

PARADIGM SHIFTS IN MISSIOLOGY
3. FROM SUPERIORITY TO
MISSION AS PROPHETIC DIALOGUE

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1. INTRODUCTION

In our first two lectures we have considered two paradigm shifts. The first was from Christendom thinking to thinking in a missional way. The second was from a framework of saving souls to a holistic view of mission.

Today we're going to consider a third paradigm shift, from having a sense of superiority in mission to engaging with others in prophetic dialogue.

First let me define the two main words.

To be '*prophetic*' is to speak God's word into our context. It is what the biblical prophets did. For Christians it is to proclaim the Good News into our specific situation. It is to challenge our society.

To be in *dialogue* is to engage with others in respectful conversation with the desire to learn and to share. When we are in dialogue we are more open than usual. We listen and learn better than usual. But we also share what we believe, in respect and humility. Dialogue can only occur between people who consider the other person an equal. A dialogical conversation is marked by courtesy and patience, never by aggression or arrogance. Dialogue is a form of love.

The term '*prophetic dialogue*' has been introduced into missiology recently by Stephen Bevans SVD and Roger Schroeder SVD, two Catholic missiologists who are members of the order called the Divine Word Missionaries and who teach at the Catholic Theological Union in Chicago, one of the leading centres of missiology in the world.¹ At the end of a big book on missiology called *Constants in Context*, they call their model for mission 'prophetic dialogue'.² They recently published a shorter and simpler book with the title *Prophetic Dialogue: Reflections on Christian Mission Today*.³

In simple terms prophetic dialogue means speaking boldly and yet humbly. It means that Christians can share the Good News of Jesus—being prophetic, speaking God's Word to those around us—but that we need to do it in humble conversation with other people, other cultures and other faiths. We do not 'drop God's Word on others' as if we are superior, or better than others. We do not fool ourselves that we have all

¹ The 'SVD' after their names stands for 'Societas Verbi Divini', Latin for 'Society of the Divine Word'.

² Stephen B Bevans and Roger P Schroeder, *Constants in context: A theology of mission for today* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2004), 348–395.

³ Stephen B Bevans and Roger P Schroeder, *Prophetic dialogue: Reflections on Christian mission today* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2011).

the light and truth and that we are shining it into total darkness. We share what we know, aware that we do not know it all. We share in the hope that, in our encounter with others, God will become better known by both them and us.

Let's consider first the old way of thinking where Christians on mission thought they were superior, or better.

2. THE PARADIGM OF SUPERIORITY

a. The Western Sense of Superiority

When western missionaries went to Africa, South America and Asia they tended to think that they were more civilised. It is true that Europeans were good at sailing around the world. It's true that they had discovered many things due to western science. It's true that their armies were strong, especially with gunpowder making guns possible. And it's true that Europe has a rich tradition in art, music, politics and philosophy.

But Europeans were in danger of being arrogant. They saw the rest of the world as 'uncivilised'. They called others 'savages' or 'natives'. They usually didn't understand the rich culture of the countries they conquered. This is certainly true of Australia, where the British settlers thought that the Australian Aborigines were half-animals, stupid, and lacking culture. We have come to realise how rich the culture of Indigenous Australians is.

It was also true of the British coming to India and Burma. They thought the Burmese were interesting but odd. Words such as 'oriental', 'exotic' and 'inscrutable' were used, showing that the British felt superior and thought they were bringing culture to the East. How wrong they were.

Western missionaries were people of their time. They often felt the same. They were bringing the gospel to the 'heathen'. They brought the light to the darkness. They would 'civilise' as well as 'Christianise'.

David Bosch says that the missionaries often followed a 'clean slate' (in Latin, *tabula rasa*) approach. This means wiping the past clean, like erasing everything on a blackboard. This meant that 'people could become Christian only if their cultural-religious practices were first destroyed, sometimes but not always by force'.⁴

There was a double sense of superiority here, both religious and cultural. To accept Christianity was to erase all past religious beliefs and traditions and start again. And to become Christian was, in effect, to become western, because it was western Christianity that was being proclaimed. We see this in the music, the buildings, the forms of worship. We see it in the fact that western denominations were set up in the East, such as the Baptists, Methodists, Anglicans, Roman Catholics and so on.

⁴ David J Bosch, *Transforming mission: Paradigm shifts in theology of mission* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1991), 178.

b. The Danger of Superiority in Conservative Evangelicalism

These days most Christians working in other cultures are more respectful of culture. But some Christians are still not respectful of other religions. There is a danger of feeling superior because we have the truth and others are living in darkness. This danger can be seen most amongst fundamentalists or conservative evangelicals. The reason it is a danger is that the picture becomes so 'black and white'. We can slip into thinking in terms of 'totally true' and 'totally false'. We can believe that anyone who is not a Christian is an evil person, whereas anyone who is a Christian is a good person.

