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Christian Discipleship and Interreligious Dialogue: A Theological Exploration

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What is the relationship between Christian mission and inter-faith engagement? What has interreligious dialogue got to do with Christian discipleship? Is one in competition with the other? Is one subsumed within the other? Is one effectively vitiated by the other? And what is the relation of mission to discipleship? Is it the case that ‘making disciples’ is the goal of mission? “Discipleship has been for centuries a way of thinking and speaking about the nature of the Christian life... But what is meant by Christian discipleship?”¹ Is engagement in dialogue an authentic component of Christian discipleship and witness? Or is interreligious dialogue enjoined, in the end, by virtue of being subsumed to mission, whose aim is something other than the pursuit of dialogical relations? These are examples of the deep questions and theological issues that have arisen ever since, in the course of the twentieth century, a sea-change occurred with the wider Christian Church in regard to relationships with, and views about, other religions. In this paper I shall address just three questions: Is there a biblical basis for inter-faith engagement? What may we make of the ‘Great Commission’ in respect to interreligious dialogue? What is the understanding of mission in regards to discipleship, and how might that relate to interreligious dialogue?

¹ Richard N. Longenecker, ed., *Patterns of Discipleship in the New Testament*. Grand Rapids: Wm B. Eerdmans, 1996, 1.

A biblical basis for inter-faith engagement

It has been said that the bible “is distinctively a book of dialogue and it contains many dialogues within. We can misread its passages if we miss the dialogical context”.² Good hermeneutics recognizes the importance of context, and context itself can be multi-layered. We need to keep this in mind when exploring the possibility of a biblical basis for inter-faith engagement. I shall confine myself to two key texts, both of which are dominical commandments. That is to say, the context of each is direct divine revelation: they give “the word of God” as directly as is possible to ascertain. The first is the ninth of the Ten Commandments: “You shall not bear false witness against your neighbour”.³ The second is confidently attributed to Jesus himself wherein the heart of faith is summarised by his citing from the *Shema* (Deut. 6:4) – “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart” – to which is added, as a second commandment: ‘You shall love your neighbour as yourself’ and the affirmation “There is no other commandment greater than these”.⁴ Does the ninth commandment, to not bear false witness against our neighbour, together with the commandment of Jesus – to love our neighbour as ourselves, juxtaposed, in effect, as co-equal with loving God – provide the basis for a biblical mandate for inter-faith engagement?

The Ten Commandments can be regarded as a distillation, in imperative form, of the foundational principles of relational integrity that comprise the vertical and horizontal planes of our existence: relationship with God, and relationships with our fellow human beings. In regards to the ninth Commandment, I suggest there is a fundamental human psychological and spiritual need for reliable witness made as to who and what we really are, which can be demonstrated by its obverse: there is an inherent reaction of hostility to slander, to being misrepresented, to having selfhood questioned or denied outright. Where an individual is constantly put down, demeaned and depreciated, the chances are it will result in a diminution of personhood, with depression, negative perceptions of self-worth, with concomitant mental health maladies likely to ensue. Indeed, to be confronted with false witness – to have our

² Israel Selvanayagam, *Relating to People of Other Faiths: Insights from the Bible*. Tiruvalla & Bangalore: CSS Books / BTTBPSA, 2004, 32.

³ Exodus, Chap. 20: 16.

⁴ Mark 12: 31; cf. Matthew 22: 39; Luke 10: 27.

identity denied in any form, our identity called into question, to have doubt cast on our very being – is to contend with a situation of profound betrayal. And if this is true at the personal psychological level, it can also be true for communities, for whole societies. Tragically this has been a mark of the historic relationship between Jews and Christians, and also between Jews and Muslims, for example. It is a feature of the history and contemporary reality of Christian–Muslim relations, as was evidenced in recent times by the Muhammad ‘cartoon’ affair, for example. Perhaps the commandment proscribing false witness against our neighbour has something to tell us about inter-communal as well as inter-personal relations. The neighbour of whom we are commanded to not bear false witness is not only the person next door, but the every-body, the every-culture, every-religion, with whom we live in ever closer proximity in the modern world.

