



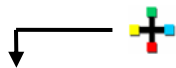
Religious Pluralism: A Missiological Approach

1993

J.E. Lesslie Newbigin

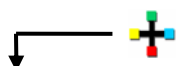
*Theology of Religions: Christianity and Other Religions* (Roma: Pontifical Gregorian University): 227-244.

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Religious pluralism is not a new experience for the Christian Church. Christianity was born in a religiously plural society and, if one takes a global viewpoint, it has never existed except in a religiously plural world. What is new, at least for Christians in the old western Christendom, is the discovery that this is so. Western Christendom took its distinctive form during the long period in which it was the religion of a small region isolated from the religious worlds of Asia and sub-Saharan Africa by the massive power of Islam and from the religious world of the American peoples by the ocean. For these formative centuries western Christendom was (except for the unsolved enigma of the Jewish people) a religiously monochrome society. It hardly needs to be said, of course, that Christianity in India has always been part of a religiously plural society. For Indian Christians, pluralism is nothing new. But, such is the dominance of western thought in the modern world, the idea that religious pluralism is something new is accepted as though it were true.

However, and this is also part of the dominance of western European thought in the modern world, the religious pluralism with which we are now familiar is new in the sense that it is part of a more fundamental pluralism. As I shall argue later in this paper, the kind of western thought which has described itself as "modern" is rapidly sinking into a kind of pluralism which is indistinguishable from nihilism - a pluralism which denies the possibility of making any universally justifiable truth-claims on any matter, whether religious or otherwise. It is this development which gives a distinctively

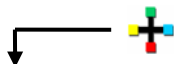


new character to the contemporary debate about religious pluralism.

The apostolic Church was launched into a religiously plural world, a world where, as St Paul puts it, there were many gods and many lords (1 Corinthians 8:5). This pluralism was tolerated, but

only on one condition - namely that supreme lordship was ascribed to the emperor. Roman law distinguished between the exercise of private religious cults, ways of worship and practice claiming to offer personal salvation to the individual soul, and the public cult of the emperor, to which all were required to conform. It would have been possible for the early Church to accept the position of one of these religions of personal salvation, and thus escape any collision with the empire. It was the refusal of this option, the stubborn insistence that Jesus alone is the one to whom the title of "Lord" may be properly given, which put the Church on a collision course with the Imperial power. The apostolic message confronted men and women with a choice about which there could be no compromise. For everyone to whom their message came there was posed a question to which an answer had to be given: Who, in fact, is Lord of all ? The answering of that question was, literally, a matter of life and death.

When the emperor finally bowed to the one who is truly Lord, and Constantine was baptized, the struggle did not end. It continued in the arena of theology and philosophy. The long and often arcane theological battles of the patristic period were, at heart, battles about the question whether Jesus is Lord in this absolute sense. For Greek philosophy to accept the full meaning of the apostolic message that the *logos* was identical with the man Jesus of Nazareth required nothing less than a complete abandonment of fundamental dualisms of matter and spirit, of time and eternity, of visible and invisible. One could, without a total break with traditional philosophy, accept the idea that Jesus was *like* God (*homoiousios*) but not that he was one in being with God (*homoousios*). The historian Gibbon mocked at the spectacle of Christians fighting over a diphthong, but that apparently minute difference concealed the whole difference between surrender to an ultimate pluralism and acknowledgement that God has actually made himself known by presence in the stuff of human history. It if is true

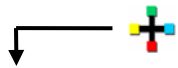


that God has done this, then this has to be the starting point of all fundamental thinking and the criterion by which all ultimate truth-claims are judged. The whole existence of the Christian faith hung on that diphthong.

