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Christianity and World Religions— The Ecumenical Discussion

J. R. CHANDRAN*

I have taken the topic to mean theological reflection on the discussion of the Christian response to the plurality of world religions within the modern ecumenical movement. However, because of limitations of time, I have only been able to give a rather sketchy outline of the progress of these discussions starting with the meeting of the World Missionary Conference of 1910 at Edinburgh.

The finality and uniqueness of the Gospel of Jesus Christ were the presuppositions of the missionary movement. But from the beginning of the modern missionary movement, the Protestant branch of which began in the 18th century, there were missionaries who were sensitive to elements of truth and goodness in other faiths. Ziegenbalg had written in 1710 in his unprinted *Remarkable Voyage*, "I do not reject everything they teach, rather rejoice that for the heathen long ago a small light of the Gospel began to shine." He wanted his readers in Europe to see "how far they had come by the light of their reason in the knowledge of God and of the natural order, and how by their natural powers, they often put to shame many Christians by their upright life also showing a much greater striving for the future life" (E. A. Lehmann, *It Began at Tranquebar*, Madras, CLS, 1956, pp. 31-32). However, during the two centuries that followed, the Christian missionary attitude to other religions and cultures was marked by a spirit of certainty about the superiority of the Gospel of Jesus Christ and the doctrines held by Christians. Even though the discovery and interpretation of the Hindu, Buddhist and other religious scriptures by the great orientalist like Max Müller, Paul Deussen, A.A. Macdonnel, Berridale Keith and others did challenge Christian missionary thinking, the traditional approach continued to dominate.

At the Edinburgh Conference the main concern was not the Christian response to other faiths. But the missionaries who had come from lands where they were confronted by advanced living faiths could not avoid the question. Even while affirming the uniqueness of Christ who fulfils and supersedes all other religions, and the goal of the missions as looking for the day when every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that Jesus is Lord,

* Dr Chandran is the Principal of United Theological College, Bangalore.

the Conference called for "a method of knowledge and charity in relation to other religions" and stated that, "on all lands the merely iconoclastic attitude is condemned as radically unwise and unjust." The Conference recognised that we should seek the nobler elements in the non-Christian religions and use them as steps to higher things. It was affirmed that these religions without exception disclosed the elemental needs of the human soul which Christianity alone could satisfy. At the same time it was also recognised that in their higher forms these religions plainly manifested the working of the Spirit of God. In his concluding speech, the chairman of the Conference, Dr Robert E. Speer, said that, "there is a sense in which the non-Christian religions, while they are encumbrances upon the religious life of man, are also expressions of that religious life and as we bring our faith over against them we shall not bring back into our faith what was not in our faith before, but we shall discern what we had not discovered was there before."

The discussions at the Conference were also reflective of the growing missionary as well as scholarly interest on the subject, which produced a number of important books. One of the best known was the book by J.N. Farquhar, *The Crown of Hinduism*. (London, Oxford University Press, 1915). As indicated by the title, the thesis of this book was that Christ fulfils the unfulfilled longings and aspirations of Hinduism. Many other scholars, including A.G. Hogg of Madras Christian College, pointed out that such a theory would be untenable because Hinduism did offer ways of fulfilling what it understands to be the goals of religion and what Christianity finds in Christ is not really what Hinduism was seeking. Another scholar, Rudolf Otto, in his book, *India's Religions of Grace and Christianity Compared and Contrasted* (Tr. by F.H. Foster, London, SCM Press, 1930) says, "The religion of India turns upon an altogether different axis from the Religion of the Bible, and the two cannot be regarded as 'preparation' and 'fulfilment' or as the preparatory stage and the stage of completion, as in the case with the Prophets and Psalms in relation to the Gospel, but that the passage from the one to the other religion involves a complete displacement of the axis, a saltus, not an evolutionary and gradual transition" (p. 65).

At the time of the second meeting of the Missionary Conference in 1928, held at Jerusalem, the enemy of the Christian mission was considered to be the spread of communism and secularism and the great religions of the world were regarded as allies of the Christian faith in the battle against secularism and atheism. The message of the Conference referred to different elements in the major religions as "rays of the same light." Special reference was made to worship and reverence in Islam, sympathy over the world's sorrow in Buddhism, the moral order of Confucianism and the desire for contact with ultimate reality in Hinduism. This, however, raised a controversy in missionary circles and among the theologians, the European Continentals

being on the whole critical while the British and Americans were sympathetic to the view.

The continental theological position was expressed by Julius Richter in his book, *Das Heidentum als Missionsproblem* (1928), which was reviewed by H.A. Mackintosh in *The International Review of Missions* (1928, pp. 688-90). Richter regarded the sympathetic interpretation of spiritual values in other faiths as the result of Ritschlian influence. According to Richter the Christian missionary goes not merely to offer the "heathen" something better than what he already possesses, but rather as the emissary of God and in his name to offer divine salvation. The Christian missionary responsibility is not to draw comparison but to announce the Gospel of redemption. "If the missionary is uncertain of this he should leave the mission alone."

