



Witnesses of These Things: Ecumenical Engagement in a New Era

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Studies 2010: Christian Understanding of Mission in an Age of Interfaith Relations

“God has not left himself without a witness in doing good”

Acts 14:7¹

Introduction

The noun ‘ecumenism’ and the adjective ‘ecumenical’, from the Greek word *oikoumenē* (meaning ‘the whole inhabited world’), have come to designate a modern Christian movement concerned with the unity, renewal and world-wide mission of the church. The roots of this movement are often traced to the historic World Mission Conference in Edinburgh, Scotland in 1910 where the primary focus was certainly on the church and its witness.

The ecumenical movement, however, has long recognized the importance of Christian relations with people of other living faiths. And in the past two generations, a period of unprecedented human interaction through globalization, interfaith relations have taken on a new urgency and significance. Such truly global problems as climate change, the proliferation of nuclear weapons, and the disparity between rich and poor demand that adherents of the world’s religions work together positively and respectfully for justice and peace.

The thesis of this paper, however, is that ecumenical Christians do not enter into dialogue and cooperation with neighbors of other faiths merely on pragmatic grounds, but out of a deep sense of mission as followers of Jesus Christ. The Indian theologian, and long-time director of the World Council of Churches’ interfaith dialogue office, Stanley Samartha, puts it this way: “The basis on which Christians enter into and continue their dialogue with others is their faith in Jesus Christ... It is Christianity, not ‘comparative religion,’ that is the basis of our concern. Our primary interest is not in ‘interreligious conferences’; it is to be with Christ in his continuing work among people of all faiths and ideologies. Christ draws us out of our isolation into closer relationship with all.”²

In order to set this affirmation in context, it is important to remember that evangelism has also been a primary value from day one of the ecumenical movement – just as it was from the

first generation of the church. In Matthew's gospel, the risen Jesus declares to his closest followers that "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age" (Mt. 28:18-20). This 'Great Commission' has traditionally been interpreted as a call to evangelistic proclamation aimed at converting others to the Christian faith, which was an impelling theme at the 1910 conference.

It seems fair to say that evangelism has had a checkered history over the past two millennia. On the one hand, mission history is filled with testimonies of great sacrifice and evidence of remarkable worldwide growth in the church. The gospel message of forgiveness and eternal life, proclaimed by evangelists, has brought hope and strength to untold multitudes. It has been an amazing force for personal and social liberation, a source of empowerment for those who are helpless and hurting. Often, Christian missionaries have made a decisive difference in a society by affirming the God-given dignity of every human being as created in the divine image.

On the other hand, evangelistic practices have, at times, been deceptive or coercive. Catastrophes are exploited when humanitarian assistance is offered as an incentive to conversion. Vulnerable people are manipulated when the call to accept Christ is accompanied by promises of wealth or power. The gospel itself is distorted when the church grows through association with colonialism and when the encounter with another culture is marked by racism or cultural imperialism.

Competition among the churches has complicated matters further. Even for the best intentioned, it is not always easy to distinguish between authentic evangelism – presenting people with the faith, hope and love we have known through Jesus Christ – and the all-too-human desire to increase our own group. This desire has even led to proselytism of Christians by Christians over the centuries! Christians surely have reason to rejoice that the gospel is preached (Phil 1:18), even as we do not want to do anything that would "put an obstacle in the way of the gospel of Christ" (1 Cor 9:12), always wanting to act "consistently with the truth of the gospel" (Gal 2:14).

The 2010 centennial commemoration of the Edinburgh World Mission Conference provides an excellent opportunity to examine the intersection of evangelism and interfaith relations. The churches are by no means united on how to understand the Christian relationship to people of other faiths! But there is a new openness to engage with interfaith partners, not only on the part of Orthodox, Catholics, Anglicans and mainline Protestants, but also on the part of Evangelical and Pentecostal Christians.

The approach of this paper is to set this examination of how evangelism and interfaith relations intersect within a holistic understanding of mission. The calling of the church is to participate in God's mission (*missio Dei*) to and for the world God has created. God's mission encompasses the whole of life, which means that the church's participation in this holistic mission includes such things as *martyria* (witness through the way one lives) and *diakonia* (service, including public advocacy), as well as *kerygma* (proclamation). The question is this: How are we to understand the church's participation in this *missio Dei*, in the name of Jesus Christ, in an age of growing partnership with neighbors who belong to other religions?

The Christian Call of Proclamation

In the words of the National Council of Churches' 1999 policy statement, *Interfaith Relations and the Churches*, "The revelation of God's love in Jesus Christ is the center of our faith. Incarnating both the fullness of God and the fullness of humanity, Jesus Christ initiates a new creation, a world unified in relationship as God originally intended. We believe that Jesus Christ makes real God's will for a life of loving community with God, with the whole human family and with all creation. Through Jesus Christ, Christians believe God offers reconciliation to all. 'In Christ God was reconciling the world to [God] self' (2 Cor 5:19)."³ Paul, in this letter to the Corinthian church, goes on to suggest that the church, as the body of Christ, has been entrusted with this message of reconciliation (2 Cor 5:19-21). *The Nature and Mission of the Church*, written by the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches, puts it this way: "In the power of the Holy Spirit, the church is called to proclaim faithfully the whole teaching of Christ and to share the Good News of the Kingdom... with everyone throughout the entire world. Thus the church seeks faithfully to proclaim and live the love of God for all, and to fulfill Christ's mission for the salvation and transformation of the world, to the glory of God."⁴ Having heard the joyous news of God's gracious love embodied in Christ, what can Christians do but share this news joyfully with others?! And what better way to participate in the *missio Dei* than to declare and demonstrate this divine gift of reconciliation?!

