

Dialogue, Interfaith

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The struggle to comprehend the relationship between Christianity and other religious traditions has been an important issue from the beginnings of the church.* Christian faith* was born in a Jewish milieu. Inevitably it soon came into contact with the Graeco-Roman world. When persons who were not of Jewish origin became Christians, controversy erupted over the basis of their common life in a religious community made up of Jews and Gentiles (Acts 15; Gal. 2). In his letter to the Romans, Paul seeks to clarify theologically the relationship between the Jewish religious tradition and the Christian faith, which by then were beginning to be seen as two distinct religious groupings. Writing to the Corinthians, Paul gave pastoral advice to people who had become followers of Christ but had partners in marriage who continued to remain in another religious tradition (1 Cor. 7:12-16).

The writings of the early church also show that there were divergent schools of thought on how to understand and relate to religious life that was not based on Christian convictions. The history of Christianity is also the history of Christian relationships, for the most part conflictual, with other faith traditions. This survey confines itself to the period of the modern ecumenical movement and to the development of the concept and practice of interfaith dialogue inspired by and structured within it.

Historical background

The world missionary conference at Edinburgh in 1910 is commonly accepted as marking the beginning of the modern ecumenical movement. This conference appealed to the 1200 delegates sent by missionary societies and so-called younger churches (a total of only 17) to bring about the evangelization of the world in that generation.

The question of Christian understanding of and relationship to other religious traditions was a central issue in Edinburgh, and the section that dealt with the missionary message in relation to non-Christian religions was by common consent the finest of all the reports produced at Edinburgh. It spoke of the Christian encounter with the religious traditions of Asia, for example, as being of the same order as the meeting of the New Testament church with Graeco-Roman culture, demanding fundamental shifts in Christian self-understanding and theology. While the evangelistic thrust predominated in the overall Edinburgh message, the discussions there stimulated scholarly interest both in comparative religion and in exploring the Christian relation to other faith traditions. An influential book of the period was J.N. Farquhar's *The Crown of Hinduism*, which argued that Christ fulfilled the longings and aspirations of Hinduism.

By the time of the next international missionary conference (Jerusalem 1928), considerable controversy had arisen within the missionary movement over the approach to other religious traditions. Some European theologians detected in liberal Protestantism, especially in the USA, troubling arguments, however tentative, in support of a universal religion.* There was also deep concern that what was considered "syncretistic thinking" with regard to Asian religions was undermining the importance and urgency of Christian mission.* But the issue that dominated the Jerusalem meeting was rising secularism in both East and West (see secularization). While asserting that the Christian gospel provided the answers to a troubled world, the conference

affirmed the “values” in other religions and called on Christians to join hands with all believers to confront the growing impact of secular culture.

But some participants could not agree with Jerusalem’s positive affirmation of other faiths and maintained that the Christian gospel is unique among religious traditions. Thus, even though the message was unanimously accepted (largely due to the drafting skills of William Temple), the Christian attitude to other faiths became a highly controversial issue shortly after the Jerusalem meeting. At the heart of the post-Jerusalem dispute was the *Report of the Commission of Appraisal of the Laymen’s Foreign Mission Enquiry*, edited by W.E. Hocking, which criticized the exclusive attitude of Christians towards other faiths and claimed that the challenge to the Christian faith came not from other faiths but from anti-religious and secular movements. In response, the leadership of the missionary movement commissioned Hendrik Kraemer, the well-known Dutch missiologist then working as a missionary in Java, to write a book on the biblical and theological basis of the Christian attitude to other faiths. Kraemer’s *The Christian Message in a Non-Christian World* became the preparatory study book for the next international missionary conference in Tambaram, India, in 1938.

Kraemer, following Karl Barth, insisted that the biblical faith, based on God’s encounter with humankind, is radically different from all other forms of religious faith. Admitting that God’s will shines through, albeit in a broken way, in the all-too-human attempts to know God in all religious life, Kraemer maintained that the only true way to know the revealed will of God is by responding to the divine intervention in history in Christ. Both Barth and Kraemer considered Christianity as a religion to be as human as any other. But neither could avoid giving, at least by implication, a unique place to Christianity in so far as it had become the vehicle through which the unique revelation* of God is lived and proclaimed.

Despite Kraemer’s impact on Tambaram and subsequent missionary thinking, there were many dissenting voices. A.G. Hogg, H.H. Farmer, T.C. Chao and others challenged Kraemer’s view that the gospel was in discontinuity with other religious traditions. They witnessed to what they were convinced was a “two-way traffic” between God and the human soul in the religious life and experience of others. It was inconceivable to them that God had no witnesses among the nations of the earth. All participants agreed on the special revelatory character of the Christ event, but many had difficulty with Kraemer’s view of religions as “totalitarian systems” of human thought and practice. Thus, although the Tambaram report leaned heavily towards Kraemer’s views, it acknowledged that “Christians are not agreed” on the revelatory character of other religious traditions and identified this as “a matter urgently demanding thought and united study” within the ecumenical movement.