Christians in the modern world are not required to offer incense before a statue of the emperor on pain of death. They are, however, in typically "modern" or "modernizing" societies, expected to accept a lower place for the name of Jesus than that of supreme Lord of all things, *pantocrator*. They are normally expected to acknowledge, for practical purposes, that Jesus is the name of one among the symbols of religious affiliation in a society where religion itself is regarded as only one among the many optional activities in which people are free to engage or from which they are free to dissent. At this point it is difficult to speak in general terms because situations are different in different parts of the world. Until recently, in societies under the dominance of Marxist ideology, the affirmation of the absolute lordship of Jesus could indeed be a matter of life and death. The same is true in some Islamic states today. In societies where the religions of Indian origin prevail, it is taken for granted that God is ultimately unknowable and the Christian claim seems to pose no immediate threat. But insofar as the process of what is called "modernization" continues in all parts of the world, the distinctive attitudes to religion which have prevailed in Western Europe since the 18th century are increasingly dominant.

For a thousand years Western Europe had been schooled in the Christian faith and had seen in the Bible, as mediated through the teaching and worship of the Church, the source of reliable truth. But another strand in European thought, deriving from the classical world of Greece and Rome, had also been present to question this biblical tradition. The seminal work of Thomas Aquinas had provided a synthesis of these two strands which shaped European thought during the high Middle Ages. But the break-down of the unity of Christendom in the religious wars of the 17th

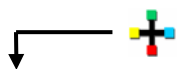
century, and the emergence of the new scientific method exemplified in Galileo, Copernicus, Kepler and -above all -Isaac Newton, offered another paradigm of reliable knowledge to which Europe increasingly turned. The period of the mid-18th century, which those who



lived through it called the Enlightenment, was a time of profound conversion. It seemed to the thinkers of this "Age of Reason" that the real light had come, that it was now possible to see things as they really are, and that the "superstitions" of the past -above all those of religion -could be put aside. Reliable knowledge was now to be obtained with the tools of modern science. Claims to truth by religious traditions were to be accepted only insofar as they could be justified at the bar of "reason" as the new age understood it. Religion must abandon its claim to rule public life. It can only be a matter for the personal life of the individual. Provided it keeps within these limits it is to be tolerated. It cannot make claims to ultimate truth.

The immense confidence of the "age of reason" was what fuelled the dramatic expansion of European power into the rest of the world. All the world was to be given the blessing of "civilization" as understood by the thinkers of Europe. European science, technology, political institutions and commerce were to be taken to every part of the globe, and the new science gave Europe the military power necessary to achieve this benevolent mission. Christian missions also, not without critical reservations, shared in this global expansion. They were among the major carriers of western education and medicine to the rest of the world, and they are still involved in this activity. It is inevitable that, as this process of "modernization" goes on all over the world, the "enlightened" view of religion tends to prevail. The various kinds of religious belief and practice, Christian or other, are to be tolerated as permitted activities for the benefit of the individual soul, but are not to claim a role in public affairs. Religious pluralism is, quite naturally, an integral part of this picture. If the religions are not making ultimate truth-claims which would challenge the assumptions of "modernity," then there is no obstacle to peaceful co-existence.

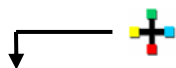
This picture of the spread of "modernity" describes with reasonable accuracy the period from the mid-18th to the mid-20th centuries. In the later decades of this century, two important changes have been taking place to modify this picture. One is the rise of religious fundamentalism. This affects all the religions, including Christianity. The accepted wisdom of "modernity" was that religion must gradually die



out. Modern science, modern rational organization of industry and management - including the management of national governments by the techniques of modern bureaucracy - must necessarily push religion more and more to the margin of public life. "Secularization" was a process which must inevitably continue and gather strength. What is happening, however, is that a strong counter-movement is taking place. Peoples everywhere are finding that "modernity" does not provide a world in which the human person can flourish. There is a passionate return to traditional religious certainties, and there is every sign that this movement will continue, and that "modernity" does not have the spiritual resources to contain it.

