

Conviction and openness

Christian witness in a multifaith world



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If I want to get a lively mission-logical conversation going, I find that all I have to do is quote Paul Knitter, who once wrote:

The goal of missionary work is being achieved when announcing the gospel to people makes the Christian a better Christian and the Buddhist a better Buddhist.¹

Christians tend to respond in three main ways: Some agree, arguing that mission is dialogue in this sense. Others strongly disagree, arguing that mission is primarily a matter of proclamation.

It is the third response—or cluster of responses—that I want to explore in detail here. Many, myself included, would like to find their way to a response in between mission as either dialogue or proclamation.

Conviction and openness

I would like to argue that mission is essentially dialogical and yet that the Christian church must also witness to what it believes is genuinely good news for all, rooted in God's revelation in Jesus Christ.

It is possible, in other words, for Christian witness to flow from a deep conviction that we are discovering a central clue to life and its meaning, but also to be characterised by an openness to discovering more, wherever God's Spirit is at work.

I remember the Muslim representative insisting that we each make large banners speaking from our own tradition, so that all could see that we were working together. He particularly wanted Muslims in Indonesia to see on television that Christians in Australia opposed the war, because, he said, they just assumed that most Australians were Christian and supported the war ambitions of the American Christian leader,

George W Bush

There are many ways to express this middle ground. For example, it is common for the three main stances towards religions to be labelled *exclusivist, inclusivist and pluralist*.² In such a framework this is a form of inclusivism—a belief that God is revealed definitively but not exhaustively in Jesus.

A second way to express it, which I will explore further, is to suggest that in a multifaith context the appropriate Christian stance towards the world is one of both conviction and openness. I want to argue that these are neither opposites nor incompatible.

A third way is to say that Christian witness is dialogical by nature, because the Good News is about love and justice, a new way of relating characterised by reciprocity and openness to *the other*.

In its broadest sense, dialogue is all about respectful conversation in which two or more parties share what they believe while open to learning from each other.

The way this middle ground was expressed at the World Council of Churches' mission conference in San Antonio in 1990 was that "we cannot point to any other way of salvation than Jesus Christ; at the same time we cannot set limits to the saving power of God".³ The delegates at this conference felt that there was an unresolved tension in this statement.⁴

David Bosch also felt an ineradicable tension in this position. In **Transforming Mission** he ends his succinct summary of various theologies of religion by asking the question: "How do we maintain the tension between being both missionary and dialogical?"⁵

But he doesn't see it as a debilitating tension. He sees it as an inevitable part of our being human and finite and, in fact, part of our spiritual adventure. We can launch into mission and dialogue confident that God's Spirit will surprise us and teach us more. In one of Bosch's signature phrases, he says our witness in a multifaith context needs to occur in bold humility, or humble boldness.⁶

Strength of the tension questioned

I am not convinced that this tension is nearly as strong as Bosch and the San Antonio gathering felt it to be. There are three reasons for my sense that the Christian call to mission is one, rather than a two-fold calling to be held in tension.

First, the Christian call to mission is a call to witness, and this term embodies both the boldness and humility to which Bosch refers. Second, my view of truth allows for both conviction and openness—a form of boldness and humility—without deep tension. Third, because our witness works itself out incarnationally, in all dimensions of life and particularly through relationships, our witness is expressed holistically in love for neighbour. Let's explore these three in further detail.

Mission as witness: Be my witnesses

The Christian call to mission is a call to bear witness to God's saving activity in Jesus Christ.⁷ The word group underlying the idea of *witness* or *testimony* is at least as frequent in the New Testament as the word group associated with *preaching the Word*, *proclaiming the gospel* or *kerygma*.⁸ The clearest expression of mission as witness is found in Acts 1:8, where Jesus appeared to his disciples, promised the power of the Holy Spirit and said, "You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

Christian witness is part of mission of God

The role of the witness is more modest than the role of defending an idea or promoting a worldview. A witness tells what he or she has seen or experienced. The witness in a court case is of no interest other than pointing credibly to what happened in the past or is happening now. The task of Christian witness is simply to tell the story of Jesus and to share how the liberating reality of the resurrection is evident now.⁹ It is the mission of God and we are invited to be a part of it by being witnesses.

