

New Zealand Association for the Study of Religions

Biennial Conference

Queenstown, 6-8 June 2007

Why Dialogue? Christian Engagement in Interfaith Relations

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Abstract

For nearly 2000 years the primary stance of Christianity and Christians towards other faiths and their peoples was to treat them as radically ‘other’ and the targets of evangelical mission. During the 20th century a sequence of dramatic changes occurred, principally through the ecclesial organs of the Roman Catholic Church and the World Council of Churches, even though many Christians (and others) are by no means adequately aware of them. In this paper I briefly review the nature of, and reasons for, this change and discuss some of the key issues and problems that have arisen.

A research task that I have been pursuing off and on for some time now has been: how and why, during the course of the twentieth century, did the Christian Church – as represented through and by the WCC and the RCC – become formally engaged in interreligious relations and dialogue? And what have been the outcomes? Where is it all going? A particular theological hypothesis has informed my thinking and research, namely that a “theology of dialogue” can be construed in terms of three elements or conceptual ‘moments’: theology *for* dialogue; theology *in* dialogue, and theology *after* dialogue. This is not to suggest a linear progression, but rather a developmental spiral, if you will, where these elements mutually reflect and inform each other as dialogical engagement progresses. For the purposes of this paper I shall discuss the Vatican and the WCC by way of setting the context then offer some findings and comments on what I take to have

been the reasons for, nature of, and some salient issues pertaining to, contemporary Christian engagement in interfaith relations and dialogue.

The Vatican and the WCC

The Vatican and the WCC, as meta-structures of Christian church life, are quite dissimilar in form and ethos; they have different modes of authority and accountability. They each constitute a different sort of dialogical partner from the perspective of interlocutors from other religions. Clearly, their different structures and forms of governance make for significant differences as to their views of interreligious dialogue. On the one hand, the centrality of the Holy See for Catholic involvement means that lines of authority and representation are strongly hierarchical and parameters of engagement are effectively set from the centre. There is clear papal teaching and overarching Church policy to follow. The RCC has, at its structural heart, the Vatican State which is engaged in formal diplomatic relations just like any other sovereign state – and so is subject thereby to the necessary demands of, and adjustments to, wider political considerations. On the other hand, for the WCC, as an organ of the ecumenical movement, lines of authority and representation are subject to more diffuse bureaucratic processes in the attempt to maintain a complex set of internal ecclesial relationships in balance.

For the Catholic participant in interreligious dialogue, the primary responsibility is to be cognisant of, and in submission to, the Magisterium of the Church; for WCC/ecumenical participants, however, a mixture of fidelity to denominational representative status and empathy to ecumenical emphases and considerations, which may sit in some degree of tension with each other, will prevail. There is no comparable central teaching or policy reference point. There is no ecumenical Magisterium. Such policy and guidelines that have been produced by the WCC have been designed for the use and benefit of member churches in their interreligious engagements – should they be so inclined to make use of them. Whereas the Vatican may issue policy in expectation of compliance, the WCC is not able to do so. Further, it is not possible for all member churches of the WCC to be directly represented at any given WCC-sponsored interfaith event; hence

officers of the WCC, necessarily mindful of that, must ensure that outcomes – by way of Statements, Messages, and the like – are able to speak to the widest possible constituency. In the absence of any clear and substantial ecumenical Magisterium vis-à-vis interreligious engagement, WCC participants are at a distinct disadvantage in comparison to RCC participants.

Differences notwithstanding, the Vatican and the WCC have shared a history of cooperative work in the area of interreligious affairs ever since the 1960s. The RCC is not – and arguably cannot be – a member church of the WCC. However, the Vatican has maintained close and cordial ecumenical relations with the WCC since the time of the Second Vatican Council: co-operation between the WCC and the Vatican emerged strongly in the aftermath of that event. In 1965 a Joint Working Group was established and in 1969 Pope John Paul II visited the Geneva offices of the WCC – the first such papal visit. Contacts, exchanges of information, and invitations to share in each other’s events, have continued since at different levels and across various functions and programmes, not the least of which has been in respect to interreligious dialogue and relations. Indeed, the working relationship in this arena has been, and continues to be, most significant.

