

Christian Mission among other Faiths

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Religious narrative may inform one's identity and one's world-view, but in itself it has no impact on one's post-death situation. Whether one believes in pushing up daisies, or in eternal salvation, reincarnation or nirvana, or is committed to a view about a world of spirits, the belief will have absolutely no impact on what actually happens at the point of death! Most religious narratives offer a post-death concept and most assume some level of human achievement such as good behaviour or the killing of an infidel.¹ Yet the Christian gospel places salvation in the hands of God alone whilst inviting individuals to place themselves in a right relationship with this self-revealing God.

So those committed to the Christian narrative would have a motivation to announce the availability of salvation as grounds for announcing the Christian gospel. However, salvation is not the only ground for this announcement. St Paul made it clear as he traveled across Europe where many other religions were adhered to that there is an immediate need to see lives remoulded by the active presence of God the Holy Spirit in the life of all those who turn to God's grace.²

We must recognize the right of all people to pursue the world-view they choose, just as Christians would wish that no matter what nation they live in they too would be free to follow their religious commitment. Given that recognition, we might ask if there is anything unique in the various religious narratives. There are some areas of overlap such as between the Pharonic concept of a wealthy after-life and some Chinese religions³, as well as between Hinduism and Buddhism.⁴ But the Christian concept of salvation in God's eternal kingdom is unique, if it were not then there would be nothing worth suffering or even dying for. Not only our past, but also sadly our present history indicates that many people suffer and die for the sake of their commitment to the God of grace.⁵ The 1910 Edinburgh conference was held to promote mission to those who did not hold a Christian Faith and we must take this into account. It assumed the potential universality of the gospel, but as Panikkar⁶ has pointed out such action creates a problem for those who do not hold to this faith.

So in today's world we need to ascertain what an appropriate position could be. In arriving at this point I would first make two warnings.

(1) There is no advantage in **patronizing others**. Each person develops a personal identity in the light of the faith adopted.⁷ We as Christians do not want to show

¹ Hendrik M. Vroom, *Religions and the Truth*. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1989).331, argues that the finitude is fundamental to all philosophies of life. One could also look at a Medina text such as Qur'an 9:111.

² For instance see Pauline letters and in particular a passage like Romans 12:1-2. Also see Vroom 329, "religious persuasion remains *alive* as long as it is sustained by experiences."

³ See for instance: David Downs, *Unwrapping the Pharaohs*, (Green Forest AR: Master Books,2006), the whole book and pp.45ff. And on Chinese religions see Ralph R. Covell, *Confucius, The Buddha, and Christ*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1986), pp.140ff.

⁴ Vroom, 325.

⁵ See Paul Marshall, *Their Blood Cries Out*. (Dallas: Word Publishing, 1997).

⁶ Raimundo Panikkar, *The Intrareligious Dialogue*. (New York: Paulist Press, 1978). 13

⁷ One might add also that culture has a very significant impact on identity, but the 1910 conference apparently did not reflect on culture. See S. Wesley Ariarajah, (*Gospel and Culture*, Geneva: WCC publications, 1994). 4.

ourselves as having a superior attitude, therefore we should not patronize those of other faiths.⁸ We are called by the Bible to be humble and our humility lies in the fact that human achievement is not the mechanism for attaining a changed life or eternal salvation. We are open to learning from other cultures and values⁹ as well as the religious understandings of those among whom we seek to make known the Christian gospel.¹⁰ However, we do have a unique message to present and each individual needs to make up her/his own mind from the range of messages heard as to which one will be followed.

- (2) There is no advantage in being **approvingly sympathetic** to other religious narratives. At the 1893 World Parliament of Religions in Chicago, Swami Vivekananda pursued Ram Mohan Roy's position that the Hindu practice of Sati (*Sutee*) could be dropped as this is not taught in the Vedas¹¹ and thus Hinduism must be acknowledged as a helpful religion.¹² If on this basis we approve the Hindu religion, then we are declaring that the Christian gospel has nothing unique to say. The same position becomes obvious when we note that regardless of what peaceful Muslims may state, their operational manual, namely the Qur'an, does declare that Islam is the only right universal religion, and apostates should be killed.¹³ The old pluralistic view that there are many paths up the same mountain all leading to the top of the mountain, is not a helpful image (particularly when doctrine and political ideology merge). If there is an eternal God, then only that God can declare who he is and how he can be reached (both Islam and Christianity reject pluralism). Any human attempt at discovering the Divine has to be a product of human imagination.¹⁴ So either we have a self-declaring God to announce or we should keep quiet. If we do make such an announcement then we do have some boundaries for we are not simply appeasers. I will comment further on boundaries in a moment.

