

CHRISTIAN APPROACHES TO PEOPLE OF OTHER FAITHS: A CHOICE BETWEEN DIALOGUE OR EVANGELISM

by Helen Reid

Throughout history Christians have lived in multi-faith communities yet in Britain today Christians have a sense of ‘newness’ about living alongside people of other faiths. The growth of religious pluralism since the end of World War II has proved variously to be a surprise, a challenge, a puzzle and an invitation to Christian communities. In response, Christians and the church collectively have sought appropriate ways to relate to people and communities of other faiths. These responses have tended to take one of two forms, either dialogue or evangelism.

A dialogical approach can be defined as people of different faiths meeting, building relationships and sharing in a joint search for truth and peace. An evangelistic approach can be defined as Christians meeting people of other faiths, building relationships and seeking to make disciples of Christ. Selecting which approach to take is usually based on soteriological beliefs. At one end of the spectrum there are those who believe that salvation is through knowledge and acceptance of Christ alone and have chosen to be evangelistic in their approach while those who believe that salvation lies within each different faith have chosen dialogue.

It would be true to say that the two approaches of dialogue and evangelism have at times been defined in opposition to each other. In more recent years, however, those who are involved in dialogue have begun more clearly to identify the importance of witness in their approach and those involved in evangelism more clearly to identify the importance of dialogue. In this way, the choice between dialogue and evangelism has become less stark. Moreover, many Christians believe that there is no choice to be made because all Christians are called to both. This is the teaching of the Pontifical Council for Inter-Religious Dialogue, although it does not use the language of dialogue and evangelism but of dialogue and proclamation.¹

This paper focuses on the practice of evangelism and dialogue as it responds to a Christ-centred understanding of salvation. It describes and analyses a dialogical approach to evangelism which draws on inter faith dialogue and evangelism among people of other faiths. There are critiques of this approach and this paper seeks to respond constructively to these criticisms out of a concern for evangelism and intra-Christian understanding.

The call to and practice of evangelism among people of other faiths is seen by practitioners as an outworking of the 'Great Commission' (Mt 28: 18-20) in the light of the late twentieth century definition of the 'mission field' including Britain as well as 'overseas'. It is generally regarded as a specific field of evangelism and there is a degree of self-consciousness in approach expressed in a concerted effort to engage with a support network and develop models of good practice. Analysis of current theory and practice ² in this area shows an emphasis on friendship evangelism, Christians being informed about other religions and cultures, and support for the evangelist in maintaining his/her own faith in a challenging context.

Evangelism among people of other faiths includes a commitment to the dialogue process which is understood as speaking and listening, building relationships and working together on shared concerns.³ In this way, it is commensurate with much evangelism practice today which emphasises caring for the whole person and listening to their perspective whatever it may be. It also affirms and upholds the following principles for dialogue agreed by the British Council of Churches:

- 1) Dialogue begins when people meet each other
- 2) Dialogue depends on mutual understanding and trust
- 3) Dialogue makes it possible to share in service to the community
- 4) Dialogue becomes the medium of authentic witness

It would seem that such an approach is 'evangelism and dialogue', however, this is sometimes challenged by those supporting an inter faith understanding of dialogue. An inter faith understanding is one created by people of different faiths, and does not arise solely from, nor can be expressed within, one tradition. It is a response to the context of multi faith society; a joining together of people of different faiths to enhance understanding and relationships in a search for peace and truth. To compare and contrast these two understandings of dialogue; while both share the

same understanding of dialogue as communication and relationship based on mutual respect, an evangelist's understanding is based on the primacy of one faith and an inter faith understanding is based on the equality of different faiths. This essential difference leads those with an inter faith understanding to question whether dialogical evangelism can authentically claim to be based on dialogue principles.

One aspect of the questioning relates to the requirement for mutuality and trust in dialogue. Any hidden agenda would be antithetical to this and, therefore, evangelists must declare their intentions before engaging in dialogue so that people of other faiths can make an informed decision as to whether or not to participate. A potential dialogue partner may then choose not to participate in dialogue due to fears of manipulation or that it will be to the detriment of his/her own faith community.

The question of whether Christians can enter into a dialogical relationship in the hope that a person of another faith comes to a personal relationship with Christ as Saviour is also raised. If one party has a fixed aim for the outcome of dialogue, the essence of mutual sharing and journeying together is undermined.

Similarly, given the open-endedness of dialogue, can it be said to be dialogue if one party enters into it 'knowing the answers'? That is, if the Gospel is regarded as essentially non-negotiable, then the evangelist is open through dialogue to learn from the other only on more peripheral matters, for example, forms of spiritual practice. It is not, therefore, a mutual search for truth.

