

Christian Discipleship and Interfaith Engagement*

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Abstract: Ever since the famous 1910 Edinburgh World Mission conference Christian individuals and the Christian Church have been increasingly challenged to relate in new ways to people of other faiths. Reflecting on the relationship between Christian discipleship and interfaith engagement this article addresses three questions. Can a biblical basis for such engagement be discerned? What is the impact of the "Great Commission" at the end of Matthew's gospel (28:18-20)? How might a new understanding of mission and discipleship relate to concerns about interreligious dialogue? In other words, can Christian discipleship actively enable positive interfaith relations and engagement with adherents of other faiths? In conclusion, the article points to a number of considerations that might indeed contribute to just such an understanding of discipleship.

FOR OVER A QUARTER OF A CENTURY interreligious dialogue has been an acknowledged legitimate dimension of Church life, and a dimension of ecumenical co-operative engagement, in many quarters of the globe. For example, the Inter Faith Relations Web-site of the Church of England notes that, as a consequence of

significant changes which have led to religious plurality in our society, the General Synod as long ago as 1981 endorsed the *Four Principles of Inter Faith Dialogue* agreed ecumenically by the British Council of Churches:

Dialogue begins when people meet each other
Dialogue depends upon mutual understanding and mutual trust
Dialogue makes it possible to share in service to the community
Dialogue becomes the medium of authentic witness.¹

*This paper is a revised version of a presentation given to a meeting of the Systematic Theology Association of Aotearoa New Zealand (STAAANZ) held in Christchurch in December, 2006.

1. Interfaith web-site (29 May 29 2006) www.cofe.anglican.org/info/interfaith/index.html

Together with its partner churches, the Church of England “seeks to build up good relations with people of other faith traditions, and where possible to co-operate with them in service to society”.² In recent years, with the growing implications of further changes in religious demographics, and the effects of media reactions with regard to interreligious issues, new and significant needs and opportunities for interreligious dialogue and the work of improving inter-communal relations have emerged. The affirmation of the four principles has opened out to the contemplation of a myriad of questions and a pressing imperative to active engagement. Reflection and action in the arena of interfaith engagement is today one of the key challenges to the life of the Church. This is so in many places around the globe, and not least in the European heartlands of Western Christianity.

Of course, interreligious dialogue is an inter-personal activity first and foremost: it occurs when people of different faith traditions meet and interact. So the first question, the first point of reflection, is: just what kind of meeting, and what kind of interaction, is taking place? What ought to be happening? Certainly interfaith dialogue, if it is to be in any way meaningful, must both presuppose and evoke mutual understanding and trust. But to what extent are these being fostered? What more needs to be done? All being well, good interfaith engagement enables healthy communal relations and co-operative responsibility with respect to shared service in and to the wider society. But how much is this being actively promoted within the life of the Church? To the extent it is not happening, why not? What strategies need to be put in place? Finally, good dialogue, and all it can portend, is affirmed as a modality of authentic witness. Yet, how is this made so? And just what is meant by witness in this context? If it is viewed as the end-point, or justifying rationale, of dialogue, to what extent can dialogical engagement be said to be authentic?

Questions continue, and broaden out. What is the relation of witness to mission? And what is the relation of mission to discipleship? Is it the case that “making disciples” is the goal of mission? As Richard Longenecker has remarked: “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?”³ 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? Or is engagement in authentic dialogue – in all its facets and dimensions – itself an authentic component of Christian mission and witness? These are perennial questions and it would take a book – indeed many – to sift through the answers and responses that

2. Interfaith web-site www.cofe.anglican.org/info/interfaith/index.html

3. Richard N. Longenecker (ed.), *Patterns of Discipleship in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 1996) 1.

have already been made.⁴ There is no prospect of producing a comprehensive review in the compass of a short article; but some specific reflection and comment may provide a clue or two, perhaps a glimmer of insight and possibility.