The key question is this: Is the ninth commandment meant to be honoured passively – that is, do we fulfil it by never actually bearing false witness as such? Or do we fulfil it actively to the extent we bear, concretely and intentionally, true witness in respect of our neighbour? I suggest, in the context of understanding the commandments as providing guidance as to the priorities and integrity of relationship this commandment is the beginning point of a theological mandate for inter-faith engagement. People of other faiths are neighbours to be loved as ourselves.⁵ Krister Stendahl once observed that the ninth commandment carries a clear implication in favour of interreligious engagement: the fulfilling of the command requires active dialogue in order to know and honour “the other” as, indeed, our neighbour.⁶ Perhaps those who would honour God would do so more by seeking to bear true witness to the religious neighbour – through proper, critical, empathetic knowledge and understanding, and through active sympathetic engagement – than by basing their stance on the rather odd notion that the Good News of God requires that the integrity and identity of the non-Christian religious neighbour is to be denied in favour of that neighbour joining the Christian club, of becoming ‘one of us’. After all, this is exactly the pattern of ecclesiastical one-upmanship within the Christian orbit that the

⁵ See, for example, S. Wesley Ariarajah, *Not Without My Neighbour: Issues in Interfaith Relations*. Risk Book Series No. 85. Geneva: WCC Publications, 1999.

⁶ As noted by Diana Eck in her moderator’s report to the DFI Working Group, 1985, 11; see WCC Archive File Box 4612.056/5.

ecumenical movement has striven hard to ameliorate: replacing mutual deprecation and rivalry with mutual respect and a wider encompassing theological vision. It is a similar wide theological vision that is called for in respect to interreligious relations. In the end, I suggest, the commandment to not bear false witness against our neighbour of another faith is the other side of the second great commandment: to love our neighbour as ourselves. For true love does not bear false witness; rather, bearing true witness is itself an act of love. We may conclude, at least provisionally, that a biblical mandate in favour of interreligious engagement, even when pressed beyond these ‘test texts’, may be adduced. But if such a mandate *can* be ascertained, where does that leave the received tradition that has premised the relation of Christians to others on the basis of Matthew 28, the Great Commission? Indeed, is there an inherent tension between these great commandments and the Great Commission?

Interreligious engagement and the ‘Great Commission’

The late David Bosch, in observing that the author of the gospel of Matthew was a Jew addressing a predominantly Jewish-Christian community, argues that the “entire purpose of his writing was to nudge his community toward a missionary involvement with its environment”.⁷ Although the protestant missionary movements during the 19th and 20th centuries, when giving account of their rationale have appealed to the Great Commission that closes Matthew’s gospel, such appeal, says Bosch, “usually took no account of the fact that this pericope cannot be properly understood in isolation from the gospel of Matthew as a whole”.⁸ For Bosch the entire gospel may be read as a missionary text: it is not a life of Jesus so much as a guide for the community of those who would follow Jesus by living out his teachings. Thus, says Bosch, it is

inadmissible to lift these words out of Matthew’s gospel ... allow them a life of their own, and understand them without any reference to the context in which they first appeared. ... the “Great Commission” is perhaps the most

⁷ David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*. Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1992, 55.

⁸ *Ibid.*

Matthean in the entire gospel: virtually every word or expression used in these verses is peculiar to the author.⁹

Matthew interprets membership of the community of Jesus' people in terms of discipleship, and the very humanity of the first disciples serves to encourage a new generation of followers to *their* life of discipleship. Thus the first disciples have an "important function, both positively and negatively, of showing the readers of the Gospel just what is involved in being a follower of Jesus and a beneficiary of his saving activity".¹⁰ The question this then raises is whether salvation is understood by Matthew – and so may be understood by us – as primarily an *individual benefit* gained by virtue of becoming, as individuals, 'disciples' or followers of Jesus; or is salvation a *mark of a particular and unique community*, the membership of which is to be understood in regard to the dynamics of discipleship, of living out salvation as the qualitative guide and measure for those who comprise the body of Christ?

Arguably, where the idea of mission – meaning, in essence, going out to 'make disciples' – lies with the former, then an assertive evangelicalism dominates with the consequence, often, of religious exclusivism and competition coming more to the fore; if the latter, then 'making disciples' may be understood more in terms of the spread and diversification of the 'Christ community' *within* the nations of the world. This presupposes the concomitant development of appropriate relations between the 'Christ community' and those diverse communities – including religious – which, together with the Christian community, make up the nations.