The second development is the rise of what is often called "post-modernism". This is a somewhat slippery word, but it is easy to identify the movement of thought which it denotes. Its main feature is the abandonment of any claim to know the truth in an absolute sense. Ultimate reality is not single but diverse and chaotic. Truth-claims are really concealed claims to power, and this applies as much to the claims of science as to those of religion. The father of this whole movement is the

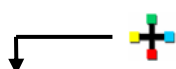
German philosopher F. W. Nietzsche. Nietzsche was the one who foresaw, in the closing years of the 19th century, that the methods of the Enlightenment must in the end lead to total scepticism and nihilism. Enlightenment thought had broadly accepted the lead of Descartes, who had exalted the "critical principle" to a position of priority in the search for reliable knowledge. Reliable knowledge is that which starts from indubitable statements (such as "I think, therefore I am") and develops from them propositions which can be demonstrated with the precision, clarity and certainty of mathematics. Everything which cannot be so demonstrated is to be doubted. Reliable knowledge will be obtained by distinguishing that which can be certainly known by a kind of reasoning of which mathematics is the model, from that which cannot be so demonstrated and which is therefore a matter of a faith. Descartes claimed, of course, like Aquinas before him, to demonstrate the existence of God so that belief in God is not merely a matter of faith but knowledge. But it is clear that the position achieved in this way is unstable. Doubt is not an autonomous activity; one can only rationally doubt a state-



ment on the basis of something else which one believes to be true. That belief can, of course, also be doubted, but only on the basis of something else which is believed to be true. The critical principle destroys itself. If it is given primacy in the search for reliable knowledge, the end can only be total scepticism and nihilism. Truth-claims lose their justification; they can only be regarded as exercises of the will, the will to power.

This critique applies to the claims of the Enlightenment as much as to the claims of religion. One of the most famous statements of the Enlightenment was the dictum of Lessing that accidental happenings of history cannot prove eternal truths of reason. This, of course, removed the Bible and the Christian tradition from the place of eternal truth. What Nietzsche and his modern disciples have done is to demonstrate that the so called "eternal truths of reason" are in fact products of particular histories. There is no such thing as a supra-historical "reason" standing above all actual human reasoning, which is always the reasoning of human beings in a particular cultural and historical situation, so we do not have any "eternal truths"; we have only narratives of how beliefs and ideas have been born and developed. There is no overarching "reason" by which all particular claims to truth might be tested; there is only a vast variety of stories. No story can claim "truth" in an exclusive sense. Ultimate reality (if such a phrase means anything) is incoherent. This is the radical pluralism with which we now have to deal.

The response of many Christians at this point is to speak about dialogue. I shall discuss this again later, but here two points may be made. The first is that we must recognize the situation in which the dialogue takes place. If it is in a "modernist" (as distinct from a post-modernist) context, then perhaps the Socratic idea of dialogue might be appropriate. The central idea of dialogue is that one is brought nearer to truth by allowing truth-claims to be questioned by other truth-claims, leading to modifications which, at each step, bring the participants nearer to the truth. If the "truth" which one is seeking is understood to be timeless, eternal truth of the kind of which Lessing spoke, then this method can be valid. The problem here is that the message of Christianity is essentially a story, a

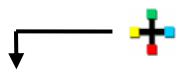


report of things which have happened. At its heart is the statement that "the word was made flesh." This is a statement of a fact of history which the original evangelists are careful to locate exactly within the continuum of recorded human history. A fact of history does not arise out of a dialogue; it has to be unilaterally reported by those who, as witnesses, can truly report what

happened. Of course there will then be dialogue about the way in which what has happened is to be understood, how it is to be related to other things which we know, or think that we know. But the story itself does not arise out of dialogue; it simply has to be told.

If, secondly, our dialogue is in the context of a post-modernist culture, the situation is different. We tell our story, but it is only one among the many stories. We accept the post-modernist position that all human reasoning is socially, culturally, historically embodied. We have left behind the illusion that there is available some kind of neutral stand-point from which one could judge the different stories and decide which is true. The "Age of Reason" supposed that there was available to human beings a kind of indubitable knowledge, capable of being grasped by all human beings which was more reliable than any alleged revelation, and which could therefore provide the criteria by which any alleged divine revelation could be assessed. This immensely powerful hang-over from the "modernist" position still haunts many discussions of religious pluralism. Much so-called "natural theology" is devoted to the enterprise of finding grounds which are variously described as "rational," "neutral" and "secular" on which the Christian story could be shown to be more acceptable than others. The assumption is, apparently, that these grounds are more reliable as sources of knowledge than God's revelation of himself in Jesus Christ. But in a post-modernist context all this is swept away. There are only stories, and the Christian story is one among them.