We can bear witness not only in word but in deed. The word *martyr* comes from the Greek word for *witness*. Many Christians have borne witness to the Good News of Jesus Christ by paying the ultimate price, giving their life.

Less dramatically, the call to mission is a call to bear witness to our understanding of God's love in all parts of life. Jesus' call to "be my witness" was not just a call to give witness verbally.¹⁰ I will return to this later when considering witness in all of life.

Multifaith context

We bear witness in the context of a new community. This is relevant to the multifaith context, because it is only together that we can, at least to some degree, point to Jesus as the source and inspiration of our community.

Darrell Guder points out that the New Testament concept of witness encompasses not only the person who witnesses, but also the testimony given by the witness and the process of bearing witness.¹¹ So Christian witness defines "the entire Christian life, both individually and corporately."¹²

(I have to say how liberating this is compared to the expectations of witness that were spelt out in my undergraduate years at university among my evangelical friends. Personal witnessing was the model; it consisted of acting as an individual to engineer conversations with strangers so that we could introduce the gospel, summarised in a few simple sentences, into the conversation. It neither valued relationships nor involved listening; worst of all it placed a burden of guilt on those who were not good at this awkward technique.)

These observations about the nature of witness make it clear how it is both bold and humble. In a court room, witnesses are asked to say what they know, but nothing beyond. Their expertise is limited, and if they speculate they are soon reminded that it is inappropriate.

Witness in informal dialogue

In a multifaith situation a clear understanding of mission as witness helps greatly.

When it comes to formal or informal dialogue, there is a time for bearing witness to the story of Jesus and to the living reality of the Spirit of the risen Christ in our lives. Sharing what we believe is an integral part of dialogue.

If we do not enter into dialogue with convictions, but pretend to have completely open minds, we have no genuine dialogue.

On the other hand, in dialogue there is also a time to

listen and learn. There are many things we do not know or understand.

I have expressed this in the words of a song:

*Lord let me learn, learn more and more
Learn that what I know is just a speck of what
there is to know,
Learn to listen to my neighbour when I'd rather
speak and go ...*¹³

Need for humility

To take a simple example of the limitations of being a witness, when we see something dramatic in daily life we know we can misinterpret it. When there are police cars, sirens and people running everywhere, are we in the middle of a crime scene or a film set, a rescue drill or a genuine emergency? A certain humility is due.

How much more is humility—or openness, provisionality, respect, listening and eagerness to learn—central to interfaith dialogue, where the deepest mysteries of life are being explored together?

A sense of proportion about the task of Christian mission takes some of the sting out of the tension of wanting to share with others yet wanting to respect their different beliefs. Our role is to point to what we know and experience, acknowledging that there is far more to be understood and experienced.

There is no ultimate tension between conviction and openness here. As Lesslie Newbigin says, in discussing the question of whether there is salvation for those outside Christian faith, how arrogant are theologians who seem to think that Christians are authorised to tell the rest of the world who will be accepted or rejected by God. All we can do is to point to the love and grace of God. It is not ours to second-guess the mind and activity of God.¹⁴

Truth in dialogue: *Through a glass darkly*

The second reason there is not a deep tension for me in the call to both Christian mission and a dialogical approach to those of other faiths stems from my view of truth.

Religions differ

There is no way to avoid the truth question when it comes to faith. Most religions have claimed to be true and to be the superior or final presentation of the key to reality and happiness. And yet they differ deeply on what reality and salvation are.

Some people think that all religions ultimately say the same thing or that we all really worship one God by different names.

When I began postgraduate religious studies at Lancaster in the United Kingdom, my professor was Ninian Smart, a renowned world religions scholar. I can clearly remember him saying, "Those who say that all religions are ultimately the same have not looked at the religions." His point was, that if we listen carefully to the genuine and deep differences between religious visions (both within and between world religions), we will be forced to give up any unifying pattern we might want to impose on the incredible variety that exists.

Some forms of faith follow one God, some no god at all, others many gods and others a complex layered system of many gods and one absolute reality. Some religious worldviews aim to escape this cosmos and others to renew it. Some religious visions insist that our salvation is up to us while others speak of grace, forgiveness and assistance on the way. Some are essentially solitary paths and others emphasise communal practices.

