Chapter 2

Dialogue, Proclamation and the Growth of the Church in Religiously Diverse Societies

David Marshall with William Glass

Defining a Problem: Religious Confidence in the Universe of Faiths

In the context of the increasing religious diversity of many western societies, the idea that Christians should proclaim the Gospel confidently to all people, and that they should hope and pray for the growth of the Church by the incorporation of new disciples from people of every background, including every religion, strikes many – including many Christians – as old-fashioned, arrogant and divisive. This essay addresses the tensions that exist among Christians over this issue. I shall argue that Christian engagement with religiously diverse societies should be marked both by the humility associated with dialogue and practical co-operation with all people, and also by the confidence associated with proclamation and the making of new Christian disciples.

First, however, a look at examples of how Muslims speak about the growth of the Muslim community in western societies helps to put current discussion of Christian thought and practice into a wider perspective. In May 2012 Abdal Hakim Murad (also known as Tim Winter), a lecturer in Islamic Studies at Cambridge University and one of Britain's best known Muslim scholars and leaders, published an article in *The Times* entitled 'Why the British are flocking to Islam's call'. Drawing on a report produced at Swansea University, Murad writes: 'There have been, it seems, a hundred thousand British conversions to Islam in the past decade, compared with sixty thousand in the 1990s. Despite the shock and horror of the 9/11 atrocities, Islam is thriving.'¹ This in fact appears to misrepresent the Swansea report, which does point to significant

¹ Available at <http://www.thetimes.co.uk/tto/opinion/columnists/article3401700.ece> accessed 18 December 2014.

growth, but on nothing like the scale Murad suggests.² For present purposes, however, it is not the accuracy or otherwise of Murad's account that matters. What is of interest is the fact that one of Britain's most respected Muslim leaders, writing in a national newspaper, displays no embarrassment or hesitancy at all in speaking of the conversion to Islam of large numbers of British citizens, most of whom one can assume were of at least nominally Christian background. The idea that there is any need to defend the growth of the Muslim community in a religiously diverse society seems not even to have occurred to Murad. And it should be stressed that he is not an untypical extremist on the margins of his community; on the contrary, he has regularly been involved in dialogues convened by the Archbishop of Canterbury; he addressed the Pope on behalf of Muslims involved in dialogue with the Vatican; he speaks regularly on BBC Radio's *Thought for the Day*.

Many other examples of the ease with which Muslims in the West speak of the growth of their community through conversion could be given. Two brief illustrations will suffice. At an interfaith panel discussion on the topic 'What do our scriptures say about "the other"?' held in February 2013 at Duke University Divinity School in the USA, Imam Abdullah Antepli, Muslim chaplain to the University, mentioned how Duke students regularly visit him to discuss their interest in converting to Islam. Imam Antepli, it should be stressed, is highly popular with his Christian colleagues and is noted for his commitment to dialogue with Christians and other non-Muslims. In a second example, on 14 May 2013 an email invitation from the Centre for Islamic Studies at the School of Oriental and African Studies, London University, advertised the launch of a report, co-sponsored by Cambridge University Press and the New Muslims Project at the Markfield Institute, entitled *Narratives of Conversions to Islam in Britain, Female Perspectives*. The launch was to be chaired by Kristiane Backer, a high-profile convert to Islam, and one of the speakers was to be Muhammad Abdel Haleem, a leading Muslim scholar and another regular contributor to Christian-Muslim dialogues.

The purpose in citing these examples is not to raise concerns or warn about conversion to Islam, but rather to show that, in the west, Muslims appear to be much more at ease than Christians in talking openly about the growth of

² The report states that there may be as many as 100,000 British converts to Islam in total, but it fixes the number of converts within the last decade at 40,000 *at most* ('there may have been between 30,000 and 40,000 conversions in total since 2001'). See M. Brice, *A Minority Within a Minority: A Report on Converts to Islam in the United Kingdom*, available at <http://faith-matters.org/images/stories/fm-reports/a-minority-within-a-minority-a-report-on-converts-to-islam-in-the-uk.pdf> accessed 18 December 2014.

their community, and do not appear to expect opposition or criticism for doing so. It is hard to imagine a Muslim publication on the growth of the Muslim community including a piece parallel to this essay, because there is no noticeable debate among Muslims about the desirability of non-Muslims embracing Islam. It should also be stressed that although we have dwelt at some length on conversion to Islam, the same essential point could be made with respect to very different worldviews. The robust proclamation of atheism by public figures such as Richard Dawkins indicates that confident, 'conversionist' proclamation of competing worldviews is a widespread, proper, and generally accepted feature of our culture. What is all the more striking, in light of such unabashed confidence among Muslims, atheists, and others is the contrasting reserve, anxiety, and sometimes polarised debate among Christians about the proclamation of their faith among non-Christians. We turn now to consider some reasons for this situation.

The Modern Turn Away from Proclamation

Major shifts in Christian thinking about mission in relation to adherents to other religions have taken place in the last few decades. John Hick was one of the most influential Christian theologians calling for a transition, which he compared to the Copernican revolution, from the view of Christianity as the one absolute truth and unique way of salvation, to which all people should be converted, to a view of Christianity as one among many equally valid and efficacious paths to God. Although Hick's vision for the reconstruction of Christian theology has probably been embraced in full by only a small minority of leading Christian theologians today, it is worth rehearsing his arguments because, even among those who have not accepted his radical approach in its totality, the questions he raised have had a pervasive influence.

