dialogos* was used for reaching the truth through the dialectical method developed by Socrates, Plato and Aristotle. Truth was the goal of the process and not the presupposition for dialogue. There is no exact equivalent to this method in the New Testament.

The Changing Role of Dialogue in the Ecumenical Movement

Dialogue has been a concern of the ecumenical movement since the Jerusalem conference of the International Missionary Council (1928) [p. 56](#) where the 'values' of non-Christian religions dominated discussion.⁹ However up to the time of the New Delhi Assembly of the WCC (1961) the idea of dialogue was set within the framework of Christian communication. The New Delhi Assembly referred to 'dialogue as a form of evangelism which is often effective today.'¹⁰ New Delhi was a turning point for WCC. On one hand it

⁸ John Stott, *Christian Mission in the Modern World*, (London, Falcon, 1975) p. 61.

⁹ Carl F. Hallencreuts, *Dialogue and Community*, (Geneva, WCC, 1977) pp. 21-34.

¹⁰ New Delhi Report (London, SCM, 1961) Section III, *cited*, by S. J. Samartha, 'Dialogue as a Continuing Christian Concern' in *Mission Trends* No. 1. eds. Gerald H. Anderson & Thomas F. Stransky (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans 1974) p. 248.

was the high water mark of 'biblical theology', while on the other, it marked the beginning of the process of the secularising of theology and of salvation as true humanization. In the context of witnessing to the cosmic Christ present in all of life, the contemporary idea of dialogue took shape. Interest shifted from dialogue in evangelism to dialogue in God's saving work in people of other faiths. The 'discontinuity' of Henrik Kraemer and Barthian era gave way to a new understanding of the continuity of spirituality common to all faiths. Christ is present in all search for truth. Karl Rahner popularized the idea that seeking non-Christians should be thought of as anonymous Christians, while Raymond Panikkar argued that Hinduism has a place in the universal saving providence of God. He states, 'The good and *bona fide* Hindu is saved by Christ and not by Hinduism, but it is through the sacraments of Hinduism, through the message of morality and good life, through the *Mysterion* that came down to him through Hinduism, that Christ saves the Hindu normally.'¹¹

The new emphasis in dialogue became evident in the series of dialogues sponsored by the WCC—Kandy 1967, Zurich, 1970, Ajaltoun 1970, Broumana 1972. The era of direct dialogue with people of other Faiths had begun. Following several consultations the meeting of Christians at Zurich (1970) prepared a Statement on new attitudes and relationships for inter-religious dialogue for the meeting of the Central Committee at Addis Ababa (1971). Interim guidelines for dialogue were proposed. At this important meeting a separate sub-unit on Dialogue was established by the WCC.

While brief reference to dialogue had been made in the documents of the Uppsala Assembly (1968), the first real development took place at the 'Salvation Today' meeting of the Commission on World Mission p. 57 and Evangelism at Bangkok (1973) where the contribution of dialogue to the theme of the consultation was seriously considered.

This proved to be a curtain raiser for a major debate on dialogue at the Nairobi Assembly (1975) in the section 'Seeking Community: The Common Search of People of Various Faiths, Cultures and Ideologies.' Five members of other faiths were present as guests—a Jew, a Hindu, a Sikh, a Buddhist, a Muslim. The chairman, Metropolitan Gregorios (Paul Verghese) of India called for a common search for world community and not a debate on dialogue. The concern for the unity of mankind was given new priority. Dialogue as total openness was advocated by some delegates. Raymond Pannikar's statement in the preparatory document that the Christian 'goes unarmed and ready to be himself converted. He may lose his life; he may also be born again' was endorsed by Dr. Samartha at the press conference which followed the debate.¹²

As already stated, the theological consultation on Dialogue in Community held at Chiang Mai, Thailand, two years later was a generally more acceptable statement to evangelicals, even though little reference was made to evangelism and many key theological issues were not discussed. It appears that since Chiang Mai this more balanced emphasis has continued in ecumenical thinking. Evangelism is once again on the agenda. Evangelical criticism from outside the movement, the appointing of more theologically conservative staff to the WCC and the growing influence of the evangelical voice world wide are having their effect. The WCC Sixth Assembly in Vancouver (1983) stated, 'Dialogue is not a device for nor a denial of Christian witness. It is rather a mutual venture

¹¹ Raymond Panikkar, *The Unknown Christ of Hinduism*, (London, Barton, Longman & Todd 1964) p. 54.