Michael Ipgrave⁴ uses a helpful analogy of sharing a cake to illuminate the difference in approaches. In an evangelist's approach, the cake is taken to the meeting and shared out. In an inter faith dialogue approach, the cake is at the meeting and as people gather, the cake is shared.

Such analysis may at first appear simply to be a redrawing of the lines between dialogue and evangelism. However, it allows the potential for an evangelical response to these concerns which can make a contribution to intra-Christian dialogue and also enhance approaches to dialogical evangelism in our multi faith society. Such a response is based on the premise that a dialogical approach is not dependent on the ideology of religious pluralism, but that it is also consistent with a commitment to the primacy of one faith allied to tolerance of different faith commitments. Netland⁵ describes this type of tolerance as 'classic' because it is based on an older

understanding of tolerance which means to not prohibit, hinder or coercively interfere with different conduct or beliefs. This is significantly different from the more recent understanding of tolerance which involves affirmation of different conduct or beliefs.

A self reflective analysis of the methods and practice of dialogical evangelism must respond to the issues raised by inter faith dialogue practitioners; namely, issues of open-ended or closed dialogue, of trust and manipulation, and of the self-definition of the Christian community and its relationships with other-faith communities. This analysis begins with a consideration of what is meant by evangelism. This paper employs a definition of evangelism which refers to its purpose not its method, namely, 'to make Christ known' and 'to make disciples of Jesus Christ.' This definition acknowledges that the first part, 'to make Christ known' is widely accepted among Christians whilst 'to make disciples of Jesus Christ' receives more emphasis among evangelical Christians.⁶

An examination of recent approaches to the process of 'making disciples' shows that in the Western Church today, an eighteenth century evangelistic method has often been employed, namely, that which arose during the Great Awakening in America. The method was to put before someone the good news of Jesus Christ and invite a response. At that time, this method was received positively by many and it continues to be used today, for example, Billy Graham is well-known for repeatedly saying, 'I'm going to ask you to come forward ...'.

It was, however, observed during the early part of the 'Decade of Evangelism' that such a propositional approach is less successful today than in the past.⁷ Such evangelism is dependent on people being prepared to attend such meetings and be open to the new experiences offered. This was more frequently the case in an earlier 'Christendom' setting than in unchurched, multi faith Britain.

The revivalist connotations of such evangelism resonate with earlier Church history. From the Reformation onwards, evangelism began to be seen as reinvigorating the Christendom model, that is, to revitalise lapsed Christians and church institutions.⁸ It might be helpful, therefore, to examine models of evangelism employed in other eras of church history which do not depend on an understanding of Christendom. The approach to evangelism employed by the Early Church Fathers was based not on a propositional approach but

on teaching and right knowledge. For example, Cyril of Jerusalem offered Christian teaching to all but was most insistent that involvement in the process was at the instigation of the catechumen. At regular points in teaching he would ask whether the catechumen wanted to continue and at any point that the catechumen wanted to leave the process, s/he could do so with Cyril's blessing. It was not assumed that teaching and learning would lead necessarily to baptism.⁹

Martyn Atkins¹⁰ has developed a contemporary analogy for this method of evangelism based in the writings of Theodore of Mopsuestia who described seeking Christ as a movement from darkness to light. Contemporary catechetical evangelism begins when someone has a spark of inquiry after the light and they seek Christian teaching. The model for this teaching is that both catechist and catechumen have their hand on a dimmer switch that can be turned as fast or as slow as desired. If the catechumen decides that 'this is sufficient light', then teaching ceases. In this way, evangelism focuses on the process and not on an intended end result. Moreover, the process is controlled by the catechumen which reduces fear of persuasion/manipulation by the catechist.

A contemporary example of this approach is, to a certain extent, the Alpha course which gives individuals the opportunity to find out more about the Christian faith without agreeing to baptism or participation in the Christian community. However, associated advertising campaigns and leafleting could perhaps be seen as propositional evangelism. The current practice of Alpha does not, therefore, entirely enact the method outlined although it is clearly dependent on a catechetical understanding of evangelism.

Such a method of evangelism is reconcilable with a dialogical approach to people of other faiths in the sense that the outcome has not been decided before the dialogue has begun and the encounter is built on trust and shared responsibility without fear of persuasion or manipulation. It is a more clearly dialogical approach than propositional evangelism. There remains, however, a critique concerning the potential negative consequences of evangelism for individuals and faith communities.

