

Multi Faith Conference

Uni-Diversity: The Challenges of Change

Business School, The University of Auckland

Session

'Perspectives on Diversity'

*What has been your experience in your tradition in the face of the
multifaith context globally and in New Zealand?*

Christianity and Interfaith Engagement

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Abstract

Early in the twentieth century the Christian Church began to question long-held exclusivist and negative assumptions toward other religions. By mid-century far-reaching changes were underway: other religions and their peoples were honoured as dialogue-partners and viewed as co-religionists capable of common cause action. Since the 1960s the official stance of the Vatican is one of goodwill, high valuation, and respect toward other faiths. Christian perspectives on religious diversity changed from vexed problem to celebrated phenomenon. However, the global resurgence of religion and allied ideologies such as fundamentalism provide new challenges to the age-old question of Christianity and other faiths.

Introduction

In February 2006 the contemporary perspective on interreligious dialogue was acknowledged

as one of the most pressing needs of our time. In addition to the theological issues arising from the shrinking of the world and the ever more porous boundaries between communities, religion has become an increasingly significant component in inter-communal relations. Faith can make things better, or it can make them a great deal worse.¹

This ‘pressing need’ has, in fact, been the subject of intense activity and reflection by the Christian Church for some sixty years and more. Indeed, since around the middle of the twentieth century Christian involvement in interreligious dialogue has become, in effect, a permanent and formally endorsed activity.

In order to address the question that governs this session – What has been your experience in your tradition in the face of the multifaith context globally and in New Zealand – I shall to speak on the subject of Christianity and Interfaith engagement, an area in which I have recently concluded research into the development and promotion of dialogical engagement through the work of the World Council of Churches², together with, since the early 1960s, that of the Roman Catholic Church³.

For the Christian Church other religions and their peoples are viewed today – at least formally – not so much in terms of competition and threat but as potential partner and actual neighbour. Leaders from other religions receive hospitable welcome at the Vatican; the religious ‘other’ is received as an honoured guest at World Council of Churches’ Assemblies. Where, previously, friendly and

¹ Mark Woods ‘Talking about religions, doing faith’, 22.02.06; www.wcc-assembly.info

² Initially, this was via a programme Sub-unit on Dialogue with People of Other Faiths and Ideologies (DFI), thence the Office on Inter-Religious Relations (OIRR) and more recently the Office or Team for Inter-Religious Relations and Dialogue (IRRD).

³ Initially this was through the Secretariat for Non-Christians (SNC) then becoming the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue (PCID).

accommodating relational détente on the basis of mutual respect and regard would have been the exception; it is now the rule. Members of other religions join with Christians as interlocutors at dialogue conferences; as partners in interfaith organisations; and in common quests and cooperative ventures of one sort or another.

It was not always so. Indeed, the standard Christian position in respect of any ‘other’ – particularly any other religion – had been, for centuries, one of antagonism whether muted or openly expressed: other religions were regarded as necessarily false, simply by virtue of being ‘other’. People of other faiths were targets for outreach and conversion. But on the whole such attitudes and responses are no longer the order of the day. Residual antipathies – and some disturbing new ones – from some evangelically aggressive quarters notwithstanding, the ‘normative’ position of the Christian Church that emerged and consolidated during the twentieth century is that other religions are to be esteemed; cordial relations and an attitude of respectful regard have become the presumption. Despite the rise of religious fundamentalism and related extremisms, and without abandoning its missionary mandate, the Christian Church has reached a position where interreligious relations and dialogue has been affirmed and embraced. There would seem to be no going back.

Equally, the way ahead – what to do and think, now, as a consequence of interfaith engagement, and how to advance it – is not exactly clear. A danger exists, I suggest, of *de facto* retrenchment into a ghettoised mentality; of a fall-back to an exclusivist position if, indeed, advances made in the twentieth century are not consolidated and developed well and quickly in the twenty-first.⁴ So, understanding the place and role of the Church in interreligious dialogue and the quest for relationship with other faiths is not only of academic interest; it may indeed contribute to a critical dimension of contemporary religious life and theological concern: the priority of interfaith engagement as such.