Any philosophy we might distil from a religious community is likely to be so deeply embedded in a complex set of myths, rituals, sacred scriptures, social structures and religious ethics, that it would be unrecognisable if we were to extract it from its embedded form.

Ghandi mistaken

So Mahatma Gandhi was mistaken when he wrote, "Religions are different roads converging to the same point." He asked, "What does it matter that we take different roads so long as we reach the same goal? Wherein is the cause for quarrelling?"¹⁵ In reply, we could ask, "Would it matter if we were to reach different goals? Would there then be reason to talk about which road to take?"

Mark Heim has built his theology of religions on this very point: There are many salvations, a "real pluralism of religious ends."¹⁶ In other words, the differences between Buddhist nirvana and Christian communion with God cannot be smoothed over.¹⁷

While I cannot make sense of Heim's own constructive proposal—that we must accept that there are many salvations and that each in some sense has validity as "the only way"¹⁸—he is persuasive in arguing (and here I use Knitter's paraphrase of Heim) that "religions not only say they are different; they really, deeply, and forevermore are different."¹⁹

We know in part: Critical realism

If religious visions are genuinely different, how do we approach the question of their possible truth? I am arguing here that there is no deep tension between conviction and openness. This follows from holding to a critical, realist view of truth.

Critical realism stands between the two poles of naïve realism and nonrealism.

Naïve realism approaches reality as external to us and readily accessible. Our language is understood to be matched by *objective reality*. This was the dominant philosophical view of truth until the 19th century. Scientific models were seen literally. When scientists posited the existence of the ether or of atoms, these theoretical objects were seen as actual physical entities.²⁰

In Christian theology the corresponding view is literalism or fundamentalism. For example, God may be seen as really more like a father than a mother, or literally a person. In interfaith dialogue, a naïve realist would argue either that the spiritual world is real and that the gods compete, or that one spiritual vision is true and the other gods do not exist.

This stance towards other religions is what is usually labelled the *exclusivist* approach, where one's own religion is seen as literally and exclusively true.

Non-realism, on the other hand, denies the existence outside ourselves of the objects we refer to in our language. Non-realists in science see theories as merely instrumental, not representative of the *world out there*, which is inaccessible. They are seen as fictions to be judged only by their usefulness.²¹

It is believed that we construct our reality. In religion, nonrealists see religious language as referring not to transcendent realities outside ourselves, but to emotions, intentions or perspectives.²² In interfaith dialogue this corresponds to one form of pluralism, where religious beliefs are seen as human constructions that meet human needs but do not actually refer to a transcendent reality.

Critical realism takes something from both of the other views. Its scientific and religious expressions are similar. N T Wright puts it well:

This is a way of describing the process of knowing that acknowledges the reality of the thing known, as something other than the knower (hence realism), while fully acknowledging that the only access we have to this reality lies along the spiralling path of appropriate dialogue or conversation between the knower and the thing known (hence critical).²³

Critical realist view

A critical realist view of truth, in simple terms, argues that the way we talk only approximates what is *out there*. We have an active role in imagining it, so we should take our constructions of reality with a grain of salt. But we have a basic faith (and ultimately that is all it is) that there is something out there to describe, and that some beliefs do better than others at describing it.

The criteria for deciding between versions of reality are complex and do not usually lead to proof. Our theories in some areas of life are not controversial, and *reality* seems to shape our theories more than the other way around. But in other areas of life—and religion seems to be one such area—the role of human imagination plays a bigger part, and worldviews compete seriously for our acceptance.