Post-Tambaram developments

Not long after Tambaram, Europe became embroiled in the second world war, and other concerns demanded the attention of the missionary movement. When the International Missionary Council* (IMC) turned its attention again to Christian relations to other faith traditions once the war was over, it was a different world. Nationalism was sweeping through the newly independent states in Asia and Africa, and with it came a revival of religious traditions. The churches, awakened to the need to express their unity in a world shattered by war, had come together in Amsterdam in 1948 to form the WCC. Both the IMC and the WCC’s department on evangelism were eager to follow up on the unfinished Tambaram debate on other faiths.

One of the strategies adopted was to set up a number of study centres around the world that would address the question in concrete historical situations. Another was a long-term joint study on “The Word of God and the Living Faiths of Men”, which sought to take the discussion beyond Tambaram and the continuity-discontinuity polarity.

A great deal of attention was focused on Asia, where outstanding work on the issue was carried out by Paul Devanandan, D.T. Niles, Sabapathy Kulendran and others. Devanandan’s address to

the New Delhi assembly of the WCC (1961) – at which the IMC was integrated into the WCC - challenged the churches to take seriously the experience of the younger churches in the newly independent countries, where they had to work and struggle together with peoples of different religious traditions in nation-building.

In this context the concept of dialogue appears in the New Delhi statement as a way of speaking about Christian relations with people of other faith traditions. This was further considered at the first world mission gathering under WCC auspices in Mexico City in 1963. A more significant discussion took place at the East Asia Christian Conference assembly in Bangkok in 1964. Its statement on “Christian Encounter with Men of Other Beliefs”, incorporating much of the re-thinking in Asia in relation to other faiths, took the debate at many points beyond the Tambaram controversy.

A WCC conference in Kandy, Sri Lanka, in 1967, proved to be a landmark both as the beginning of serious interest in interfaith dialogue as such in the WCC, and as the first involvement in the ecumenical discussion of the Vatican Secretariat for Non-Christians. In Kandy Kenneth Cragg challenged in a fundamental way the Barth-Kraemer attitude to religions that had so dominated Protestant thinking during the previous decades.

Developments within the Roman Catholic Church

There were in fact significant differences between Protestants and Roman Catholics in their general theological orientation towards other religions. The Protestant missions tended to place enormous emphasis on Christology and on the need to respond to the message of the gospel as a way to salvation.* While the attitude to other faiths had not always been negative, it had tended to be neutral at best on the question of salvation outside a response to Christ. This gave rise to a sense of urgency to bring the message of the gospel to the nations of the world.

Roman Catholic theology placed greater emphasis on ecclesiology. Salvation is a free gift of God* offered in Christ to one who has faith in Christ. This faith is expressed by being baptized and becoming part of the church, which was instituted by Christ to carry on his saving work. Within the overall concept of the church as the sign and sacrament of the saving work of Christ available to all humankind, Roman Catholic theology could provide for the possibility of salvation to those who had not explicitly become members of the church. With reference to those who had lived before the ministry of Jesus and those who had had no opportunity to hear the message, Roman Catholic theology developed the idea of “implicit faith” or “faith by intention”, so that no one was “lost” simply because he or she was born at a particular time or place which made it impossible to become part of the historical expression of the church. Salvation offered in Christ is mysteriously available to all who seek to fulfill the will of God; it is possible to be incorporated into the sacrament of the paschal mystery, the church, by intention.

These thoughts were developed in the 1960s by French cardinal Jean Daniélou and German theologian Karl Rahner. In so doing these two prominent Catholic thinkers spelled out the theological implications of some of the positive developments at the Second Vatican Council regarding the question of other faiths.

The Roman Catholic Church (like the WCC and many of its member churches) has had a long history of relating to the Jewish people. During Vatican II* it was decided that a similar relation should be developed with the followers of other religions as well. Pope Paul VI thus established a special secretariat (later a pontifical council) for relationships with non-Christians; and the papal encyclical *Ecclesiam Suam* emphasized the importance of positive encounter between Christians and people of other faith traditions. The Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions (*Nostra Aetate*), promulgated on 28 October 1965, spelled out the pastoral dimensions of this relationship. Other key Vatican II documents, such as the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (*Lumen Gentium*) and the Decree on the Church’s Missionary Activity

(*Ad Gentes*), included important pointers to a dialogical attitude towards people of other religious traditions.