Any current understanding of the concept of 'making disciples' is overlaid by the Christian tradition associated with conversion. Conversion is often understood as an occasion that pivots on a personal decision to accept the Lordship of Christ and to be his follower. Moreover, that this decision is

followed by baptism and public participation in the life of the community of believers, thus taking the individual disciple into an institutional context. In practice, this involves an intertwining of the spiritual and social consequences of conversion and is based on two critical assumptions; that conversion is an event and that joining the Christian community implies separation from the former faith community.

An understanding of conversion as an event is evident in an important model of conversion. Augustine taught that conversion is when the soul turns from the temporal to the eternal realities, that is, a pivotal event. However, Aquinas taught that the soul is the principle of growth in all things and conversion is part of this cycle of growth. These two understandings of conversion do not necessarily stand in opposition to one another. Augustine may have had a conversion experience in the garden but his journey began during his childhood when he stole some fruit and was convinced of his own sinfulness. There was a process of many years leading up to that conversion moment and, as the Confessions continue after that event, a process after it as well.

An understanding of conversion as a process reduces the emphasis in the propositional approach to evangelism that calls for a response now, and also one that calls for a specified response in terms of incorporation into the institution of the church. It suggests that responses to the Good News can be a process of learning and growth. Moreover, a process that relates to the individual's existing experience and to all the development and experience that lies ahead. This understanding of the process of conversion is more readily reconcilable with dialogical evangelism because it implies a commitment to personal openness, growth and self-development rather than conforming to a set pattern of behaviour.

While this may be helpful in terms of appreciating the faith journey of the individual, yet there remain questions concerning the separation of the individual from the other-faith community. Conversion has traditionally been defined as leaving one faith community and entering into another; thus it is regarded positively by the receiving community and negatively by the abandoned community.¹¹ The necessity of rejecting, and being rejected by, preexisting community commitments and members has been challenged in many ways, and particularly by the experience in India in recent centuries.

A crucial issue in India is that baptism and publicly declaring Christian faith may lead to being denounced by family and community, it may even mean being persecuted. As a result, the phenomenon of 'Secret Christians'

has developed, that is, believers who do not participate in the public life of the church. While some remain Secret Christians all their life, for the majority of converts to Christianity it is a stage in their faith journey, and the goals of baptism and being publicly Christian are eventually achieved.

As Wingate¹² writes, it is possible to support people in such a journey of faith by working to 'Indianise' the church so that converts need not reject all existing cultural norms and practices which would thereby make them unacceptable to their community. In addition, an inclusive understanding of church which encompasses differing journeys of faith, allows support and acceptance to the non-baptised as catechumens. Thirdly, an awareness of the bigger picture of communalism in India is also crucial and Christians can seek to defuse communalism by serving others. The three aspects of this approach seek to enable people to be disciples of Christ and maintain family and community links, thus challenging the established link between conversion and separation.

In practice, this might be described as an aspiration that is being achieved rather than a fully present reality. The process of seeking to 'Indianise the church' and enhance inter community relations is on-going and focuses on internal issues such as the style of worship or church structures and external issues such as community loyalty. Some key aspects of this process are illustrated below with reference to the examples of thought and practice of two Christian initiatives.¹³

N.V. Tilak,¹⁴ born a Hindu Brahmin in the mid nineteenth century, was a committed nationalist and spiritual seeker. When he became a Christian, he sought to combine loyalty to Christ with loyalty to his country, culture and community. Throughout his life, he wrote poetry in Marathi set to music in the style used by Hindu saints which were, and still are, used for Christian worship. He went beyond attempts to Indianise worship and sought a different form of church which would be essentially Indian (he used the term 'Hindi'); he saw this as a church that was not dominated by missionaries nor rejected by local communities and which could attract Hindus to Christ. At first, he and his wife set up an informal *ashram* (a place where people can devote their time to religious contemplation) in their home where they used the form of *kirtan* for worship (music, poetry and eloquence). In order to achieve this, they broke from the missionary church and did not accept its money or leadership. Eventually, Tilak became *sannyasi* (one who renounces worldly living) and established a

darbar (brotherhood) which would serve Christ and seek to transform the Indian church. Sadly, he died shortly after establishing the *darbar* and, because it had been set up to be too dependent on Tilak, it did not continue after his death. It was an important experiment cut short.¹⁵

Many other Christians, to this day, are seeking to establish and maintain ways of being a worshipping community which are essentially Indian. This has come to be known as ‘indigenisation’ but it must be acknowledged that this was happening long before the term came into being in the 1950s. A current example of indigenisation is the Christian Santhi *Ashram* in Andhra Pradesh.¹⁶ This movement is based on the Indian ideal of ashram as a place or small community for religious contemplation and tranquillity as well as on the Christian calling to serve others. It is a worshipping community which seeks to bring peace to people who have no peace due to a lack of joy, sickness or their social and economic circumstances. It is based in the Baptist tradition but has indigenous leadership and styles of worship. The fruits of this movement are recorded as growth in discipleship, reaching the poor and the needy, prayer, training local people to be pastors and the construction of new churches. The commitment to being spiritually and culturally authentic for those within and outside the movement is at the heart of its structure and practice.