⁴ Cf. Douglas Pratt, ‘Exclusivism and Exclusivity: a contemporary theological challenge’. *Pacifica* 20/3 (October 2007), 291-306.

So, what took the Christian faith, in and through its central ecclesial structures, into dialogical engagement with other religions? How did Christianity, in its twentieth century, take up this relational modality in respect to other faiths in a way that was wholly new in comparison to the preceding history and paradigms of interfaith engagement?

Early Ecumenical Developments

A most significant initial event was the first World Missionary Conference held in Edinburgh, Scotland, in June of 1910.⁵ It was the first such conference where the question of relating the Christian faith to, rather than simply preaching at, people of other faiths was raised. The missionary movement was beginning to ask self-reflexive questions in respect to its relation to other faiths. Interfaith dialogue as it is now known was not mooted, but the conditions that resulted in the dialogical option latter being taken up were certainly laid. The second such conference was held in Jerusalem in 1928.⁶ As at Edinburgh, the “issue of religious plurality, and the proper Christian response to it, received a great amount of attention”;⁷ A new attitude had emerged toward non-Christian religions which, as “systems of thought and faith ... were dealt with positively and not simply negatively. Chief attention was to bringing out their values... to be appreciated, conserved and where necessary supplemented”.⁸ But it was the perception of a global growth in secularism, and the challenge which that posed for religion in general, and Christianity in particular, that constituted the main focus.

The challenge of secularism was perceived to offer a point of contact with other religions: secularism was identified as the “chief antagonist of the Christian faith – in fact, of all religious faiths”.⁹ Indeed, the Jerusalem conference included a call

⁵ See Volume 1, *International Review of Mission [IRM]*, (1912) for an early record and discussion of this conference and its outcomes.

⁶ Latourette in Rouse and Neill, *History*, 368f; see William Paton, ‘The Jerusalem Meeting of the International Missionary Council’, *IRM*, Vol. Vol 17 (1928), 3-10; cf. *IRM*, Vol 16 (1927), 278-287.

⁷ Jan Hendrik Pranger, *Dialogue In Discussion: The World Council of Churches and the Challenge of Religious Plurality between 1967 and 1979*. IIMO Research Publication 38, Utrecht-Leiden, 1994, 1.

⁸ John R. Mott, ‘At Edinburgh, Jerusalem and Madras’, *IRM*, Vol 27 (1938), 297-320.

⁹ *Ibid.*

for other religions to join with Christianity in the struggle against secularism. Although this was a controversial initiative, to be severely criticised only ten years later, it nevertheless prefigured one of the platforms of dialogical engagement that was to emerge several decades further on: working together in a common cause.¹⁰ The conference message “addressed to all churches with the unanimous approval of the participants ... spoke against any imperialistic attitude of Christians to other faiths ... (and it made) use of the word ‘sharing’ for the act of Christian witness to those of other faiths”.¹¹ But a wave of conservative reactions, opposed to the nascent pluralist perspective implied in the very stance of being open to interreligious dialogue, quickly emerged: opposition was soon voiced to the call for dialogical engagement that the debates at Jerusalem 1928 had signalled.¹²

At the now-famous 1938 meeting of the International Missionary Council held at Tambaram, near Madras in India, the motif of other religions evincing some positive spiritual values, as affirmed at Jerusalem a decade earlier, was maintained.¹³ But at the same time Christian relations with people of other faiths was reconsidered and curtailed relative to the openness and broad acceptance that had emerged thus far. An assertion of Christian uniqueness and superiority was made such that intercourse with any other faith tradition was correspondingly queried – if not negated – if it was other than evangelistic in modality and intent.¹⁴ This change of stance derived largely, but by no means solely, nor without opposition, from the work of the Dutch missionary theologian, Hendrikus Kraemer.¹⁵ The outcome of his work, which was to remain highly influential until quite late into the twentieth century, was to popularise and extend the distinction

¹⁰ Indeed, secularism, as a point of common cause with other faiths, was soon critiqued by Hendrikus Kraemer: see his ‘Christianity and Secularism’, *IRM*, Vol 19 (1930), 195-208, where he advocates the theology of Karl Barth and the priority of revelation as the counterpoint to ‘secular corrosion’; and also by Emil Brunner who argued that against “the all-menacing tide of secularism there is but one breakwater—the Word of God”, ‘Secularism as a problem for the Church’, *IRM*, Vol 19 (1930), 511.