In his essay 'The Non-Absoluteness of Christianity', Hick explains why many Christians, like himself, feel the need to move away from traditional Christian thinking and embrace the revolution for which he argues. Firstly, Christians have gained greater and more accurate knowledge about other faiths and, often, with that knowledge has come greater respect. 'The immense spiritual riches of Judaism and Islam, of Hinduism, Buddhism and Sikhism, of Confucianism and Taoism and African primal religion, have become better known in the West

and have tended to erode the plausibility of the old Christian exclusivism.³ Secondly, as Christians come to know other faiths better they also become more aware of the quality of life of the adherents of other faiths. As they do so, fair-minded Christians tend to acknowledge the 'observable facts' that the fruits of individual and social transformation are just as apparent in other faith communities as among Christians. Thus, for Hick, there are 'no good grounds for maintaining that Christianity has produced or is producing more saints'⁴ and, on a wider canvass, 'it seems impossible to make the global judgment that any one religious tradition has contributed more good or less evil, or a more favorable balance of good over evil, than the others ... as vast complex totalities, the world traditions seem to be more or less on a par with each other'.⁵ A third point concerns the relationship between Christianity and colonialism in recent history. Awareness of this connection has led many Christians to feel that the claim that Christianity is uniquely true is inevitably bound up with an attitude that seeks to dominate and exploit the world politically, economically and culturally.⁶ Finally, a particular example of how the sense of Christian superiority can lead to literally murderous results lies in a supersessionist Christian view of Judaism. For Hick, along with many other Christians, this view inevitably led to an attitude of contempt towards Jews which at the very least eased the way towards anti-Semitism, persecution and ultimately the Holocaust.⁷

Hick's arguments reflect ideas that are widespread in western culture and have deeply influenced Christian discourse and practice. One of the main practical outcomes of the influence of such thinking has been a radical decline in the sense that it is important or even appropriate for Christians to proclaim their faith to members of other religions and desire their conversion; dialogue and co-operation are instead emphasised as the most suitable approaches. This outlook is expressed by Stanley Samartha, an Indian theologian who became the first Director of the World Council of Churches' sub-unit on Dialogue with People of Living Faiths and Ideologies:

... when alternative ways of salvation have provided meaning and purpose for millions of persons in other cultures for more than two or three thousand years, to claim that the Judaeo-Christian-Western tradition has the only answer to all

³ J. Hick, 'The Non-Absoluteness of Christianity', in J. Hick and P. Knitter (eds), *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness* (London: SCM, 1987): 17.

⁴ Ibid: 23.

⁵ Ibid: 30.

⁶ Ibid: 18–20.

⁷ Ibid: 18, referring to the essay by Ruether in the same volume.

problems in all places and for all persons in the world is presumptuous, if not incredible. This is not to deny the validity of the Christian experience of salvation in Jesus Christ, but it is to deny the exclusive claims made for it by Christians.⁸

Before coming to the main proposal of this essay, in support of a Christian position that can be described as both/and in relation to dialogue and proclamation, we shall first consider a few points in critique of Hick's position. In an essay of this length, it is not possible to engage all of Hick's arguments noted above. In particular, it will not be possible to discuss his third and fourth points mentioned earlier, concerning colonialism and Christian views of Judaism, though both (and especially the latter) would need serious attention in a more extended essay.⁹ The critique offered here, which will focus on those parts of his argument most directly related to the relationship of dialogue to proclamation, can be summed up in Gavin D'Costa's observation of a principal theological problem inherent in Hick's pluralism. Hick stresses 'the axiom of the universal and salvific will of God'.¹⁰ Additionally, although Hick argues that both theistic and non-theistic religions are equally salvific in value, 'he holds that our final (and therefore presumably true) relation to the "Real" is one of eternal loving communion with a personalist, all-loving God'.¹¹ That is, although Hick

⁸ S. Samartha, quoted in *The Mystery of Salvation: The Story of God's Gift: A Report by the Doctrine Commission of the General Synod of the Church of England* (London: Church House Publishing, 1995): 155–6.

⁹ For a different approach to Hick's on colonialism and Christianity, see B. Stanley, *The Bible and the Flag: Protestant Missions and British Imperialism in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (Leicester: Apollos, 1990). On Christian approaches to Judaism within the Church of England, a helpful brief overview is offered in *Sharing One Hope? The Church of England and Christian-Jewish Relations: A Contribution to a Continuing Debate* (London: Church House Publishing, 2001). Of particular relevance to the concerns of this essay are the discussion of different views on Christian mission and Jewish people (25–7). For a recent discussion of Anglican approaches, see M. Ipgrave, 'Remembering the Covenant: Judaism in an Anglican Theology of Interfaith Relations', *Anglican Theological Review*, 96.1 (2014): 39–56. See also P. Morrow, 'Christian Mission and Jewish Christian Particularities', in *Jews and Christians: Perspectives on Mission*: 23–45, available at <http://www.woolf.cam.ac.uk/uploads/Woolf%20Mission%202011%20print%20version.pdf> accessed 18 December 2014. For two contrasting Roman Catholic views on the question of Christian mission and Judaism, see the essays by G. D'Costa and J. Pawlikowski in the September 2012 edition of *Theological Studies* (*Theological Studies*, 73 no 3 S 2012: 590–613; 629–40).