I was brought up in a family that thought like this. We didn't mix much with non-Christians. We didn't go to the movies or the football. By the time I grew up I even wondered how non-Christian parents could love their children properly if they didn't know the God who is love. This was a very superior feeling, and now I realise I was wrong.

In the theology of religions, the position that we live in complete light while other religions are in complete darkness is called 'exclusivism'. It means that the truth is exclusive to Christianity, or found only on Christ. It holds that other religions are wrong and are under the influence of Satan. They live in deep darkness and their believers are spiritually lost.

The paradigm of prophetic dialogue still speaks of the truth of the way of Jesus. but it makes room for the truth found in other religions. There are ways of affirming truth without taking a superior stance. Let's look at this possibility in more detail.

Question:

Can you think of any Burmese ways (or Karen ways or Chin ways, etc.) that western missionaries condemned or disapproved of in the past, but which your church is rediscovering today?

3. THE PARADIGM OF PROPHETIC DIALOGUE

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'.⁵ I've already mentioned exclusivism, the view that truth is found

⁵ 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 Bosch, *Transforming mission*, 478-483. The framework is discussed in detail in Perry Schmidt-Leukel, 'Exclusivism,

exclusively in Jesus Christ. At the other end of the spectrum is pluralism, the belief that there are various paths to God, none better than the other. Prophetic dialogue is a form of the middle approach, that of inclusivism—a belief that God is revealed definitively but not exhaustively in Jesus.

Let me explain these two words ‘definitively’ and ‘exhaustively’. To say that Jesus ‘definitively’ reveals God is to say that we believe that God is ‘Jesus-shaped’—Jesus defines God for us. But to go on and say that God is not ‘exhaustively’ revealed in Jesus is to say that there is more to know about God than Jesus shows us. We only know in part. God is infinite mystery. God cannot be put in a box.

So in a multifaith context the appropriate Christian stance towards the world is one of both conviction and openness. We have conviction, that is, strong belief. But we are open to learning more. These two attitudes can go together.

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’.⁶ The delegates at this conference felt that there was an unresolved tension in this statement.⁷

David Bosch embraced this tension. In his book *Transforming Mission* he asks the question: ‘How do we maintain the tension between being both missionary and dialogical? In one of Bosch’s famous phrases, he says our witness in a multifaith context needs to occur in bold humility, or humble boldness.⁸ You might think we need to be one or the other—bold and confident, *or* humble and open. But the two go together.

I also believe that boldness and humility go together. There are three reasons for holding them together as one approach.

- 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.

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), 343-355.

⁶ 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.

⁷ Wilson, ed. *The San Antonio Report*, #1.29, p. 33.

⁸ Bosch, *Transforming mission*, 489.

4. 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.⁹ 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'.¹⁰ 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'.

The role of the witness is a simple and modest one, to *report what they know*. The witness does not defend an idea or promote 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 to what happened in the past or is evident now.¹¹ 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' (*martureo* = to 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.¹² I will return to this later when considering witness in all of life.

We bear witness in the context of *a new community*. 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.¹³ So Christian witness defines 'the entire Christian life, both individually and corporately'.¹⁴

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 go beyond what they saw or heard they are soon reminded to stick to what they know.

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

⁹ 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, 10:41, 13:31, 22:15, 23:11, Rom 8:16, Heb 12:1, 1 Pet 5:1, Rev 17:6.

¹⁰ Thorwald Lorenzen, *Resurrection and discipleship: Interpretive models, biblical reflections, theological consequences* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1996), 209.

¹¹ Lorenzen, *Resurrection and discipleship*, 211.

¹² Darrell L Guder, *Be my witnesses: The church's mission, message, and messengers* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), 91.

¹³ Darrell L Guder, *The continuing conversion of the church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 55.

¹⁴ Guder, *The continuing conversion of the church*, 55.

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 ...¹⁵

Let's 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.

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

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.

So the first reason to engage in prophetic dialogue is that our call is to bear witness in conviction and openness.

5. SEEKING TRUTH IN DIALOGUE: 'THROUGH A GLASS DARKLY'

The second reason stems from my view of truth.

a. 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 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 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

¹⁵ Available at <www.rosslangmead.com>.

differences between religious visions 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 I believe 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?'¹⁶ 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?'

To use Paul Knitter's words, 'religions not only say they are different; they really, deeply, and forevermore are different'.¹⁷

b. We Know in Part

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.

In my understanding of truth, we can know what is 'out there', but we also shape what is out there with our imagination. Truth is both objective and subjective. We have an active role in imagining it, so we should take our constructions of reality as only rough, partly-true and partly-imagined.¹⁸ This is so for religious belief as well. Each faith perspective is likely to contain some truth as well as error.