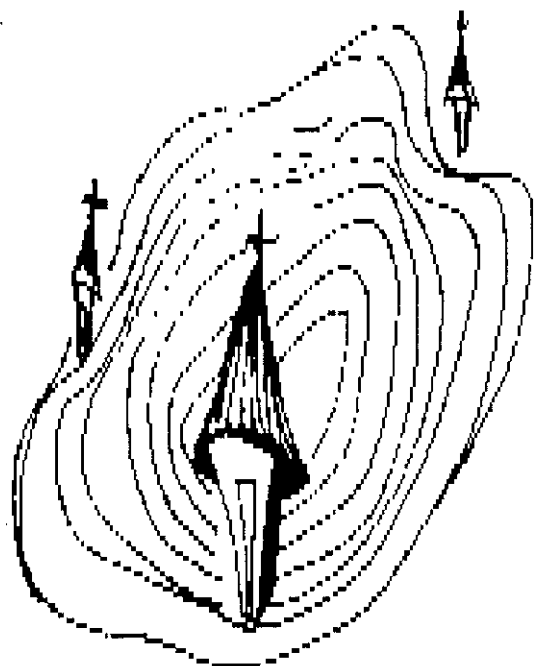
We can find whole paradigms of existence, fully fleshed-out and satisfying millions of people while leaving others cold. Critical realists say that some of these visions of reality are closer to the truth than others, although we don't have direct access to reality in order to decide between them. Each faith perspective is likely to contain some truth as well as error.

Echoes of St Paul

There are echoes of this recognition of the limits of our knowledge in St Paul's famous words in 1 Corinthians 13: "For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known" (1 Cor 13:12). As a result of this partial knowing, Paul says, we must walk by faith.

Dialogical engagement

We can see easily that a critical realist approach to truth makes a big difference in the way we approach the religious beliefs of others. There is no tension between conviction and openness. It is the very nature of our understanding of truth that it will be partial.



As a result, Christian witness is appropriately accompanied by an openness to learn about God as understood by those who differ from us; that is, it is naturally characterised by dialogue as a way of life.

Tolerance

This openness is often described as *tolerance*, but tolerance is too passive a concept.

Not that we should ask for less than tolerance, as some Christians seeking a theocracy seem to demand. As a Baptist, I value religious toleration highly and regard freedom of religion as a central plank of human rights. There are many places in the world where even tolerance is not granted.

This is an example of where, if the issue of religious freedom came up in interfaith dialogue, I would feel compelled to express my deep convictions, despite the risk of frosty relations. For example, I am aware that in some parts of the world, Muslims who convert to another religion risk losing their citizen rights, their freedom and even their lives.

No, we should aim for more than tolerance, if tolerance means merely that we accept the co-existence of *the other*, perhaps with indifference or even hostility. In interfaith dialogue, we should aspire to actively engage with those around us who follow a different path. Part of our religious conviction is that we know only in part.

Meeting *the other* is an opportunity for us to learn more about faith. Jews in Jesus' time would not have expected to learn from Samaritans and yet Jesus powerfully invited his hearers to revise their religious understanding by learning from the Good Samaritan in Jesus' famous story of faith with its sleeves rolled up (Luke 10:30–7).

This open stance, in which we recognise that we do not have the whole truth, is also sometimes labelled *inclusivism*. Classically, this position held that the partial truth in other religions found its fulfilment in Jesus Christ.²⁴ But there are a variety of Christian inclusivisms. Karl Rahner called certain believers in other religions who live by grace *anonymous Christians*.²⁵ Others, such as Gavin D'Costa, believe that God's Spirit (admittedly constrained by being the Spirit of Christ) works freely throughout the world, so Christians are obliged to engage dialogically with believers in other faiths in order to learn more about what the Spirit is doing.²⁶

While inclusivism—a commitment to a partially-understood Christ balanced by acknowledgement that there is much to learn elsewhere—is the stance towards believers of other faiths that resonates most easily with a critical realist approach to truth, I would argue that critical realism can be found in each of the three commonly identified positions.

Pluralism

There are *gentle exclusivists*, such as the well-known Evangelical, John Stott, who say that, although they believe that salvation is available only through Jesus Christ, they trust that in the grace of God the great majority of humans will be saved, although we don't know how.²⁷

The World Evangelical Fellowship also left the question open at its 1992 conference.²⁸ The combination of conviction and openness is to be found in these views, where a certain agnosticism about the ways of God can be seen.

Pluralism also often takes a critical realist approach. John Hick is explicit about this, even though his dismissal of much religious belief as *mere myth* suggests that he sees religious belief as mostly shaped by human construction with only some shaping by a transcendent reality.²⁹ Wherever he stands on critical realism, however, Hick—with nearly all pluralists—is deeply committed to dialogue involving the sharing of our convictions in an open spirit.