¹⁰ G. D'Costa, *Theology and Religious Pluralism: The Challenge of Other Religions*, Signposts in Theology Series (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1986): 45.

¹¹ Ibid: 44. He quotes J. Hick's own admission that his post-Copernican conception of God at the end of the universe of faiths 'requires a "conception of God as personal Lord,

intends to relativise traditional Christian claims about Jesus as the determinative revelation of God, he at the same time implicitly maintains a picture of God that is essentially as revealed in Jesus. Yet it is not at all clear why this should be so. The religions of the world, taken on their own terms, do not all believe in a personalist God who seeks loving communion with all human beings. The Christian understanding of God looks rather unlike what some religious traditions speak of when they use the word 'God'. Hick at one moment tells us that we can't claim that Christianity gives us a uniquely true account of God and at the same time proposes a basically Christian understanding of God, placing that God as the divinity secretly at the heart of the world's religious traditions.

A related point concerns Hick's insistence that, despite the theological differences between the world's religions, there is at the ethical level a convergence and essential parity between them. A significant challenge to this view is found in the work of Charles Taylor, who disputes the idea that radically different claims about the nature of the world can produce basically similar ethical traditions. The tie between those claims and the ethics they inspire is much tighter; thus, religious beliefs should be understood as 'lived conditions, not just theories or sets of beliefs subscribed to'.¹² As Taylor observes, 'a moral order is more than just a set of norms; ... it also contains what we might call an "ontic" component, identifying features of the world which make the norms realizable'.¹³ Accounts of the virtues depend on what a people holds to be most true about the world in which that people lives. By 'lived conditions', Taylor refers to a complex co-inherence of the way a culture lives, what it thinks it knows about the world, and how it thinks it can know. There simply is no way to explain the ethical traditions of Muslims, Christians, or anyone else without reference to the particularities of what they believe to be true about the world. Any attempt to do so requires an externally imposed vision of virtue that papers over particularities in community practices, and reflects its own bias as to which behaviours 'count' as individual and social transformation.

Hick's approach in fact presupposes the long history of Christian engagement with the world, and that history leaves its unmistakeable mark on his ethics. When he equates Christian *agape* with the negation of 'the present false ego' of Hinduism or the 'egoless openness'¹⁴ of Buddhism and assumes the equality

distinct from his creation", for only so can that God at the end of the universe be 'in loving communion with all humankind'.

¹² C. Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007): 8.

¹³ C. Taylor, 'On Social Imaginary', available at <http://blog.lib.umn.edu/swiss/archive/Taylor.pdf> accessed 18 December 2014.

¹⁴ J. Hick, *Problems of Religious Pluralism* (London: Macmillan, 1985): 70.

of these Hindu and Buddhist virtues with a commitment to liberating 'social structures', it appears that they are being uprooted from their own specific contexts and Christianised by Hick's assumption that they naturally lead to the political action commended by Christian liberation theology.¹⁵ Nor is this surprising, because Hick is heir to a culture that values people who simply were not valued before Christianity emerged in the ancient world.¹⁶ Christians, as David Bentley Hart argues, scandalised Greco-Roman sensibilities precisely because they 'were willing to grant full humanity to persons of every class and condition, of either sex'.¹⁷ This willingness arose from the conviction that, in Christ, God had redeemed and dignified all human beings.

Thus, Hick's argument that there is no real difference between the distinct contributions made by the world's different religions to the ethics of its peoples suffers from the same internal contradictions as his theology. If Taylor is right, there is no way to understand the virtues of any given faith tradition except by the adoption of that tradition's dogmas – which is to say, their own way of seeing and being in the world. Likewise, to engage a religious tradition wisely requires attention to its own particulars: its own answers to its own questions, within its own universe of meaning. Questions of likeness and difference must not be assumed on the basis of some metaphysical *a priori*. It might be thought that Hick's pluralist theology offers the best possible basis for inter-religious dialogue, but in fact his prior convictions about what religions *are* and what they are *for*, seriously weaken the possibility of respectful and attentive engagement with another religious tradition in all its difference from one's own.

¹⁵ Ibid: 79.

¹⁶ This is what D.B. Hart means by calling western culture a 'culture that, in a sense, sprang from Peter's tears'. Hart argues that Christianity is largely responsible for creating a culture in which the tears of Peter, a peasant who denies his Master and regrets it afterwards, have any real sense of *pathos*. D.B. Hart, *Atheist Delusions: The Christian Revolution and its Fashionable Enemies* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009): 167.

¹⁷ Ibid: 169. Further in this vein, Hart writes: 'It would not even be implausible to argue that our very ability to speak of "persons" as we do is a consequence of the revolution in moral sensibility that Christianity brought about. We, after all, employ this word with a splendidly indiscriminate generosity, applying it without hesitation to everyone, regardless of social station, race, or sex; but originally, at least in some of the most crucial contexts, it had a much more limited application. Specifically, in Roman legal usage, one's person was one's status before the law, which was certainly not something invariable from one individual to the next.' Hart, *Atheist Delusions*: 183.