As Paul says 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).

¹⁶ Mohandas K Gandhi, *Hind Swaraj* (Ahmedabad: Navajivan Publishing House, 1938), 36.

¹⁷ Paul F Knitter, *Introducing theologies of religion* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2002), 192.

¹⁸ N T Wright, *The New Testament and the people of God* (London: SPCK, 1992), 36.

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.

c. **Dialogical Engagement**

If we only know in part, Christian witness should be accompanied by an openness to learn about God from those who differ from us. In other words, dialogue is a way of life for Christians.

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 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.¹⁹ But there are a variety of Christian inclusivisms. Karl Rahner called certain believers in other religions who live by grace 'anonymous Christians'.²⁰ 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.²¹

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. Bold humility is another way of describing prophetic dialogue.

So for me there is no tension between conviction and openness, first, because we are called to be witnesses and, second, because we know only in part.

6. **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.

¹⁹ J N Farquhar, *The crown of Hinduism* (London: Oxford University Press, 1913).

²⁰ Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian faith* (New York: Seabury, 1978), 178-203.

²¹ Gavin D'Costa, *The meeting of the religions and the trinity* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2000), 122.

Several dimensions of this all-of-life witness are suggested in the 1984 Catholic document 'Dialogue and Mission', which calls us to pursue dialogue in theological exchange, religious experience, action and daily life.²² I've changed the order and listed them in rough order from the rare to the everyday.

a. 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.

b. 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.

Our spiritual experience can open 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.²³

c. 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

²² 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.

²³ 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)

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.²⁴ 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 looked likely 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 divisions 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.

d. 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. 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.

²⁴ 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).

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).

Before I finish I'd like to touch specifically on Buddhist-Christian dialogue, because I imagine that is the most likely interfaith dialogue you are likely to engage in here in Myanmar.

I'm not an expert on dialogue with Buddhists, so I can't help you much in this area. But here are a few suggestions that may be helpful:

i. Remember, the Motive Is Love and Desire to Understand

The main focus of dialogue is sharing and learning, not evangelism. It may lead to such opportunities or develop into a telling of the gospel, but to listen and learn is an important aim in itself. It may grow out of a simple desire to be friends with a Buddhist person.

ii. Learn Something about Buddhism First.

Read their scriptures. Find out what makes them tick. Ask around to see how Buddhism is practised, not just what scholars say about Buddha's teachings. Just because we live next door to people it doesn't mean we understand them.

iii. Affirm What You Can in Buddhism.

Seeking common ground is a good first step in dialogue. For example, I find their teaching on compassion inspiring at times, even though it differs a bit from Christian love. Another example is that their emphasis on wisdom is rather similar to the Jewish idea of Sophia, a name for God in the Wisdom literature in the Old Testament. Also, there are similarities between the Buddhist doctrine of *anatta* ('no self') and the Christian idea of losing your soul to gain life.²⁵

iv. Respect Their Practice.

Many Christians have discovered that meditation is a valuable spiritual discipline, helping to bring mind and body into harmony. Our religious

²⁵ La Seng Dingrin, 'Christian understandings of the Buddhist doctrine of Anatta (no-self)', *Rays: MIT Journal of Theology* 3 (2002): 89-106.

tradition has not always given us a method for seeking peace of mind, and we can respect a religious tradition that has helped people over centuries.

v. Tell the Story of the Wise Man Jesus Who Helps Us Reach Bliss

Can we tell the gospel story using words that connect better with the Buddhist world view? Perhaps nirvana (or *nibbana*) is different from heaven, but Jesus was very much the wandering wise man with connections beyond the earth. His enlightenment and compassion opens the way for us much as Buddha's does for Buddhists.

vi. Do It

I once thought that Christians in Asian countries, surrounded with the world's religions, would find it easy to be in dialogue. I now realise that the need to survive may mean that religious communities talk within their group but not much between their groups. Indian missiologist M M Thomas once said that although you would expect a lot of inter-religious dialogue in India, it doesn't often happen. He wrote, 'Hindu, Muslim and Christian communities living in the same region are largely isolated from each other without a common language of discourse at spiritual depth.'²⁶ So the task is ahead of us. We actually need to get out there and do it.

7. CONCLUSION

Bosch's famous phrase 'bold humility' has been a helpful one as I've explored the new missiological paradigm of prophetic dialogue.

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. This is the meaning of prophetic dialogue.

I've explored three reasons for holding that the Christian call to mission is one rather than twofold and 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—again, boldness and humility—without significant tension. And third, 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.

²⁶ M M Thomas, 'Christology and pluralistic consciousness', *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 10.3 (July 1986), available at <http://www.internationalbulletin.org/files/html/1986-03-contents.html>, 106