¹¹ Ariarajah, *Hindus and Christians*, 45.

¹² Cf. Pranger, *op. cit.*, 46.

¹³ See Jutta Sperber, *Christians and Muslims: The Dialogue Activities of the World Council of Churches and Their Theological Foundation*. Berlin & New York: de Gruyter, 2000, 7; cf. James Thayer Addison, ‘The Changing Attitude toward non-Christian Religions’, *IRM*, Vol 27 (1938), 110-121.

¹⁴ Cf. William Paton, ‘The Meeting of the International Missionary Council at Tambaram, Madras’, *IRM*, Vol 28 (1939), 161-173.

¹⁵ H. Kraemer *The Christian Message in a Non-Christian World*. London, Edinburgh House Press, 1938.

between revelation, understood as divinely given through Christ alone, and religion *as such* – that is, all forms of human seeking-for-the-Divine. Tambaram affirmed the dualist ideology of continuity and discontinuity: Christianity, *qua* religion, is indeed one of many; yet revelation in and through Christ sets Christianity apart from all religion.

A decade later – 1948 – the first Assembly of the newly mandated World Council of Churches was held in Amsterdam.¹⁶ However, other than a report and recommendations on the ‘Christian Approach to the Jews’¹⁷ – admittedly a significant post-War focus – the inaugural Assembly did not address directly the issue of relationship to other faiths; rather the presumption of evangelical witness predominated. The dominant Christian ideology at the time held that relationship to persons of other religions was to be primarily, if not solely, evangelistic and *not* dialogical. The *de facto* stance of the Christian ecumenical movement towards other religions appeared at this stage to be unremittingly exclusivist. The influence of Kraemer was uppermost. Prospects for genuine dialogical engagement, other than for missionary purposes, seem to have been bleak.

But then the second Assembly of the WCC, held in America in 1954, saw some shift in ground towards a new openness to other religions and the possibility of genuine dialogue.¹⁸ A new mood in respect to other faiths became evident. An affirmation of the ecumenical heritage was coupled with a new note of humility. The pre-War language of sharing re-emerged. There seemed to have been something of a thaw; a warming to other religions and their peoples expressed, for example, in the acceptance and high valuation of Asian Christian leadership which promoted positive relating to other religions.

By 1955 directions taken since 1938 were re-opened and re-examined; the debates and dialogical issues raised in the late thirties were again addressed. An awareness

¹⁶ See Willem Adolf Visser’t Hooft, ‘The Genesis of the World Council of Churches’ in Rouse and Neill, *History*, 697-724.

¹⁷ Allan R. Brockway, *et. al.*, eds., *The Theology of the Churches and the Jewish People: Statements by the World Council of Churches and its member churches*. Geneva: WCC Publications, 1988, 5-9.

¹⁸ Cf. Ans Van der Bent, entry ‘WCC Assemblies’, in Lossky, *Dictionary*, 1091-92.

of the wide-spread renaissance of other religions had come to the fore.¹⁹ Nevertheless, there was still an overriding priority given to the missionary imperative.²⁰ Yet the issue of establishing and pursuing an interactive relationship with other religions was gathering momentum.²¹ The drive to engage seriously in interreligious dialogue was again underway. Thus the WCC initiated, in 1955, a study programme entitled *The Word of God and the Living Faiths of Men* which ran until 1971. Significantly, in July 1960 the study programme was affirmed as being inclusive specifically of Christian–Muslim dialogue, with the final report underlining “the responsibility of Christians for meeting Muslims in a constructive way”.²²

