

DIALOGUE AND WITNESS IN A MULTIFAITH WORLD

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 If I want to get a lively missiological 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, want to feel their way to a response in between mission as either simply dialogue or simply proclamation.

Conviction and Openness

 I would like to suggest 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.

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 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 not incompatible — they can go together. I'll say more about these two later.

 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 to other people in which we are open and welcoming to those who are different from us, those we might call “the

¹ Paul Knitter, *No other name?* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1985), 22.

² As, for example, in Alan Race, *Christians and religious pluralism: Patterns in the Christian theology of religions* (London: SCM, 1983); Gavin D'Costa, *Theology and religious pluralism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986); and David J Bosch, *Transforming mission: Paradigm shifts in theology of mission* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1991), 478-483. The framework is discussed in detail in Perry Schmidt-Leukel, 'Exclusivism, inclusivism, pluralism: The tripolar typology — Clarified and reaffirmed', in *The myth of religious superiority: A multifaith exploration*, ed. Paul F Knitter (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2005), 13-27, and (using different labels) in Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *An introduction to the theology of religions: Biblical, historical, and contemporary perspectives* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 3432-355.

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 a deep tension in this position. In his book *Transforming Mission* he ends his wonderful short summary of various theologies of religion by asking the question: "How do we maintain the tension between being both missionary and dialogical?"⁵ 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 famous phrases, he says our witness in a multifaith context needs to occur in bold humility, or humble boldness.⁶

🍎 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 that Bosch refers to. 🍎 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.

🍎 1. 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".

³ Frederick R Wilson, ed. *The San Antonio Report: Your will be done: Mission in Christ's way* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1990), #1.26, p. 32. See also World Council of Churches Central Committee, 'Ecumenical affirmation: Mission and evangelism', in *New directions in mission and evangelization, 1: Basic statements, 1974-1991*, eds. James A Scherer and Stephen B Bevans (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1992), #6 and #43, pp. 39 and 50.

⁴ Wilson, ed. *The San Antonio Report*, #1.29, p. 33.

⁵ Bosch, *Transforming mission*, 488.

⁶ Bosch, *Transforming mission*, 489.

⁷ Among many New Testament passages which see Christians as called to be witnesses to Christ are Lk 24:48, Jn 3:28, Acts 1:8, 1:22, 2:32, 3:15, 5:32, 10:39, 10:41, 13:31, 22:15, 23:11, Rom 8:16, Heb 12:1, 1 Pet 5:1, Rev 17:6.

⁸ Thorwald Lorenzen, *Resurrection and discipleship: Interpretive models, biblical reflections, theological consequences* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1996), 209.

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 evident now.⁹ 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. 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 witnesses” was not just a call to give witness verbally.¹⁰ I will return to this later when considering witness in all of life.

🍏 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

🍏 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.

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 enter dialogue without clear 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’ve 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

🍏🍏 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.

⁹ Lorenzen, *Resurrection and discipleship*, 211.

¹⁰ Darrell L Guder, *Be my witnesses: The church’s mission, message, and messengers* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), 91.

¹¹ Darrell L Guder, *The continuing conversion of the church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 55.

¹² Guder, *The continuing conversion of the church*, 55.

¹³ Available at <www.rosslangmead.com>.

Humility is particularly central to interfaith dialogue, where the deepest mysteries of life are being explored together. It's appropriate to have a certain openness, provisionality, respect, listening and eagerness to learn.

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

So the first reason there isn't a deep tension for me in the call to both Christian mission and a dialogical approach to those of other faiths is that our call is to bear witness in conviction and openness.

2. Seeking Truth in Dialogue: "Through a Glass Darkly"

🍎 The second reason 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 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. I disagree. When I began postgraduate religious studies at Lancaster in the UK 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 follow many gods and some follow no god at all. Some religious worldviews aim to escape this world 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. All religious views are deeply embedded in a complex set of myths, rituals, sacred scriptures, social structures and religious ethics. We can't extract "pure religious beliefs" from their existence in a cultural setting.

🍎 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?"

¹⁴ Lesslie Newbigin, *The gospel in a pluralist society* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 177-178.

¹⁵ Mohandas K Gandhi, *Hind Swaraj* (Ahmedabad: Navajivan Publishing House, 1938), 36.