In 1984 a Catholic observer noted a level of ecumenical theological rapprochement to attitudes of Vatican II which, barely a decade or so earlier, would have been unthinkable; but then by 1986 it was noted that pressure of other work was hampering closer cooperative activity. Nonetheless, at the time Pope John Paul II himself stressed his support for interreligious dialogue and for the context of ecumenical co-operation in this regard.¹ In 1988 “the sustained relationship” between the Dialogue Sub-unit of the WCC and the Secretariat for Non-Christians of the Vatican was affirmed within the WCC “as a model that other programmes should seek to emulate”.²

¹ Cf. Jutta Sperber, *Christians and Muslims: The Dialogue Activities of the World Council of Churches and Their Theological Foundation*. Berlin & New York: de Gruyter, 2000, 19.

² See Director’s Report, Dialogue Working Group Meeting, Baar 1988, 3; [WCC-AFB 4612.062/1]

The cooperative working relationship between the Vatican and the WCC in respect to interreligious dialogue saw, during the 1990s, joint study programmes on interreligious marriage and interfaith worship placed high on the agenda. In 1992 it was decided to undertake a joint study-exercise on interreligious prayer.³ Other cooperative activities have taken place since including, most recently, the 2006 joint study of conversions in an interreligious context.⁴

Theology and Dialogue

The theologian Maurice Wiles once commented that “for Christians who want to embark on dialogue with people of other traditions in a way which is consistent with the integrity of their own Christian profession, there is need to reflect about the theological basis on which they are so doing”.⁵ He distinguished theology of dialogue, as that which emerges out of interreligious encounter, from theology for dialogue as that “which prepares for that encounter”.⁶ The modality of dialogue has itself evolved, of course: “the concept of interreligious dialogue has ranged from communication for the purpose of pre-evangelism to communication for the purpose of a fruitful and mutual exchange of meaning”.⁷ But the time comes, in any sustained encounter, when the deep and thorny issues – matters of intellectual perspective on the metaphysics and ideologies which permeate and undergird any given religious worldview – must be openly and honestly confronted and addressed. And it is at this point that the fine line between witness, and openness to the ‘other’, needs to be both defined and walked. It is at this juncture that concerns about the distracting and deleterious effect of postures of religious superiority, or claims – whether declared or undeclared – to hold the only valid or central position, come into focus. The internal problem facing anyone who is party to dialogical engagement is how to maintain the sureness of religious

³ See joint publication *Pro Dialogo/Current Dialogue*, Pontificium Consilium Pro Dialogo Inter Religiones, Rome: Bulletin 98 1998/2, in which are contained a selection of preliminary papers and the formal reports and findings of the study on interreligious worship and prayer.

⁴ See ‘Conversion – Report on the Meeting in Velletri, May 2006’, *Current Dialogue*, No. 47, June 2006, 46-47.

⁵ Maurice Wiles, *Christian Theology and Inter-religious Dialogue*. London: SCM Press, 1992, 3.

⁶ *Ibid*, 4.

⁷ J. Mark Hensman, ‘Beyond Talk: The Dialogue of Life’. Unpub. DTheol thesis, MCD, 1999, 45.

identity without succumbing to the presumption of religious superiority, let alone to a supercessionist perspective.

The first research question, the answer to which might hopefully contribute to a theology *for* dialogue, is simply: what has taken the Christian faith, in and through its major ecclesial structures, into dialogical engagement with other religions? What has emerged as the Church's theological rationale for dialogue? My research suggests that it has been the theological motifs of 'community', 'creator', and '*diakonia*' which have lain at the heart of the rationale for dialogue in the thinking of the WCC. Similarly, community and the social good, together with the presupposition of a common human thirst for God, and a theological anthropology, inform the theological rationale of the RCC. However, in the case of the Vatican there has been greater attention paid to theology: thus the idea of a universal Creator, a direct implication of trinitarian belief, the implication of a salvific ecclesiology, and so on are among the points of rationalisation given for the engagement of the RCC in interfaith relations and dialogue.

