

Evangelicals and the Encounter with Other Faiths

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I

First-time events are usually of interest and sometimes of great import. Such was the case at the Sixth Assembly of the World Council of Churches (WCC) last summer in Vancouver, Canada. I participated in the Assembly as an advisor and guest editor of the October 1983 issue of the *International Review of Mission* which dealt with the missiological implications of the Assembly.

I can testify to the unease felt by some evangelicals present when – for the first time in the history of the modern ecumenical movement – representatives of some of the world's major religions delivered brief addresses at a plenary session of the Assembly. These representatives were also given opportunity to participate fully in most of the Assembly's activities.

Was this further evidence of syncretistic tendencies inherent in the WCC? Or was it merely a long overdue recognition of the religious pluralism of modern global society and the need to make common cause with other religions in the fight against secular humanism? Or was it rather the next step in a necessary dialogue that carries possibilities of more effective Christian witness, as well as potential for understanding our own faith better through the prisms of other faith communities?

My experience with the WCC through the years leads me to discount the first suggestion. And while not underestimating the importance of the second, it is the third which seems to me to be the most relevant to evangelicals today. We live in a world in which millions of our neighbors have their own faith commitments and their own specific testimonies to share. In such a context, can we confidently, not to say triumphally, proclaim that Jesus Christ is *the* life of the world? (This was the theme of the Vancouver Assembly.)

According to participants in the Assembly sub-group studying the topic, "Witnessing in a Divided World," of all the things we do as Christians, witnessing among peoples of living faiths and ideologies is the most difficult and causes the most confusion. In my judgment, this witness to established faiths will, by the end of this century, dominate our mission agenda – and this is true not only with respect to "overseas" missionary work. Both in Europe and in North America thousands upon thousands of guest workers, illegal immigrants, and students live in our midst. As on the day of Pentecost, the whole world has been brought to our

doorstep. It is our privilege and moral responsibility to share the gospel with them.

Historically, there have been at least three major approaches to peoples of other faiths and ideologies. The first has been that of simple proclamation, the second that of confrontation, and the third that of dialogue.

The three are not mutually exclusive, nor should they be, though in practice the tendency has been to focus upon one at the expense of the others. Evangelicals, by and large, have opted for proclamation. When pressed, we have resorted to confrontation. Only exceptionally and with great hesitancy have we been prepared to engage in dialogue.

Proclamation appeals to evangelicals because of our conviction that the unembellished gospel has an inherent power to move people to repentance and faith. Romans 10:13-14 is a classic expression of this conviction. Furthermore, disciples of Christ are commanded to proclaim the good news (e. g., Mark 16:15). And besides, it is erroneously thought, though rarely verbalized, that proclamation is the easiest approach: one simply takes the gospel as he or she has received it and shares it, trusting that the Spirit of God, using the Word of God, through the servants of God will guarantee the hoped-for results.

Our experience over the past 200 years, however, demonstrates that world evangelization is not as straightforward as such a scenario would indicate. True, we have witnessed a major expansion of the church worldwide. But closer examination reveals that this expansion has been achieved primarily among peoples of “primal” religions and relatively unsophisticated cultures.

Attempts at evangelizing Hindus, Muslims, Buddhist, and Communists, by contrast, have met with meager results. This is evidenced by the fact that after two centuries of effort (four centuries, when Roman Catholic efforts are included), less than five per cent of the population of Asian, which itself contains more than half of the world’s peoples, has professed faith in Christ.

Faced with such recalcitrance on the part of the hearers, many evangelical missionaries have resorted to confrontational approaches. These have been of two types. The first can be conceived in terms of “power encounters” in which healings and other putative miracles are relied upon to demonstrate the superiority of Christ. This approach has been successful in some primal religious contexts but not, to any significant degree, among the adherents of the world’s major religions.

The second confrontational approach is intellectual and dogmatic. At its best it attempts by comparisons and arguments to convince peoples of other faiths of the excellence of Christ and Christianity. At its worst, it aims to ridicule and demean the major tenets of the target religion and – especially in the case of Islam –

its founder. Some of the greatest missionaries of the past have relied on this approach. Samuel Zwemer comes to mind. Enough time has elapsed, however, for us to conclude that confrontation, as a primary methodology, holds little or no prospect for the conversion of the peoples of Asia.

We are left, then, with dialogue – an approach from which most evangelicals to date have shied away. We suspect it borders on treason. We fear that, if fruitful (which we rather doubt) it will lead to syncretism in any churches that might emerge, or worse, to the compromise of our own faith. These possibilities exist, to be sure, and for this reason David Hesselgrave, director of the School of World Mission and Evangelism at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, has called for “a new kind of bravery” for dialogue in our time.

I agree wholeheartedly with this call. After a lifetime of missionary service, mostly in the Middle East and in Asia, I am convinced that neither our proclamations nor our confrontations will be successful on a significantly large scale unless preceded by, and undergirded with, several generations of serious dialogical work. Do we have evangelical theological students today who will respond to the challenge of this new missionary dimension?

II

In Singapore there lives a widow, now in her sixties. This lady, in the face of incredible hardships, has raised a large family. Her grown children include a doctor, a teacher, a military officer and a social worker. They love her dearly. By almost any standard this lady's life has been successful.