In many respects it was this programme that enabled interreligious dialogue to be taken up by ecumenical Christianity in a way never before possible. Indeed, its development signalled a growing responsiveness to the increasingly pressing demand for a serious and significant addressing of intercultural and interreligious relations and issues. The context of such concern was that of post-war mid-twentieth century. The early emergence of globalisation was beginning to be felt. Improvements to mass-media enabling a more rapid and immediate exchange of information were well underway. The television age was dawning. And the increased and more widely-spread capacity for demographic shifts, through the ebbs and flows of migration, were stimulating ever more significant cultural and population encounters. Such factors either brought about changed circumstances in terms of the situations in which people now lived, or else alerted the world to hitherto unacknowledged contexts – and thus to new issues to be tackled. Interreligious dialogue was not merely a theoretical option; it was an immediate existential demand.

¹⁹ See Lesslie Newbigin, who in this regard expressed a quietly confident Christian position; ‘The Summons the Christian Mission Today’, *IRM*, Vol 48 (1959), 177-189.

²⁰ Cf. Austin Fulton, ‘The Missionary Nature of the Church: Reflections on the Christian Faith and other religions’, *IRM*, Vol 48 (1959), 389-397.

²¹ See for example, David G. Moses, who expresses a somewhat typical sympathetic outlook toward other religions, yet within a clear assertion of the superiority of Christianity; ‘Christianity and the Non-Christian Religions’, *IRM*, Vol 43 (1954), 146-154.

²² Sperber, *op. cit.*, 8.

Although there was a clear missionary concern to the fore, the emergence of wider interreligious interests became unstoppable. Paul Devanandan, a key-note speaker at the 1961 Assembly of the World Council of Churches, affirmed other faiths as manifesting responses to the creative activity of God: “The only alternative is to confess either the Christian ignorance of God’s ways with people or the Christian blindness in refusing to believe in God’s redemptive work with people of other faiths”.²³ It is at this juncture that new – indeed epoch-making – developments occur, both in terms of the World Council of Churches as well as for the Roman Catholic Church, to which I now turn.

Catholic Initiatives for Interreligious Dialogue

For centuries the Roman Catholic Church had lived wholly within its own worldview framework: resistant to winds of change and slow to adapt; in effect content with the status quo of received tradition within which any modification was carefully contained. In this context acknowledgment of the ‘religiously other’ – even other Christian Churches – was, at best, rather muted. To the extent that any encounter with another religion might be entertained, for whatever reason, the official response was one of considerable caution. Certainly there was no salvific value accorded to other religions, and the notion of establishing some kind of dialogical relationship with any religious ‘other’ was a fringe idea in the extreme. Up until the 1960s religious exclusivism held unassailable sway: the doors and windows of the Roman institutional edifice were fixed firmly shut. However, a great change was about to occur.

Not long into his five-year pontificate Pope John XXIII convened a great Council, comprising the bishops from throughout the worldwide Roman Catholic Church, which met at the Vatican for several sessions at different times from 1962 up to and including 1965. This event is known as ‘Vatican II’ – being the second such convocation in modern times to be held at the Vatican; the first was held during the 19th century. In an echo of the early post-War development with the World Council of Churches, concern for a reappraisal of the relation of the Church to the

²³ M.M. Thomas, *Risking Christ for Christ’s Sake: towards an ecumenical theology of pluralism*. Geneva: WCC Publications, 1987, 89.

Jews had featured in the thinking of Pope John XXIII when he convened the Second Vatican Council.

In the event, Pope John died in June 1963 before the Council had concluded. His successor, Paul VI, then took up the reigns of papal office and saw the Council through to its ending, and it was under his leadership that significant innovations were undertaken. He advocated respect for “the moral and spiritual values” of other religions and openness to them, and pledging “willingness for practical dialogical engagement”.²⁴ Throughout his pontificate Paul VI was both guided by, and stamped his interpretive refinement on, the directives and pronouncements that emerged from the deliberations of the Second Vatican Council.