¹² See Bruce Nicholls, *Nairobi 1975: A Crisis of Faith for WCC* (Taipei, Asia Theological Association, 1976) pp. 20–24. The author was present as an observer.

to bear witness to each other and the world in relation to different perceptions of ultimate reality.¹³

However, the question must be raised as to whether dialogue as developed in ecumenical circles has a significant role for the future. If it means only elite scholars of different faiths, all skilled in the language of cross-cultural relationships, meeting together and producing reports, then its value is questionable. Dialogue must get beyond textbook religion to the actual religious life as experienced by ordinary believers, for it is here that communal prejudices are strong and inter-communal rioting takes place. Today the major religions are experiencing the p. 58 revival of religious fundamentalism and fanaticism. The hope of achieving peace through ecumenical dialogue is fading. In the context of mounting poverty, injustice and oppression, it is not surprising that concerned Christians are turning away from dialogue and embracing the political ideologies and practices of Liberation theologies. Political theology is overshadowing dialogical theology.

Dialogue in the context of evangelism

Is there a better way to the more effective use of dialogue? We believe there is. A more faithfully biblical understanding of dialogue must be recovered. Dialogue must once more be set in the context of evangelism. The proclamation of a message of forgiveness and hope, of peace and justice undertaken in a spirit of authenticity, humility, integrity and sensitivity, to use John Stott's categories,¹⁴ is essential to dialogue becoming an effective agent of change in an increasingly violent world.

David Hesselgrave's challenge to evangelicals to 'demonstrate a new kind of bravery' in entering into a true dialogical relationship with people of other faiths, is still largely unheeded.¹⁵ Similarly, Vinay Samuel and Chris Sugden have called evangelicals to dialogical mission in the context of religious pluralism and social injustice.¹⁶

III. UNVEILING HIDDEN ASSUMPTIONS IN DIALOGUE

Advocates of ecumenical dialogue rightly condemn hidden agendas in dialogue, and any attempt to manipulate for evangelistic ends those who have received help through social service. The Chiang Mai Statement warns, 'We soundly reject any idea of "dialogue in community" as a secret weapon in the armoury of our aggressive Christian militancy.'¹⁷ This warning needs to be heeded by all Christians, protestants and catholics alike. True dialogue calls for transparent openness and integrity between partners in dialogue but without compromise or eclecticism. My observation is that nonChristian partners expect this kind of integrity from Christians. They may be offended and angry when they are told that they are already P. 59 saved by the hidden or anonymous cosmic Christ. The

¹³ *Gathered for Life*, Official Report, VI Assembly of WCC p. 40. cited by Paul Schrottenboer, 'Inter Religious Dialogue', in *Evangelical Review of Theology*, Vol. 12. No. 3, 1988 ed. Sunand Sumithra (Exeter, Paternoster Press) p. 211

¹⁴ *op cit* pp. 71–73.

¹⁵ David J. Hesselgrave, *Communicating Christ Cross-Culturally*, (Grand Rapids, Zondervan 1978) pp. 227–240.

¹⁶ Vinay Samuel & Chris Sugden, 'Dialogue with other Religions—an Evangelical View' in *Sharing Jesus in the Two-Thirds World* (Bangalore, PIM, 1983) pp. 177–204.

¹⁷ *Faith in the Midst of Faiths*, *op. cit.* p. 144.

resurgence of religious fundamentalism could be in part a reaction to the hidden agendas of Christians which are interpreted as signs of arrogance and imperialism.

In contemporary ecumenical dialogue, theological assumptions are often left undiscussed for fear of being devisive. Of these, we will limit our discussion to three areas that need open reflection—the nature of truth, the universalism of the people of God and the work of the Holy Spirit outside the Church.