Sustaining her through years of adversity has been her religious experience. A devout Hindu, she reads her scriptures and prays before an altar in her modest home for three or four hours daily. (How many Christians spend this much time in prayer?) It is obvious that her faith is the well-spring of her life.

She has heard the gospel, for two of her children have become Christians, but shows little interest in it. Has she been duped by Satan? Has her life-long spirituality been an illusion? Is she destined for hell? Or is it possible that God has met her, and continues to meet her, in a life-fulfilling way?

Such questions may be answered more or less satisfactorily in an academic setting, depending on one's theology. But for those of us who interact personally with peoples of other faiths and ideologies over extended periods of time, and within the context of their own cultures, answers come less easily and are fraught with ambiguity.

We need answers because up till now we have been unsuccessful in communicating the gospel to millions and millions

of people like the lady in Singapore. In spite of centuries of effort on our part, less than five percent of Asia is nominally Christian. The problem is not in our message, which is the power of God to salvation, but in our attitudes and methods. To date our primary methods have focused on proclamation, confrontation, or alternatively, social service.

The one approach evangelicals have *not* utilized, to any great extent, is that of dialogue. A few attempts have been made – E. Stanley Jones springs to mind – but they have been marginal to the mainstream of evangelical mission. The time has come for evangelicals to engage in serious dialogue with Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus and adherents of other faiths and ideologies as well.

If we are to do this, we must become familiar with “the rules of the game.” These are not complex, but for most of us they require the exercise of new attitudes and skills.

In spite of what was said earlier about evangelistic methodology, conversion is not the primary objective of dialogue. What we seek first in dialogue are deeper levels of understandings of alternative worldviews, of God, and of his relationship in real life to human beings in community. This inevitably leads to new insights into our own faith as well as the faith of our partners in dialogue. On the basis of these understandings and insights we may expect a more fruitful communication between both parties.

Enhanced communication has its own value in a pluralistic age, of course, regardless of whether conversion occurs in either direction. Christians, however, have a mandate for evangelism from Jesus Christ himself. It is my contention that no evangelistic breakthrough with respect to the world’s great religions may be expected in the near future apart from dialogue. Only dialogue will provide the mutual perceptions from which the gospel may be recast in language commensurate to the deepest felt needs of a people.

A commitment to dialogue is a commitment to vulnerability. This is what makes it a risky business. And this may be why one leading missiologist, David Hesselgrave, referred to earlier, has called for “a new kind of bravery” – a bravery capable of leading a person deep into the heart of another’s religious experience, thereby risking the possibility of conversion, in part or in whole, to the other’s frame of reference.

Dialogue involves listening more than talking – listening not only with our ears but with all our senses. This happens best when partners in dialogue live or work together in common enterprises within the community. In such a context an understanding of the impact of faith upon the whole of life, and vice versa, is more likely.

An ashram, or even an apartment in an urban slum, provides the kind of setting I am suggesting, while service projects related to

felt needs (health care, agriculture improvement, disaster relief) afford opportunities to work together.

Joint enterprises of this type are often possible in typical missionary situations. But they are rarely taken advantage of. Instead, evangelical missionaries tend to live in culturally isolated settings such as campuses or hospitals or the “western” quarters of Third World cities, and work primarily on projects that are managed from beginning to end by Christians.

The story recorded in Acts 10 is instructive. It begins with Cornelius who, not unlike the laide in Singapore, was “a devout man, who feared God with all his household, gave alms liberally to the people, and prayed constantly to God.” We learn that – quite apart from the embryonic Christian community – the Spirit of God was present and at work in Cornelius’ context. An angel appears to Cornelius in a vision, reassures him as to his relationship with God, and gives him a message.

The scene shifts to Peter’s house, Peter who was about as culturally insular as a person can be. At great length God works at changing Peter’s attitudes with respect to the religious status of Gentiles. “What God has cleansed you must not call common or unclean.” Peter’s new frame of mind prepared him for genuine dialogue which in turn prepared him for effective communication. He takes in Cornelius’ messengers as his house guests.

The story shifts back to Cornelius. We see him bowing before Peter. But Peter, stripped now of his cultural superiority by virtue of his position in Christ, says to Cornelius, “Stand up. I too am a man.” Then Peter assumes the role of a listener. “I ask you when why you sent for me.” This gives Cornelius the opportunity to witness to his own faith experiences with God.

And what did Peter learn about his own religion as a result of Cornelius’ testimony? The words fall strangely on evangelical ears, but here they are: “Truly I perceive that God shows no partiality, but in every nation any one who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him.” This is a new insight for Peter. It came about by taking seriously another person’s faith experience.

By now mutual trust between the two men has been established. Peter is free to present his own witness to Jesus Christ. While Peter is still speaking the Holy Spirit acts sovereignly again, pouring out his gifts on those present. Peter is astounded but accepts the reality of what he has experienced in the encounter. “Can anyone forbid water for baptizing these people?” he asks, and proceeds to baptize them in the name of Jesus Christ.

Not all dialogical encounters develop so smoothly, with much learned so quickly on both sides. Yet all the essential elements, including the factor of risk, are present in this story. It stands as a challenge to evangelicals today in religiously plural world community. Will we respond?