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# Religious Pluralism and Dialogue in Evangelism: Evangelism and Human Rights

Elaine Storkey

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## Introduction

There is no culture on the globe where the issue of other faiths is entirely absent for Christian evangelism. In some cultures this is the main issue facing those who would preach the gospel: how to do it in the context of other religious voices, especially when those voices are in a powerful or vociferous majority. In other cultures, the issue is hidden beneath the appearance of secular-

ism, where Christianity is lumped together with other world religions and the majority of the population sees itself as non-religious.

I had an experience of this recently in Britain when I was asked to be interviewed on a television programme with the BBC. During her briefing of me in the pre-broadcast discussion, the researcher discovered that I regularly worked for the BBC Religious Department.

'I don't know why they carry on making those programmes', she volunteered, 'They seem so irrelevant.' 'Really,' I asked, 'What's your position, then?' 'Oh, I don't have any position', she replied. 'I just don't believe that God exists.' I explained, of course, that this was indeed a position; in fact it formed the basis of a whole view of the world which would colour every value she had and every programme she made. 'Well, maybe', she insisted, 'But I'm just normal.'

In much of western culture some form of secular religious worldview has become dominant, and it decides what is real and true for the majority. For in any culture, normality is

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**Elaine Storkey, (DD, Lambeth), president of TEAR and a member of EA UK Council, is known throughout Britain, Europe and around the world as a popular writer, speaker and broadcaster. She was Director of the Institute for Contemporary Christianity, London, and has been associated with a number of institutions including King's College, London, and the Open University. Most of her academic work is in the areas of Philosophical Theology and Sociology. She is the author of *What's Right with Feminism* (1985), *Mary's Story*, *Mary's Song* (1994—republished in 1998 as *Magnify the Lord*), *The Search for Intimacy* (1996), *Conversations* (with Margaret Hebblethwaite, 1999) and *Created or Constructed?* (2000). This paper was presented to the Theologians' Task Group at Amsterdam 2000 and is used with permission.**

defined in relation to the prevailing worldview and that worldview is inevitably religious in nature.

### Old and New Religions

Globally, the world is constituted by old religions and new religions. Old religions are still very powerful, especially in non-western cultures. Islam is growing in Africa, the Middle East and in western Europe, especially in old Catholic cultures such as France. Christianity is flourishing in parts of Asia, Africa and Latin America, but still dying in Europe; Hinduism is reasserting itself; Buddhism is becoming more and more attractive in the West; Sikhism is gaining more converts; Bahai, Confucianism, Animism and various forms of spiritism continue to flourish; almost every indigenous religion is gaining new confidence. Probably only Judaism is retrenching. It has, of course, become an important political force in the State of Israel, as Islam is a strong political force wherever it exists in a majority. But since Judaism is not an evangelistic religion it loses numbers elsewhere every year, to intermarriage and conversions.

Some faiths believe in a personal God—Christianity, Judaism and Islam are often put together as Semitic Religions. Others believe in many manifestations of God, or in many gods, as in Hinduism. Others, like Buddhism, do not focus on a faith in God but on a religious way of life. Indigenous religions have their own ancestral gods or their local forms of worship. Each major religion also has its subsections and regional derivations. Sects, cults and cultural adaptations exist in every faith.

But in addition to all these old reli-

gions, we have many new religious movements. In fact, in most of the major cities of the secularised West we would find a plethora of spiritual expressions competing for the heart and the attention of the population. Many of these are individualised, subjective, and 'quirky'. Many are secretive forms of Eastern mystic religions and contemporary New Age mythology. The majority of these faiths are highly experiential. Come with me, then, on a multi-faith tour of London. (And, for those who want to go out in the capital city of Holland, you will find something very similar in Amsterdam.)

*(Here followed a multi-faith description of London, incorporating traditional Anglicanism, Hara Krishna processions, Theosophy, Transcendental Meditation, Yoga, Hinduism, Islam, New Age spirituality shops, proselytising Islamic converts, Methodism, Levitation, Yogic flying, Natural Law, Sikhism, Paganism—Druidism, white witches, occultism. The tour ended with a large poster which decorates Picadilly Circus announcing 'Yesterday was yesterday. Live for the Present.')*

### How Do We Relate to those of Other Faiths?

It would be a mistake to assume that there is only one model for engagement. There is not. How we engage with our non-Christian neighbours depends largely on our context. I want to consider two different ways of engagement.