The 2005 "Presence and Engagement" Report of the Church of England addressed issues of ministry and mission in contemporary multi-faith contexts.⁵ Arising out of reflection on the two decades and more of ministry in this field, the report sought "to draw attention of the wider Church to a range of issues arising from our increasingly multi Faith contexts".⁶ The concerns raised are by no means new, though arguably fresh approaches are discerned and called for. There is a long-standing uneasy accommodation, which can sometimes break out into open hostility, between those who construe Christian mission and discipleship as inherently subordinating, if not superseding, other religions, and those who would see a *prima facie* need to view other religions – or more particularly the people of other faiths – in some form of equal, or at least balanced, relationship. The question then becomes, what sort of balance? What kind of relationship? Indeed what, theologically, might be the proper relationship between a Christian and a person of another faith such that the integrity of Christian mission and discipleship, together with the integrity of the religious identity, beliefs, and experience of the religiously "other" are neither compromised nor reductively relativised? And then, one may ask of course about the classic text of Christian exclusivity: John 14:6: "Jesus said to him (Thomas), "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me"." (NRSV)

In response to these broader issues, I address here, albeit briefly, three questions: First, is there a biblical basis for interfaith engagement? Second, what are we to make of the missionary imperative of Christianity derived from the "Great Commission" at the end of Matthew's gospel (28:18-20)? Third, what is the understanding of mission in regards to discipleship, and how might that relate to interreligious dialogue? Is there any prospect for an understanding of discipleship that not just allows for, but actively enables, positive interreligious relations with our neighbours of other faiths?

4. See for example John Hick and Brian Hebblethwaite (eds.), *Christianity and Other Religions* (London: Collins, 1980); Paul F. Knitter, *No Other Name?* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis, 1985); Harold Coward (ed.), *Hindu-Christian Dialogue: Perspectives and Encounters* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis, 1989); J. A. Dianoia, *The Diversity of Religions: A Christian Perspective* (Washington DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1992); Diana L. Eck, *Encountering God: A Spiritual Journey from Bozeman to Banares* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993).

5. See "Presence and Engagement: The churches' task in a multi Faith society" report of the Inter Faith Consultative Group, considered and recommended by the General Synod of the Church of England, July 2005. See the Church of England Web-site: www.cofe.anglican.org/search?SearchableText=Presence+and+Engagement&go=Go

6. See the report "Presence and Engagement" (n. 5 above), Introduction.

A BIBLICAL BASIS FOR INTERFAITH ENGAGEMENT

Theologian Israel Selvanayagam notes 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”.⁷ Good hermeneutics recognises 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 interfaith engagement. I shall confine myself to two key texts – one from the Hebrew Scriptures and one from the Christian Testament – 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” (Exod 20:16). The second is one confidently attributed to Jesus himself wherein the heart of faith is summarised by citing from the *Shema* (Deut 6:4) – “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart” – to which is added: “The second is this, You shall love your neighbour as yourself. There is no other commandment greater than these” (Mark 12:31; cf. Matt 22:39; Luke 10:27). Does the ninth commandment, to not bear false witness against our neighbour, together with the commandment of Jesus – to love one’s neighbour as oneself, juxtaposed, in effect, as co-equal with loving God – provide the basis for a biblical mandate for inter-faith engagement?

The Ten Commandments, when subject to careful interpretive scrutiny, can be regarded not merely as a summary set of ethical requirements but rather the distillation, in an 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 fellow human beings. I suggest that human beings experience a fundamental psychological and spiritual need to have reliable witness made as to who and what they really are. It is a commonplace that this is not always easy to acknowledge, perhaps even to recognise; but it is there, nevertheless. Perhaps the point can be demonstrated by its obverse: there is an inherent human 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, and concomitant mental health maladies likely to ensue. On the other hand, there is, without doubt, profound value in having those who know us and whom we trust bearing true witness to and of

7. Israel Selvanayagam, *Relating to People of Other Faiths: Insights from the Bible* (Tiruvalla and Bangalore: CSS Books, 2004) 32.

us; confirming our identity, affirming who we are, upholding our worthiness. Mental health and spiritual health are correlated.