These stories are, as the post-modernists correctly perceive, also claims to power. If, for example, one accepts the story which is told in the normal European school or university, where world-history is taught as the history of the development of "civilization," then one is committed to shaping one's life in accordance with this story. In that case, the stories told



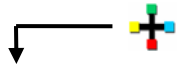
by the different religions will be seen as disrupting. One will wish to see them subordinate their stories to the main story. Rival religious claims will be judged in accordance with their positive or negative contributions to the progress of human 'development' understood in terms of this story.

Among the stories which the religions tell, the one which Nietzsche singled out for the most violent attack was the Christian story, which he saw as undermining human power. Christianity, with the story of the crucifixion at its centre, would create a world of slaves rather than of masters. In that also, Nietzsche's perception was acute. What is unique in the Christian story is that the cross and resurrection of Jesus are at its heart. Taken together (as they must always be) they are the public affirmation of the fact that God rules, but that his rule is (in this age) hidden; that the ultimate union of truth with power lies beyond history, but can yet be declared and portrayed within history. The fact that the crucifixion of the Incarnate Lord stands at the centre of the Christian story ought to have made it forever impossible that the Christian story should have been made into a validation of imperial power. Any exposition of a missionary approach to religious pluralism must include the penitent acknowledgement that the Church has been guilty of contradicting its own gospel by using it as an instrument of imperial power.

Why does religious pluralism pose a problem to us? I suppose that it is because deep in the heart of every human being there is a desire for harmony, for coherence, for the mental security which comes from knowing that there is no threat from what is radically alien. We all want unity because of the security which it brings. The problem is that we seek unity on our own terms. As Andre Dumas has said, every proposal for the unity of humankind, unless it explicitly specifies the centre of that unity, has the self of the proposer as its implicit centre. One could tell the story of the human race as the story of successive attempts to impose unity on larger and larger areas of



human life. When we are the authors of these efforts they appear in a benevolent light; when they are the projects of others, we label them "imperialism." It is very hard to recognize the imperialist element in our own projects for human unity.



Why is it that our projects for human unity become rival imperialisms? It is because of that deep corruption in human nature which leads me to see myself as the centre of the world and to judge everything from this centre. That corruption has been met, exposed and dealt with in the atoning work of Jesus Christ. It is the dying of Jesus for the sin of the world which brings me to the point where I can say with St. Paul: I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself up for me" (Galatians 2:20). The self is displaced by a new centre, and that can only be so because the One who so displaced my self is the one through whom and for whom all things exist and in whom they hold together. That is why Jesus can say, as he looks towards Calvary, "I when I am lifted up from the earth will draw all to me" (John 12:32). The one place where our self-centred human wills can be drawn together is the place where this radical corruption has been met and dealt with, where sin has been forgiven and atonement made, the mercy-seat where we can meet together as common debtors to the Immeasurable grace of God.

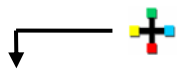
I am, of course, using confessional language, the language of one among the contending confessions which make up the multiple conversations of our pluralist society. I know that this will be objected to as improper for a discussion of pluralism. But if I am asked to use another and more "objective" kind of language I shall have to decline the invitation. For, as I have been saying already, there is no language which is "neutral," no language which does *not* arise out of a particular tradition of reasoning. I could, of course, use the language which I was trained to use in my school and university education. I could use the kind of language used in the comparative study of world religions. But this language is, of course, the language which belongs to another story, another way of understanding the human situation, another belief about what is ultimately reliable knowledge. I can, of course, use this language, for it is the language I learned at school. But its use necessarily implies that Jesus is *not* the one of whom the Scriptures and the Christian tradition speak - the one who is the Word made flesh, the one who is the source and goal of all that is.