Further, I have endeavoured to discern theological concerns, issues, priorities and perspectives which could be said to point to theology *in* dialogue: problems and challenges that have emerged within the context of dialogical engagement. The fears enunciated from within both the RCC and the ranks of the WCC include syncretism; compromise on the uniqueness of Christ; the loss of a sense of both distinctiveness and urgency for mission. The perennial tension between the understanding of 'mission' and the meaning and application of dialogue, together with recurring anxieties about engagement threatening the purity of faith – the so-called fear of syncretism – are among the 'classic' issues which, today, have been joined by the pressing concerns of pluralism, on the one hand, and fundamentalism on the other.

Kenneth Cracknell puts the issue of pluralism – or rather, religious plurality – somewhat succinctly.⁸ If there is but one God; how is it there are so many religions? How are Christians to relate to peoples of other faiths – and, indeed, to their faiths as such? Are we caught in a context of perpetual rivalry? Is the only peaceful option that of mute co-existence at the level of bare tolerance? Are we called to a life of cooperation with people of other religions? Are we not all fellow-travellers? In contrast with much of the later 20th century perspective in regard to other religions, Cracknell proposes an alternative theological stream, from Justin Martyr to F.D Maurice, Hendrikus Berkhof, and others; which he sees leading to greater openness to other religions. Cracknell is one whose work has directly impacted upon ecumenical thought.

Secularisation, and with it an appreciation of secular ideologies, tended to dominate the WCC somewhat during the third quarter of the twentieth century, distracting attention from the interreligious arena *per se*. However, with the collapse of some of the key secularist ideologies and programmes in the closing quarter of the century, and the concomitant rise of concern for interfaith cooperation and engagement, it would seem the prospect of the religions of the world finding common cause to address rampant materialism and secularism, and also the predominating ‘free-market’ ideology which has the globe in its grip, is now real and urgent. The matter of dialogue as a modality of polite and friendly conversation, a means of fostering neighbourly relations and promoting peace and goodwill, is one thing; dialogue as a mode of critical and intentional socio-theological engagement with the religious ‘other’, is another. Both continue as key issues. The thrust of the WCC is more with the former, though it does not discount totally the latter. The RCC will raise the latter, but often inclines more to the former.

The Continued Significance of Dialogue

The context of religious plurality in which, today, more and more people live in consequence of demographic, socio-economic and other changes, and the upsurge

⁸ Kenneth Cracknell, *Considering Dialogue: Theological Themes in Interfaith Relations, 1970-1980*, London: British Council of Churches, 1981.

of socio-political activity involving religion, suggest more, not less, external impetus for interreligious dialogical engagement. At the same time there is a paradoxical response evident from within the wider Christian Church. On the one hand the contemporary missiological stance of both Catholic and so-called 'mainline' protestant churches, at least, tends to favour non-confrontational partnering arrangements as expressive of mission in regard to people of other faiths. Of course, a conversionary response would rarely, if ever, be directly parried; the wider context of religious freedom, advocated in particular by the RCC, would allow for it in any case. On the other hand there is increasing evidence of a resurgent assertive, if not aggressive, evangelical missionary stance that adheres to many Christian groups which lie outside, or are at the fringes of, the ecumenical movement.⁹ There is also an increased conservatism, if not fundamentalism, evident within member Churches of the WCC, and similarly within the RCC. Very often this is seen in the context of localised negative interactions with Islam, for example. The result is that there appears to be a growing resistance to, and dismissal of, interreligious engagement as a valid component of Christian life and Church activity.

The immediate future of interreligious dialogue, from the point of the Christian Church could be said to be somewhat unclear. In some quarters the need to press ahead is obvious and unquestioned, and often attendees at interreligious conferences and allied occasions report that such events are a vital component in today's world. But equally church leaders otherwise sympathetic, even enthusiastic so far as interreligious dialogue is concerned, are likely to find themselves under pressure to downplay, or desist engaging in, interreligious activities. At the same time, in much of the western world, there is a contemporary upsurge of interest – even governmental and other institutional interest – in matters of interfaith concern and allied organisational relations. Very often this is in response to local political pressures and to the wider quest for harmonious