However, to be confronted with false witness – to have identity denied in any form, or called into question, to have doubt cast on one's 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, for example. It is also a feature of the history and contemporary reality of Christian-Muslim relations, as was evidenced rather vividly in recent times, courtesy of the Muhammad "cartoon" affair in Denmark. Perhaps the commandment proscribing false witness against our neighbour has something to say about inter-communal as well as inter-personal relations. The neighbour of whom we are commanded not to 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 to be honoured passively only – 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? In the context of understanding the commandments as providing guidance as to the priorities and integrity of relationship – between ourselves and God, ourselves and our fellow human beings – I suggest that this commandment is the beginning point of a theological mandate for interfaith engagement. People of other faiths are our neighbours.⁸ The biblical scholar, Krister Stendahl, observes 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, the neighbour.⁹ 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 the 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 ecumenical movement has striven hard to ameliorate: replacing mutual deprecation and rivalry with mutual respect and a wider encompassing theological vision. A similarly wide

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

9. 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.

theological vision is called for in respect to interreligious relations. In the end, the commandment not to bear false witness against the neighbour of another faith is the other side of the second great commandment: to love the neighbour as oneself. While true love does not bear false witness, bearing true witness is itself an act of love.

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”.¹⁰ 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, 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, one dimension of which is 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. Also significant is the immediate relational setting of the saying. “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.”¹¹

In other words, it is important to keep in mind that the giving of abstract utterances of a philosophical kind is not in the manner of the discourse of Jesus. The discourse that reliably reflects his known interpersonal style is 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? (14:5)” This reflects the immediate focussed, or narrow, 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”.¹² In this

10. Selvanayagam, *Relating to People of Other Faiths*, 229.

11. Selvanayagam, *Relating to People of Other Faiths*, 230.

12. Selvanayagam, *Relating to People of Other Faiths*, 230.

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 in the Fourth Gospel. 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.¹³

We may conclude, at least provisionally, that in terms of the key dominical texts that suggest relational openness to the religious “other”, and the principal counter-text which has tended toward an exclusivist interpretation (John 14:6), it is the dominical texts which carry greater weight. The likelihood is that a biblical mandate in favour of interreligious engagement, when pressed beyond these “test texts”, can be adduced. It is certainly the case that there is no compellingly conclusive biblical warrant *against* interfaith relationships and inter-religious dialogue as such.

But if a biblical mandate to relate dialogically to our neighbour of another faith can be ascertained, where does that leave the received tradition that has premised the relation of Christians to others on the basis of Matt 28:18-20, the Great Commission? Indeed, is there an inherent tension between these great commandments and the Great Commission?

INTERRELIGIOUS ENGAGEMENT AND THE “GREAT COMMISSION” (MATT 28:18-20)

The late South African missiologist, David Bosch, in observing that the author of the gospel of Matthew was a Jew addressing a pre-

13. Selvanayagam, *Relating to People of Other Faiths*, 232.

dominantly Jewish-Christian community, argues that the “entire purpose of his writing was to nudge his community toward a missionary involvement with its environment”.¹⁴ Although the Protestant missionary movements during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, when giving account of their rationale, have appropriately 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”.¹⁵ 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 Matthean in the entire gospel: virtually every word or expression used in these verses is peculiar to the author of the first gospel.¹⁶

Peter Cotterell concurs that in Matthew the commissioning of the disciples for mission is the intentional climax of the gospel in its entirety. In the text of the pericope “the words of Jesus fall into three parts, a statement, a command, and a promise”.¹⁷ The statement amounts to the assertion of “all authority” suggestive of a new means of empowerment; the command, to “go and make”, is an exhortation to empowered action that knows no boundaries, meaning that what heretofore was a localised and particular activity is now of universal import; and the promise is that the unalloyed divine presence will surely accompany this active empowered process. Indeed, the “Commission” may itself be read as an affirmation of the universal applicability of the work and mission of Jesus – into and for the whole world, not just the Jewish world – as a distinctly post-resurrection development. And Terence Donaldson remarks that the climax to the gospel narrative is not so much the resurrection of Jesus *per se* but the signalling of “a new community of salvation...a community drawn from all nations, bound to Jesus...” wherein it is the authority of Jesus which “makes it possible for his disciples to carry out the helping role

14. David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis, 1992) 55.

15. Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 55.

16. Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 57.

17. Peter Cotterell, *Mission and Meaninglessness: The Good News in a World of Suffering and Disorder* (London: SPCK, 1990) 96.

for which they were initially called".¹⁸ Further, the disciples are no religious super-heroes: Matthew depicts them in all their human frailty; in their relation to Jesus, for example, they are portrayed as slow to understand (Matt 15:12-20; 16:5-12), showing fear (Matt 14:26, 30) and lack of faith (Matt 14:31; 16:8).¹⁹

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".²⁰ 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 Protestant evangelicalism dominates, the consequence being that religious exclusivism and competition come more to the fore; where, on the other hand, the emphasis tends more to the qualitative and communal, then "making disciples" is to be understood more in terms of the spread and diversification of the "Christ community" *within* the nations of the world, and therefore 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."²¹ The disciples, while 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 [*ekklesia*] (16:18; 18:17), discipleship takes place in the context of a distinct, discipled community".²² The "making of

18. Terence L. Donaldson, "Guiding Readers – Making Disciples: Discipleship in Matthew's Narrative Strategy", in Longenecker (ed.), *Patterns of Discipleship in the New Testament*, 40.

19. Donaldson, "Guiding Readers – Making Disciples", 36; cf. also p. 42.

20. Donaldson, "Guiding Readers – Making Disciples", 41.

21. Donaldson "Guiding Readers – Making Disciples", 43.

22. Donaldson "Guiding Readers – Making Disciples", 46.

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".²³ Also, for Matthew, as discipleship "means living out the teachings of Jesus... (i)t is unthinkable to divorce the Christian life of love and justice from being a disciple".²⁴

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" or "educating" 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, what I am suggesting is, given the propriety of positive and mutually respectful relations that even a preliminary rethinking of 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". Let us explore this idea a little further.

CHRISTIAN DISCIPLESHIP AND MISSION

Given that the linguistic (Greek) derivation of the term "disciple" is literally that of "pupil" or "learner" – in the sense of one who learns from and becomes "a follower of a particular teacher", as was the normative pattern at Greek philosophical schools of the time²⁵ – does it really make sense to think of the chief goal of mission in terms of some sort of programmatic "making disciples" activity? Indeed, can someone be "made" a disciple as such? Of course, a lot depends on how we interpret and apply the verb: what is the intent of "making" in this case? Equally, a lot depends on what we mean by the content of "discipleship". At the very least, discipleship has to do with mission – inasmuch as the Christian disciple is one who participates in the mission of Christ. Thus it is worth approaching the question of discipleship from the perspective of asking, what is the meaning of "mission" that inheres to it?

Martin Conway, a former Study Secretary of the World Student Christian Federation, once commented that the responsibility of

23. Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 74.

24. Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 81.

25. Longenecker, *Patterns of Discipleship in the New Testament*, 2.

mission belongs, in reality, with God in Christ: “and ours only in a derived sense. But it gives us a freedom and flexibility to respond in appropriate ways to the actual circumstances”.²⁶ Mission is not a matter of applying fixed or pre-determined patterns of events and expectations. To the extent that witness, for example, is integral to the idea of mission, Conway usefully notes that witnessing “is not to cajole or argue other people into accepting your point of view or joining your community: it is to do no more than point to what you believe to be significant and true, or to offer a criterion and an interpretation in which you find meaning and purpose”.²⁷ Further, says Conway, whereas undertaking witness is the responsibility of the disciple, “the response to that witness is the affair of the other”.²⁸ And, importantly, it is God, not the disciple, who is responsible for conversion, if there is such: the mission-task of bearing witness to the good news in the context of relational engagement is sufficient, for it is God who works in the heart and life of those to whom witness is borne. It is never the evangelist who effects conversion; it is only ever in and by the Spirit and grace of God. So the interconnected elements – witness, mission, discipleship – do not necessarily denote some fixed or narrow agenda for Christian action. And although these terms remain of crucial importance in the self-understanding of the church, their content is in fact much more open and opaque than we might at first think.