The Anglo-Saxon writers on the contrary stressed the importance of comparative study even for the purpose of establishing the uniqueness of the Gospel. William Temple, for example, asked, "How are we to present Christ as the fulfilment and more than fulfilment of the highest aspirations of the many races of mankind unless we know sympathetically what these aspirations are?" In an article in *The International Review of Missions* of 1929, comparing the interpretation of the Christian message in the two International Missionary Conferences of 1910 and 1928, D.S. Cairns emphasised the role of Christianity in the preservation of the Greek and Roman cultures and suggested that it continued to have a similar role in relation to other cultures. "All other religions today seem crumbling before the advance of the secular spirit. But the secular spirit must itself succumb to Christianity and be transformed by it, for Christianity alone can guarantee what the best secular civilisation demands: continual progress, constancy of direction, sacredness of human personality etc." (*op. cit.*, pp. 321-331).

One of the results of the Jerusalem Conference discussions was widespread interest in comparing Christianity with other religions and the publication of a large number of books and articles. One of the concerns was how the uniqueness and universality of Christianity might be understood and affirmed. Most scholars took it for granted that the Hebrew-Greek-Roman framework for the formulation and interpretation of Christianity was definitive. Even a person like J.S. Hoyland, who was very sympathetic to India and Indian culture, writing in the *Young Men of India* in August, 1927, had assumed that India did not have any heritage like Plato and Socrates and that by accepting Christianity India would also be accepting the Hebrew-Greek-Roman cultural values. Writing in *The International Review of Missions* of 1928 (pp. 472-482), A.J. Appasamy challenged such an interpretation. He pointed out that, "The first and most natural reaction that a good many Indian Christians may have to his suggestion is one of resentment and criticism. With our deep love for the heritage of

India, we may find it difficult to believe that it has to yield to Greek philosophy. We readily acknowledge the uniqueness of Jesus and bow humbly and willingly before him, but when we are told that we must learn from Plato before we can learn effectively what Jesus taught we hesitate and wonder.”

In another article in *The International Review of Missions* in 1928, entitled “The Christian Message in relation to non-Christian Religions,” A. K. Reischauer, a missionary in Japan, challenged an earlier article of Heinrich Frick which had made the *a priori* assumption about the superiority of the Christian revelation. Frick had affirmed that Christianity should give up all other claims to superiority, such as the superiority of the Christian civilization, but still hold to the superiority of the heart of the Christian revelation. Reischauer considered this approach questionable insofar as we do not know enough about other religions and other religions made similar claims. He wrote, “What is absolutely essential is the right approach, right attitude. This involves two important qualifications: (i) true open-mindedness and (ii) actual experience of religion from within religion. Open-mindedness is readiness to acknowledge truth wherever it is found. Seeing religion from within religion is seeing it sympathetically without assuming an attitude of superiority.” He stressed the need to be aware of the relation between the heart of the Christian message and its fruits in practical living. “What is absolutely indispensable is the missionary’s conviction as to the reality and adequacy of the Christian message for his own life. If the missionary finds that his hearers already have a deep experience of the things of the Spirit, he will rejoice that God has not left himself without a witness among them, and he will share with them humbly his own experience of God through Him who came not to destroy but to fulfil.... We should not hamper our free enquiry by unnecessary assumptions as to superiority growing out of inherited beliefs, as to the exclusiveness and finality of Christianity.”

Many books appeared on the subject of Christianity and other religions. In 1933 *The International Review of Missions* reviewed six books namely,

Von Heinrich Frick : *Das Evangelium und die Religionen*

Von Walter Holsten : *Christentum und nicht-Christliche Religionen*

Edgar W. Thompson : *The Word of the Cross to the Hindus*

Von D. Dr Carl Clemen : *Der Einfluss des Christentums auf andere Religionen*

Charles Samuel Braden : *Modern Tendencies in World Religions*

Robert E. Speer : *The Finality of Jesus Christ*

Another book given in the Bibliography was :

An important contribution to the discussion of the subject was the report of the Laymen's Enquiry with W. E. Hocking as chairman which appeared under the title *Rethinking Missions* (Harper and Brothers, New York, 1932).

One chapter of this book (ch. II) had the heading "Christianity, Other Religions and non-Religion." A very critical review was made of the missionary policy in relation to people of other faiths. It was noted that people had been uprooted from their society and culture and had not been fully integrated into the Christian Community as equals with the missionaries. The "clean breach" method of the mission policy was shown to be mistaken. The fact that changes were happening within the non-Christian religions needed to be recognised. The challenge to religion from anti-religion in the Soviet Union, non-religion in Turkey and religionlessness in much of the western world meant that the real issue was not Christianity versus other religions but religion versus anti-religion or non-religion. The aim of the Christian mission, therefore, is not to proselytise but to share. "The Christian will regard himself as a co-worker with the forces which are making for righteousness within every religious system." With regard to changes taking place through mutual borrowing among religions, Dr Hockings' view was that "the unique thing in Christianity is not borrowable nor transferable without the transfer of Christianity itself. Whatever can be borrowed and successfully grown on another stock does in fact belong to the borrower. Hence all fences and private properties in truth are futile. We desire the triumph of the final truth. We need not prescribe the route."

