



# Mission and Salvation III. Christian Faith and Other Faiths

| Hooker, Roger

**The Tension Between Dialogue and Evangelism.** Canon Dr. Roger Hooker, the Bishop of Birmingham's Adviser for Interfaith Relations, expresses his views on Mission and Interfaith Dialogue.

## Mission and Salvation III

### Christian Faith and Other Faiths - The Tension Between Dialogue and Evangelism

by Canon Roger Hooker

Evangelism lies at the heart of Christianity. It is central to the New Testament; we have only to think of the Great Commission at the end of St Matthew's Gospel, and the letters and journeys of St Paul.

It is also central to Christian history: I would not be writing this article if missionaries had not come to these islands long ago and preached the Christian message to our forebears.

Today there are  
Christians to be  
found in almost  
every country of the  
world, the faith of  
many of them being  
the fruit of labours  
of the often  
maligned  
missionaries of the  
nineteenth century  
and their  
predecessors.  
All that is so  
obvious as hardly to  
need stating, yet  
today, evangelism is  
under question for a  
number of reasons.

### **Three reasons**

I will mention three  
of them: first, the  
missionaries of the  
past usually  
assumed that  
people who followed  
other faiths were  
benighted heathens  
groping in the dark.  
In those other faiths  
there might be the  
odd flicker of light  
here and there but  
that was all.  
Today we know  
much more about  
other faiths. There  
are plenty of reliable  
books and other  
material available  
which can give us a  
much more  
accurate and  
sympathetic picture.  
In addition, many  
countries, including  
Britain, are now  
multi-faith societies.  
Many of us have  
friends and  
neighbours of other

faiths whose devotion and integrity we cannot but honour and admire. There is much more meeting across religious boundaries than there used to be, and one result of this is an increase in mixed-faith marriages. All these changes are having profound effects on us all.

Second, in the nineteenth century and before, the missionaries often arrived under the protective umbrella of imperial power. The first two missionaries to reach India in modern times were two Franciscans who arrived in a man-of-war captained by Vasco da Gama in 1498 - a combination of circumstances which was deeply symbolic. Many people ask today how far assumptions of the superiority of Christian faiths were simply a reflection of the military and technical superiority and assumed cultural superiority of the civilisation from which the missionaries came.

Third, we are increasingly aware of the immense

harm that has been  
done by  
misunderstanding  
and violence  
between religions.  
Although most of us  
have conveniently  
forgotten the  
Crusades, the  
Muslim world has  
not.  
Yet since the  
collapse of the  
Soviet Union - the  
"evil empire" in  
Ronald Reagan's  
notorious phrase -  
Islam has replaced  
it for many as the  
demonic enemy  
which the West  
seems to need in  
order to feel secure  
in its own identity.  
Must we not  
therefore work  
towards a more  
generous and  
honest assessment  
of Islam, and  
encourage much  
more meeting of  
Muslims and  
Christians, for the  
sake of world  
peace?

## Dialogue

These three points,  
and many others,  
have led some  
Christians to the  
conviction that  
evangelism must be  
abandoned, or at  
least soft-pedalled,  
and that instead our  
primary, if not our  
only, task is to  
engage in a  
dialogue with  
people of other

faiths.

A leading contemporary exponent of this approach is Hans Kung, who has expressed his convictions in three memorable aphorisms:

- No peace among the nations without peace among the religions.
- No peace among the religions without dialogue between the religions.
- No dialogue between the religions without investigation of the foundation of the religions.

Though the roots of this dialogic approach are to be found in our past, there is an essential novelty about it. Here I turn to Max Warren, who was General Secretary of CMS (Church Missionary Society) from 1942 to 1963. In the General Introduction to the Christian Presence series of books, which he edited in the 1950s and 1960s, he wrote:

"The Christian church has not yet seriously faced the theological problem of "co-existence" with other religions. The very term seems to imply the acceptance of some limitation on the universal relevance of the Gospel. Can that be accepted? It can hardly be doubted that the answer must be "no". Are we then shut up to the alternative of what in some disguise or other must be an aggressive attack on the deeply held convictions of those who live by faiths other than our own?"

The word "co-existence" was part of the vocabulary of that era and reflected, of course, the uneasy relationship between the two superpowers. The Church of that time had hardly begun to talk about dialogue, though in fact it sometimes went on under other names. The question marks about evangelism were then relatively new, but anyone who has friends in other faith communities must know how often Christian evangelism does indeed seem to be

"an aggressive  
attack" on their  
"deeply held  
convictions".

## **Faithful witness**

Christians who have  
begun to venture  
along the path of  
dialogue will often  
say that, far from  
undermining their  
faith, the experience  
has deepened it.  
They make the  
further point that as  
they are willing to  
listen to what their  
friends of other  
faiths have to say,  
so they are able to  
bear faithful witness  
to their own  
Christian  
convictions.