Humility and Confidence in Interfaith Engagement

In contrast to Hick's kind of approach, I propose that dialogue and proclamation are equally necessary and inter-penetrating practices of a Christian engagement with other religious communities, reflecting the humility and the confidence that are both fundamental features of authentic Christianity. This approach recognises that there are salutary challenges in some of Hick's points, especially where he identifies tendencies to Christian triumphalism and an inability to recognise God's presence and activity beyond the Church; but it resists his conclusion that in order to meet those challenges Christians must radically revise and relativise their understanding of the heart of their faith, the uniqueness and universal relevance of the revelation and the redemption given by God in Jesus Christ.

I also suggest that the approach proposed here agrees with a broad Christian consensus. It is especially noteworthy that two recent official church reports, both published in 2010, support my argument about the need for both dialogue and proclamation – *Sharing the Gospel of Salvation*, from the Church of England, and *Meeting God in Friend and Stranger*, from the Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales.¹⁸ The emphasis in the two documents is somewhat different. *Sharing the Gospel of Salvation* was prompted by discussion in the Church of England's General Synod of the question of evangelism among people of other faiths, so naturally focuses on that theme, while also giving an account of the wider range of ways in which the Church should (and does) engage with other faith communities.¹⁹ The primary concern of *Meeting God in Friend and Stranger* is to introduce the concept of dialogue to Catholics to whom the idea is unfamiliar and puzzling: 'Dialogue with believers of other religions is a new concept for many Catholics, and they may well feel that it is

¹⁸ *Sharing the Gospel of Salvation*, available at <http://www.churchofengland.org/media/39745/gsmisc956.pdf> accessed 18 December 2014; *Meeting God in Friend and Stranger: Fostering Respect and Mutual Understanding between the Religions* (Catholic Truth Society: London, 2010). See also *Christian Witness in a Multi-Religious World: Recommendations for Conduct*, a brief 2011 document emerging from discussions between representatives of the World Council of Churches, the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue and the World Evangelical Alliance available at <http://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/wcc-programmes/interreligious-dialogue-and-cooperation/christian-identity-in-pluralistic-societies/christian-witness-in-a-multi-religious-world> accessed 18 December 2014.

¹⁹ References to evangelism, proclamation, the making of disciples and such themes are frequent in *Sharing the Gospel of Salvation*. For example, see paragraphs 87 and 94 (the latter quoting R. Williams).

“one challenge too far”.²⁰ But while its primary focus is on dialogue it repeatedly emphasises that the promotion of dialogue must not be understood to mean that the Church should no longer proclaim Christ to all people and desire their conversion.²¹ In what follows I shall draw on both these official church documents, as well as making extensive reference to the highly relevant 1991 Vatican document *Dialogue and Proclamation*.²²

Proper Humility and the Call to Dialogue

The days are gone, or very nearly so, when the churches could address western societies from a place of presumed authority and influence. In the wake of massive shifts in the religious demographic of western culture, Christianity finds itself not only part of the religious marketplace but also often the ‘less interesting’ part as new and intriguing voices appear. The Church cannot ignore those voices, nor simply dismiss the influence they are having in the culture. Although Murad exaggerates the number of Muslim converts in the United Kingdom, it is true, even so, that Muslim converts constitute a significant portion of a significant religious minority. Christian engagement with this phenomenon must consist, at least in part, of a willingness to hear the testimonies of those who have converted, thereby at least implicitly stating the failure of Christianity to provide what they were looking for. There is a proper humility for the Church in its approach to a religiously diverse culture: humility in relation to those outside the Christian fold, yes, but humility primarily before God, acknowledging our frailty before the truth, and attentive to what God might have to teach us through the other.

Christian humility, then, will motivate an openness to dialogue. Those who commit themselves to dialogue will soon learn that it is not possible for Christians to ignore the weight of history as it bears upon present inter-religious relationships. So openness to dialogue will compel a willingness to be challenged concerning the failure of the Church, past and present, to live up to its own explicit ideals.²³ It will also lead to a readiness to see God’s work in people of other

²⁰ *Meeting God in Friend and Stranger*, Preface: 9.

²¹ Ibid: paragraphs 51, 74, 87, and 89.

²² Available online through the Vatican website, <http://www.vatican.va> accessed 18 December 2014. See M. Fitzgerald, “‘Dialogue and Proclamation’: A Reading in the Perspective of Christian-Muslim Relations”, in D. Kendall and G. O’Collins (eds), *In Many and Diverse Ways: Essays in Honor of Jacques Dupuis* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2003): 181–93.