Undoubtedly, discipleship is a leitmotiv of Matthew's gospel: "Matthew eventually makes it clear that he wants his readers to become disciples and recipients of Jesus' teaching as well".¹¹ The disciples, slow on the up-take, got there in the end – and were finally 'commissioned'. In effect, says Matthew, "The same can go for you, dear reader..." However, the corporate dimension of Matthew's portrayal of discipleship is really quite clear: "in the only Gospel that refers to the church

⁹ Cf. *ibid.*, 57.

¹⁰ Terence L. Donaldson 'Guiding Readers – Making Disciples: Discipleship in Matthew's Narrative Strategy' in Longenecker, ed., *Patterns of Discipleship in the New Testament*, 41.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 43.

[*ekklesia*] (16:18; 18:17), discipleship takes place in the context of a distinct, disciplined community”.¹² The “making of disciples” is thus to be read as working to bring others into a new and widely inclusive community – understood now to be of universal import, beyond the confines of its originating (Jewish) particularity. For Matthew there is “no discontinuity between the history of Jesus and the era of the church”.¹³ Also, for Matthew, as discipleship “means living out the teachings of Jesus ... It is unthinkable to divorce the Christian life of love and justice from being a disciple”.¹⁴

Mission is not simply the narrow activity of ‘winning converts’, even though there will always be a welcome given to the new entrant to the community. Rather it may be seen as also the never-ending and much broader task of socialising, educating, or inculcating people into an appreciative awareness and understanding – and so a discovering and deepening of – the Christian discipline, or ‘way of life’. And this may be something other-than, and alongside, the joining of a particular ecclesial community by way of taking up active membership within it. So, given the propriety of positive and mutually respectful relations that even a preliminary rethinking the interpretation of the dominical commandments has shown, the relational motifs of ‘socialising’ and ‘educating’ may themselves be interpreted and applied quite broadly. A relationship with an ‘other’ who knows, understands, and sees value in my religion, and I in theirs, may well be, in certain contexts, a sufficient discharge of the task of ‘making disciples’.

Mission, discipleship, and interreligious dialogue

My third question addresses the understanding of mission in regards to discipleship, and how that might relate to interreligious dialogue. A contemporary leading paradigm of mission sees the task of the church, or the Christian community, as being to participate in the mission of God – the *missio Dei* – wherein, strictly speaking, “mission is not primarily an activity of the church, but an attribute of God ... Mission is thereby seen as a movement from God to the world; the church is

¹² *Ibid*, 46.

¹³ Bosch, *op. cit.*, 74.

¹⁴ Bosch, *ibid*, 81.

viewed as an instrument for that mission. ... To participate in mission is to participate in the movement of God's love toward people".¹⁵ Mission, in this sense, is the fulfilling of relational injunctions: to love; to bear true and proper witness; to honour and respect; to offer hospitality to the stranger; and so on. Mission is the act of reaching out to the other in both an imitation and an enacting of the outward reaching love of God. This opens us to a wider and enriching interactive understanding of mission, one which allows for inter-faith engagement as a component dimension.

Bosch reminds us that the "most we can hope for is to formulate some *approximations* of what mission is all about ... Our missionary practice is not performed in unbroken continuity with the biblical witness; it is an altogether ambivalent enterprise executed in the context of tension between divine providence and human confusion".¹⁶ Furthermore, whereas the modern-era missionary enterprise was founded on notions of the inherent superiority of Christianity, the fact we are living now in a manifestly pluralist world has produced a new context and, says Bosch, this is an element of the contemporary 'crisis' of mission.¹⁷ But a situation of crisis – if that is what it is – does not mean mission is vitiated; only that it must, as with all things theological, be constantly re-thought.

In this regard Roger Bowen acknowledges that the question of the proper Christian "attitude to people of other faiths" is the "hardest theological question which faces the whole Church".¹⁸ Although, says Bowen,

God is at work outside the area of the Church's witness, there have been times when the Church's witness to Christ has been so false that God cannot have been in it. The obvious example is the Crusades, which were so cruel that Christians should be ashamed to use the word at all. What response should Saladin and his Muslim armies have made to the Christ whom they saw then?¹⁹

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 390.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 9.