Further, when we  
get to know and  
trust one another  
across religious  
boundaries in the  
way that sort of  
conversation  
demands, then we  
may find  
opportunities for  
active co-operation.  
After all, disease  
and the destruction  
of the environment  
are now to be found  
on such a massive  
scale that we are  
bound to ask if  
people of different  
faiths cannot, and  
should not, work  
together to create a  
better world.  
And considering all  
the bloodshed  
which wars and

disputes between religions have caused, and still cause, is not such co-operation likely to promote world peace as well, as Hans Kung and others argue?

All this adds up to a powerful case for a dialogue, which also includes authentic witness to one another, but it still leaves an unease in the minds of many Christians - and of their counterparts in some other faiths. They would say that, while the kind of witness I have advocated is necessary, it stops short of the goal of evangelism, which must be conversion.

### **The heart of the tension**

This brings us to the heart of the tension between evangelism and dialogue, for if the aim of the conversation on my side is conversion, then how can the conversation be genuinely open and how can I expect the other person to trust me?

We must also put that question the other way round: people sometimes say to me,



"Suppose just one of your Hindu, Muslim or Sikh friends were to be converted to Christ through your ministry, would not that spell the end of any friendship with other members of the convert's community? So is that friendship really compatible with loyalty to the Gospel? Have you not really sold the evangelistic pass?"

My response to that dilemma is this: my task is to listen to what the other person says, to be challenged and questioned, disturbed and attracted by it. It was Max Warren who taught us that we have so to expose ourselves to the other faith that we are tempted to join it. Only as I am prepared to do that can I bear witness to the Christ who has called me. And because I believe in Christ, such witness is bound to be persuasive.

I cannot bear witness in a detached way, for my whole being is bound up with what I say. But - and this is the crucial point - the results of that conversation are not in my hands, nor in

the hands of my  
friend of another  
faith, but in the  
hands of the Holy  
Spirit. I can neither  
predict nor control  
the outcome.

## **Evangelisation**

Let me expand on  
that with some  
stories.

An Indian priest  
whom I know, has,  
for 30 years, been  
living and serving  
the Hindus and  
Muslims who live in  
a slum colony on  
the edge of a huge  
Indian city - working  
not for them but with  
them. Whenever  
one of them asks  
him if he is trying to  
convert them, he  
replies, "I am trying  
to convert the life of  
this area."

If individuals make  
enquiries about  
Christian faith, he  
sends them  
elsewhere because  
if individuals start to  
become Christians,  
this could disrupt  
the precarious  
communal harmony  
of the area.  
His ministry is what  
the Roman  
Catholics would call  
"evangelization" -  
permeating society  
with gospel values.  
Recently, a group of  
15 Hindus  
approached one of  
the priest's

colleagues and asked for instruction in the Christian faith. He sounded out the local Hindu and Muslim leaders to get their reaction to this move. They had no objection precisely because they knew the Hindus were acting of their own free will and had not been openly and actively evangelised.

I believe that that approach in that context is right - which is by no means to claim that other approaches in other contexts may not be equally right.

Again, I think of a community of the Little Sisters of Jesus whom I have known for many years. When Hindus ask if they are trying to convert the local Hindus, they often reply, "First we must be more deeply converted ourselves."

A few months ago I found myself reading a thought-provoking article on Jewish/Christian relations written by one of the Sisters of the Love of God (SLG). In it she remarked that in the so-called ages of faith it was often literally a matter of life and death for a person to profess

what was then  
Christian orthodoxy.  
That necessity  
meant that one's  
unbelief got  
suppressed but  
what is suppressed  
in that way needs  
an external  
scapegoat, and so  
the Jews were  
depicted as  
"unbelieving" for  
their refusal to  
believe in Christ.  
The terrible  
consequences of  
that we all know.  
Now, in any context,  
if the evangelists  
are not being more  
deeply converted  
themselves, then  
they are inevitably  
going to project their  
own  
unacknowledged  
inner darkness on to  
the very people they  
are trying to reach.

### **The heart's unreached areas**

To sum up: all  
evangelism springs  
from a concern for  
the total well-being  
at every level of  
those we long to  
reach with the  
Gospel, but its first  
object must be the  
unreached areas of  
the evangelist's  
own heart.

Dialogue with  
people of other  
faiths means  
entering so deeply  
into what they hold

precious that we begin to find it attractive and are tempted to embrace it ourselves. When that happens we can begin to find the appropriate words and ways to bear witness to our own faith.

## **Uneasy partners**

All that means that evangelism and dialogue have to walk together but always as uneasy partners. If they are not walking together, there can be no tension between them. If there is no tension, then the proponents of each caricature the others in order to enjoy the phoney security of always being right. When that happens we stop asking questions and so no longer grow.

Is it our vocation in CMS to keep dialogue and evangelism close enough to one another for the tension to be real enough to provoke those questions we have to ask on the next stage of our journey?

This paper was originally written for the Church Missionary Society.

Common Ground 1997/3