Revelation: Relational or Propositional

We begin by asking, ‘Is religious truth always relative or is there a finality of truth that can be known and experienced?’ This issue turns on whether revelation is always relational or whether it is also propositional. Dr. S. J. Samartha, the former director of the WCC unit on Dialogue with People of Living Faiths and Ideologies, clearly states his position: ‘Since truth in the biblical understanding is not propositional but relational ... dialogue becomes one of the means of the quest for truth.’¹⁸ His successor, Dr. S. Wesley Ariarajah, holds a similar position. He states, ‘Rightly understood, all theology is “storytelling”. It is the framework within which one seeks to give expression to one’s experience and faith ... The danger and temptation are to hold that one “story” is more valid than the others.’¹⁹ The issue is a hermeneutical one. Evangelicals who affirm their confidence in the Bible as the authoritative and infallible Word of God hold to a gospel that is non-negotiable, because they believe in the finality of Christ in whom all Scripture finds its ultimate fulfilment. The relational and relative view of truth undergirds the existential interpretation of the Christian Faith which owes much of its inspiration to Martin Buber, Emil Brunner, Paul Tillich and Rudolph Bultmann. The dialectical process is basic to the methodology of ecumenical dialogue. For Hegel no idea had a fixed meaning or unchanging validity. In the dialectical principle of thesis, antithesis and synthesis, truth is never final. It is always relative, always becoming. The rational law of noncontradiction no longer applies. Truth is always inclusive. This creates an expectation in dialogue that opposing and mutually exclusive understandings of reality can ultimately be reconciled and harmonized. **p. 60** Hence the unity of mankind has become an attainable goal. To this assumption is added the process theology of Alfred North Whitehead and the evolutionary goals of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. It is then a short step to turn from spiritual and theological categories to those of sociology and politics. The genius of the Indian theologian M. M. Thomas lies in his capacity to utilise the marxist dialectical method to synthesise divergent lines of thought and action in terms of the process of secularization and to synthesise salvation as humanization. Since the Nairobi Assembly M. M. Thomas has forcefully advocated ‘a Christ-centred syncretism.’ Paul Knitter, the American Catholic theologian, has more recently developed the unitary principle as a new model of truth for dialogue.²⁰ He sees all religious traditions as talking about the same reality.

Incipient Universalism

The universalism of the people of God has become an assumption of many engaged in dialogue. If special revelation is only a providential evidence of God’s general and universal revelation and salvation history is the salvation of human history itself, then ‘the people of God’ become co-existent with humanity. In this context, the shift in

¹⁸ S. J. Samartha, *Courage for Dialogue*, (Maryknoll, Orbis, 1981) p. 11.

¹⁹ S. Wesley Ariarajah, ‘Towards a Theology of Dialogue’, *The Ecumenical Review* (Vol 29, No. 1) p. 5.

²⁰ Paul F. Knitter, *No Other Name?* (Maryknoll, Orbis, 1985).

emphasis from the unity of the Church to the unity of mankind becomes significant as the goal of dialogue. This leads to the view that the universal Christ is present in all religious dialogue and that Christianity is only one of many ways to God. As Ariarajah concludes, 'A theology of dialogue should take the human community as the locus of God's activity. There is nothing particular about the Christian community except that it has come to accept the event of Jesus Christ as a decisively significant event in the whole history of humankind.'²¹ Undoubtedly universalism in salvation is the central assumption in much of ecumenical dialogue today. In a pluralistic world, it is assumed to be true but it is rarely 'unpacked' and openly discussed. Is it not a subtle form of manipulation?

This incipient universalism is frequently couched in terms of a common pilgrimage. The Chiang Mai statement called Christians to participate fully in the mission of God (*Missio Dei*). It states, "To this end we would humbly share with our fellow human beings in a compelling pilgrimage."²² It then adds that as disciples of Christ we [p. 61](#) come to know him more fully as we engage in his mission in the world and enter into dialogical relationships of service with other human communities. From my own experience, I have found this to be true. In dialogue, the issues of continuity and discontinuity, of judgement and hope, have been sharpened, enriching my own theological understanding and my commitment to Christ has been strengthened. As pilgrims we are exhorted to live godly lives ([1 Peter 2:11](#)).

However, to others at Chiang Mai 'a compelling pilgrimage' meant a common search with people of other faiths to find the truth and experience salvation. This view is unacceptable to us and a denial of the grounds of Christian assurance. For the Christian, peace with God is the beginning of the road, not its goal. Salvation is by grace through faith and is not the reward for any self-denying quest ([Ephesians 2:8-10](#)). A compelling pilgrimage is a compelling discipleship of the Lord Jesus Christ. Christology is the central issue in dialogue. Jesus' question, 'Who do you say that I am?' is the central question.

Salvation as a Universal Pentecost

The question of the Holy Spirit outside the church is an increasingly compelling issue in our pluralistic world and one in which great communities of people are without a clear understanding of the gospel demands. This is no academic matter. I am the pastor of one of 16 CNI churches in the State of Haryana with its 16 million people and we are the strongest church in the State! The spiritual and eternal lostness of people outside of Christ, calls us to new faithfulness in discipleship.