²³ *Dialogue and Proclamation* refers to ‘socio-political factors’ and ‘burdens of the past’ as obstacles to dialogue (1.5.52, see also 2.7.74). *Sharing the Gospel of Salvation* refers to the ‘dark side’ of the history of mission in the Church of England, while adding that ‘this is not a reason ... to give up on mission’ (5, paragraph 32).

faiths and to learn from them. Thus the Catholic Bishops of England and Wales encourage us to expect that, through inter-faith encounter, 'God may sometimes lead us into further truth about himself, because God's mystery can never be fully within our grasp, and the journey into it is endless.'²⁴ Further, engagement in dialogue should give rise to a deep concern for universal religious freedom, fundamentally out of respect for the God whose working among human beings demands that they be able to respond without compulsion.²⁵ The dialogical process will also reveal areas of common concern between Christians and others. Christian humility before God and neighbour will thus motivate cooperative action for the common good, together with a concern that real goods in the earthly city be made available to all its citizens.²⁶

Although there is a continuing need for the churches to work on this agenda for dialogue and the related attitudes and practices just described, there is no shortage of evidence of the commitment over recent decades of the historic Christian churches to inter-religious dialogue. Thus it was in the midst of the Second Vatican Council that the Secretariat for Non-Christians was created in 1964. Renamed the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue in 1988, it has initiated and taken part in numerous examples of dialogue in the following decades.²⁷ Three examples of the work of the Church of England and the Anglican Communion in the last decade, specifically in Christian-Muslim relations, are the creation of the Christian-Muslim Forum, the launching of an annual dialogue meeting with al-Azhar al-Sharif in Cairo, and Building Bridges, an annual seminar for theological dialogue, chaired by Rowan Williams throughout the decade in which he served as Archbishop of Canterbury.²⁸

²⁴ *Meeting God in Friend and Stranger*: 14. This passage, significantly, goes on to say that at other times interfaith encounter will require Christians to confess, courteously, 'that what we are meeting is simply false, and not a glimpse of God's truth or holiness'. See also D. Marshall, *Learning from How Muslims See Christianity* (Grove Books: Cambridge, 2006).

²⁵ See the Vatican II declaration on religious freedom, *Dignitatis Humanae*, noting especially its grounding of this commitment in the revelation of God and God's ways (section 11). See also D. Marshall, 'Christians, Muslims and Religious Freedom', in S. Goodwin (ed.), *World Christianity in Muslim Encounter* (Continuum: London, 2009): 115–27.

²⁶ See L. Bretherton, *Hospitality as Holiness: Christian Witness amid Moral Diversity* (Ashgate: Farnham, 2006), chapters 4 and 5.

²⁷ See its bulletin *Pro Dialogo* for documentation of its work in this field.

²⁸ On the Christian-Muslim Forum, see: <http://www.christianmuslimforum.org/> accessed 18 December 2014; on the dialogue process with al-Azhar, see: <http://nifcon.anglicancommunion.org/work/declarations/al-azhar.cfm> accessed 18 December 2014; on Building Bridges, see: <http://berkeleycenter.georgetown.edu/projects/the-building-bridges-seminar> accessed 18 December 2014.

There is also increasing evidence that this emphasis in the senior councils of the churches on the need for a dialogical and co-operative approach to other faiths is also reflected in practical ways in many local churches.²⁹

Proper Confidence and the Call to Proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ

Pre-supposing this commitment to dialogue as a fundamental and continuing characteristic of the Church – rather than a merely pragmatic necessity – we turn now to explore the Church's concurrent call to proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ. As we do so it is important to reiterate that although dialogue and proclamation are distinguishable, they are also inter-penetrating practices of the Church. As we will discuss further below, there can be practical difficulties in negotiating the relationship between them but it is nevertheless crucial for Christians involved in inter-faith relations to recognise the mutual indispensability of dialogue and proclamation. Thus, for those who emphasise dialogue, it is important to recognise that fruitful negotiation of the boundary between self and other in inter-faith engagement depends upon the proper confidence that motivates and accompanies proclamation. For Christians to attempt to occupy a space void of proclamation is to collapse the boundary between self and other in ways that make meaningful dialogue ultimately impossible. One cannot speak from nowhere. So proper humility depends for its authenticity on a simultaneous confidence in the place from which one speaks to others, even as one also hopes to meet God in them and to learn from them.

Dialogue and Proclamation argues that all Christians are 'called to be personally involved in these two ways of carrying out the one mission of the Church', but goes on to stress that they 'must always bear in mind that dialogue ... does not constitute the whole mission of the Church, that it cannot simply replace proclamation, but remains oriented towards proclamation ...'.³⁰

²⁹ The Church of England report *Sharing the Gospel of Salvation* gives numerous examples of how parish churches have sought to build bridges of dialogue and co-operation with other religious communities, while also witnessing to the Christian faith. One example is the Springfield Project in Birmingham (*Sharing the Gospel of Salvation*: 27–8, paragraphs 147–54), which is described in greater detail in "Strangers and Neighbours": The Springfield Project and Barelwi Mosque Next Door – Edmund Newey in Conversation with Richard Sudworth, in F. Ward and S. Coakley (eds), *Fear and Friendship: Anglicans Engaging with Islam* (Continuum: London, 2012): 17–38.

³⁰ *Dialogue and Proclamation*: 4.3.82.