To use Paul Knitter's words, "religions not only say they are different; they really, deeply, and forevermore are different".¹⁶

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". Theoretical objects are seen as actual physical entities. This was the dominant philosophical and scientific view of truth until the nineteenth century.¹⁷ In Christian theology the corresponding view is literalism or fundamentalism. In this framework, we believe we have pretty good access to the truth and those who disagree with us are plainly wrong.

 Nonrealism, on the other hand, sees the "world out there" as inaccessible. It says we construct our own reality. In religion nonrealists see religious language as a product of our own imagination, shaping God out of our own desires. 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, or refer to an unknowable transcendent reality.¹⁸

 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 as provisional. As N T Wright puts it, 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, although we don't have direct access to reality in order to decide between them.¹⁹ Each faith perspective is likely to contain some truth as well as error.

 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. We must even stake our lives on one form of faith or other, and we do.

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.

Because 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

¹⁶ Paul F Knitter, *Introducing theologies of religion* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2002), 192.

¹⁷ Ian G Barbour, *Myths, models and paradigms: The nature of scientific and religious language* (London: SCM, 1974), 34.

¹⁸ Barbour, *Myths, models and paradigms*, 36.

¹⁹ N T Wright, *The New Testament and the people of God* (London: SPCK, 1992), 36.

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 (Lk 10:30–7). We can almost hear the disciples going, "Did he say the Samaritans?".

🍎 This open stance, in which we recognise that we don't have the whole truth, is also sometimes labelled "inclusivism". Classically this position holds that the partial truth in other religions finds its fulfilment in Jesus Christ.²⁰

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, in fact, it is possible for critical realism to be found in each of the three commonly identified stances towards other faiths, exclusivism, inclusivism and 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.²¹ The World Evangelical Fellowship also left the question open at its 1992 conference.²² A combination of conviction and openness is to be found in these views, where Jesus is preached as the only way but a certain agnosticism about the ways of God can be seen.

🍎 Pluralism also often takes a critical realist approach. John Hick certainly claims to be a critical realist, even if he sees religious belief as mostly shaped by human construction with only some shaping by a transcendent reality.²³

Whatever the stance towards non-Christian religions, a critical realist position on truth leads to a commitment to dialogue because we know only in part. 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 listen and learn, even to the point of revising what we believe.

So for me there is no tension between conviction and openness, first, because we are called to be witnesses and, second, because of my critical realist approach to truth.

3. 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; that is, it is one thing involving many dimensions in harmony. 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.

²⁰ J N Farquhar, *The crown of Hinduism* (London: Oxford University Press, 1913).

²¹ D Edwards and John Stott, *Essentials: A liberal-evangelical dialogue* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1988), 327-328. See also Clark Pinnock, *A wideness in God's mercy: The finality of Jesus Christ in a world of religions* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992); and Newbigin, *The gospel in a pluralist society*, 182-183.

²² Bruce J Nicholls, ed. *The unique Christ in our pluralist world* (Carlisle, UK: Paternoster, 1994), 15.

²³ John Hick, *Disputed questions in theology and philosophy of religion* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993), 3-7; John Hick, 'Jesus and the world religions', in *The myth of God incarnate*, ed. John Hick (London: SCM, 1977), 178.

🍊 This all-of-life witness can take place in various dimensions of dialogue. Let's take four such dimensions. We can pursue dialogue in theological exchange, religious experience, action and daily life.²⁴

🍊 *Theological exchange*

Much of my discussion so far has focused 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. It is a dialogue of the heart.

🍊 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.²⁵

🍊 *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

²⁴ Pontifical Secretariat for Non-Christians, *Dialogue and mission: The attitude of the church to the followers of other religions: Reflections and orientations on dialogue and mission* (Rome: The Vatican, 1984). See also Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue and Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples, *Dialogue and proclamation* (Rome: The Vatican, 1991), #42, which is also found in James A Scherer and Stephen B Bevans, eds. *New directions in mission and evangelization, 1: Basic statements, 1974-1991* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1992), 187.

²⁵ John Drane, *Do Christians know how to be spiritual? The rise of new spirituality and the mission of the church* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2005)

know peace between religions.²⁶ There are many local initiatives where interfaith cooperation occurs in common resistance to social evils.

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”, Hindus 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 TV 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.

🍏 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. 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 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”. 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).

²⁶ Hans Küng, *Global Responsibility: In search of a new world ethic* (London: SCM, 1991); Paul Knitter, *One earth, many religions: Multifaith dialogue and global responsibility* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1995).

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 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've 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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