The single most important Second Vatican Council document with regard to interreligious dialogue was *Nostra Aetate* – the Declaration on the relation of the Church to non-Christian religions. This epoch-making, relatively short statement (only some 1200 words of text in its original Latin) was promulgated in 1965. It is divided into five sections.²⁵ The first comprises an introduction in which the motif of the timeliness of “examining with greater care” the relationship of the Church to other religions, in the context of the commonality and transcendent unity of the human community which yet displays great religious diversity, sets the tone. This diversity is elaborated in the second section which makes mention, in particular, of Hinduism and Buddhism, and alludes to other religions more generally. Significantly, within this section there is found a pivotal passage which states:

The Catholic Church rejects nothing of what is true and holy in these religions. She has a high regard for the manner of life and conduct, the precepts and doctrines which, although differing in many ways from her own teaching, nevertheless often reflect a ray of that truth which enlightens all men.²⁶

²⁴ Paul VI encyclical, *Ecclesiam Suam* (ES), clause 107-108.

²⁵ See Francesco Gioia, ed., *Interreligious Dialogue: The Official Teaching of the Catholic Church (1963-1995)* Boston: Pauline Books and Media/Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, 1997, 37-40.

²⁶ NA cl. 5; Gioia, *ibid*, 38.

Very clearly an attitude of openness to the ‘other’ is here signalled. However, this significant, if somewhat general, indication of relational regard is followed immediately by a delimiting statement:

Yet she proclaims and is duty bound to proclaim without fail, Christ who is “the way, the truth, and the life” (John 14:6). In him, in whom God reconciled all things to himself (cf. 2 Co. 5:18-19), men find the fullness of their religious life.²⁷

Openness to other religions, wherein is urged “with prudence and charity ... discussion and collaboration with members of other religions”, is not absolute: it is rather a relative stance that insists on a clear perspective of identity and mission whence the Church’s openness to interfaith dialogue is to proceed. The third section of the declaration focuses on Islam. It speaks of the Church’s “high regard for the Muslims” and also acknowledges the “many quarrels and dissensions” that have obtained in the past between Christians and Muslims, yet seeks to go beyond that past and urges “that a sincere effort be made to achieve mutual understanding”.²⁸

The fourth section speaks at relative length of the relationship of the Church to Judaism. The essential Hebraic heritage of Christianity is acknowledged, going back to the indissoluble link with the patriarch Abraham. Further, a reminder is given that Jesus and the Apostles were all of them Jews. On the basis of “a common spiritual heritage” the Vatican Council encouraged “further mutual understanding and appreciation”.²⁹ Significantly, *Nostra Aetate* states unequivocally that

the Jews should not be spoken of as rejected or accursed. ... Indeed, the Church reproves every form of persecution ... she deplores all hatreds,

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ NA cl. 8, Gioia, *ibid.*, 39.

²⁹ NA cl. 13, Gioia, *ibid.*, 40.

persecutions, displays of anti-Semitism levelled at any time or from any source against the Jews.³⁰

Nostra Aetate concludes with three short paragraphs that echo the motif of the Introduction: the common bonds of humanity by virtue of being created by God. And it adds the clear reprobation of any form of discrimination or harassment.³¹

At the time, *Nostra Aetate* may have occasioned some disappointment at what was left unsaid; but it nevertheless stands as a most significant document in Roman Catholic Church history – indeed of Western Christianity as such – for what it did say. With *Nostra Aetate* the first formal step by the Church of Rome to genuine and mutual dialogue with other religions was taken; an open attitude to other faiths was clearly encouraged by the Second Vatican Council. The document also encapsulated what by then had become the dominant thinking of the World Council of Churches.