And, of course, this other "non-confessional" language embodies imperial claims which those who use it do not notice but which are obvious to others. During 1992 there was considerable excitement in the English-speaking world over the writings of a US civil servant named Francis Fukuyama, who claimed that with the collapse of Marxist socialism as a world power, we had reached the end of history. There were no more great battles to be fought. The future belonged to the victorious liberal free market economies of the west. All the world would come to recognize that this is the only future for humanity. He did make passing reference to Islam as a possible contender for world dominance, but no reference - as far as I know - to Christianity as a possible player in this game. This is the language of "enlightened" Europe, and if this is our story, then dialogue among the world religions will naturally be conducted in the languages of Europe (mainly English, Spanish and German) and within the conceptual framework which these languages embody. The imperialist claims of this particular project for human unity are, as usual, concealed from those who share this story but obvious to those who do not. Once again I am making the obvious, but often unrecognized point that there is no neutral" or "objective" approach

to religious pluralism. Any claim to such neutrality conceals an imperialism which is more dangerous for being unacknowledged.

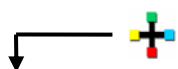
I am, of course, aware that this position will be challenged. It will be seen as arbitrary and irrational. It may be dismissed as "fideism", or as a blind "leap of faith". But these charges have to be thrown back at those who make them. Every claim to show grounds for believing the gospel which lie outside the gospel itself can be shown to rest ultimately on faith-commitments which can be questioned. There is, indeed, a very proper exercise of reason in showing the coherence which is found in the whole of human experience when it is illuminated by the gospel, but this is to be distinguished from the supposition that there are grounds for ultimate confidence more reliable than those furnished in God's revelation of himself in Jesus Christ, grounds on which, therefore, one may affirm the reliability of Christian belief. The final authority for the Christian faith is the self-revelation of God in Jesus Christ.



If I am pressed to give reasons for being a Christian, I can only reply by speaking of the calling of Jesus Christ which has come to me through his Church and is authenticated by the working of the Holy Spirit as mediated to me through the word and sacraments of the Gospel and the life of the believing community. If I have accepted that calling, I cannot agree to place the name of Jesus as one among a class of names to be subsumed under some more inclusive category. If Jesus is the Word made flesh, then there is no more inclusive category. In particular, I cannot accept the widely prevalent custom of putting the cross in a whole list of symbols of the world's religions. The cross is not a mere symbol like the OM often used to denote Hinduism, or the crescent denoting Islam. The crucifixion of Jesus was an event in history, the mighty act of God by which at infinite cost he reconciled the fallen world to himself and rescued it from perdition. To suggest that there is a reality more inclusive than this is to deny it.

How, then, from this standpoint, does one approach the devout adherents of the world's religions? I suggest the following as guiding principles.

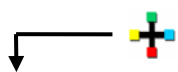
1. The first is that one approaches the adherents of another faith (whether "religious" or not) with an eagerness to discover and welcome all the evidence of the work of God's grace in the life of that person. If our starting point is God's revealing and atoning work in Jesus Christ, we know that Jesus is the eternal word of God active in all creation and in all human life. We know that as the ascended Lord, at the right hand of the Father he reigns over all and there is no limit to the reach of his gracious work. We know that he is the light that illuminates all being. We will rejoice in every reflection of that light wherever it is found. To put it in the negative form, it will *not* be our endeavour to probe the soul of the other person in order to discover the sins, the weaknesses, the anxieties which might provide the "point of contact" for the Gospel. Human beings have a natural desire to protect themselves against this kind of probing. The recognition of need, of weakness, of sin will indeed come, but it will be the work of the Holy Spirit mediated through the telling of the Gospel story which brings this about. As St Paul argues in the letter to the Galatians, the promise of God comes before the law. It is in the light of God's



immeasurable mercy in Christ that we learn how deep is our need and how dark our sin. The Church must acknowledge with thankfulness and without reservation all that is of God In the world outside the walls of the Church and beyond the sound of the Gospel.

