

## The Significance of the Multi-Faith Environment (MFE) for the Christian Confession of Faith and Mission.

I bring to this reflection a life journey in the Christian faith and biblical scholarship, significantly interpreted by the last five years of my experience with Jews and Muslims, together presenting our faith to Year 10 students. These presentations occur under the auspices of Jews Christians and Muslims in Australia (JCMA).

A presentation has four components:

- i. 6-minute DVD in which young people say what is good and bad about religions and invite the young people present to ask their questions;
- ii. each of the 3 presenters reads some fast facts comparing and contrasting the 3 faiths;
- iii. each presenter speaks personally about his/her own faith experience and understanding;
- iv. up to 45 minutes responding to questions from the audience.

This presentation, to several thousand students, has drawn great acclamation from teachers and students of private and state schools in city and regional areas.

In this paper I am reflecting mostly on the MFE of the three Abrahamic faiths. My remarks are directed towards practical responses to this MFE and I first set out some viewpoints that lie behind the practical responses that I propose.

**In historical terms**, the MFE of today represents a move back towards some features of the first century. The Christian community can no longer express itself as it did under the mono-cultural umbrella of Christendom. We now have to speak as a small voice that is not immediately heard amidst the noises of wind, fire and earthquake that are abroad. The major difference in the MFE of today is because of a watershed paradigm shift in viewpoint, within the Christian community and within other faith communities. This change in viewpoint is **the acceptance of pluralism** in our community, the understanding that people other than Christians have a grand narrative as well as cultural and religious patterns that constitute a legitimate and valued spiritual and ethical life.

Here, as in other aspects of Christian theology, I take pains to place the Christian experience in **the context of the Jewish experience**. Jewish history is largely the story of a minority struggling to survive in a dominant culture, such as in ancient Egypt and Babylonia, or in modern Europe. From the time of the Yahwist (10th century or possibly late 8<sup>th</sup>, due to the impetus of the Fall of Samaria), Jewish theology recognized and accepted a mission to be a blessing to all the world (Gen 12.1-3).

One aspect of the Jewish approach to this mission provides a reference point for the Christian approach, namely **the inherently pluralistic character of Jewish tradition**. Jewish texts/scriptures are pluralistic in that they embody contrasting viewpoints from different historical periods. I give three examples.

- i. The Documentary Hypothesis revealed the contrasting theologies and agendas of J E D and P in the Torah.

- ii. In the latest Tanakh texts we have the contrast between the racial cleansing of Ezra-Nehemiah and the affirmation of Ruth the Moabitess as ancestress of King David.
- iii. My own research explored the contrast between the theology linked to Abraham and that linked to Lot.

Through the story of Abraham we are introduced to the great themes of Call, Promise, Blessing, Covenant and Faith. The story of Lot has none of these elements but in the vivid narratives of Genesis 14 and 19 we are first introduced to one of the great themes of the Older Testament, **divine mercy or loving kindness** (*chesed*, 19:19) which is not found in relation to Abraham at all. Lot is primarily a figure, seemingly without faith or religion, who is saved unconditionally by the grace of God through the divine messengers.

Clearly Christians value both groups of themes in the stories of Abraham and of Lot, but in Genesis they are starkly divided. Each of the three Abrahamic faiths, based on the principle of covenant, inherits a strong sense of faith boundary. Some are in the covenant, some are not. Genesis says Ishmael would be blessed, in ways similar to Jacob, but that he would not be in the covenant. Similarly the story of Hagar, as powerfully explicated by Phyllis Trible, represents profound elements of divine encounter with humanity but she was not in the covenant. The surprise of the story of Lot is that he was a figure outside of covenant but was still saved by divine grace and mercy. So scripture places right in the middle of the primary covenant story, something completely different that says covenant is not the whole story. Here is an early affirmation of a pluralist understanding of how God deals with humanity.