A brief review of the contemporary origins of interreligious dialogue so far as the ecumenical movement – at least via the work of the World Council of Churches – and the Roman Catholic Church are concerned (and which between them represent the vast majority of the worldwide Christian community) provide clues and pointers to what has taken the Christian Church into interfaith engagement. The purpose of dialogue is not just a matter of co-existence. The assertion that “God as creator of all is present and active in the plurality of religions” is understood to lead inexorably to the inconceivability “that God’s saving activity could be confined to any one continent, cultural type, or groups of peoples”.³² The singularity of creation and the universality of redemption are drawn upon, implicitly at least, as part of the supporting rationale for interreligious dialogue: all of humanity shares a common divine origin and eschatological orientation.³³

³⁰ *NA* cl. 14 & 15; Gioia, *ibid.*

³¹ *NA* cl. 19; Gioia, *ibid.*

³² See 1990 Theology of Religions Consultation, preparatory paper ‘Religious Plurality – Theological Perspectives and Affirmations’; WCC-AFB 4612.064/5

³³ Cf. Francis Cardinal Arinze, ‘Interreligious dialogue: Problems, prospects and possibilities’. *Bulletin* No. 66 [XXII/3], 1987, 254.

But what have been key critical issues that have emerged in the context of Christian involvement in interfaith engagement?

Critical Issues

The ecumenical leader and theologian, Wesley Ariarajah, at a 1984 consultation, noted the upsurge in the quest for religious identity and meaning that was evident in many contexts throughout the world. He remarked that this resurgence shows evidence of both promise and problems: “While on the one hand there is a genuine search for deeper, more profound and liberating meaning for religion and a quest for an appropriate spirituality for our times, there has also been, on the other hand, resurgence of fundamentalism and fanaticism which destroy the very spirit and goal of religious life”.³⁴ And in 1985 he noted in particular the challenge of religious pluralism and the issue of concomitant teaching undertaken, and indeed needing to be undertaken, by the religions – especially for Christians the need to “give a theological account for the presence of other faiths”; along with the key question of “how should we teach and learn theology in the context of religious pluralism and the emphasis on dialogue”.³⁵

At a special conference on the theology of religions in 1990, which involved theologians from Orthodox, Protestant, and Roman Catholic traditions, the issue of plurality was to be understood in terms of “both the result of the manifold ways in which God has related to peoples and nations as well as a manifestation of the richness and diversity of humankind”.³⁶ Indeed, this significant Christian gathering averred that the “conviction that God as creator of all is present and active in the plurality of religions makes it inconceivable to us that God’s saving activity could be confined to any one continent, cultural type, or group of peoples”.³⁷ In effect any denigration of diversity, even religious diversity, can be viewed as a denial of the activity of the Creator or, put positively, the Creator is honoured as the rich diversity of creation is affirmed; and that includes human

³⁴ Wesley Ariarajah, ‘Introductory Remarks’, December 1984, p. 3; WCC-AFB 4612.056/1

³⁵ Wesley Ariarajah, Introduction to Kuala Lumpur ‘Implications of Interfaith Dialogue for Theological Education Today’ Consultation, June 1985, p. 3; WCC-AFB 4612.056/3

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

cultural and religious diversity or plurality: indeed, “Christian faith in God (provides the challenge) to take seriously the whole realm of religious plurality”.³⁸ At the same time, the fact of plurality does not mean equality of value, nor does the affirming of diversity lack discriminatory diversification: an intelligent critical stance is called for.

The issue of religious plurality and with it the question of religious pluralism as an interpretive, even ideological, response has been a long-standing issue and remains very much a lively question within the Christian Church today. It is brought into focus in respect to the practice and understanding of interfaith engagement. Other chief issues and concerns that surfaced early, and which are still very much alive, include the missionary vocation of the Church; anxieties over the prospect that dialogue results in the compromising of faith; the slide into a false irenicism, where relational friendliness detracts from spiritual fidelity; the incipient danger of syncretistic outcomes; the promotion of a shallow relativism implying the idea of equal value of religions; and the prospect that dialogue might lead to any substantive doctrinal innovation or changes to established dogma. Diversity may be acknowledged, but the implication of pluralism is often kept well at bay. The fears that interreligious dialogue amounts to a betrayal of mission, and the opening of the flood-gates of relativism and syncretism, were certainly early on dismissed as groundless within both the World Council of Churches and the Roman Catholic Church, even though such fear has resurfaced from time to time.