So whatever the stance towards non-Christian religions, a critical realist position on truth leads to a commitment to dialogue. Christian mission, then, will take the shape of witnessing in bold humility, prepared to share, when appropriate, our partial understanding of God's activity as we have experienced it and yet open to listening and learning, even to the point of revising what we believe.

Incarnational witness: In all of life

The third reason I find it natural to see Christian mission as one, rather than as two tasks in tension, is that our witness works itself out incarnationally in all dimensions of life, particularly through relationships. We are called to express our witness in love for neighbour. This is a holistic concept. Our strong desire to follow Jesus' way of love is not compromised by our openness to difference in the other or by the likelihood that we will learn and be changed as we interact.

Several dimensions of this all-of-life witness are suggested in the Catholic document *Dialogue and Mission* (1984), which calls us to pursue dialogue in theological exchange, religious experience, action and daily life.³⁰ I have listed them in rough order from the rare to the everyday.

Theological exchange

Much of my discussion so far has focussed on theological exchange. We have to admit, however, that genuine interfaith dialogue at this level, in which the conversation partners are mutually enriched by listening to each other and probing each other on

matters of belief, is rare. While we do not give up on it, from day to day it is the other three dimensions where we have most opportunity to bear witness through our dialogical approach.

Religious experience

Our personal experience of God is a vital aspect of bearing witness to the reality of Christ. By religious experience I am referring here to prayer, contemplation, faith journey and any experiences of a distinctly spiritual nature, whether *ordinary* or *extraordinary*.

While experience can confirm a narrow religious outlook, if religious experience occurs within the framework of conviction and openness, it opens us to *the other*. For example, my wife has a friend who is a devout Muslim woman. Because the spiritual dimension of life is real to both of them, a deep openness to the reality of both their experiences is present in the relationship. To encounter believers of other faiths, who are deeply committed to their spiritual paths, is often to become aware of a holy space and to provoke ourselves to ask again how the Spirit of God is active in the world.

I suggest that in a multifaith context, one of the best ways for Christians to witness to their faith is to practise the spiritual disciplines and allow them to bear fruit in their lives. Many younger spiritual seekers in the west bypass the church because they do not see them as spiritual—this is probably a surprise to Christians.³¹

There are times when Christians will feel able to meet with people of other faiths in a multifaith gathering, and then questions of whether we can pray together or enter into rituals belonging to other traditions arise. Increasingly there are guides to such occasions in order to help us to respect each other as we gather together and sense the spiritual experience of others.³²

Action

The dialogue of action is, in one sense, the least controversial, because most religions affirm certain ethical ideals related to peace, justice and human rights which would allow them to co-operate and work together *dialogically* for human freedom. Given the mess our world is in, the religions have a job to do and could learn a great deal from each other by working shoulder-to-shoulder for peace, justice and care of the environment.

This is certainly the vision of writers such as Hans Küng and Paul Knitter, who call for a global ethic: If the world is to know peace between peoples it will need to know peace between religions.³¹ There are many local initiatives where interfaith cooperation occurs in common resistance to social evils.

Christians for peace

I was an organiser of a peace vigil against the war in Iraq when it loomed as imminent in 2003. The group began as *Christians for Peace*, but was soon joined by *Muslims for Peace* and other groups, and the vigil became an interfaith protest.

I remember the Muslim representative insisting that we each make large banners speaking from our own tradition, so that all could see that we were working together. He particularly wanted Muslims in Indonesia to see on television that Christians in Australia opposed the war, because, he said, they just assumed that most Australians were Christian and supported the warring ambitions of the American Christian leader, George W Bush.

This example, however, reminds us how urgent and important the dialogue of action is, because huge political rifts are forming across the world along broadly religious lines.

It also reminds us that many social ideals are not shared by all; examples are renunciation of terrorism, a multifaith and multicultural society, the opposing of patriarchy and a commitment to democracy. There are great differences within religious communities as well as between them.

In the dialogue of action, Christians can bear witness to their faith through their commitment to the kingdom of God, the new order of relationships in which the poor are fed, the voiceless are heard, the powerful do not exploit the powerless and there is liberation for all to become fully human. Some of this vision may, at times, be distinctively Christian, but we share a common cause with many believers of other faiths.