For Christian Mission today we need to grasp some concepts.

- (1) The most widely known concept is that of contextualization.¹⁵ A range of meanings have been attached to this concept. It has its roots in Paul's message at the Areopagus (Acts 17), in that he related to an existing inscription on a local altar and recognized the belief in an 'unknown God'. He was relating to an awareness of many of his listeners. Over the years many missionaries have found that the local people among whom they are ministering already have some awareness of concepts which need to be further developed. There are some truths in most world-views. Lesslie Newbigin embarks on this concept

⁸ Superiority is a cultural product according to H. Kraemer, *The Christian message in a Non-Christian World*. (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1956).109.

⁹ The Jerusalem 1928 WCC conference placed some emphasis on values in other cultures and religions. Ariarajah, p.4.

¹⁰ This point is strongly made by Kraemer, in his preface p.2 & pp 101ff.

¹¹ Swami Ranganathanda, *The essence of Indian Culture*. (Calcutta: the Ramakrishna Mission, 1965). 55-8 and David Burnett, *The Spirit of Hinduism*, (Oxford: Monarch Books, 2006). 236, 249.

¹² Daniel Gold in Martin E. Marty and R. Scott Appleby, *Fundamentalisms Observed*. (Chicago: Uni of Chicago, 1991). 535. However, this publication and the Chicago Parliament of Religions precedes the development of the Political ideology of Hindutva and its antagonism to Indians not being Hindus.

¹³ Qur'an 3:85-91; 5:32; 9:5,29; 16:106. & in the Hadith by Bukhari,4:260. However some writers object to the interpretation and argue that punishment is only in the after-life – see M.M. Ali, *The Religion of Islam*, (Lahore: Ahmadiyya. 1990). 438. This is an ideological stance not followed by all Muslims, but is reflected also in the Hindutva ideology.

¹⁴ This comment is supported by Ariarajah, 6 and Biblical texts such as John 14:6.

¹⁵ A useful publication on this topic is David J. Hesselgrave & Edward Rommen, *Contextualization*, (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 1989).

with a chapter in his “The Gospel in a Pluralist Society” (p141-154). He states that the truth about the gospel must be announced in a way that makes sense to the hearer and yet at the same time it must ‘not be a product shaped by the mind of the hearer.’¹⁶ The gospel must be conveyed in the culture in which it is being announced and not presented in its original Hebrew culture.¹⁷ Some religions have a concept of a Creator God yet know little if anything about him. Vince Donovan discovered this in his work with the Masai.¹⁸ Don Richardson found a redemptive analogy in his ministry among the Asmat tribe in Irian Jaya.¹⁹ Workers among Muslims can identify with the ‘One God’ concept, with the belief in ‘Isa’ and that we represent God in the world, but in all cases there is an enormous movement away from their original understanding as the story about Jesus unfolds and the character of a loving Christ is made clear.²⁰ Eventually the missionary will discuss the Triune nature of God, since contextualization means both relating to already known ideas as well as sensitivity to the yet to be known. The term ‘contextualization’ is also used to establish a faithful declaration of God’s written word and relating this meaning to the context in a meaningful way.