David Bosch, following the work of W. Crum,²⁹ suggests that the Church may be regarded as a community gathered, elliptically as it were, around two foci:

In and around the first it acknowledges and enjoys the source of its life; this is where worship and prayer are emphasized. From and through the second focus the church engages and challenges the world. This is a forth-going and self-spending focus, where service, mission and evangelism are stressed.³⁰

Further, 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 viewed as an instrument for that mission.... To

26. Martin Conway, *The Undivided Vision* (London: SCM, 1966) 71.

27. Conway, *The Undivided Vision*, 78.

28. Conway, *The Undivided Vision*, 79.

29. See W. Crum, “The *Missio Dei* and the Church”, *St Vladimir’s Theological Quarterly* 17 (1973) 285-89.

30. Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 385.

participate in mission is to participate in the movement of God's love toward people.³¹

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.³²

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.³³ 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".³⁴ 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?³⁵

Christians can claim no inherent and 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 the Christocentrism of Bowen 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

31. Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 390.

32. Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 9.

33. Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 3.

34. Roger Bowen, *So I Send You: A Study Guide to Mission* (London: SPCK, 1996) 210.

35. Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 212.

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."³⁶

Roger Herft, the Sri Lankan-born Archbishop of Perth, Australia, in a key-note address at the 1990 meeting of the Anglican Consultative Council, spoke of the need of theology to engage in dialogue with other faiths. At the same time he asserted that, "in all our efforts in dialogue we cannot lay aside the truth that God in Christ has been present and active in all nations, cultures and religions, nor can we lay aside our call to be fishers of women and men".³⁷ And Martin Conway once wrote of mission that it amounts to the "entire task of the church", that "Mission is not so much one entity as a whole way of living – of feeling, of seeing, and of searching for love and truth".³⁸

THE "OTHER" TO WHOM MISSION IS ADDRESSED

There is a further dimension to the question of discipleship and mission: namely, the question as to whom is the mission directed? Who is the "other" to whom the invitation to discipleship is issued, let alone who is to be the subject of a "making disciples" initiative? In other words, who is the "other", theologically speaking? And what is being proposed in respect of this "other"?

Bosch notes that, in 1302, Pope Boniface proclaimed that "the Catholic Church was the only institution guaranteeing salvation"; later the Council of Florence, in 1442, "assigned to the everlasting fire of hell everyone not attached to the Catholic Church".³⁹ The legacy that these decrees have bequeathed the Church today is that, in terms of Catholic dogma, outside the *church*, or at least *without* the church, there is no salvation. For Protestants it is more the case that without the *word* there is no salvation: hence the driving force to evangelical proclamation of the "Word" for the winning of converts – for it is only so that salvation may be accessed. The upshot is that, historically, for "both these models mission essentially has meant *conquest* and *displacement*. Christianity was understood to be...the only religion which had the divine right to exist and extend itself."⁴⁰ The goal of mission was to displace the other faith and win over the people of that faith.

In either case, of course, the central point of reference is Christ. However, the interpretation and so application of the understanding of Christ differs considerably. Although the focal interpretation as to

36. Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 220.

37. Roger Herft, "The Gospel and Communication" in *Mission in a Broken World: Report of ACC-8, Wales 1990* (London: Anglican Consultative Council, 1990) 78.

38. Conway, *The Undivided Vision*, 65.

39. Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 474.

40. Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 475.

what is essentially meant by that Christianity wherein salvation is obtained – the one being ecclesiocentric, the other christocentric – the effect vis-à-vis those standing outside the Christian community is the same: they are numbered among the “lost”. So, to that extent, people of other faiths were counted as “lost sheep”, at least until they had the chance to hear the Gospel and respond with belief in, and allegiance to, Christ and his Church, and so enter the salvific fold. Therefore the proper relationship that predominated, at least until the middle of the twentieth century, in terms of the Christian stance towards other religions and peoples of other faiths, was they were to be the subject of evangelical outreach and the quest for conversion – all for the sake of salvation in and through Christ. But is this overt relation to Christ the only valid mode of relationship to God?