2. But the Church must also tell the story which has been entrusted to her. There is no substitute for this story. There are several places in Scripture where we see both the apostolic recognition of the work of God outside the Church, and the necessity to tell the story. To the pagan crowd at Lystra St Paul speaks of the blessings they have received from God, but immediately insists that he is bringing them good news of something new. To the citizens in Athens he affirms their great religious devotion and quotes with approval from one of their poets, but immediately goes on to tell them that he has news; God has done a new thing which confronts them with a radically new situation (Acts 14:8-18 and 17:22-31). Perhaps the most striking illustration of this point is provided by the encounter of St Peter and his colleagues with the household of Cornelius (Acts 10). Here it is explicitly stated that God hears the prayers and accepts the gifts of a pagan Roman soldier (vv. 4, 31, 34f). Nevertheless Peter is commanded to go to him and "to give him the news of what God has done in Jesus Christ, and as the story is told, the Holy Spirit is given to Cornelius and his household. The matter is expressed in precise terms in the opening verse of St John's Gospel where we read both that the Word who was made flesh in Jesus was already in the world, because all things were made through him and he is the light that gives light to everyone, and also that he came into the world and the world did not know him. Both sides of this paradox must be affirmed. It is the paradox of our fallen nature, both made in the image of God and also alienated from God. It is vital that we do not use either side of the paradox to deny the other; neither use the reality of God's universal grace to deny the necessity and the uniqueness of his action in Jesus Christ, nor use the uniqueness of his action in Jesus Christ to deny the reality of his universal presence and action. Much of the debate about religious pluralism arises from falling into this trap.

3. There is no substitute for telling the story. It is

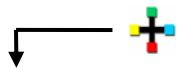


necessary to say this because it is sometimes said that "Christian presence" rather than "evangelization" is the proper form of Christian response to religious pluralism. This is a confusing half-truth. It is indeed true that the message with which the Church is entrusted cannot be faithfully delivered by a company of people who do not follow the incarnate Lord in his total commitment to our human condition. The Church has both to embody and to proclaim the Gospel. When Jesus commissioned his apostles he said to them "As the Father sent me, so I send you", and he showed them his hands and his side (John 20:19-23). It was surely an unforgettable reminder to them that they would be recognizable as truly his representatives if their corporate life bore the scars of his encounter with the ruler of this world. The Gospel as Jesus proclaimed it was that the kingdom, the active reign of God, is at hand, present in his life of healing and teaching, and present supremely in his final conflict with and victory over the powers of sin and death. The commission to the Church is to be his body, the place where the reign of God is present and therefore where the battle with the powers of darkness is joined. Mere words, proceeding from a company which is in peaceful co-existence with the world will not truly represent the Saviour. But words are not dispensable. Jesus himself preached and commanded his apostles to preach. We deceive ourselves (but nobody else) if we imagine that our mere presence is sufficient to do the whole work of Jesus. Certainly there are times when words are not appropriate, yet - even in these circumstances - our presence will be a witness to Christ only because we are known to represent a Church which does preach the Gospel. And there are also times when silence is betrayal.

4. It is important do distinguish between pluralism as an ideology and plurality as a fact. Plurality of religious communities is a present fact, and I do not find in Scripture grounds for believing that, within this age, all human beings will be Christians. Rather the New Testament clearly suggests that the normal attitude of the world towards the Christian Church will be one of hostility: The fulfilment of Jesus' promise to draw all people to himself belongs to the



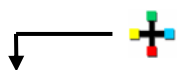
consummation and not - surely - to terrestrial history. And given the fact of religious plurality, it is important that



Christians should do everything possible to create and maintain good relationships between the religious communities. There are very many social and ethical issues on which there can be cordial co-operation, based on mutual respect. This will be furthered if Christians are eager, as they should be, to recognize and give thanks for the work of God's grace in the lives of those outside the Church. It is also very desirable that members of the different religious communities should understand as fully as possible the beliefs and practice of their neighbours of other faiths. Christians who engage in this kind of sharing find their own understanding of the Christian faith deepened and enlarged, and this experience is of course not confined to Christians.