In broad terms, the Christian perspective on dialogue is that it is understood to include both witness to, and exploration of, the respective religious convictions of dialogical interlocutors. The practice of dialogue amounts to discerning and confirming religious value in the other. At the same time the identification of incommensurable values and genuine contradictions distinguishes Christianity from any other religion with which it engages: from the Catholic perspective the idea “that all religions are essentially the same, that every religion is equally a

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

way to salvation” is regarded as erroneous.³⁹ This would find echo within the ecumenical constituency. The fundamental Christian proclamation of ‘good news’ and the new modality of engagement in interreligious dialogue are deemed to be interrelated, but not interchangeable: each has its own proper sphere and application within the wider mission of the Church. A related issue concerns the paradigm shift signalled by the juxtaposition of the evangelical assertion of Jesus Christ as the normative ‘way of salvation’, with an affirmation that no limit can be set to the saving power of God.

Lying behind the impetus to dialogue, for many Christians, is the pressing question of how to live “as religiously committed people in a multi-religious society”.⁴⁰ Towards the latter part of the 20th century there was mounting evidence of a widespread quest for an appropriate spirituality, apparent within many societies in respect of which new appraisals and appropriations of religious plurality were taking place. Pluralism, together with secularism, did not just constitute a responsive context of, and so a rationale for, dialogue; it also emerged as a significant issue that impinges directly upon dialogue. Indeed, the issue of faith-identity within the context of religious plurality is critical for interfaith engagement because it is this plurality which sets the context for interfaith engagement and also raises the question of relativities of religious identities and presumptions of absolute truth.⁴¹ Situations of religious plurality effectively demand dialogical engagement in order to resist a slide into exclusivism or the encroachments of an imperial inclusivism.⁴²

³⁹ *Ibid*, 264.

⁴⁰ See Report of the Moderator, Diana Eck, to the Dialogue Working Group Meeting, 1988, p. 19; WCC-AFB 4612.062/1.

⁴¹ 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.

⁴² 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.

Plurality – Understanding the Multiplicity of Religions

Kenneth Cracknell has put the issue of plurality somewhat succinctly: If there is but one God; how is it there are so many religions?⁴³ How are Christians to relate to peoples of other faiths – and, indeed, to their faiths as such? The literature addressing pluralism is, of course considerable.⁴⁴ From the innovative work of Alan Race, Christian discourse has focussed on the paradigmatic options of exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism.⁴⁵ Exclusivism represents the dominant Christian position that has been taken towards any other religion or ideology down through the ages – at least until around the middle of the twentieth century.⁴⁶ Although formally eclipsed, it remains a lively and vexed issue.⁴⁷ Inclusivism has become the predominant Christian paradigm in respect to religious plurality, although the paradigm of pluralism, despite much contentious debate around it, holds out the prospect of a more fruitful and apposite theology of religious diversity.⁴⁸ Furthermore, with respect to religious diversity, “it is important to recognize not only the plurality of religions but also the plurality *within* religions”.⁴⁹ The theologian M.M. Thomas once remarked: “The churches today face no greater challenge than the one they encounter in the situation of religious, cultural and ideological pluralism”.⁵⁰ Nothing has changed really; this key challenge remains. Perhaps, today, it is more urgent than ever.

⁴³ Kenneth Cracknell, *Considering Dialogue: Theological Themes in Interfaith Relations, 1970-1980*, London: British Council of Churches, 1981.

⁴⁴ See, for example, Gavin D’Costa, *Theology and Religious Pluralism*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986; Michael Barnes, SJ, *Religions in Conversation: Christian Identity and Religious Pluralism*. London: SPCK, 1989; Harold Netland, *Dissonant Voices: Religious Pluralism and the Question of Truth*. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm B. Eerdmans; Leicester, UK: Apollos, 1991; 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, pp. 191-209; Jacques Dupuis, *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism*, Maryknoll: Orbis, 1997; Kenneth Cracknell, *In Good and Generous Faith: Christian Responses to Religious Pluralism*. Peterborough: Epworth, 2005.