In the early 1960s, as the World Council of Churches was in the early stage of developing the protestant ecumenical journey into interreligious dialogue, the Roman Catholic Church embarked on its epochal Second Vatican Council (1962-65), at which the influence of the theologian Karl Rahner was to be felt. Rahner was one who agitated

for a shift from an ecclesiocentric to a christocentric approach to the theology of religions. It is important to take cognizance of the fact that Rahner’s point of departure, when discussing other religions and their possible salvific value, is Christology. He never abandons the idea of Christianity as the absolute religion and of salvation having to come only through Christ. But he recognizes supernatural elements of grace in other religions which, he posits, have been given to human beings through Christ. There is a saving grace within other religions but this grace is Christ’s. This makes people of other faiths into “anonymous Christians” and accords their religions a positive place in God’s salvific plan. They are “ordinary ways of salvation”, independent of the special way of salvation of Israel and the church. It is in the latter that they find fulfilment.⁴¹

From this relatively innovative perspective the position of “inclusivism”, as the newly governing paradigm, supplanted “exclusivism”. Peoples of other faiths were no longer arbitrarily and comprehensively excluded from the grace of God – until such time as they came into the Christian fold – but were accorded the respect of their own integrity and the recognition that, in some sense, they already participated in salvific grace. However, to the extent this might be so, it means that they are already theologically “included” within the divine scope.

On the other hand, the later development of a more sophisticated and intentional pluralism – one seeking to obviate the inherent

41. Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 481.

superiority of the Christian position in regards to inclusivism – is not without its own problems. Bosch, a missionary theologian, asserts “we are in need of a theology of religions characterised by creative tension, which reaches beyond the sterile alternative between a comfortable claim to absoluteness and arbitrary pluralism”.⁴² Although he appears to dismiss both exclusivism and pluralism, he is by no means uncritically accepting of inclusivism. The problem in regard to this paradigm applied to the interreligious arena is trenchantly put: “In the end everything – and everyone! – is accounted for. There are no loose ends, no room left for surprises and unsolved puzzles. Even before the dialogue begins, all the crucial issues have been settled”.⁴³ Bosch asserts that, in reality, “both dialogue and mission manifest themselves in a meeting of hearts rather than of minds. We are dealing with a mystery”.⁴⁴ And so we are.

CONCLUSION

The third question I posed sought to address the understanding of mission in regards to discipleship, and how that might relate to interreligious dialogue. I suggest a number of elements have emerged from the foregoing discussion that 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. Such engagement 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. The “dialogue of life” dimension itself can take on a more intentional edge in terms of the range of social intercourse necessarily taking place in the context of communal existence: different communities, including religious communities, within the wider society may well interact, conscientiously in terms of their religious identities and perspectives, in the public arena such as in the context of participation in community councils and such-like.

Further, joint responses to societal issues and cooperative actions premised on shared, or at least compatible, values and perspectives speak of a planned and intended level of interreligious relating that may be classified as representing the “dialogue of action”.

Finally, occasions wherein an interfaith event of a liturgical, meditative/reflective, or otherwise worshipful nature is engaged in,

42. Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 483.

43. Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 483.

44. Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 483.

represent 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”: this discursive activity is what the term “dialogue” immediately suggests, but in fact it is the most difficult to pursue, and really requires a history of relationship being built up by way of the other modalities of dialogue before it can be confidently entered into.

In the light of the discussion of the biblical basis for interreligious engagement, and the contours of mission in regards to other faiths, all four of these modalities can be seen, from the perspective of Christian faith and reflection, as representing appropriate dimensions of the way of discipleship.

Furthermore, there is also the indirect element of intentional inter-religious engagement by virtue of a religious community – a parish church, 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.⁴⁵ 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 interfaith relations.

Both dialogue and mission are to be pursued in a context of the humility that proceeds from 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.

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 beyond any sense of “business as usual”. The dialogical engagement of interfaith 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 un-chartered waters of understanding and new engagements.

45. Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 483-85.

A final comment: 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 *oikumenê* – the whole inhabited earth. And this means all that lies therein, including the rich 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 that 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 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 long been 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 the life which goes with that quest and knowledge. 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.

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