¹⁷ Cf. *ibid.*, 3.

¹⁸ Roger Bowen, *So I Send You: a study guide to mission*. London: SPCK, 1996, 210.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 212.

Christians can claim no inherent automatic right of superiority in terms of the historical praxis of the faith, even if, as with Bowen himself, priority is yet given to Christ as the only sure means by which, in the end, the deepest reality of God may be known. Yet Bowen's Christocentrism does not preclude him from acknowledging the place and role of interreligious dialogue within the wider mission of the Church which "should not be to trade bargaining points between the religions, but to admit that we all have a journey of faith to go on ... Perhaps people of different faiths can sometimes go on part of this journey together as they talk with one another".²⁰

I suggest a number of elements contribute to understanding discipleship as, in fact, actively enabling interreligious relations with our neighbours of other faiths. In the first instance, Christians simply living out their lives in the context of everyday interactions within a religiously plural environment are engaged in non-intentional dialogue. This occurs without any conscious design as such; it simply takes place as the 'dialogue of life'. Beyond that a range of intentional interreligious engagements can and does occur. Joint responses to societal issues and cooperative actions premised on shared, or at least compatible, values and perspectives suggest the appropriateness of an intentional planned level of interreligious relating that may be classified as – the 'dialogue of action'. Occasions where an inter-faith event of a liturgical, meditative/reflective, or otherwise worshipful nature, is engaged in exemplify the 'dialogue of religious experience'. Events where scholars and other allied experts from across two or more religions get together to pursue deep discussions is often referred to as the 'dialogue of discourse': most often this is what the term 'dialogue' immediately suggests, but in fact it is the most difficult activity to pursue. It requires a history of relationship being built up by way of the other modalities of dialogue before it can be confidently entered into. Arguably, from the perspective of Christian faith, these four modalities represent appropriate dimensions of the way of discipleship.

²⁰ *Ibid*, 220.

There is also the indirect element of intentional interreligious engagement by virtue of a religious community – a parish or congregation, for example – undertaking self-reflection in respect to the fact of the religious plurality in which it is set: seeking to discern and understand its role vis-à-vis its neighbours of other faiths. In this regard, Bosch usefully summarises the attitudes, preconditions and perspectives for interreligious engagement.²¹ There must be both a clear and willing acceptance of the co-existence of different faiths and an intentional cultivation of a deeper commitment to one's own faith. Dialogical engagement then proceeds in the confidence of the God who precedes us, who is there before us in – from our viewpoint – the uncharted waters of inter-faith relations. Further, both dialogue and mission are to be pursued in a context of humility – this is an exercise of being open to Grace. Religions are to be understood as discrete worldview systems, thus interactions with them – or rather their followers – will vary accordingly: the form and focus of relations between Christians and Muslims will be different from that of Christian–Buddhist encounter, for example. Such dialogue neither subverts nor substitutes for mission understood in its wider sense of living out the *missio Dei* in and to the wider world.

At the same time dialogue moves us beyond any sense of “business as usual”: the dialogical engagement of inter-faith relations will effect change, if not in fundamental beliefs and values, then certainly in the modality of their interpretation and application. To that extent, a new phase of the life of discipleship is entered into when interreligious engagement is taken up. And a role in all this may be found for the level of more sophisticated theological investigation and reflection in seeking a rationale for, and engaging in an evaluation of, interreligious relationships and allied dialogical activities, which simultaneously takes us back into our own heritage and forward into new waters of understanding and new lands of engagement.