The Alliance of Asian Christians (AAC)¹⁷ in Britain bears witness to the relevancy of these issues in Britain today. The ACC works through mainstream churches and Asian Fellowships, to support Asian Christians in their life and witness, and to encourage churches fully to recognise and support the unique contribution of Asian Christians both as Asians and as Christians. This involves rethinking issues around the process of conversion and building good community relations, as well as style of worship and church leadership. In the current multi cultural context and encounter with other faiths, the church is faced with challenges that arise in terms of personal identity, ecclesiology and community relations. Finding ways to respond could be modelled on the process and decision- making of the Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15 and Galatians 2) when the early Christians had to agree a response to Jewish and Gentile Christians. They chose to respond directly to the diversity of Christian experience and life situations by identifying what was essential and what was unnecessary for followers of Christ. Initiatives here in Britain and in other parts of the world church are seeking what this means today.

This paper began by exploring dialogical evangelism, an approach which seeks to combine a commitment to evangelism (understood as ‘making Christ known and making disciples of Christ’) and to dialogue (understood as respectful interaction between people of different faiths). The related issues of conversion and community that this raises are not simply issues for evangelism and methods of evangelism, but for the whole of church life. They require explorations into what it means to be a disciple of Christ and to be a Christian community alongside different faith communities. More specifically, dialogical evangelism is dependent on the existence of models of Christian living that are inclusive, creative and open, not closed or separatist. For practitioners in the field, dialogical evangelism is a dynamic process that is developing through action and reflection. Evaluation from other perspectives within the church and the response of those not in the church would also play a useful part in this process.

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References

1. The Vatican does not use the term evangelism but rather uses the term proclamation to mean “the communication of the Gospel message. ... an invitation to a commitment of faith in Jesus Christ” see Pontifical Council for Inter-Religious Dialogue (1991) The Vatican
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3. Compare with the Vatican analysis of dialogue as being a dialogue of life, of collaboration, of the intellect and of religious experience. Secretariat for non-Christian Religions (1984) The attitude of the Church Towards the Followers of Other Religions: Reflections and Orientations on Dialogue and Mission, The Vatican
4. Inter Faith Advisor to the Archbishops’ Council and Secretary to the Churches’ Commission on Inter Faith Relations (in conversation).
5. Netland, Harold (2001) Encountering Religious Pluralism Leicester: Apollos, pages 142-144

- 6 Saxbee, John (1994) *Liberal Evangelism*. London: SPCK
- 7 Strange, Daniel (2000) *Filling the Gaps: Church Planting/New Ways of Being Church in Post-Christian Britain*. London: Church Mission Society, page 16
- 8 Bosch, David J. (1991) *Transforming Mission*. Maryknoll, N.Y.:Orbis Books, page 245
- 9 It must be noted that such a gradual catechetical model was typical of the Eastern Early Church Fathers, in contrast to, for example, Ambrose of Milan who saw catechesis as leading to baptism or Irenaeus who saw it more as systematic theology.
- 10 Director of Postgraduate Studies at Cliff College (in conversation)
- 11 Taylor, Donald 'Conversion: inward, outward and awkward' in Lamb, Christopher and M. Darrol Bryant (1999) *Religious Conversion. Contemporary Practices and Controversies* London: Cassells, pages 35-50
- 12 Wingate, Andrew (1997) *The Church and Conversion*. Delhi: SPCK, pages 137, 198-208
- 13 Acknowledging that similar concerns led other Christian theologians, including MM Thomas and Stanley Samartha, down different paths.
- 14 His expressed preference was to be addressed as Tilak.
- 15 Richard, H.L. (1998) *Following Jesus in a Hindu Context. The intriguing implications of N.V. Tilak's Life and Thought*. California: William Carey Library
- 16 Merugumalla, Sudheer (2002) 'Christian Santhi Ashram: An Indigenous Movement in Andhra Pradesh' in Dharma Deepika: A South Asian Journal of Missiological Research 2002 No. 1 January-June: 31-36
- 17 The Alliance of Asian Christians was established in 1990 and works with Asian Christians in the Historic Churches, the New Churches and Asian Churches and Fellowships.