While some theologians have advocated a cosmic or anonymous Christ present in every community, others have framed their response in terms of the universal work of the Holy Spirit outside the Church community. The Orthodox Metropolitan, George Khodr, in his well-remembered address at the Addis Ababa meeting of the WCC (1970) spoke of the economy of the Holy Spirit in a universal Pentecost. He suggested that 'non-Christian religions may be considered as places where his (the Holy Spirit's) inspiration is at work. All those visited by the Spirit are the people of God.'²³ Khodr added that the man of faith must wait patiently for the coming of the Lord and 'secretly be in communion with all men and economy of the Mystery within which we are moving slowly towards the final

²¹ *op. cit.*, p. 10f.

²² *op. cit.*, p. 143.

²³ George Khodr, 'Christianity in a Pluralistic World—the Economy of the Holy Spirit' in *Living Faiths and the Ecumenical Movement* (Geneva, WCC 1971) p. 140.

consummation, when all things p. 62 will be gathered up in Christ.' Once more universalism in salvation is the assumed premise of this position.

IV. THE HOLY SPIRIT ON THE FRONTIERS OF THE KINGDOM

The Holy Spirit is God's missionary to the world.²⁴ He is sent by the Father into the world as the Spirit of truth ([John 14:16](#)). He was in the world from the divine act of creation, 'Hovering over the waters' ([Genesis 1:2](#)). He energises nature and controls history ([Psalm 104:29f](#) & [Isaiah 34:16](#)). The Spirit of God in the Old Testament is God active in the whole of life and culture. He guided the children of Israel and used the rulers of the pagan nations as his servants. He prepared the people of Nineveh to turn from their evil ways at the preaching of Jonah. At Pentecost the Holy Spirit came upon God-fearing Jews and proselytes who were worshipping in Jerusalem. God has not left himself without a witness in the changing seasons of nature ([Acts 14:17](#)). He prepared the Gentile Cornelius to respond to the Word preached to him ([Acts 10:44-48](#)) and he opened the hearts of some of the educated pagans of Athens through Paul's dialoguing with them ([Acts 17:16-34](#)).

God the Holy Spirit is always ahead of the Church's witness. He goes before and prepares the hearts of those who will respond to the Good News. He is in the frontiers of the Kingdom as the Spirit of Truth—penetrating the Kingdom of Satan, the father of lies and the ruler of this world. An awareness of and sensitivity to the prevenient grace of the Spirit is foundational to a biblical understanding of dialogue. It creates a spirit of expectancy, delivers us from aggressive behaviour born out of false insecurity or over-zealous self-generated responsibility. We know that salvation is of God and we can trust him to work. Dialogue is a way of life, an attitude of mind as well as a verbal defence and proclamation of the Gospel. The testimony of the fruit of the Spirit in our lives is more important than debate or verbal persuasion. The Spirit enables us to listen as well as speak and to discern what God is already doing in the lives of the partners in dialogue. The great poet and hymn writer of western India Narayan p. 63 Vaman Tilak, a Brahmin convert, claims to have come to Christ 'over the bridge of Tukuram.' The Hindu saint of the sixteenth century, Tukuram, the worshipper of the god Vithoba, had a Spirit-filled hunger for God. In one of his poems, he cries out

'As on the bank the poor fish lies
And gasps and writhes in pain,
Or as a man with anxious eyes
Seeks hidden gold in vain,—
So is my heart distressed and cries
To come to Thee again.'

Tilak shared this hunger but found satisfaction in Christ which began in a dialogue with a missionary on a train journey. Christ fulfils all spiritual search. Professor J. N. D. Anderson the noted Islamic scholar wrote, 'I have found that converts from Islam never regard the God whom they previously sought to worship as wholly false, but rather rejoice that they

²⁴ Evangelicals took up the issue of the work of the Holy Spirit in the world with special reference to evangelization at a consultation at Oslo in May 1985 sponsored by the Theology Working Group of the Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization and the Theological Commission of the World Evangelical Fellowship. Dr. D. F. Wells was commissioned to author a book based on the material presented and the discussion of the consultation. See, David F. Wells, *God the Evangelist, How the Holy Spirit Works to Bring Men and Women to Faith* (Exeter, Paternoster Press 1987).

have now, in Jesus Christ, been brought to know and have fellowship with that God as he really is.’²⁵

As the image-bearers of God, all human beings have an insatiable longing for God or spiritual reality. Agnostic secular humanism and atheism only mask this hunger. Marxism as an ideology is not match for the spiritual power of the world’s religions, be they Christianity, Islam, Hinduism or Buddhism, as the history of Marxist Europe and Asia is now unfolding. Those religions that are able to offer a wholistic view of life are having the strongest appeal.

Every day millions of people in India repeat the prayer recorded in the Brihadarayaka Upanishad:

‘From the unreal lead me to the real
From darkness lead me to light
From death lead me to immortality.’