The acceptance of this fact of plurality must not be confused with acceptance of the ideology of pluralism if that means the abandonment of the human responsibility to seek and know the truth. There is a proper kind of pluralism which affirms the freedom of people to seek for truth without being coerced, although this freedom is empty unless it is combined with a sense of responsibility to a cultural tradition. But a pluralism which simply abandons the struggle to distinguish truth from falsehood can only lead to the kind of society to which we are sadly becoming accustomed in the "developed" world - a society which loses any sense of meaning and therefore can find no higher goal than the multiplication of amusements.

It is characteristic of the "post-modern" situation that claims to truth are regarded as concealed assertions of power. In this perspective, evangelism is seen as an expression of the will to dominate, and dialogue is seen as the renunciation of this desire. Dialogue is seen not as a means of coming nearer to the truth but as a way of life in which different truth-claims no longer conflict with one another but seek friendly co-existence. An "instrumental" view of dialogue is rejected. One speaks rather of the dialogue of cultures and of dialogue as a celebration of the rich variety of human life. Religious communities are regarded as varieties of human culture rather than as bearers of truth-claims. In this perspective, of course, dialogue is seen as the preferred alternative to evangelization. But we have to ask whether we are not dealing here with another example of

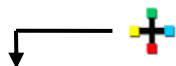


the failure of nerve of Christians who are too much controlled by the collapse of western European culture into scepticism and nihilism.

5. In a religiously plural world it is sometimes regarded as arrogant for the adherents of one religion to claim a unique relation to the truth and therefore to seek to make disciples of the faithful adherents of others. "Proselytism" is, for most people, a word of condemnation. And there have been enough examples of a kind of arrogance which might justify this condemnation. But a few elementary observations are enough to show that this cannot be the last word, however annoyed we may sometimes be by a certain kind of religious proselytising. No religious community would exist unless at some time there were men and women who went out and made disciples. Moreover the arrogance is not all on one side. To assert that there are no such discrepancies between the truth-claims of different religions as to justify the attempt to persuade people of the truth of one's own is - in fact - to claim a knowledge *superior* to that of the adherents of these religions. It is to relativise all their truth-claims on the authority of a supposedly superior truth. In many other areas of human discourse we are continually engaged in seeking to persuade others in the truth of what we believe: it would be odd if, in this area alone,

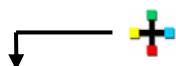
such persuasion were ruled out of order. And, finally, it is plain that Jesus commissioned his apostles to go and make disciples, and that the Christian Church would not exist if they had not obeyed this command. To deplore the effort to bring others to faith in Christ is to desire the extinction of Christianity.

But, when all this has been said, there are understandable reasons for the condemnation of proselytism. We are commissioned to bring good news, to tell the story of God's marvellous and mighty acts for the salvation of the world. We must not withhold this story from anyone. To keep it to ourselves, as though it were a private "in-house" story of the Church, as though Jesus were the lord of Christians but not the lord of all, would be intolerable sectarianism. We have no right to keep silent about it, and if we try to do so we deny its truth. But it is not our work to convert any human soul to Christ. That is the work of the Holy Spirit. It is impossible to overstate the importance of this. The New Testament repeatedly



affirms that it is the Holy Spirit who is the primary witness to Christ. It is he only who can "convict the world in respect of sin, of righteousness and of judgment" (John 16:8). The faithful witness of the Church gives the occasion for the witness of the Holy Spirit, but it is that witness which alone can truly convert the heart. When the Christian thinks that he or she can convert another to Christ, there is something badly wrong. The ways in which men and women (and children too) are brought to faith in Christ are mysterious and almost infinitely various. It is perhaps enough to refer to the great number of people in all times and cultures who have come to faith through a vision or a dream, to remind us that the business is not in our hands. The life of the Church, its words, its deeds, its corporate life and - above all - its worship may in the providence of God provide the occasions for the inner witness of the Holy Spirit in the heart of an unbeliever. Christians must pray and hope for that. But the answering of the prayer is in the hands of God alone.