The sad truth, however, is that the church has not always lived up to its calling to be "ambassadors" of Christ, entreating others in word and deed, "be reconciled to God" (2 Cor. 5:20). One problem, of course, is the tragically divided state of the church. The oneness of formerly-estranged communities should be a demonstration of God's power to reconcile, a sign of God's healing purpose for all the world. The way the churches often relate – through competition, arrogant dismissal, or mutual neglect – is, thus, nothing less than counter-witness to the gospel.

But another problem is surely the way Christians have related – and, often, still relate – to neighbors of other faiths. The message of reconciliation is undercut by triumphalistic claims of religious superiority or loveless acts of exclusion which often accompany our witness to our belief in Christ. It is only when we approach interfaith neighbors as loved or respected children of God that they may find in us genuine seeds of reconciliation. In our witness to people of other faiths, we should not be obsessed with their conversion (which, after all, is something only God can accomplish), but concerned that they can see in us expressions of God's love and reconciling purpose – can see in us a reason to follow Christ.

The 1989 World Conference on Mission and Evangelism in San Antonio named the paradoxical character of this position in a by-now-famous formulation: "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... We appreciate the tension and do not attempt to resolve it."⁵ Such paradox should not be a cause for embarrassment since many of the central Christian claims – Jesus Christ is both truly God and truly human; our response to God's grace is both faith and works; human beings are both "dust and ashes" and "a little lower than the angels" – are paradoxical. To say it another way, the church should be marked, paradoxically, by *bold humility* – boldly declaring its allegiance to Christ and proclaiming the gospel, while humbly rejoicing in the grace

we see in others and in the opportunity we have been given to join with them in God's mission of reconciliation.

The Christian Call to Witness and Service

A holistic understanding of mission, then, does not minimize proclamation of the gospel. Our own knowledge of God comes only through the unique witness of Jesus Christ and our experience of him in the Spirit, and thus we have no other word to speak than his gospel. But a holistic understanding of mission does recognize that participation in God's mission includes more than evangelism. Two dimensions we wish to highlight are witness and service.

The term 'witness', from the Greek word *martyria*, shares a common root with the English word 'martyr,' those who choose to lose their life rather than deny their faith in Christ. A broader definition, however, is those who testify with their lives to the gospel's message of hope. In the New Testament, hope is the assurance of God's love and presence in the world, even to the end of time, as revealed in Christ (Heb 6:11; 11:1). The church bears witness to this hope by living faithfully, especially during times of suffering. Suffering, as understood by the church, is a part of life, not an end in itself. Witnesses to Christ should be prepared to experience suffering since the gospel is so often a counter-cultural message. But a missionary church, by demonstrating compassion and hospitality in the way it lives, testifies that suffering will not have the final word.

Diakonia, meaning service, is seen by some as a lesser, although helpful, ministry. Yet it is best understood as descriptive of the entire ministry of Jesus. Just as Jesus was present to the needs of those around him during his time on earth (Mk 5:18; 6:30-44; 10:46-52), so the church is called, as an instrument of God's mission, to be responsive to the needs and sufferings of the world (Mt 25:33-40; Heb 13:1-3). In this sense, working with other humanitarian aid organizations to provide food, water, shelter and tools for development is a significant expression of both *diakonia* and *martyria*.

This, however, is not enough. The ministry of service or witness without a strong emphasis on justice is theologically anemic. Simply to ameliorate the suffering that goes with poverty or violence, without addressing the causes of such suffering, is important but ultimately inadequate. These three themes – witness, service and justice – are intertwined in several parts of scripture, including Isaiah 52-53 with its vision of God's suffering servant who is strengthened by God to bring forth justice to the nations – a sign of hope for those who have been excluded and enslaved.

This means that the church's participation in God's mission properly includes what is often called 'advocacy' – support for political decisions and policies that are consistent with the gospel. The church does not lobby, since that is the exercise of influence on behalf of those with power and money. Rather, the church advocates, using its influence on behalf of those without power and money in order that greater justice may be effected in a world marked by tremendous disparity in the distribution of resources but also through raising its voice on behalf of justice, even when (especially when) it is costly and unpopular to do so.

Service and advocacy are ministries that the church appropriately does for and with neighbors of other faiths. Christians care for people suffering from hunger and other effects of

poverty, or persons affected by natural disasters, without regard to religious affiliation. Indeed, this is one of the most effective ways that it bears witness to its Lord who welcomed those on the margins of his society and whose compassion, the church confesses, extends to all the world.