To be able to join with confidence in the Church's proclamation of the Gospel, Christians need strong foundations in the story that they are called to announce. As *Sharing the Gospel of Salvation* puts it,

... a rootedness in scripture and in an understanding of its originating contexts, provides a foundation for good practice in sharing the gospel. A Church which has generally been unused to reading and studying the Bible with its multi religious context in mind will find much to wrestle with and to be encouraged by.³¹

The Acts of the Apostles, for example, narrates the encounter of the Gospel with the religious and intellectual cultures of the Gentiles, giving much insight into the early apostolic proclamation, motivated by the utter singularity of God's saving action in Christ (4:12), but also indicating responsiveness to the particularities of different religious and cultural contexts (14:8–20; 17:16–34). The sending out of the disciples to proclaim Christ is indeed a pervasive theme throughout the New Testament, for example in the concluding sections of each of the four gospels. In the longer ending of Mark, the disciples are sent to 'preach the Gospel to the whole creation' (16:15). Matthew and Luke conclude with extended reports of appearances of the risen Jesus, in which he sends the disciples into all the world to make disciples (Matthew 28:19) and to preach forgiveness in his name (Luke 24:47). As John narrates it, one of Jesus' last prayers on earth is that God protect his disciples, whom Jesus sends into the world just as God has sent him (17:18), in order that the world should 'believe in [Jesus] through their message' (17:20). Also relevant here is Paul's narration of the events by which God has saved the world, and the proclamation to which this gives rise. Thus Paul moves in Romans from his account of the significance of the death of Jesus, as at 3:21–6 and 5:6, 8 ('While we were still powerless, Christ died for us ... God demonstrates his own love for us in this: while we were still sinners, Christ died for us') to his resurrection and the coming of the Spirit (8:11–16) and the future hope to which all this gives rise (8:18–25). And it is this story of what God has done in Christ that motivates Paul to proclaim the Gospel in order to bring about the obedience of faith among all the Gentiles (1:5; cf. 10:14; 15:18–20).

In line with this pervasive testimony of the New Testament to God's redemptive work in Christ and the proclamation to which it naturally gives

³¹ *Sharing the Gospel of Salvation*: 15 (paragraph 90). *Dialogue and Proclamation* expounds the Church's call to proclaim Christ with extensive citation of scripture, for example at 2.1.55.

rise, the Roman Catholic Church is likewise at pains to stress the necessity of proclamation. While the Second Vatican Council is understandably and properly associated especially with the new emphasis on dialogue with the wider world, including people of other religions, it is also clear that the Council repeatedly reaffirmed the Church's task of proclamation to all people, notably in *Ad Gentes*, the Decree on the Mission Activity of the Church. It was also during the Council that Pope Paul VI insisted, in *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (5) that 'the presentation of the Gospel message is not optional for the Church. It is her duty, by command of the Lord Jesus, so that men may believe and be saved'. This complementarity of the calls to dialogue and proclamation continues to be affirmed, above all in *Dialogue and Proclamation* which, as we have seen, both affirms the importance of dialogue and also teaches that 'the Church's mission is to proclaim the Kingdom of God established on earth in Jesus Christ, through his life, death and resurrection, as God's decisive and universal offer of salvation to the world'.³² Thus, 'there is no true evangelization if the name, the teaching, the life, the promises, the Kingdom and the mystery of Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of God, are not proclaimed'.³³ As we have seen, this dual emphasis is echoed more recently (2010) by both the Catholic Bishops of England and Wales in *Meeting God in Friend and Stranger* and by the Church of England in *Sharing the Gospel of Salvation*.

Holding Dialogue and Proclamation Together

This chapter has argued that Christian approaches to other faiths should be characterised, on the one hand, by the humility that is expressed in dialogue and, on the other, by the confidence that issues in proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. In practice, however, relating these two elements has proved difficult.³⁴ The very existence of the 1991 Vatican document *Dialogue and Proclamation*, cited frequently in this essay, is itself a pointer to this difficulty.

³² *Dialogue and Proclamation*: 2.2.58.

³³ Ibid: quoting *Evangelii Nuntiandi*: 22.

³⁴ This might prompt the response that it is in the west that Christians find it difficult to hold dialogue and proclamation together, while this is not so to anything like the same degree elsewhere in the worldwide Church. There may be some truth in this, though the earlier quotation from S. Samartha shows that it is not just western Christians who oppose proclamation to non-Christians. Anyway, to the extent that it is true that western Christians find it especially difficult to hold dialogue and proclamation together, part of their task is to learn from the experience of Christians elsewhere in the world.

Its composition and publication jointly by both the Pontifical Council for Inter-religious Dialogue and the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples arose from an awareness of how difficult some Christians found it to relate dialogue to proclamation. As the document puts it:

The practice of dialogue raises problems in the minds of many. There are those who seem to think, erroneously, that in the Church's mission today dialogue should simply replace proclamation. At the other extreme, some fail to see the value of interreligious dialogue. Yet others are perplexed and ask: if interreligious dialogue has become so important, has the proclamation of the Gospel lost its urgency?³⁵

The document thus seeks to draw into greater theological and practical harmony two areas of the Church's activity which all too easily drift apart or indeed exist in a state of some tension. Much the same can be said of other church documents in this area, such as the Church of England's *Sharing the Gospel of Salvation*. As one of the contributions to this report puts it: 'It has been said that most churches either obey the great commandment to love our neighbour, or the great commission to make disciples. They rarely manage to do both.'³⁶

One reason for the apparent difficulty of holding dialogue and proclamation together is that proclamation, especially if accompanied by conversions or even a hint of the possibility of conversions, can appear to be the enemy of dialogue and inter-communal harmony. Even those who accept the principle of freedom of religion do not relish losing members of their community through conversion to another faith. For some religious communities this remains an extremely sensitive issue and any hint that Christians are seeking to convert their members can generate significant tensions. An example of this occurred in 1992 when it was reported that Michael Marshall, a Church of England bishop appointed to co-lead an initiative in evangelism, had written that 'the call to win Islam for Christ is on the agenda,' leading to complaints from Muslim and Jewish organisations.³⁷ This issue recurs in various forms; for example, Hindu groups may make it a condition of dialogue that Christians should renounce any intention to convert Hindus.