This report asked for greater openness and sensitivity to truth and goodness in all religions and the recognition of the possibility of learning from one another and the reconception or reformulation of religions.

Quite a vigorous theological discussion followed which led to the sharpening of the missionary theology of the Continental theologians. The clearest expression of their position is found in H. Kraemer's book, *The Christian Message in a Non-Christian World*, which was written as the preparatory volume for the Third World Missionary Conference held at Tambaram in 1938. Kraemer's position was based on the theology of Karl Barth and stressed the principle of discontinuity between the Gospel and other religions, affirming that God's self-disclosure in Jesus Christ was *sui generis*.

He affirmed, on the basis of what he called "Biblical Realism," that Christ does not simply perfect what has been there before but brings radical judgement and discontinuity. The Christian should make his firm stand on the Christian Revelation which places itself over against the many efforts of men to apprehend the totality of existence. When Christianity as a total religious system

approaches the non-Christian religions as total religious systems, there is only difference and antithesis, there is no point of contact. There is no possibility of cooperation on any religious basis. The dominant themes of the book were the "absoluteness," "finality" and "otherness" of the Gospel. Empirical Christianity was, however, regarded as a religion alongside of other religions (pp. 113, 115-120, 300).

Even though many at the Conference did not agree with the conservative theological position of this book, the final statement of message adopted by the Conference was on the whole along the lines of Kraemer's theology. The statement was as follows:

There are many non-Christian religions that claim the allegiance of large multitudes. We see and readily recognise that in them ought to be found values of deep religious experiences and great moral achievements. Yet we are bold enough to call men out from them to the feet of Christ. We do so because we believe that in Him alone is the full salvation which man needs.

Mankind has seen nothing to be compared with the redeeming love of God in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. What He is for us, Judge and Redeemer, Teacher and Friend, Brother and Lord, we long to see Him become also for others.

We do not think that God has left Himself without witness in the world at any time. Men have been seeking Him all through the ages. Often this seeking and longing have been misdirected. But we see glimpses of God's light in the world of religions, showing that His yearning after His erring children has not been without response. Yet we believe that all religious insight and experience have to be fully tested before God in Christ; and we see that this is true within as well as outside the Christian Church. Christ is revolutionary. He brings conversion and regeneration when we meet him from whatever point we may have started.

Both Kraemer's book and the Tambaram message inspired much discussion of the issues raised including radical criticism of the position of "discontinuity" between the Gospel and other faiths. In India, a group of Indian theologians, P. Chenchiah, V. Chakkarai, D. M. Devasahayam and others, mostly laymen, expressed their radical disagreement with the book in a volume entitled, *Rethinking Christianity in India*. W. E. Hocking published another book, *Living Religions and a World Faith* (New York, Macmillan Company, 1940), restating more systematically what he had said in the Laymen's Report. He said, "We shall not assume that they are wrong, nor in advance of our own enquiry shall we assume that they are right; in the meantime it would certainly be a matter of shame rather than of congratulation if the

only evidence for the finality of our faith were its supernatural origin and the only evidence for its supernatural origin were our faith" (p. 64). Another critical as well as constructive response came from A. G. Hogg in his book, *The Christian Message to the Hindu*. Several other books also carried the discussion forward. But on the whole the consequence of the Tambaram findings and the impact of Kraemer's book was a certain decline of interest in the study of other religions and a tendency to evaluate other religions purely on the basis of the traditionally held Christian doctrines of God, Man, Church, Salvation, Sacraments, etc.

But even while affirming the relevance of the call for conversion to the Christian faith as the goal of evangelism, many Christian scholars and theologians openly departed from the traditional exclusive and authoritarian approach to other religions and advocated a more liberal and open-minded approach which would promote healthy dialogue between religions.

Several articles in *The International Review of Missions* carried on the discussion. An interpretative article on the Tambaram findings by H.H. Farmer entitled, "The Faith of the Church" (*IRM*, 1939, pp. 174-180) pointed out that even at Tambaram the Conference was divided between those who affirmed that there is to be discerned in the highest things in non-Christian religions evidence of God's active presence and some response of man to it and those who were unable to affirm this. Some of the other articles on the subject were: Nels Ferré on "Christianity and Karma" (*IRM*, 1940, pp. 189-198), R.C. Das: "Hinduism—the Source of its Power" (*IRM*, 1940, pp. 199-203) and Nicol Macnicol: "Is There a General Revelation—a Study in Indian Religion" (*IRM*, 1943, pp. 241-257). Nels Ferré in his own article pointed out that even his brief comments indicated how the patient study of Hinduism may help us in thinking through some of our own theological problems.

