

Comment of the Doctrine Commission of the Anglican Diocese of Sydney on "Towards a Theology of Inter-Faith Dialogue"

(This report was received by the Synod of the Diocese of Sydney in October 1987.)

(This comment was prepared for and endorsed by the Standing Committee of the Synod of the Anglican Diocese of Sydney.)

1. The booklet "Towards a Theology of Inter-Faith Dialogue" (referred to afterwards as "TTIFD"), prepared by the Inter-Faith Consultative Group of the Board for Missionary Unity of the Church of England, has been sent to all dioceses of the Anglican communion for study and reflection in preparation for the Lambeth Conference 1988. The question that it addresses is not new, but it has become more immediate for Christians in the UK because of the recent influx of those of other races and faiths. For those who have been engaged in presenting the gospel beyond their own culture, it would seem that there are few new fundamental issues raised.

2. The proposed solutions are not new. All are well-worn paths in missiological studies. TTIFD tries to be fair to all schools of thought - exclusivist, inclusivist and pluralist, to use its own language. Again, it recognises diversity but thinks on the whole that the middle or inclusivist position is best. The authors want to hold to the uniqueness of Christianity but also to the possibility of salvation in other faiths. So, to the authors, Christ it seems becomes a "norm" only. Truth can be found in other faiths. The logos and the Spirit are to be found in them all. Revelation seems to be confused with experience. The two must "interrelate" and correct each other. The Bible and tradition are to be our great guides, and the insights of the Fathers into the place of other faiths are to be examined as well. Single verses of the Bible, if they are too definite, are to be weighed against the context of the Bible as a whole, where great play is made of the Old Testament.

3. It must be asked whether the total biblical picture can be assembled without attention to the particular texts that have a bearing on this question. Further, one would ask whether the exclusivism of the Old Testament touched on in TTIFD is given genuine weight in assessing the Old Testament material. As the Old Testament is said to have been a "preparation for the gospel", so are other faiths today; thus implicitly dislodging the Old Testament from its place in the corpus of revelation. TTIFD does go on to state that there will always be some for whom the Old Testament has a special place.

4. There does not seem to be a consistent grasp of the finality and completeness of the revelation in Christ. Biblical texts asserting this are discounted. Indeed, the exegesis of verses like Acts 4:12 and John 14:6 fails to take adequate account of the immediate context and the context of TTIFD as a whole in each case, and could be described as "special pleading".

5. Of course we must see the need for different racial and religious communities to live together in peace and understanding. Of course there is need for "conversation" with those of other faiths. But unless this is permeated by determination to win them to Christ, the belief that they need to be so won, we are not in step with the teaching and practice of the New Testament.

6. Why did Christ come to earth and die? Was it just to give a fuller revelation of God, a "norm" by which we might test the beliefs and convictions of others? Why did Paul spend his life presenting the gospel to fanatical Hebrews, Romans, and cultured, broadminded and amoral Greeks? To affirm the view (as it would seem TTIFD by implication does) that to say, for example, Paul's sermons in Acts were exercises in comparative religion, would in our judgement have grievously misjudged Paul and also the whole ethos of the Early Church. It would seem that TTIFD tries hard to hold two irreconcilable points of view.

7. The real danger is that if the process of relativisation is extended to other faiths, it could then be legitimately extended to Christianity. The question is asked as to whether TTIFD leaves unreconciled, and indeed, contradictory points of view side by side, without offering solutions of a distinctively Christian framework of reference. To affirm that what is called "monologue" belongs to the past would seem to deny the very roots from which Christianity and its extensions sprang.

8. We cannot agree when it says, "Christ will provide the link by which the different religions will be brought into a deep and mutually enriching relationship with each other". Once they forge that link with Christ, they will cease to belong to "other religions". That is the watershed, and every missionary knows what an agony and stumbling block it can be. This is virtually what Michael Nazir Ali says in his excellent appended essay, coming as it does from personal experience in the context of Muslim-Christian dialogue.

9. Further specific comments are offered.

- (a) How flexible a meaning are we to give to "ecumenism" (par. 4)?
- (b) Can it be so confidently affirmed, as TTIFD does, that biblical exclusivism is post-exilic?
- (c) The sentence which includes the phrase, "all humanity is the people of God", simply seems to ignore certain fundamental Old Testament affirmations which create a foundation and a framework for the expression of the New Testament gospel.

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- (d) As the logos concept is developed, one would ask whether a distinction has finally been made between scriptural and extra scriptural writings.
- (e) Is it correct to use the parallel, "the self-giving of God and the Incarnation" and "the self-giving of Christians and dialogue"?
- (f) Have possible, even doubtful, conclusions (such as the exegesis of Acts 4:12 and John 14:6) been taken as proven and then used as premises in a subsequent argument?
- (g) Has TTIFD really taken into account the debate in missiological studies in the presentation of the gospel in other cultures?

There are a few echoes in this booklet of the work of people such as Walther Freytag and Heindrik Kraemer, whose writings in earlier decades still stand. While they represent one point of view, it is a point of view that cannot be ignored.

Conclusion

10. The fact that Christianity has moved in some parts of the world from a dominant position, to one where, from a sociological point of view it is one religious system among many, does not touch the essential validity of Christianity in a way that is new. If, as said above, the missionary motive of Acts is continuing and obligatory for the whole Church, sociological change as touching religious systems cannot be said to put the everlasting gospel in a different position as God's good news to humankind.

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