Although Vatican II did not develop clear theological positions on other religions, it did, by opening up the issue in the direction of interfaith dialogue, mark a new phase in the relationships of the Roman Catholic Church, in all parts of the world, with people of other faiths. The preparatory materials for the Kandy meeting included *Nostra Aetate* and parts of *Lumen Gentium*.

The dialogue controversy

The Kandy meeting affirmed dialogue as the most appropriate approach in interfaith relation; and after the Uppsala assembly (1968) the WCC commission on World Mission and Evangelism engaged Stanley J. Samartha of India to pursue with greater intensity a study begun some years earlier on "The Word of God and the Living Faiths of Men". A turning point in this study was the first multifaith dialogue convened under WCC auspices: Hindu, Buddhist, Muslim and Christian participants came to Ajaltoun, Lebanon, in 1970, not only to consult about inter-religious dialogue, but also actually to engage in it. Two months later, a WCC consultation in Zurich evaluated theologically the experience of dialogue in Ajaltoun and produced a report that became the fundamental document on the basis of which the WCC central committee, meeting in Addis Ababa in 1971, created a new Sub-unit on Dialogue with People of Living Faiths and Ideologies, with Samartha as its director.

The establishment of the Vatican Secretariat for Non-Christians and the WCC Sub-unit on Dialogue heightened the visibility of interfaith dialogue in the life of the churches. The secretariat published materials promoting interfaith dialogue and encouraged closer collaboration between Christians and others in local situations. The WCC Dialogue Sub-unit organized bilateral dialogue meetings with Jews, Muslims, Hindus and Buddhists and sought to clarify the meaning and significance of interfaith dialogue.

Basically, interfaith dialogue was understood as an encounter between people who live by different faith traditions, in an atmosphere of mutual trust and acceptance. Dialogue did not require giving up, hiding or seeking to validate one's own religious conviction; in fact, the need for being rooted in one's own tradition to be engaged in a meaningful dialogue was emphasized, as were common humanity and the need to search in a divided world for life in community. Dialogue was seen as a way not only to become informed about the faiths of others but also to rediscover essential dimensions of one's own faith tradition. The benefits of removing historical prejudices and enmities as well as the new possibilities for working together for common good were recognized and affirmed.

Within this general framework individual theological explorations have yielded a variety of points of view. Some see dialogue primarily as a new and creative relationship within which one can learn about and respect others but also can give authentic witness* to one's own faith. Others see it as an important historical moment in the development of religious traditions, in which each of the faith traditions in dialogue is challenged and transformed by the encounter with others. Still others view dialogue as a common pilgrimage towards the truth, within which each tradition shares with the others the way it has come to perceive and respond to that truth.

Within the Christian tradition, the practice of dialogue has raised questions regarding the theological assumptions about other faiths at the heart of Christian mission. Suspicion of interfaith dialogue among some Christians surfaced in the open controversy at the WCC's fifth assembly (Nairobi 1975). For the first time, five persons of other faiths were invited to a WCC assembly as special guests and took part in the discussions of the section on "Seeking Community", where the dialogue issue was debated. Plenary discussion of the report of this section highlighted the deep disagreement within the church on the issue of dialogue. Fears were expressed that dialogue would lead to the kind of syncretism* against which the 1928 Jerusalem meeting warned, or that it would compromise faith in the uniqueness and finality of the revelation in Christ, or that it would

threaten mission seen as fundamental to the being of the church itself. As in Tambaram, Asian voices in particular defended dialogue as the most appropriate way for the church to live in a pluralistic world. The assembly referred the report back to the drafting group, which added a preamble to meet the hesitations expressed at the plenary.

But Nairobi made clear the urgent need to clarify further the nature, purpose and limits of interfaith dialogue and to give more detailed attention to issues of syncretism, indigenization, culture,* mission, etc. Evaluating the debate, the WCC central committee authorized a major theological consultation to pursue further the questions raised at the assembly. That meeting, on the theme "Dialogue in Community", held in Chiang Mai, Thailand, in 1977, aimed to clarify the Christian basis for seeking community with others and to draw up guidelines for Christian communities in pluralistic situations, in order that they might become communities of service and witness, without compromising their commitment to Christ.

The Chiang Mai consultation affirmed that dialogue is neither a betrayal of mission nor a "secret weapon" of proselytism but a way "in which Jesus Christ can be confessed in the world today". The Chiang Mai meeting led to the formulation of "Guidelines on Dialogue", adopted by the WCC central committee in 1979 and commended to the churches for study and action.

Within the Roman Catholic Church, there were similar problems. All agreed on the need to develop positive and friendly relations with people of other faiths and on the value of interfaith dialogue for mutual understanding and collaboration. But the plenary commission of the secretariat also had to draw up guidelines that dealt with the purpose and goals of dialogue so that it was seen within the overall convictions of the church; the relationship of dialogue to mission remained a persistent problem also in Roman Catholic discussions. In general, dialogue and mission have been affirmed as legitimate activities of the church. The initial guidelines sought to avoid placing dialogue at the service of mission, a view advocated by some within both the Roman Catholic Church and the member churches of the WCC.