- (2) The next concept I need to mention is the not so well known concept of determining the boundaries. Those in ministry today would be expected to identify the Biblical boundaries of behaviour linked to the nature and practice of the person of Jesus (e.g. Hebrews 12). One would hope also that all those in ministry today will work within the cultural boundaries until any of these boundaries are in conflict with the nature of the person of Jesus. Those committed to some faith or to no faith usually hold to some truths and Christians need to identify these, build on them and respect the culture in which they have been formed. But Christians owe allegiance and discipline only to the Cross. This means that whilst doctrine is not changed, values may be reviewed and adjusted as needed without necessarily being in conflict with the boundaries set.
- (3) The common basis for relating to people of other faiths today appears to be on a dialogue platform. The assumptions about dialogue vary enormously. But the essentials are firstly, that neither side expects to change its doctrinal stance. Secondly then, the purpose cannot be for conversion and it must be to convey historical facts, and/or to explain doctrinal positions²¹ and/or to promote harmony among the people. In Nigeria it has been used in an attempt to persuade Muslims not to kill Christians and burn down their churches (no doubt a desire for peace) and this has been a noted failure. In Nepal and India it has been used to explain that people are not paid money to convert (an attempt to explain the facts) and this too has not been successful. In Pakistan it has been used in an attempt to eliminate the blasphemy law, but this too has failed, even at the political level.²² In Australia it has been used to improve the

¹⁶ Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans).141.

¹⁷ op. cit. 145-7.

¹⁸ Vincent J. Donovan, *Christianity Rediscovered*, (London: SCM Press, 1978). 42ff.

¹⁹ Don Richardson, “Concept Fulfillment”, in Ralph D. Winter & Steven C. Hawthorne (eds). *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement*, (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 1981). 419.

²⁰ See Mark Durie, *Revelation? Do we worship the same God*, (Upper Mt Gravatt: City Harvest, 2006).

²¹ Panikkar argues that one can absorb some teaching from other religions and allow it to develop one’s already existing beliefs. See his p.14ff. But he fails to show how this does not become pantheism, or where the boundaries are being drawn.

²² Bishop Mano Rimal-Shah, “Race, class, culture and Christ” in *Church Scene*, Feb2, 1996 p11.

understanding of two faiths which are engaging, but there has been little evidence of a helpful result either in publications²³ or in reducing proposed acts of terrorism by extremists²⁴. The desire often is to strengthen the capacity for tolerance and this could mean an improvement in relationships, but normally means a shift in values as doctrine is not adjustable. The “Common Word” written-dialogue promoted Islamic values and decried extremism, but claimed the right to kill apostates.²⁵ It also requires that Christians not be aggressors against Islam, with no comment about Islamic aggression. Clearly, dialogue tends to be a publicity event rather than an effective means of increasing tolerance. It certainly is not a means, and should not be used as a means, for Christians to announce the gospel.²⁶

Any and every mission action among those of other faiths or of no faith should be undertaken not as a displacement concept, but as an opportunity to build on whatever knowledge and ideas the listener(s) may hold to and be open to a debate about the content of the narrative. Such debate will not change the essential features of the narrative, but may change the approach and may open up ways for further declaration of the message of a right relationship with the God who has revealed himself both in word and in The Word.

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²³ Currently a discussion with the Affinity group in Sydney indicates the lack of genuineness in the dialogue situation. Their latest news release (6 August 2009, www.affinity.org.au) maintains that Muslims do not get involved in terrorist acts. I have also witnessed Ata Mustafa's pretence at dialogue in some churches in Sydney. Also read the first chapter in David Claydon (ed), *Islam, Human Rights and Public Policy*, (Melbourne: Acorn, 2009) and see the inconsistency between statements made in an Australian publication by Abdullah Saeed and what he said in his home nation of the Maldives.

²⁴ E.g. Abdullah Saeed in *The Australian*, 7/08/09, and *Sydney Morning Herald*, 25/08/09, p.4.

²⁵ “The Common Word” is dated 13 Oct 2007 and addressed to Pope Benedict XVI. See article by Jon Hoover, Assistant Professor of Islamic Studies, Beirut, in *Theological Review XXX*, 2009. 50-77.

²⁶ I note the intentions of the Parliament on World Religions Conference, to be held in Melbourne in December this year, that it is aiming at promoting peace among the religionists (www.parliamentofreligions.org). This will be a worthwhile hope, but if the event promotes a concept of relativity or that people can worship many divinities, then it is entering into the doctrinal sphere and failing to be honest as to its purposes.