⁴⁵ See Alan Race, *Christians and Religious Pluralism*. 2nd Edition, London: SCM Press Ltd, 1993.

⁴⁶ See Douglas Pratt, ‘The Dance of Dialogue: Ecumenical Interreligious Engagement’. *The Ecumenical Review* Vol 51, No. 3, July 1999, 274-287.

⁴⁷ Cf. Douglas Pratt, Exclusivism and Exclusivity: A Contemporary Theological Challenge. *Pacifica* 20/3 (October 2007), 291-306.

⁴⁸ Cf. Douglas Pratt, Contextual Paradigms for Interfaith Relations. *Current Dialogue*, No 42, December 2003, 3-9; – Pluralism, Postmodernism and Interreligious Dialogue, *Sophia*, Vol 46/3, December 2007, 243-259.

⁴⁹ Ariarajah, *Not Without My Neighbour*, 22.

⁵⁰ M.M. Thomas, *Risking Christ for Christ’s Sake: towards an ecumenical theology of pluralism*. Geneva: WCC Publications, 1987.

The Continued Significance of Interreligious Dialogue

Arguably, advocacy of interreligious dialogue – or interfaith engagement more widely – 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 World Council of Churches and the Vatican. Interreligious dialogical engagement remains of vital significance for the life of the Churches and for relations between the Christian Church and peoples of other faiths. Nevertheless, people of other faiths are sometimes concerned that Christians might use dialogue for missionary purposes, thus vitiating one of the principal tenets of interreligious dialogue, namely, a mutuality of respect in regard to each other's religious integrity. This, too, must be resisted. Chester Gilles rightly, in my view, articulates the significance of interfaith dialogical engagement for Christianity:

Dialogue is not an end in itself but it is an essential component of the contemporary theological enterprise. Contemporary theology simply cannot be done adequately from a single-source vision. The very nature of theological discourse itself is affected by the dialogical exchange between and among religions. Theology for the twenty-first century must be attentive to interreligious dialogue as a resource, and interreligious dialogue must seek reliable theological insight.⁵¹

Dialogue impacts upon theological thinking in a profoundly self-reflexive manner; if it does not, it is not really dialogue. The contemporary challenge of interfaith engagement is to address pressing critical concerns of peace, justice, human rights, the environment and inter-communal co-existence – to name but a few. To successfully do this, dialogue needs to be more than mere talk-fest: it needs to engage deeply.

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

⁵¹ Gilles, *op. cit.*, 40.

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. 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.⁵² 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 multicultural co-existence and, of course, the current war on religious-based terrorism.⁵³

⁵² 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.

⁵³ 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.

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.⁵⁴ 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.

Conclusion

Jonathan Sacks has recently observed that “great responsibility now lies with the world’s religious communities. Against all expectations, they have emerged in the twenty-first century as key forces in a global age”.⁵⁵ And he goes on to assert, somewhat in echo of the quotation with which I began this address:

Religion can be a source of discord. It can also be a form of conflict resolution. We are familiar with the former; the second is far too little tried. Yet it is here, if anywhere, that hope must lie if we are to create a human solidarity strong enough to bear the strains that lie ahead. The great faiths must now become an active force for peace and for the justice and compassion on which peace ultimately depends. That will require great courage, and perhaps something more than courage: a candid admission that, more than at any time in the past, we need to search – each faith in its

⁵⁴ See: S. Wesley Ariarajah, *Not Without My Neighbour: Issues in Interfaith Relations*. Risk Book Series No. 85. Geneva: WCC Publications, 1999 15.

⁵⁵ Jonathan Sacks, *The Dignity of Difference*. London & New York: Continuum, 2007, 4.

own way – for a way of living with, and acknowledging the integrity of, those who are not of our faith.⁵⁶

That is the challenge of change that faces all of us today. It is the challenge of diversity that has faced, and continues to face, the Christian community both globally and locally, the response to which sets the parameters for engagement with those who are not of our faith.

⁵⁶ *Ibid*, 4-5.