#### 1. To engage on issues of oppression and denial of human rights

In some cultures, the question of dialogue is an academic one.

Christians there are into survival mode, for they are being persecuted by other religions, and their greatest single challenge is faithfulness. For these brothers and sisters the typical mode of engagement is that of receiving persecution and oppression, witnessing the martyrdom of family members, and even facing their own death. The concept of dialogue is almost irrelevant here. Surviving as faithful servants of Christ overrides everything else.

Dialogue is a very pluralist concept. It occurs in those places where pluralism is a way of life—in contemporary western cultures, but also in older Asian cultures where Christianity has lived in a multi-faith context for all of its life. In cultures of oppression, pluralism is not on offer. In the Sudan, Saudi Arabia, parts of Nigeria, Pakistan, and many more places, Christians have to coexist with oppressive Islamic (and sometimes other) regimes who are not interested in any dialogue with them, only with the exercise and extension of Islam—even in law and political expression—because they believe this will please God. Yet, as Christians who understand the New Testament, and worship the Prince of Peace, we have to say that it is not pleasing to God. As St Paul found on the Damascus Road, God cannot be served by violence and bloodshed. Zealots who use persecution, torture, attempts at annihilation, coercion and oppression to spread their message are always wrong.

In these cases, the issue for the wider, global Christian community is to support brothers and sisters undergoing such persecution, to let their plight be known, and to call for the proper exercise of human rights. We have to go out of our own way to ensure that what God has given to

each person, namely the right to worship him, must not be denied by others. This means, of course, that we also must defend the rights of other faiths to worship. For God issues the call to each of us: 'Choose this day whom you shall serve.' It is our responsibility, and we stand accountable to God for the choices we make. The proper avenue for conversion is through faith, proclamation and Christian witness, not by manipulation, force or coercion.

This is pertinent to us, because Christian evangelism is often perceived as some form of racism. Jews, for example, accuse Christians of being anti-Semitic when they target Jews for evangelism. Asian people in Europe also often allege racism when their own Muslim or Hindu identity is challenged. This is an issue western Christians must face. For our cultures do not have a great record on racial equality. We are often accused of harbouring attitudes of white supremacy.

However, it is also easy to misunderstand the nature of oppression and human rights violation. I do not think that this is ever just a 'white' or colour issue. We have seen tyrannical outrages against many racial groups from those of identical skin colour. It is an issue about power. People who have power are often afraid of what might happen if it is taken from them. Many of those who have used it to their own ends fear retribution when power passes to the opposition. So, given the ubiquitous nature of human sin, those in power often find a way of reinforcing and maintaining it, even when others are silenced or violated.

Unfortunately, Christians are not exempt from this either. We can hide behind organisations and money, and not realize that they contain

people who are on a power trip, and who need to control others. This was never the way of Christ. I pray that Christians may be open to hear God on this, and be ready to relinquish power when it gets in the way of the gospel. We also need to recognize that we are called to defend the human rights of every people group. Whenever people are violated or oppressed by others, Christians should be speaking out on their behalf.

## 2. *To evangelise with courtesy and respect for other faiths*

Western Christians are to have a different approach to engagement with those who are themselves in a minority situation, whether they are Jews in the Diaspora, refugees to Western Europe and North America, immigrant groups and overseas visitors. It is important that courtesy and respect dominate the relationship. There is much fear that conversion to Christianity will erase the culture and ethnicity of those whose roots are elsewhere.

*(An example followed here about a visit to Israel and a series of seminars with Jewish rabbis on the question of 'What is a Jew?'. The argument from the Jewish side was that a Jew was anyone with a Jewish mother who had not become a Christian. So although it was possible, technically, to be Hindu Jew, it was not possible to be a Messianic Christian Jew. Although the Jewish people perceived the greatest political threat to come from their Middle Eastern Islamic neighbours, they perceived the greatest spiritual threat to their Jewish identity coming from Christianity.)*

When minority groups become religiously organised and assertive in

cultures of the North and West the concept of dialogue is of crucial importance. It is also important in cultures which are much more truly pluralist, e.g., in Hindu cultures, and in those where the gospel is being absorbed into indigenous religious situations. However, dialogue can never replace evangelism. It is a different process. The heart of the Christian gospel is that the Good News must be communicated. Dialogue is one of the processes whereby we can better understand how to do that.