In India, the discussion on the Kraemer position of Tambaram and the position adopted by the Re-thinking Group was carried on through articles in *The Guardian*. Dr P.D. Devanandan took a position critical of both the Tambaram formulation and the Chenchiah group in an article entitled, "The Gospel for the Modern Hindu" (*The Guardian*, 1940), Chenchiah had been pleading against the concepts of "finality," "supremacy," "uniqueness" etc., as inadequate, being philosophical concepts. He was also assuming the similarity of religious experience in all religions. While agreeing with Chenchiah on the inadequacy of the philosophical categories of finality, uniqueness, etc., for interpreting the Gospel, Dr P. D. Devanandan held that the historicity of the Christ-event did make a basic difference and that, in religious experience, the Christian commitment to a wider concern for the transformation of society as integral to salvation was different from the individualism implicit in the Hindu view of salvation. At the same time Dr Devanandan also recognised the reinterpretation

of Hinduism by Radhakrishnan and others stressing the importance of human and social values of justice, respect for life, etc., as evidence of the work of the Holy Spirit in Hinduism and called upon Christians "to join hands with all Hindus who like Radhakrishnan aim at a dynamic rejuvenation of outdated Hindu theory."

As early as 1949, Professor E.C. Dewick, who had been a missionary teacher in India for many years, in his Hulsean Lectures, after examining different Christian attitudes to other religions came to the following conclusions:

In the course of our study, we have found nothing to disprove, and much to confirm the faith that through Jesus Christ, God has given a revelation of truth that is central, distinctive, supreme and satisfying for all mankind.

We do not consider that the Christian attitude excludes the possibility that God may also have truly spoken to men through other channels; and we are ready to examine all evidence adduced in favour of this without fear or prejudice.

We are told that a Christian, while recognising the reality of the difference between religions, may rightly take part in inter-religious gatherings and discussions, especially if held in an atmosphere of prayer and worship, believing that since there is in men of all races and creeds something of God's mind and spirit, those who seek the truth in sincerity will be led by him into fuller light.

(E.C. Dewick: *The Christian Attitude to Other Religions*, Cambridge University Press, 1953, p. 202).

Similar concern for openness in the Christian response to other religions has been expressed by many scholars, both Protestant and Roman Catholic, such as A.C. Bouquet, Kenneth Cragg, Ninian Smart, Geoffrey Parrinder, R.L. Slater, Paul Tillich, J.M. Kitagawa, W.C. Smith, R.C. Zaehner, and P.D. Devanandan, to name only a few.

Some of the affirmations of Paul Tillich, whose theology has influenced many towards the development of a more open attitude, deserve to be quoted. These are brought out in his book, *The Future of Religions* (ed. by J.C. Braner, New York, Harper and Row, 1966).

1. Revelation is not propositional. Revelatory experiences are universally human. One can never separate revelation and salvation.

2. Revelation is received by man in terms of his finite human situation. It is received under the conditions of man's estranged character.

3. When systematic theologians assume the significance of the history of religions, it involves the belief that there are not only particular revelatory experiences throughout human history, but that there is a revelatory process in which the limits of adaptation and the failures of distortion are subjected to criticism. Such criticism takes three forms—mystical, prophetic, secular.

4. There may be a central event in the history of religions which unites the positive results of those critical developments in the history of religion in and under which revelatory experiences are going on—an event which, therefore, makes possible a concrete theology that has universalistic significance.

5. The history of religions does not exist alongside the history of culture. The sacred does not lie beside the secular, but it is its depth. The sacred is the creative ground and at the same time a critical judgement of the secular. But religion can be this only if it is at the same time a judgement on itself.

One of the results of the new attitude of openness and objective enquiry and dialogue is the development, since about 1950, of several centres for the study of religion under Christian auspices, particularly in Asia, where facilities have been provided for members of different religions to come together for study, conferences and consultations on particular religious and social questions. Worthy of special mention are the Christian Institute for the Study of Religion and Society in Bangalore and the Roman Catholic Institute of Indian Studies at Bandra, Bombay, and similar centres for the study of religion in Sri Lanka, Hong Kong and Japan.

The development of these centres had ecumenical support through the Mission Boards of the different churches and one of the results was the decision of the Central Committee of the World Council of Churches at their meeting in Davos, 1955, to launch a study on "The Word of God, and the Living Faiths of Men" as a parallel study to the studies on "The Lordship of Christ over the Church and the World." Carl F. Hallencreutz in his book *Dialogue and Community* (W.C.C., Geneva, 1977) points out the number of books and articles which appeared on the subject during that period, particularly Kenneth Cragg's *Call of the Minaret* and Arendt Van Leeuwen's *Christianity in World History*. The East Asia Christian Conference also took great interest in the study and held consultations and conferences to promote the study.