⁹ Mark Hensman notes an early tension between the "WCC's Commission on World Mission and Evangelism (CWME) which in 1970 recognised 'interreligious dialogue as a Christian activity in its own right' and the evangelical opposition's Committee on World Evangelism (CWE) whose 1971 Frankfurt Declaration 'upheld the primacy of preaching and rejected other religions as loci for the saving presence of Christ'." Hensman, *op. cit.*, 39.

multicultural co-existence and, of course, the current war on religious-based terrorism.¹⁰

Nevertheless, and despite a considerable contemporary upsurge of interest and engagement, interreligious dialogue remains somewhat “fragile” and is still rather “elusively defined”.¹¹ In some ways the term “dialogue” has become over-worn to the point, perhaps, of being unhelpful. Since the beginnings of formal dialogical activities, WCC emphasis has shifted more towards “relations” thereby indicating that interreligious engagement was much more – even other than – a discursive dialogue. Actions speak louder than words, but words are by no means unimportant: ‘dialogue’ *per se* has been more recently rehabilitated. For the Vatican, it has ever been the case that ‘dialogue’ is to be understood as a diverse phenomenon, inclusive of word and action. Perhaps the phrase ‘interreligious engagement’ might itself be a more useful term to employ – it is inclusive of both ‘relation’ and ‘dialogue’, and yet more open-ended than either. Nevertheless, the dialogical task and focus remains important and multifaceted. Dialogue, as both relational mode and structured activity, remains of vital significance for the life of the Churches, and for relations between the Christian Church and peoples of other faiths.

Where to from here?

Perhaps the issue of faith-identity within the context of religious plurality is a useful focus for the future of dialogical praxis, and of reflection upon dialogue and the fact of many faiths; for it is religious plurality *per se* which sets the context for dialogical engagement and also raises the question of relativities of religious identities and presumptions of absolute truth.¹² Stanley Samartha once gave voice to the sharp challenge posed by plurality in asking “Does universality mean simply the extension of Christian particularity? What happens if our

¹⁰ Cf. Douglas Pratt, ‘Religious Fundamentalism: A Paradigm for Terrorism?’ in Rachel Barrowman, ed., *International Terrorism: New Zealand Perspectives*. Wellington: Institute of Policy Studies, Victoria University of Wellington, 2005, 31-52.

¹¹ Hensman, 4.

¹² See, for example, Michael Barnes, SJ, *Religions in Conversation: Christian Identity and Religious Pluralism*, London: SPCK, 1989; Israel Selvanayagam, *Relating to People of Other Faiths*, Tiruvalla: CSS-BTTBPSA Joint Publication, 2004, among others.

neighbours of other faiths also have similar notions of universality, that is of extending *their* particularities?”¹³ Situations of religious plurality effectively demand dialogical engagement in order to resist a slide into exclusivism or the encroachments of an imperial inclusivism.¹⁴ Where religious people choose to ignore the other and reject dialogical encounter, this “can only lead to a closed particularity which feeds on itself and in the process impoverishes the community”.¹⁵

Religious plurality is, in effect, the necessary context for mission: mission is necessarily to an “other” and presupposes some form of dialogical engagement at least.¹⁶ Furthermore, “it is important to recognize not only the plurality of religions but also the plurality *within* religions”.¹⁷ Religious plurality need not be the problem it is often feared to be; but it does require further sustained reflective work.¹⁸ Along with religious pluralism, the issue of fundamentalism as a concern of, for, and in interreligious dialogue requires to be addressed. It signals a very particular dimension of not only the wider religious plurality in which dialogue is set, but also nowadays the global geo-political context of much inter-communal tension and so interfaith pressures.¹⁹

¹³ S.J. Samartha *Courage for Dialogue: Ecumenical issues in inter-religious relationships*, Geneva: WCC 1981, 88.

¹⁴ Cf. Douglas Pratt, ‘Pluralism and Interreligious Engagement: The Contexts of Dialogue’, in David Thomas with Clare Amos, eds., *A Faithful Presence, essays for Kenneth Cragg*, London: Melisende Press, 2003, 402-418; – ‘Contextual Paradigms for Interfaith Relations’, *Current Dialogue*, No 42, December 2003, 3-9.

¹⁵ Samartha, 100.