## What is Dialogue?

I believe a number of features are involved in dialogue

1. A readiness to hear the other person. We come ready to have our assumptions about them challenged and to learn something new.
2. A willingness to be vulnerable. Christians often make the mistake of thinking that because the gospel is true, they themselves are always right, and those of other faiths are therefore wrong. Sometimes, we have to recognize that there are things we do not know about. We are not omniscient.
3. A preparedness to recognize what we have in common. Christians with a truly biblical theology will find that those of other faiths share many of our values and live in the same reality created by God. We should expect to find common areas.
4. A need to be sure about the basis for dialogue—both philosophical and theological. It is rooted in a biblical theology of creation, and a recognition of the universality of sin. It is not rooted in a belief

- that there are many ways to truth.
5. An openness about our own beliefs and commitment. People respect us less, not more, when we compromise our own commitments in order to be more acceptable to others.

### **A Theology of Engagement**

Whether or not Christians feel able to engage in dialogue is related to their overall theological position on engagement. Historically, there have been three main positions, often referred to as Exclusivism, Inclusivism and Pluralism.

#### **Pluralism**

Pluralism has traditionally espoused dialogue whole-heartedly. But that is often because dialogue is at the centre of their theology. It defines truth. For many pluralists, truth is a process. It is that which emerges through the process of listening to one another. It comes about in our multiple stories of faith, in their narration, dissembling, deconstruction and reconstruction. In fact, it would not be unfair to say that the only substantial theology here is a theology of dialogue, and that the central notion of truth of something is constructed, plural and, by implication, in the constant process of change.

There are many forms of pluralism. The old pluralism of people like John Hick, the philosopher, was essentially that of a secular rationalism. Although they maintained that there are many ways to truth, ultimately, human rationality decided between them. Now, however, rationalism has been dethroned and contemporary pluralism needs no arbiter. Who needs to decide? The old pluralism was not truly pluralist,

for it believed in the ultimate truth of human reason. Now pluralists accept that there are simply many truths. And of course, it is not a long step from the idea that there are many truths to the idea that there is no truth. Pluralism often disintegrates into relativism. And to say there is no truth is ultimately an absolutisation of indifference.

There are, of course, logical and epistemological problems with relativism. To start with, it cannot be articulated. What status does the statement, 'Everything is relative' have? If it is relative, then it has no universal import so can be largely ignored. If however, it is spoken with universal intent (which indeed it is) then it assumes the status of being absolute. In that case, it contradicts the very statement it is making. Yet, even though the relativist position is untenable, many hold it!

It is possible to be pluralist in an operational or political sense—that is, to acknowledge that many views about God exist and are institutionalised in organisations—without being pluralist in a theological sense. Once we separate the two, Christians can learn to handle the issue of coexistence peacefully, without being afraid of affirming relativism.

#### **Exclusivism**

For good reasons, then, evangelicals have not been known for their enthusiasm for pluralism. By contrast, they are mostly to be found in the very opposite camp, amongst the exclusivists. The position here is that we should not accept the right to existence of other religious views, let alone try to work with them. For not only are non-Christian religions fundamentally in error, they are also

dangerous. They point the way to God, but it is the wrong way. So other religions are harmful, destructive, evil and idolatrous. They worship something other than God and they lead people deeply astray.

Clearly, from this perspective, dialogue is not only unlikely, it is also unprofitable. For what dialogue can light have with darkness? What engagement can the one true faith have with idol-worshippers? By even opening up the process of listening, we could be guilty of giving space to those forces of evil, which would utilise Christian goodwill for its own evil ends.

It is important to notice that this is precisely the position taken by fundamental Islamists. They are not interested in dialogue, because they alone are right and righteous in their worship of the one true God. I believe that the results of this approach are what we are witnessing in the world today. If, as evangelicals, we believe we can hold to an exclusivism whilst still being active for those of other faiths who are persecuted, we need to show some evidence of this.