The challenge of this age, however, is to go further – to recognize that mission, which used to be aimed *at* interfaith neighbors, must now be done *with* them. It makes little sense to talk about the Christian response to climate change or poverty reduction or global peacemaking! The issues are simply too big to be dealt with apart from other religious communities who also claim service and advocacy as part of their faithfulness to the Creator. If God’s mission calls us to protect the environment, stand in solidarity with those on the margins of society and work for peace, then it would seem that our participation in that mission demands collaboration with interfaith partners. It is not just expedient but faithful to do so.

Beyond 2010

As the NCC policy statement on interfaith relations points out, “the Americas have always been religiously plural.”⁶ When Europeans arrived on these shores, they encountered indigenous peoples whose spirituality is marked by respect for the earth and all creation. Jews – first, from Latin America and later from Europe – were among the early colonists. African slaves brought with them a heritage of traditional African religion; and some nineteenth-century immigrants – for example, those who worked on the intercontinental railroad – were adherents of Asian religions.

The religious diversity of this country, however, has dramatically increased in recent generations, especially since the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 expanded the possibilities for non-European immigrants. In the words of the NCC’s policy statement, today “for many of our congregations, interreligious and intercultural relations are an integral part of community and family life... In their efforts to address community problems, provide hope for a better society and work for justice, Christians find themselves working side-by-side with men and women who practice religions other than their own.”⁷

But none of this should be taken for granted! The growth of fundamentalism among many of the world’s religions, including Christianity, reminds us how important it is to affirm that following Christ does not mean disparaging others. Religion is still too often associated with hateful rhetoric, inhospitable actions and even deadly violence, a reminder for Christians to declare and demonstrate what the apostle Paul called “a more excellent way” – that of love (1 Cor 12:31).

These concerns lead to the following recommendations:

1. That the member communions of the National Council of Churches and Church World Service increase their emphasis on teaching about people of other faiths and encourage their congregations and parishes to engage in dialogue and collaboration with interfaith neighbors in their local settings. Ignorance of the other has too often damaged opportunities for individual Christians and churches to relate constructively with those who do not share their religious beliefs and practices. Getting to know the interfaith

neighbor can, thus, be a vital part of Christian mission; and experience shows that dialogue (serious, sustained conversation) with others can also help Christians learn more about their own faith commitments.

2. That the member communions of the NCC and CWS reaffirm (or strengthen) their participation in the work of the Council's Interfaith Relations Commission and of its Jewish-Christian and Muslim-Christian dialogues. Bilateral conversations (e.g., Lutheran-Jewish) can have significant value, but churches generally attest that interfaith dialogue pursued ecumenically (e.g., Christian-Jewish) is even more constructive. A great deal is at stake in how the world's major religions respond to the challenges of this era when religions interact as never before. Active participation in dialogues sponsored ecumenically through the NCC, as well as in this study process, can be a step in the right direction.
3. That the member communions of the NCC and CWS revisit and, if possible, reaffirm the 1999 policy statement, "Interfaith Relations and the Churches." The statement, available on the NCC website, contains guidelines and other resources intended to equip congregations for interfaith relations. Another policy statement that needs revisiting is "Evangelism Today," adopted by the Council in 1976. Doing so might enable the churches to affirm the importance of evangelism – positive witness through word and deed to the Good News of God's amazing grace incarnate in Jesus Christ – while taking account of the relationships that have grown over the last thirty-five years between the churches and their interfaith partners.
4. That the member communions of the NCC and CWS commit themselves publicly to pray for peace and goodwill among the various faith communities in the United States and around the world. There is much Christians can and should do to promote a respectful, cooperative relationship among religions; but such activity must always be understood as a response to what God is doing in the world. Christian hope, like Christian mission, begins with God, which is why prayer has been, since the Edinburgh conference, at the very heart of the ecumenical movement.

ENDNOTES

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1. Scripture references are taken from Bruce Metzger and Roland E. Murphy, eds., *The New Oxford Annotated Bible with the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books: New Revised Standard Version*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991).
 2. S.J. Samartha, *Courage for Dialogue: Ecumenism in Interreligious Relationships*, (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1981), p. 12.
 3. “Interfaith Relations and the Churches” (A Policy Statement of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1999), ¶31, <http://www.ncccusa.org/interfaith/ifr.html>.
 4. Commission on Faith and Order, *The Nature and Mission of the Church. A Stage on the Way to a Common Statement*, (Faith and Order Paper 198), (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 2005), ¶41.
 5. Frederick R. Wilson, ed., *San Antonio Report – Your Will Be Done: Mission in Christ’s Way*, (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1990), p. 32 ¶26 and p. 33 ¶29.
 6. “Interfaith Relations and the Churches” (A Policy Statement of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1999), ¶5, <http://www.ncccusa.org/interfaith/ifr.html>.
 7. “Interfaith Relations and the Churches” (A Policy Statement of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1999), ¶8, <http://www.ncccusa.org/interfaith/ifr.html>.