Discipleship, as a response to the greater reality of God, a reality that is manifestly universal in reach and inclusive in scope, implies an openness to that which necessarily falls within the purview of the *missio Dei*, namely the *oikumene* – the whole inhabited earth. And this means *all* that lies therein, including the rich

²¹ Bosch, *op. cit.*, 483ff.

diversity of human culture and religion. Interreligious engagement is not the pursuit of dialogue by an ‘in-group’ in respect to an ‘out-group’ on the basis of the one is within the divine encompass, and the other is not. For there is no ‘out’; nothing is ‘outside’, or beyond, the reach and scope of the reality of God. Those who would be disciples of the Christ participate in the mission of God which is intrinsically governed by this dimension of universality and inclusiveness. Therefore, discipleship is not about the attempt to “gather in” those who are “outside” – this very bifurcation, which derives from the pastoral imagery that played a role in the early establishment and self-reflection of the Christian community has been long-eclipsed by developments in theological understanding. Rather, the life of Christian discipleship is a matter of engaging both self and the world in the quest for deeper knowledge of God and living out that life which goes with that knowledge and quest. And it is a way of life that presupposes dialogical modality: the interior dialogue as each seeks and follows their individual path; the dialogue of belonging within the community in which the quest is situated and shared; and the dialogue with others – especially others of different faith-traditions and paths – who are similarly living out their own quests.

Appendix:

But what of the classic counter-text John 14:6 – does this not say, unequivocally, that there is but one modality of salvation, as in ‘way to God, the Father’, namely through Jesus, the Son? Selvanayagam rightly notes that this text is, most usually, “taken out of context and proclaimed as an established doctrine which is non-negotiable”.²² Caution and discernment, with a deep reading of the full text in its context is required before rash claims to theological – and specifically soteriological – exclusivity can be entertained. This text does not carry the same revelatory weight as do the two dominical texts: it can not be assumed that these words, as recorded in scripture, are the actual verbatim speech of Jesus. They bear the hallmark of theological redaction by the compiler of the gospel. But it is an important text to address, nonetheless, and a number of points need to be made. The text admits of a multiple, or multi-layered, context of which one dimension is that of its inclusion in the set of ‘I am’ sayings attributed to Jesus. And one facet of this is that, so far as attribution to significant religious figures go, an ‘I am’ saying is by no means unique to Christian texts. Similar sorts of sayings are found in the texts of other religions in reference to their specific key or divine figures: to that extent the ‘I am’ structure is a religious-literary trope utilised by the gospel writer. The immediate relational setting is also significant, namely: “The context of John 14 is the farewell discourse of Jesus addressed to his desperate disciples with passion and intimacy. 14:6 is part of a dialogue”.²³

In other words, we need to remember that the giving of abstract utterances of a philosophical kind is not in the manner of the discourse of Jesus; that which reliably reflects his known inter-personal style was more likely to be concrete and direct, with a provocative, or perhaps poetically evocative, edge: Jesus was a teacher in the Hebrew–rabbinical, not the Greek–rhetorical, mode. This is supported by the fact that the text itself comes in response to the concrete question of Thomas, raised in the context of the farewell discourse: “How can we know the way, when we don’t know where you are going?” This reflects the immediate focussed, or narrow,

²² Selvanayagam, *op. cit.*, 229.

²³ *Ibid*, 230.

context. But there is also a wider context. The community for which John wrote was made up of mainly Jewish-Christians caught up in an intra-Jewish struggle and, in particular, “facing a conflict situation created by the conservative wing of the Jewish leadership”.²⁴ In this setting, messianic interpretations, applications, and expectations were critical.

So, in summary, there is a complex contextual *sitz-im-leben* for this text which cannot be ignored. At many levels it is a text that must be understood in terms of a nuanced and multi-layered dialogical setting, which certainly goes beyond its immediate context as given by John. Selvanayagam concludes:

When we highlight the intra-Jewish context of Jesus, we need to take note of and connect this with the basic affirmation that Jesus was the embodiment of the eternal divine Word – as recorded in the prologue of John. (The Word/Logos) is internally present as light and life in all human beings, struggling to enlighten them. In a Hellenistic world such an interpretation made [a] lot of sense. But what we should not forget [is] that the particular embodiment was in the form of a Jew, called teacher and prophet and confessed as Messiah and the Son of God; and also that the eternal Word which was embodied in Jesus continued to be present as light and life in every human being ... It is not up to us to make judgements on other embodiments whether they are claimed to be of the cosmic Word or principle, but it need not be an arrogant act if we test every claim against the claim of Jesus within the Jewish context.²⁵

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 232.