Wider ecumenical recognition for this approach has been given through both the World Council of Churches and the Second Vatican Council. The Fourth Assembly of the World Council of Churches, meeting at Uppsala in 1968, said:

The meeting with men of other faiths must lead to dialogue. A Christian's dialogue with another implies neither a denial of the uniqueness of Christ, nor any loss of his own commitment to Christ, but rather that a genuinely Christian

approach to others must be human, personal, relevant, and humble. In dialogue we share our common humanity, its dignity and fallenness, and express our common concern for that humanity. It opens the possibility of sharing in new forms of community and common service. Each meets and challenges the other; witnessing from the depths of his existence to the ultimate concerns that come to expression in word and action. (*The Uppsala Report*, World Council of Churches, Geneva, 1968, p. 29).

Reflecting on the Uppsala decision on Dialogue, Dr Hallencreutz describes the specific Christian contributions to dialogue as follows: "For the Christian participant in dialogue, the witness to the Risen Lord is a simple act of sincerity and honesty and as such a necessity" (*Dialogue and Community*, p. 77). He further adds, "In dialogue with people of other faiths, the Christian enters into a relationship with persons with other experiences of and relations to transcendent reality and with different basic apprehensions of the totality of existence, compared with his own."

Following Uppsala, the World Council of Churches has established a Department at its headquarters in Geneva, for Dialogue with Men of Living Faiths and Ideologies, with Dr S. J. Samartha as its Secretary. Under the auspices of this Department, an important consultation was held in March 1970 at Ajaltoun, Lebanon, which had the active participation of eminent members of different religions, including several Hindus, Muslims and Buddhists from India. As pointed out in the Ajaltoun memorandum:

The particular object of the consultation was to gather the experiences of bilateral conversations between Christians and men of major faiths of Asia with full participation of members of these Faiths to experiment with a multilateral meeting and to see what could be learnt for future relations between people of living faiths...The keynote of the consultation was the understanding that a full and loyal commitment to one's own faith did not stand in the way of dialogue. On the contrary, it was our faith which was the very basis of, and driving force to, intensification of dialogue and a search for common action between members of various faiths (*Study Encounter*, World Council of Churches, Geneva, Vol. VI, No. 2, 1970, pp. 97-106; *The Ecumenical Review*, World Council of Churches, Geneva, Vol. XXIII, No. 2, April, 1971, pp. 129-142).

For the meeting of the Central Committee of the World Council of Churches held at Addis Ababa in January, 1971, the main theme was Dialogue with Men of Other Faiths and Ideologies. The main address on this theme was given by Metropolitan George Khodr of Lebanon. Speaking on "Christianity in a Pluralistic

World," the Metropolitan rejected the traditional Christian missionary attitude as dangerous and contrary to the genuine Christian spirit of the Bible. He pleaded for an attitude of "profound peace and gentle patience." He said:

There is a universal religious community which, if we are able to lay hold of what it offers, will enrich any Christian experience...What we have to do is to penetrate beyond the symbols and historical forms and discover the profound intention of religious men and to relate their apprehension of divinity to the object of our Christian hope...When we seek to understand the adherent of another religion, we should not be concerned to arrive at a descriptive account of him as an example of his particular faith, but we must rather treat him as someone who has something to teach us and something to manifest to us of God. (*Ecumenical Review*, Vol. XXIII, No. 2, April, 1971, pp. 118-128).

The outcome of the discussions at Addis Ababa on this theme was an interim statement of policy and guidelines. This statement recognised the importance of responsible dialogue with men of other faiths as a legitimate aspect of the Church's life and witness and therefore the need to prepare individuals and groups to be able to engage in religious dialogue. This statement affirms that "dialogue is concerned with much more than talking together. It is a process in which individuals and communities learn to lose their fear and distrust of each other and enter into a new confidence. It is thus a dynamic contact of lip with lip, concerned with living together and acting together" (Minutes of the Addis Ababa Meeting of the Central Committee of the World Council of Churches, January, 1971).

The quest of inter-religious dialogue was also raised at the Bangkok (1973) Conference on Salvation Today, of the Commission on World Missions and Evangelism of the W.C.C. At this Conference, a visit to a Buddhist Monastery was arranged and discussions were held with the Buddhist monks. The Statement from Bangkok reaffirms and strengthens the Uppsala emphasis on dialogue.