The renewal of the Hindu way of life, fuelled by national TV serials on traditional religious epics, is the most powerful force in Indian society today. That 10–15 million pilgrims could bathe in the Ganges during the Kumbh Mela at Allahabad on one day (6th February 1989) which was auspicious for the washing away of sins, is visible evidence of this fact. This spiritual search creates an atmosphere of openness that is conducive to genuine dialogue, but only when the Holy Spirit is in our midst. Therefore prayer is an essential component of living dialogues.

However, we must not lose sight of the reality of satanic presence in p. 64 every dialogue, for all human beings are fallen beings and we are ever rebelling against God and rejecting his Law. Sin pervades the whole of life and taints and perverts all of culture. (Lausanne Covenant par. X) so that all people and all societies are idolatrous in all their acts, whether the symbols are visible and material, as in Baal worship or Hinduism or spiritual and relational as immorality and covetness ([Colossians 3:5](#)). The rebellious worshipper creates his god in his own image, and then seeks to manipulate deity through symbolic or magical rituals and *mantras*. Forsaken by God, the idolator becomes a slave of his own creation. Paul’s account of this process ([Romans 1:18–32](#)) is a salutary reminder that serious dialogue is an engagement with evil as well as good. Thus dialogue is warfare as well as reconciliation and peace. Judgement precedes hope, discontinuity is inseparable from continuity and we should not shrink from either. The Holy Spirit convicts the world of guilt in regard to sin and righteousness and judgement ([John 16:8](#)) as well as guiding into all truth ([John 16:13](#)) and the way of peace and discipleship ([John 20:21f](#)).

CONCLUSION

In the light of the issues discussed in this chapter, a number of conclusions are suggested

a) Dialogue is only authentic when the Holy Spirit is present, convicting of sin and leading into all truth. We dare not go ahead of him; we must let God do his own work. As Christian partners, we are called to patience, to transparent honesty and openness and to a sensitivity to the work of the Spirit in others as well as ourselves. We go into dialogue resting in the confidence that God the Holy Spirit is in our midst.

b) The Christian in dialogue must be Christ-centred. He or she must know him in whom they have believed, and have the inner witness of the Spirit of their own salvation

²⁵ Sir Norman Anderson (ed) *The World Religions* (London, IVP, 1975) p. 236.

in Christ. The Christian partner must with humility and grace confess that there is no other name by which salvation comes.²⁶ We acknowledge that the gospel itself is not negotiable, though others may help us to see our own misunderstandings of the gospel. A Christ-centred approach to dialogue will involve a costly identification in the sufferings, hurts and fears of others and obedience to the way of the cross in self-denial. The finality of Christ precludes a false universalism in salvation. p. 65

c) Dialogue is the life style of the community. If the Church is to maintain an effective openness and witness in dialogue, it needs to be constantly transformed in all its life, theological understanding, spirituality, ethical behaviour, unity and structures, and commitment to mission in the world. *Ecclesia reformata semper reformanda*. The structures of the Church must be constantly renewed to maintain the primacy of the Church's function. In the economy of God the Church is God's agent for change. She lives on the frontiers of the Kingdom in a hostile world.

d) Effective dialogue demands that the Church live on the frontiers of mission, meeting genuine needs whenever and however they may arise. This may mean meetings with leaders of other faiths, to overcome misunderstandings, joining with other communities in times of national crisis or disaster to reduce human suffering, being peace makers in times of violence, working together for the betterment of the wider community life. It will also mean rebuking corruption and oppression in every area of living, attacking the evils institutionalised in social structures. But it will also mean faithfulness in witnessing to salvation in Jesus Christ, recognising that 'if our Gospel is veiled it is veiled to those who are perishing'. (2 Corinthians 4:3). True dialogue belongs to the mission of the Church in the same way that God enters into dialogue with the world he created and in Christ redeems. Everything the Church is and does has a missionary dimension but everything does not have a missionary intention.

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Kenya's Turbulent Bishop

A. N. S. Lane

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In this moving account of an African bishop's stand against injustice, the author raises the issue of the Church's witness in the market place of politics. Are the political and spiritual fields incompatible or complementary? Whether the bishop loved mercy and walked humbly with his God as well as acting justly (to quote the prophet Micah) is a question not answered in this article. Justice without reconciliation and peace is always in danger of becoming another form of injustice.

Editor

²⁶ See W. A. Visser't Hooft's *No Other Name* (London, SCM Press, 1963) for a valuable discussion on the dangers of syncretism and the nature of Christian Universalism.