### **Inclusivism**

Many more evangelicals are now identifying themselves as inclusivists, and again there are several expressions of this position. They would say that we cannot be exclusivist in every area of our theology. If we have a fully biblical theology of creation, sin and redemption, then that gives us much scope for dialogue and even for working together in some areas. For a theology of creation helps us to acknowledge that many other religions see God as Creator. God made the world, the skies, seas, animal kingdom, and ourselves as human

beings. Most religions see human personhood and identity as derivative. We rely entirely on the activity of God. Most other religions also see God as holy, and therefore see the call for human beings to reflect and emulate the holiness of God in the ways that we live. Our theology of creation leads us to expect that other religions will all have a positive view of creation ordinances—the family, for example, and good neighbour relations, and sometimes, even the stewardship of the earth.

A theology of sin also gives us scope for dialogue. For many other religions recognize and affirm that much of what goes on in our world is the result of sin. People harm each other. There is jealousy, greed, theft, adultery, malice, murder, power-mongering. Most religions feel the weight of sin heavily. Indeed, many Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs living in Europe and North America are perplexed why Christians seem to live so comfortably with sin in their midst. (I have been in more than one multi-faith meeting where it has fallen to the Muslims to support me in my rebuke to the media or advertising industry for implicit blasphemy against Christ. Whilst the liberal Christians have been silent, on pluralist grounds, the Muslims have spoken up, on the grounds that Jesus is one of their prophets.)

It is ultimately on the theology of redemption that the issue of dialogue faces its greatest difficulty. And here, although I hold an inclusivist position, I recognize that our grounds for dialogue are shaky. For we cannot maintain anything else other than there is salvation only in the name of Jesus. And how can people call upon that name unless they have heard? And how can they hear unless we proclaim the Good News?

Consequently, Christianity has always been a missionary religion, precisely because we believe that through Jesus alone do we have our sins forgiven, and a redemptive relationship with God and each other.

Yet, it is possible to hold that only through Christ can people be saved, and yet be agnostic about the relationship between the faithful believer of another faith, and the love of God. None of us knows the secrets of the human heart, or just how the Holy Spirit works in conviction and giving knowledge about God. This does not in any way water down the salvific work of Christ, for everything depends on the Cross. Nor does it justify any inactivity in Christian evangelism and witness. But it does urge the need for humility. And it also acknowledges that the love of God is bigger than we are, and the justice of God is beyond that of human beings.

Dialogue is therefore an important way forward for us to consider, as both preparing us for evangelism and in getting to know our non-Christian neighbours. But we should never forget that Christianity is a unique journey of faith, based on the love of God in the uniqueness of Jesus Christ. At the heart of this journey is the centrality of grace.

I was recently involved in an inter-faith broadcast with the BBC World Service. The Jewish Rabbi and Islamic Professor and I were all answering questions sent in by listeners from all over the world. The discussion was courteous, good-humoured and pleasant until one question came up. It was about how we can identify the real believer from the counterfeit. We all agreed that it was by their fruits that we could know them. Then the Rabbi told us about the enormous weight of the

Law which had been given to the people of Israel, and how we would need to see some evidence of seriousness about living in accordance with God's norms and standards. The Muslim went through all the obligations to worship, the great holiness of God, the need to counter all forms of evil and infidelity, the importance of the moral law, and on and on. When it came to me, the presenter changed the question. 'What do Christians have to do, Dr Storkey?' I took a deep breath and explained that Christians did not have to do anything. We had to simply hold out empty hands to receive all that Christ had done for us. For we could not reach these standards of God's on our own. It was only through the grace of God in the work of Christ that we were acceptable.

The Islamic professor was horrified, and lectured me for many minutes on the way this would open the door for young people to do anything they wished. I had two attempts to reply, when the Rabbi finally came to my aid. Putting a hand on the Muslim's shoulder he said, 'My dear friend, you will have to accept what she says. You and I will never understand this. We are a Jew and a Muslim. But this grace is what Christians are all about. It is what makes Christianity different from every other religion.'

Dialogue, you see, had worked. This dear Jewish man now understood the heart of the gospel. And we have to leave it to him to make his own response to God. But dialogue can work for all of us, if we approach believers of other faiths with respect, courtesy, love and commitment. And if we truly know the power of God, and who it is that we believe, we do not need be afraid of listening to other people.