The dialogue approach for Christian response to other faiths had also been strengthened by a number of books which had appeared during the decade. Of these special mention may be made of a few:

Raymond Pannikar: *The Trinity and World Religions* (Bangalore: CISRS, 1970)

W.C. Smith: *The Faith of Other Men* (New York: New American Library, 1975)

W.C. Smith: *Questions of Religious Truth* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1967)

John Hick: *God and the Universe of Faiths* (London: Macmillan, 1973)

John Hick (ed.): *Truth and Dialogue—the Relationship between World Religions* (London: Sheldon Press, 1974)

M.M. Thomas: *Man and the Universe of Faiths* (Bangalore: CISRS, 1975)

W.C. Smith urges that we give up the quest for the essence of religion and the judgemental evaluation of true or false among religions. Even the attempt to describe what it means to be Christian, Hindu, Buddhist etc., is to be abandoned. For him the end of religion is God, and when God appears vividly before us in his depth and love and unrelenting truth all else dissolves and the concept of religion is brought to an end.

John Hick speaks of the need for a Copernican revolution, replacing the centrality of Jesus Christ by the centrality of God. For M.M. Thomas, "the common humanity and the self-transcendence within it, more especially the common response to the problems of humanisation of existence in the modern world rather than any common religiosity or common sense of the Divine, is the most fruitful point of entry for a meeting of faiths at spiritual depth in our time."

The next major ecumenical discussion on Christian response to world religions took place at the Fifth Assembly of the World Council of Churches at Nairobi in 1975. One of the sections of the Assembly had the theme "Seeking Community: The Common Search of People of Various Faiths, Cultures and Ideologies." At Nairobi there was considerable opposition from those with Barthian and Conservative Evangelical orientations to the continuance of the Dialogue Secretariat. As a result, the Section on Seeking Community produced a very cautiously worded report. The following paragraphs illustrate the caution expressed.

But is there also a theological basis on which Christians should seek community with their neighbours of other faiths and convictions? Several answers were given to this question. Many stressed that all people have been created by God in his image and that God loves all humanity. Many believed that in a world broken by sin it is the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ which provides the basis for the restoration of the creation to the wholeness. Others would seek this basis for community in the trinitarian understanding of God. Still others find theological meaning in the fact that history has removed and is removing geographical and cultural barriers which once kept us isolated and so is moving us towards one interdependent humanity. In all this discussion we encountered the question of a possible double basis for our search for community. Christians have a specifically theological basis for such a search. Is there also a common basis which should be mutually acceptable to people of differing faiths and ideologies? Considerable difficulty was experienced about this and no agreed conclusion

reached. It would appear, however, that in practice in particular situations men and women of various cultures, faiths, and ideologies can enter into community together, although their own understandings of their motivations will vary.

The question was discussed whether we can posit that Jesus Christ is at work among people of other faiths. Here opinions differed. Some stated as their conviction that Jesus Christ as Saviour is not present in other religions, although they accepted the idea of a natural knowledge of God. Others acknowledged the presence of *logoi spermatikoi* (scattered seeds of truth) in other religions but stressed that only in Jesus Christ do we receive fulness of truth and life. Others gave first-hand testimony that their own faith in Jesus Christ had been greatly deepened and strengthened through encountering him in dialogue with those of other faiths. The point was also made that the Spirit works among people outside Israel and outside the Church, and that this Spirit is one with the Father and with the Son.....

Dialogue also varies in accordance with the nature of the partner. There is a very special relationship between Christianity and Judaism. The three West Asian religions, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, have a close historical relationship and theological inter-connections. The relation between Christianity and East Asian religions has a different history. Traditional religions in Africa and elsewhere have yet another kind of relationship to Christianity.

Even such a cautious stance was opposed by some theologians like Roger Mehl of the Reformed Church of France as "dangerously close to syncretism." But voices from Asia and from missionary theologians acquainted with the dialogue programmes helped the Assembly to take a more balanced view and the report of the Section was commended to the churches for study and action. The Assembly report has also extensive quotations from the statements made by me and Dr Lynn de Silva of Sri Lanka. Part of my statement was as follows :

This development is not simply the consequence of human considerations of tolerance, religious harmony, and peace. On the contrary, it is deeply rooted in our confession of Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour and our commitment to the trinitarian faith. The theology of creation affirms the presence and the work of God in all cultures. Our confession of Christ as Lord is an affirmation that he is Lord, not only of Christians, but of all peoples. He is the Logos who holds all things together. He is the light which lightens everyone. It is in him all things and all peoples are to be united.

We also need to acknowledge that we have not yet fathomed the depths of the unsearchable riches of Christ and our knowledge of him must never be absolutized or identified with the fulness of the reality of Christ. It is the Holy Spirit who leads us into all truth. He does this by interpreting Christ to us and by helping us to learn from one another's experience of Christ. In a genuine sense, our knowledge and experience of Christ is enriched by the response of the people of other faiths. Witnessing to Christ is, therefore, a two-way movement of mutual learning and enrichment.

The Church which evangelizes is also evangelized in the sense that its knowledge and experience of Jesus Christ and his gospel is deepened by the response of those to whom the gospel is proclaimed. This is true also because Christ whom we proclaim and witness to is greater than our knowledge and experience of him. We do not possess him. He possesses us and all peoples. Discerning and making manifest his presence in the faith and experience of others is also part of the process of our witnessing to him.