³⁵ *Dialogue and Proclamation*, Introduction: 4 (c).

³⁶ *Sharing the Gospel of Salvation*: 35 (paragraph 186).

³⁷ *The Tablet*, 11 January 1992: 25–6, available at <http://archive.thetablet.co.uk/article/11th-january-1992/25/decade-of-evangelism-offends-muslims-and-jews> accessed 18 December 2014.

However, although it is therefore understandable that some Christians who feel called to promote dialogue see an emphasis by other Christians on proclamation as a threat to their work, the Church as a whole simply cannot remove proclamation and the possibility of conversion from its agenda. As Rowan Williams and John Sentamu put it, writing as the two Archbishops of the Church of England:

... conversion must never become a word of which Christians fight shy ... there should be nothing embarrassed or awkward about the Church's commitment to draw others to Christ. This we do, not in order to win favour for ourselves, nor to make others more like us, but simply because we want to share God's gifts as we have received them – freely and unearned.³⁸

How Christians hold this commitment together with a commitment to seeking the common good and the harmony of society will often be taxing. There is no simple formula that can be offered here. While the Church should seek to be at peace with all people (Romans 12:18), it cannot be the Church of Jesus Christ and at the same time insist that its life in a religiously diverse society will be without tension and conflict. The Church cannot fulfil its commission from Christ to proclaim the Gospel and make disciples of all nations (Matthew 28:19) and expect never to encounter opposition. Nevertheless, as part of the commitment of the Church to intelligent dialogue with other communities about the common good, it should also seek peaceful ways in which all people can freely express their convictions. It is encouraging, therefore, that some progress has been made in frank inter-faith discussions about conversion. Notably, the Christian-Muslim Forum has produced a set of *Ethical Guidelines for Christian and Muslim Witness in Britain*.³⁹

An authentic Christian motivation for desiring the conversion of all peoples to Christ is the conviction that the Church is only a pale reflection of what it is called to be, with an inevitably limited understanding of the full significance of Christ, until it is filled with people of every background, all bringing their distinctive contributions and insights to the diversity in unity that should characterise the life of the Body of Christ. *Sharing the Gospel of Salvation*, quoting the earlier Church of England report, *The Mystery of Salvation*, comments: 'It

³⁸ *Sharing the Gospel of Salvation*, Foreword. R. Williams also discusses the theme of conversion across religious traditions in his Afterword to *Fear and Friendship*.

³⁹ Available at http://www.christianmuslimforum.org/downloads/Ethical_Guidelines_for_Witness.pdf accessed 18 December 2014.

may be ... that our understanding of Christ will itself be enhanced when people of other faiths are gathered in'.⁴⁰ Kenneth Cragg elaborates on the same point:

... it takes a whole world to understand a whole Christ. Those who bring Christ are not vulgarly universalizing their own culture: they are conveying what, when apprehended, both they and their hearers learn They who take Christ are in a state of perpetual discovery, and the discoveries they make are made through the discoveries they enable.⁴¹

In this same spirit that looks to how the Body of Christ will be enriched by the diverse peoples of the world, Christians may often contemplate aspects of the life of other faith communities with 'holy envy' and (to adapt the language of Hebrews 11:40) reflect that 'without them, we will not be made perfect'.

Christians who hold such a vision of the growth of the Church need also to be aware of the difficulties that may arise when people from other faith communities become Christians, and the consequent challenges for churches that wish to become welcoming communities to them. In particular, such converts may experience severe tensions with family and wider community, sometimes becoming alienated from them. The transition from being embedded within the close family and community life of a non-western culture to membership of a church community in the individualistic modern western world can be traumatic and experience of life in the Christian community can be disappointing. A British Christian from a Sikh background comments:

... those from other faiths often genuinely leave all behind them: families, friends and culture. What they often receive in return is a Sunday morning meeting! It's a poor trade-off because many of our other faith neighbours come from deeply interwoven and supporting communities. The hour or so we give to weekly worship and prayer, and the nodding, "Fine" to the cursory, "How are you?" over cheap coffee and rich tea biscuits can be an insulting parody of the kingdom community to which Christ calls us.⁴²

Churches which desire to be faithful to the call to make disciples of all nations need to reflect on what it will mean for them to welcome, support, and truly integrate new Christians from other religious communities; they will also

⁴⁰ *Sharing the Gospel of Salvation*: 14 (paragraph 85).

⁴¹ K. Cragg, *The Call of the Minaret*, third edition (Oxford: Oneworld, 2000): 168.

⁴² Cited in R. Sudworth, *Distinctly Welcoming: Christian Presence in a Multifaith Society* (Bletchley: Scripture Union, 2007): 124.

need to reflect on the impact of such conversions on relations with other faith communities and the wider common good. While there may be no simple solution to the tensions that can arise, churches which are already at work on the dialogical agenda sketched out earlier, and have established good relations with other communities, can hope that their work of proclamation will be experienced not as an isolated and hostile activity, but as a part of the wider mission of the Church to love and serve all its neighbours.