Daily life

It is in the interactions of daily life that incarnational witness occurs most frequently. I have in mind here all the ways in which Christians bear witness, most often through their actions, their relationships and their attitudes and values, and occasionally through opportunities to speak about their faith.



We bear witness when we move beyond our comfort zone to befriend the outcast, the migrant, the believer of another faith—the *other*. It is the practical outworking of loving our neighbour. We bear witness when we live simply and in a welcoming manner, when our discipleship takes a *downward* journey as well as an inward journey and an outward journey.

We bear witness when we defend the weak, care for the orphan, share our resources and visit the lonely and isolated. We bear witness when we are honest at work and treat others respectfully. The list goes on, of course.

The dialogical dimension of this witness is found in our openness to *the other*. The biblical tradition of hospitality to the stranger, to the traveller and to widows and orphans is specifically linked in the New Testament to the discovery of God in *the other* (Genesis 18, Matthew 25:31-46, Luke 24:2, 24:13-25, Romans 12:13, Hebrews 13:3).

Enlarged by the other

In the search for truth we acknowledge that we know only in part, and we seek greater understanding by listening to others; in the witness of daily life we acknowledge that we are diminished by interacting only within our own group and we are enlarged as we make space for *the other*.

In daily life, difference is a gift from God. Just as we are richer and wiser in a multicultural context, we are also spiritually richer and wiser when we interact in a multifaith context. Our witness, being dialogical in nature, is always open to both sharing (in word and deed) and receiving (in word and deed).

Conclusion

Bosch's famous phrase *bold humility* has been a helpful one as I've explored what Christian witness means in a multifaith context. It has helped me to argue that the tension he identified between being missionary and being dialogical is not a deep one after all.

If we acknowledge our limited understanding and live open to learning more about God and the activity of God's Spirit in the world, it is part of our very witness to listen as well as to talk, to learn as well to share, to explore faith in a spirit of mutuality with believers in other religions.

I explored three reasons for holding that the Christian call to mission is unitary rather than twofold and to be held in tension. The Christian call to mission is a call to witness, and this term embodies both the boldness and humility that Bosch refers to. A critical realist view of truth allows for both conviction and openness—again, boldness and humility—without significant tension.

And witnessing through the dialogue of religious experience, action for justice, and daily life is a holistic expression of love for neighbour in which it is natural for us to open out to *the other* at the same time as we witness to our own faith ■

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News & Notices

AAMS CONFERENCE 2008

Following the successful Australian Missiology Conference in September 2005, the new Australian Association for Mission Studies (AAMS) is planning a second conference, to be held in July or September 2008 in Canberra. Details will be published in this journal as they become available.

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IAMS CONFERENCE 2008

The International Association for Mission Studies (IAMS) will gather for its 12th assembly in Budapest, Hungary, from 16 to 22 August 2008. The theme will be: *Human Identity and the Gospel of Reconciliation: Agenda for Missionary Churches in the Twenty-First Century*. Abstracts for proposed papers are due by 31 March 2007.

For further information, see www.missionstudies.org

EDINBURGH CONFERENCE 2010

An international conference on world mission will be held in Edinburgh exactly 100 years after the International Missionary Conference in Edinburgh in 1910, which many say marked the beginning of the ecumenical movement of the 20th century. The dates will be 14 to 23 June 2010.

There is a series of annual gatherings leading up to Edinburgh 2010, the next being a seminar on Christian unity to be held at New College, Edinburgh, on 27 and 28 April 2007.

For information on Edinburgh 2010 and associated events, see: www.towards2010.org.uk

INTERNATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF CATHOLIC MISSIOLOGISTS CONFERENCE 2007

(IACM) will hold its Third Assembly in Pieniezno, Poland, 28 August to 2 September 2007.

The theme is: *The word of God grew and multiplied (Acts 12:24): Sharing the Good News in the interaction of cultures*. Participants should arrive in Warsaw by August 27th at the latest and will be bussed to Pieniezno.

For further information contact the secretary of the association, Bill LaRousse, at: wlarousse@Maryknoll.org