Therefore those who preach Christ to people of other faiths should also be willing and expectant to learn about the fulness of the reality of Christ by listening to what they have to say in witness of their faith. Only through such dialogue can we grow into the presence of Christ and deepen and enlarge the catholicity of the Church.

We would like our brethren who are concerned about the commitment to the great commission of our Lord and the dangers of syncretism to be willing to listen to the testimony and insights of those who have more intimate knowledge of our faiths and are in no way committed to Jesus Christ and his mission. We plead that they avoid the mistake of making judgements on the basis of traditional doctrines without the knowledge of other peoples and their faiths, and thus failing to grow into the fulness of Christ.

Lynn de Silva shared his convictions on dialogue which were based on his experience of actual dialogue with Buddhists :

1. Dialogue does not in any way diminish full and loyal commitment to one's own faith, but rather enriches and strengthens it. Many have borne testimony to this fact.
2. Dialogue, far from being a temptation to syncretism, is a safeguard against it, because in dialogue we get to know one another's faith in depth. One's own faith is tested and refined and sharpened thereby. The real test of faith is faiths-in-relation.
3. Dialogue is a creative interaction which liberates a person from a closed or cloistered system to which he

happens to belong by an accident of birth, and elevates him to spiritual freedom, giving him a vision of wider dimensions of spiritual life by his sharing in the spirituality of others.

4. Dialogue is urgent and essential for us in Asia in order to repudiate the arrogance, aggression and negativism of our evangelistic crusades which have obscured the gospel and caricatured Christianity as an aggressive and militant religion. As a result of this Jesus Christ appears in the eyes of people of other faiths as a religious Julius Caesar, as one of our honoured guests from another faith present in this Assembly put in one of our Section's meetings. Let us remind ourselves that Jesus Christ was not a Christian—he belongs to all—but we have made him appear as a western Christian of an affluent society, somewhat like a Julius Caesar.

5. Dialogue is essential to dispel the negative attitude we have to people of other faiths, which makes proclamation ineffective and irrelevant. A negative attitude invites a negative response: if we are not prepared to accept the others in love they will not accept us...Above all, dialogue is essential for us to discover the Asian face of Jesus Christ as the Suffering Servant, so that the Church itself may be set free from its institutional self-interest and play the role of a servant in building community—the community of love or the Kingdom of God.

An important insight which emerged at Nairobi was that "Dialogue in Community" is what makes dialogue meaningful and purposive. As a follow-up from the Nairobi debate, consultations were planned on Dialogue in Community. One such consultation was held in Chiang Mai in April 1977 and its report has been published under the title, *Faith in the Midst of Faiths—Reflections on Dialogue in Community* (ed. by S.J. Samartha, WCC, Geneva, 1977). The statement adopted at the end of this consultation had a section on the theological significance of people of other faiths and ideologies. It says, "As we engage in this faithful 'dialogue in community,' with people of other faiths and ideologies we cannot avoid asking ourselves penetrating questions about their place in the activity of God in history. We should remind ourselves, however, that we ask this question not in theory, but in terms of what God may be doing in the lives of hundreds of millions of men and women who live in and seek community together with ourselves, but along different ways. So we should think always in terms of people of other faiths and ideologies rather than of theoretical, impersonal systems" (p. 145). The statement also raises the issue of syncretism and warns against two dangers. The first danger is that in attempting to "translate" the Christian message for a cultural setting or in approach to faiths and ideologies with which we are in dialogue partnership,

we may go too far and compromise the authenticity of Christian faith and life. The second danger is that of interpreting a living faith not in its own terms but in terms of another faith or ideology. In this way we may syncretise "Christianity by seeing it as only a variant of some other approach to God or we may wrongly syncretise another faith by seeing it only as a partial understanding of what we Christians believe that we know in full" (p. 148f).

As a result of the different ecumenical, consultations, the World Council of Churches adopted some guidelines for Dialogue for Study and Action by the churches at the meeting of the Central Committee held in Kingston, Jamaica, in January, 1979. One of the guidelines is that partners in dialogue shall be aware of cultural loyalties. "Dialogue and sensitivity to neighbours need to be developed in the area of relating Christian faith to cultures...A culture should not be romanticised or made into a false absolute but it may often challenge and enrich the expression of the Christian faith" (*Guidelines on Dialogue*, WCC, Geneva, 1979, p. 20).

In conclusion the *Guidelines* say: "To enter into dialogue requires an opening of the mind and heart to others. It is an undertaking which requires risk as well as a deep sense of vocation. It is impossible without sensitivity to understand the richly varied life of humankind" (p. 22).

In reflecting on the significance of the dialogue approach as the basic Christian response to other religions, I would like to refer to two points in the New Testament witness itself which have a bearing on our approach to people of other faiths.

