Mission and Salvation III. Christian Faith and Other Faiths

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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

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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

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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:

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"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

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"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,

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"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

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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

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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

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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?

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