6. This is the context in which we should speak about inter-religious dialogue. If dialogue is understood in its broadest sense as referring to any kind of conversation between human beings, then it is hardly necessary to say that we cannot live without dialogue. But in the context of a discussion of religious pluralism, the word dialogue is often introduced as though it were the preferred alternative to evangelism. I have already argued that dialogue in its classical Socratic sense cannot be a substitute for the telling of the story which is the gospel. It can lead up to the telling of the story - as in the conversation between Jesus and the woman at the well in Samaria. It can follow from it as we try to understand the meaning of the story - and much of the Pauline correspondence is one side of such a dialogue with the young churches which he had brought to birth. What is the place of inter-religious dialogue in a religiously plural society where Christianity is already well established? There is, I believe, an important place. It is a way of enabling the participants to learn about and to enter into the religious experience of others, of creating mutual understanding and so building friendship. It can also be a way of exploring the possibilities of common action on contemporary social and political issues - issues on



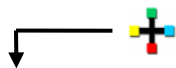
which different faith-communities may have many shared objectives.

Such dialogue should not be seen as an occasion for evangelism, but rather as the proper pre-condition for it. But nor is it a substitute for evangelism. What is important is that the Christian participant in such conversations is, and is known to be fully committed to and loyal to the Church which is publicly preaching the Gospel and calling people to conversion and faith. There

are very many of our daily activities in which we are not (and should not be) engaged in direct evangelism, and inter-religious dialogue is one of these. But we engage in dialogue as members of a Church which is publicly confessing Jesus Christ as Lord of all and publicly calling men and women to give their allegiance to him.

To put the matter in another, if perhaps very obvious way, the participants in dialogue should be truly representative of the faiths for which they speak. To enter into dialogue without a proper understanding of one's own faith-tradition is to sell our partners short. And to enter into dialogue with one's own faith held -as it were - in suspension, as though for purposes of dialogue one could subordinate it to some higher more inclusive principle, is equally to make the dialogue sterile. A dialogue in which the participants are *not* truly representing the claims to truth which their traditions make cannot be truly fruitful, nor can it enhance real mutual respect.

7. In speaking about proselytism I touched on the matter which is most important of all. At the heart of the Christian faith is the affirmation that God so loved the world that he gave his beloved Son to be incarnate among us, to die for us and to rise victorious so that we might be delivered from the bondage of sin and death. If these things are true, they cannot be subordinated to anything else. They cannot be bracketed within some more inclusive category. The response which they call for is primarily that of worship. The centre of Christian witness is worship. It is the presence of a truly worshipping community which draws people to Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit. The kind of proselytism which hardens the hearts of others against the gospel arises from the confusion into which Christians have often fallen by thinking too much of themselves as the agents of mission. We are indeed called to



bear witness to what has been given to us. But our witness is subordinate to the witness of the Spirit. We are not in control. We are not the final judges. We await the final judgment and meanwhile point men and women to him who is both the Saviour and the Judge. We know from our Lord's teaching that there will be many surprises on that day. We know that some who have said "Lord, Lord" will be left outside and that many who were far off will be in the Father's kingdom. We are only witnesses, not judges. But we who have been redeemed as the first-fruit of God's new creation must be above all concerned that his name is honoured. In a religiously plural world we cannot offer any other centre for human unity except the one which he has provided in the atoning work of Jesus. The life of a church wholly devoted to honouring him in worship, loving obedience and faithful witness is the human means through which he will fulfil his promise to draw all peoples to himself. The heart of our praying is that he should see of the travail of his soul and be satisfied.

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