The first is with regard to the frontier for the Christian mission. In the New Testament the frontier is not that between Christianity as a religion and other religions. The goal of evangelism was to call people to believe in Jesus Christ and not to make people simply give up their religion and adopt Christianity as a religion. To begin with the disciples continued within the Jewish religion. Faith in Christ did not imply giving up Judaism. The issue with regard to Gentile converts was whether they had to become Jews in order to benefit from the Christian faith. The answer given by the first Missionary Council in Jerusalem was that it was not necessary. The main point was that the faith in Christ should be witnessed to by giving up the things recognised as evil and not necessarily by joining an already organised religious community. What the evil things are that people should give up when believing in Christ can be determined only in the light of the situation and cannot be formulated for all time.

There are not many references to other religions in the New Testament. But there is no indication of categorical condemnation of other religions by either Jesus or his apostles. The only references we have suggest an attitude of respect for people of other faiths. In the well known parable Jesus tells an orthodox Jew,

“Go and do like what the Samaritan did” (Lk. 10:29-37). This amounts to saying that the Jews had to learn from the Samaritans whose religion the Jew had traditionally despised. Jesus took every opportunity to point out what was good in the faith of others with whom he came in contact such as Samaritans (Lk. 17: 12-19), the Syrophenician or Canaanite woman (Matt. 15:21-28) and the Roman Centurion (Matt. 8:10-12). It is obvious that the way of recognising others as belonging to the community of faith appears to be his main concern rather than the way of excluding them. In the passage referring to the Roman Centurion, Jesus says, “Many, I tell you, will come from east and west to feast with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the Kingdom of heaven. But those who were born to the Kingdom will be driven out” (Matt. 8:11-12; cf. Lk. 13:29). It is precisely the affirmation of such views which brought him into conflict with the Pharisaic leaders of his time. In the teaching of the Apostles also we find that people acceptable to God are not limited to any particular religion. In the Book of Acts, Peter, who had come from a rather narrow Jewish background, learns the lesson that “God has no favourites, but that in every nation the man who is god-fearing and does what is right is acceptable to him” (Acts 10:34-35). The author of the First Epistle of John, in dealing with a controversy which had divided the early Christian community, tells the congregation, “If you know that he (God) is righteous, you must recognise that every man who does the right is his child” (1 Jn. 2:29). The boundary or frontier for the Christian mission is that between light and darkness, righteousness and wickedness, good and evil and not that between Christianity as a religion and other religions. It is one of the mistaken developments in Christian history which made the missionary frontier identical with the frontier between Christianity formulated and organised in particular forms and other religions. Only Christ and no formulation of Christ can determine the frontier.

The second point about the Christian mission we learn from the New Testament is that it is an expression of God's love and not judgement. It is described as a ministry of reconciliation. St. Paul describes the work of Christ accomplished through his death on the Cross as having taken away the middle wall of hostility separating the Jew and the Gentile and making the two into one new man (Eph. 2:11-16). Christian Baptism is also a sacrament which receives its meaning and content from its link with the Baptism of Jesus. We are baptised into Christ, his Baptism, his death and his resurrection (Rom. 6:3-4; Gal. 3:26-29). In his Baptism Jesus identified himself with a sinful humanity, not allowing his sinlessness and righteousness to stand as a barrier between him and other men, but making that identification the key to the righteousness of God. Therefore Paul says that when we are baptised into Christ all distinctions of Jew and Greek, slave and free man and even male and female are transcended.

Baptism is incorporation into the one new humanity which Jesus has brought into being through his reconciling ministry. Baptism, rightly understood, therefore, is the sacrament of inclusive identification with the humanity with which Jesus identified himself. It is the sacrament of commitment to belong to inclusive humanity, overcoming all temptation to belong to exclusive groups determined by different kinds of divisive principles such as religion, race, language, culture, moral standards, class and the like. If there is any justification for the concept of "separation" associated with Baptism, it can only be separation from the exclusiveness and divisiveness which characterises man in his fallen state.

Unfortunately, Christian Baptism has been too much associated with the scandal of exclusiveness. The Christian affirmation is that Christ came not to judge and to condemn but to forgive and to save, not to divide but to unite, not to separate but to reconcile. But the Christian practice of mission and Baptism has added to the divisiveness of humanity. The mission which was to be a blessing for humanity for the healing of its distortions and divisions has been changed into a curse. If Christian mission is to be rooted in God's love seeking to bring reconciliation and inclusiveness, then the mission frontiers should be recognised as those where the missionary will promote love, understanding, removal of barriers and reconciliation in human relations.

Let me conclude with the words of Robert D. Young's summary on the re-examination of dialogue in his book *Encounter with World Religions* (Philadelphia, Westminster Press, 1970):

If we know the absolute only relatively, if there is inherent weakness in propositional truth, if the goal of the devotee to a revelation is to know an ultimate reality who/which saves rather than to accumulate systematic knowledge and if the logos en arche deepens with mystery the presentation of logos en sarx, then the theological method of dealing with other religions must always be that of dialogue.