After many revisions, arising from disagreements among Catholics on the theological basis of dialogue, a version was officially accepted and issued by Pope John Paul II in 1984 under the title "The Attitude of the Church towards the Followers of Other Religions: Reflections and Orientations on Dialogue and Mission". Like the preamble to the WCC's Nairobi report, it stressed the missionary vocation of the church, even as it sought to exhort Christians to be in a relationship of dialogue with others. But the pressure to clarify further the dialogue-mission relation was so great that, not long after the proclamation of this statement, the secretariat had to begin work on a document that specifically dealt with "Dialogue and Proclamation".

Dialogue in the churches

While the theological issues continue to be discussed, dialogue activities have been more and more accepted at the local level. A number of churches have expanded their desks on ecumenical affairs to include an interfaith component. Some churches and councils have created staff positions to promote interfaith dialogue. There has been an increase in the number of local and international interfaith councils. Interest in interfaith prayer was further kindled by the call issued by Pope John Paul II to leaders of all religious communities to come together in Assisi in 1986 to pray for peace, an event that attracted media attention.

Interfaith dialogue today takes place at many levels. There is the continuing dialogue of life in all pluralistic situations. There is intentional dialogue, or discourse, where persons come together to share and converse on specific issues. There are academic dialogues among scholars, as well as spiritual dialogues, emphasizing prayer and meditation. Zen and Benedictine monasteries, for example, exchange monks each year to learn from each other's meditative practices. In India there are weekend live-in sessions where people of diverse traditions come together for exposure to each other's prayer life and to participate in common devotions. There is a proliferation of books and articles on interfaith dialogue and the challenge of pluralism.*

Dialogue as a continuing ecumenical concern

Evidence of the overall impact of the programme on dialogue was clear at the WCC's sixth assembly (Vancouver 1983). The number of guests of other faiths rose to 15, and four made presentations to plenary sessions. Interfaith dialogue was an integral part of the assembly's extensive visitors' programme. In the section on "Witness in a Divided World", there was no serious disagreement on the need for interfaith dialogue. There was, however, much controversy over the theology of religions, with a number of participants challenging a statement in the report that spoke of God's hand active in the religious life of our neighbours. Whether other religious traditions are vehicles of God's redeeming activity became a hotly debated issue.

Evaluating the experience of Vancouver, the Dialogue sub-unit identified theology of religions as an important issue for sustained study. A four-year study project - "My Neighbour's Faith - and Mine: Theological Discoveries through Interfaith Dialogue" - was launched with the distribution of a study booklet that was eventually translated into 18 languages, in order to raise the awareness of plurality in the churches and to explore how Christians today may look theologically at other traditions of faith. For the first time in the history of its mission conferences, the WCC invited consultants from other faith traditions to its tenth such conference, in San Antonio, Texas (1989), where the relationship of Christianity to other faiths and the challenge of dialogue to Christian understandings of mission and evangelism were among the major issues discussed. The preparation for the WCC's seventh assembly (Canberra 1991) was preceded by a major consultation on the theology of religions (Baar 1990). Representatives of other religious and indigenous traditions, including the Australian Aboriginal and Islander peoples, played a significant role in the Canberra programme, creating controversy and new interest both in gospel and culture and in the theological understanding of other religious traditions. A four-year study on gospel and culture* in the churches led to a report to the next world mission conference in Bahia, Brazil (1996). Issues in the theology of religions were followed up in Baar II (1993).

The WCC's eighth assembly (Harare 1998) provided additional opportunities for wider participation of persons of other faiths in an assembly. The padare (meeting place) programme enabled a succession of interfaith encounters between Christians and peoples of other faiths to be organized within the context of the assembly itself. Within the WCC, the post-Harare period has been marked by increased cooperation between the Office on Inter-religious Relations (successor to the Sub-unit on Dialogue in the WCC's new structure) and those programmes of the Council that deal with issues such as education, health, indigenous peoples, international relations and youth. Collaboration between the office and the Pontifical Council for Inter-religious Dialogue has also further developed. Joint studies have led to joint publications on interfaith prayer, interfaith marriages and the spiritual significance of Jerusalem.* A study project on the contribution of Africa to world religiosity is under way, involving various aspects of African-inspired religion.

Within the ecumenical family interfaith dialogue will continue to remain a profoundly important, if controversial, issue. The challenge it brings to the ecumenical movement is far-reaching. It summons the church to seek a new self-understanding in its relation to other religions. It requires it to look for deeper resources to deal with the reality of plurality, and it calls the church to new approaches to mission and witness.