Returning to the issue of differences in emphasis among Christians, in practice it tends to be the case that individual Christians and specific Christian organisations feel a call towards one activity or the other, dialogue or proclamation. It is true that this distinction can never be absolute, as dialogue always involves some communication of one's own faith and proclamation cannot really begin in the absence of any human dialogue. Nevertheless, a genuine distinction remains and there is an observable tendency for Christian groups to opt for one emphasis or the other. In general, the more established historic churches, partly because of their strong connections with civic institutions and their emphasis on responsibility for working for the common good, have tended to prioritise dialogue. We have seen that such churches will also often state (sometimes prompted by their more evangelistic members) that proclamation remains on their agenda; but in practice their official initiatives have tended to be in the field of dialogue.⁴³ In contrast, other Christian organisations, usually evangelical, will emphasise proclamation, or, if that word is not used, the sharing of the Christian faith in the hope that others will embrace it. Among such groups there is confidence that despite the difficulties involved, there has been a steady increase in the numbers of people coming to Christian faith from other religious backgrounds. For example, on the basis of his doctoral work at London University on the almost entirely unresearched question of the conversion of Muslims to Christianity in Britain, Tim Green writes: 'Today, in Britain and worldwide, more Muslims are turning to Christ than at any time in history.'⁴⁴ Of particular note are the numbers of Iranians converting to Christianity;

⁴³ In a conversation in 2005, a senior Roman Catholic expert in inter-religious relations, when asked about the commitment of the Roman Catholic Church to both dialogue and proclamation, as expressed in the document *Dialogue and Proclamation*, commented that while there were numerous examples of institutional commitment to dialogue, he could not name a single official church initiative promoting proclamation among non-Christians. That same broad trend is found in other historic Christian denominations.

⁴⁴ T. Green, 'Conversion from Islam to Christianity in Britain', in S. Bell and C. Chapman (eds), *Between Naivety and Hostility: Uncovering the Best Christian Responses to Islam in Britain* (Milton Keynes: Authentic Media, 2011): 101.

it has been calculated that there are probably two to three thousand of them in Britain.⁴⁵

However, in recent years the dichotomy, in practice if not in theory, between dialogue and proclamation has perhaps become less stark. Church leaders, together with specialists and educators in the field of inter-religious relations, have begun to place more emphasis on the need for Christians to have greater confidence in articulating their own faith as well as on seeking a sympathetic understanding of their neighbour's faith and offering hospitality and support to communities which, in recent decades, were often new to Britain. Thus Archbishops Williams and Sentamu comment:

The experience of parishes and people working in multifaith contexts is that, whilst stridency is counterproductive, failure to be open about our beliefs is equally unhelpful. Others want to know why we do things as well as seeing what we do. Because God loves all His people, encounters begin with respect for the other. If we are too cautious of sharing openly the foundations of our beliefs and the nature of our discipleship ... we put constraints on that respect and deny a little of God's nature.⁴⁶

Of the many needs facing Christians as they address the opportunities and challenges of relations with other religious communities, I conclude by identifying two. Firstly, through experience of sustained personal encounter, study and prayerful reflection, Christian leaders need to develop a discerning intelligence as to what kinds of initiative in relation to other faith communities best express the mission of the Church at specific times and in specific contexts. As has been said before, there is no simple formula. Mistakes will be made; patience and perseverance will be needed.

Secondly, Christians need to be aware of the great range of ways in which the whole Body of Christ should express its multi-faceted mission towards all people. This awareness will enable them to recognise the partial and limited nature of any one initiative in this field and so exercise a charitable attitude towards fellow Christians whose emphases may be quite different. Those who are called towards an emphasis on dialogue may well feel nervous about the possible results of efforts towards evangelistic proclamation by other Christians, but need

⁴⁵ Ibid: 101, 105.

⁴⁶ *Sharing the Gospel of Salvation*, Foreword. For a similar emphasis from a senior Roman Catholic specialist in Christian-Muslim relations, see C. Troll, *Muslims Ask, Christians Answer* (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2012); C. Troll, *Dialogue and Difference: Clarity in Christian-Muslim Relations* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2009).

to recognise that these too may be faithfully expressing part of the meaning of Christ for all people. Conversely, those with a zeal for proclamation need to see that it takes more than proclamation to witness fully to the 'grace and truth' that became incarnate in Jesus. No Christian individual or organisation will ever get the balance quite right, but all can pray that the whole Church, in its multiple activities, inspired by sometimes quite different theological convictions, may convey, however imperfectly, the full significance of Christ for the whole world.

The challenge outlined in this chapter might well suggest a daunting balancing act. It is as well to acknowledge that, in many ways, the encounter with religious diversity takes western Christians beyond their usual comfort zones and into places where they can be painfully aware of their lack of experience and their stark disagreements with each other. Viewed more positively, this is an opportunity for growth, growth in understanding of God-in-Christ and of God's ways in the world, but also growth of the Church in size and diversity as it learns to engage with all its neighbours with the humility and the confidence which have been our themes.