¹⁶ See Theo Sundermeier, ‘*Missio Dei* Today: On the Identity of Christian Mission’, *International Review of Mission*, Vol. XCII No. 367, October 2003, 560-578.

¹⁷ S. Wesley Ariarajah, *Not Without My Neighbour: Issues in Interfaith Relations*. Risk Book Series No. 85. Geneva: WCC Publications, 1999, 22.

¹⁸ This is an area in which I am currently working. See Douglas Pratt, ‘Religious Plurality, Referential Realism and Paradigms of Pluralism’ in Avery Plaw, ed., *Frontiers of Diversity: Explorations in Contemporary Pluralism*, Amsterdam & New York: Rodopi, 2005, 191-209; – ‘Universalising Rhetoric and Particularist Identities: Pluralism and the Future of Our Religious Pasts’, *International Journal in the Humanities*, Vol. 1, 2003/2004, 1347-1356, – ‘Pluralism, Post-modernity and Interreligious Dialogue: Philosophical Issues and Theological Prospect’, *Sophia*, (forthcoming).

¹⁹ This is likewise a current area of my own research, as previously noted. See above, p. 5; see also Douglas Pratt, ‘Religious Fundamentalism: A Paradigm for Terrorism?’ in Rachel Barrowman, ed., *International Terrorism: New Zealand Perspectives*, Wellington: Institute of Policy Studies, Victoria University of Wellington, 2005, 31-52; – ‘Religious Fundamentalism: on the way to Terrorism? A Paradigm Analysis’, *Australian Religion Studies Review*, (forthcoming).

Calls have been made, from various quarters and at various times, “for a new assessment of the theological significance of people of other faiths. Its emphasis is not on religions or systems or ideas; its emphasis falls on people. It says that people are not simply objects for conversion”.²⁰ It is clear that advocacy of dialogue implies a radical revision of the stance of Christianity towards people of other faiths, and this has been made obvious throughout the development of dialogical sensibilities with respect to both the WCC and the Vatican. However, the notion that dialogue is only something which occurs to and between people, and not between religious systems; and that theological reflection refers to the significance of the people and their concerns, and not of their belief systems as such, is flawed. It amounts to a confusion of process with substance. Whilst it is people who relationally engage, the dialogue encounter – especially that of deep cognitive engagement – must involve the depths of worldviews and allied belief systems, for it is they that undergird religious identity.

At the level of process, different models of dialogue apply according to circumstance and need. But wherever there is any substantive worldview or ideological content involved, whether in terms of articulating spiritual perceptions, religious values, or metaphysical theologies, then clearly what is being engaged is not just interpersonal relations. Dialogue involves a meeting of minds as much as an intercourse of friendship and a collaboration of concerns. For example, dialogue aims at understanding the other and reconfiguring an attitudinal stance toward the other as no longer a competitor, but a partner.²¹ But it requires neither the rejection nor the acceptance of the religion of the other in any cognitive sense; rather it requires accepting the other as authentically a religious person, acknowledging the place and importance of religion as such, and honouring that with sincere critical engagement: affirming and endorsing where appropriate; challenging and critiquing where called for. And that means being capable to both give and receive in authentic dialogical engagement.

²⁰ Wesley Ariarajah, *Dialogue*. CCA Concerns Series 1, Singapore: Christian Conference of Asia, 1980, 13.

²¹ See: S. Wesley Ariarajah, *Not Without My Neighbour: Issues in Interfaith Relations*. Risk Book Series No. 85. Geneva: WCC Publications, 1999 15.

A Final Word

As far back as 1981 Stanley Samartha noted that “what has yet to be taken seriously – not least by the academic community – are the implications of the academic study of religions for inter-religious relationships on the one hand, and the experience of actual dialogues for academic studies on the other”.²² Twenty-five years later it would seem that both the WCC and the Vatican, as stakeholders in the ecumenical interreligious dialogical enterprise, have made, and continue to make, significant advances. Clearly an age of interreligious engagement, which emerged with vigour and commitment during the twentieth century, is set to continue well into the 21st. So, too, must the academic work of investigating dialogue and the specifically theological task of reflecting upon it – including the articulation of theology after dialogue. But that is a task for another day.

²² Samartha, ix.