It is my hypothesis that the writer of the Lot narratives may have deconstructed, not only the Abraham story but the entire covenant theology of the Torah from a viewpoint close to that of Jesus, to present a story of **salvation of a person outside of the covenant**. There are some indications that the Lot narratives and theology come from a Deuteronomistic base, particularly in relation to the theme of love from God and love for God and neighbour and stranger that clearly distinguishes the second 'law' from the first in Exodus. Apart from the story of the Cross, no other story in scripture more eloquently portrays the absolute grace of God towards humanity, particularly to the outsider, represented by Lot. The stories of Zacchaeus and the Woman of Samaria come close.

These particular insights regarding the Abraham and Lot narratives, and their different theologies illustrate that **much of the Christian gospel arises from the Older Testament**. Through Jeremiah (ch.31), the Deuteronomists bequeathed to the world the ideas of the new covenant (New Testament), including the thorough democratization of religious faith: 'I will put my law within them and write it on their hearts. No-one will have to teach his fellow to know the Lord, because all will know me from the least to the greatest'. Why then do Christians seem mostly oriented towards distinguishing ourselves from our Jewish roots rather than embracing and celebrating them?

With these perspectives I turn to the question of our approach to the MFE. My belief is that in the MFE, the first agenda for Christians is to reflect afresh on **what Jewish faith and experience has to say to us**, rather than what we have to say to them. There are two complementary questions here that are both challenging.

i) To what degree can Christians fruitfully perpetuate the pluralistic aspect of Jewish tradition?

One way may be to develop a more explicitly pluralistic attitude within Christianity. This would enable us to be more open to acknowledge the meanings of other faiths. Our acceptance of the OT as canon implies such an openness. From the other side of this issue, the gospel elements of Jewish tradition remind us that Christianity may be described as a type of Reformed Judaism.

ii) But at what points are the claims of Christian faith radically distinct?

These kinds of questions are not new, and they are not peculiar to Christianity. Practically, they are not going to be determined prior to our engagement with other faiths but only in the journey of drawing near. The MFE in most countries of the world, especially in 'western' countries such as Australia, is a challenge to every faith that takes root. The topic of this reflection is equally an issue for Muslims in Australia, and Islam has its own account to give. For this reason, the MFE calls not just for an exchange of views and information about beliefs and practice but also for **a common exploration** of what the protocols of confession and mission should be in a respectful MFE.

My view is that Christians, engaging with each other, can fruitfully identify the questions of pluralism and distinctiveness as important aspects of our own agenda. **We can also acknowledge this agenda to our partners in dialogue from other faiths.** We can be open hearted in dialogue and cooperation and allow our existential engagement, alongside our inherited tradition (creeds), to inform our conclusions.

This proposed strategy, I believe, is supported by elements in the New Testament, despite the fact that for much of twenty centuries, Christians have been burdened with the concern to ensure that we all believe the same things, and that all non-Christians would accept Christ according to an established pattern. This concern has often been at odds with the strategy Paul himself adopted towards Greeks (and Romans), summed up in his famous words 'to be all things to all men that I might save some'. Paul's advice is relevant both to our method of responding to the current MFE and to our message.

As for **Paul's method**, we see him going into places of debate to engage Greek philosophers and opening discussion with them by reference to their agendas and viewpoints, e.g., as represented by the statue to an unknown God (Acts 17). We also discover that he was free to speak the word relevant for the conversation in hand, and did not feel the need to present a total theological system on every occasion.

As to **Paul's message**, we find him offering certain language that is as accessible to us today as then, when he speaks of God as 'not far from any one of us; God in whom we live and move and have our being'. For me, this God concept complements the Johanine language regarding the Spirit, breathed into the disciples by Jesus, and the powerful implication that God lives and moves and has God's being in us. These are metaphors of a God who infuses all creation. For dialogue within the MFE, **Christians have a mandate to choose the language and metaphors that will connect with others most fruitfully.**

Perhaps the greatest challenge for Christian apologetics in the MFE is what we have called the two natures of Christ. I take this as an example to which the above discussion may be applied. I wonder if the metaphor of infusion can transcend the dichotomy created by the language of 'over against

'humanity'? Can Christians be satisfied to affirm 'God was in Christ, reconciling the world, ... not counting our sins .... and giving us the message of reconciliation' (2 Cor 5:19) without having to proclaim up front the more developed traditions of Christ as Son of God, or Christ as an offering for sin. I struggled with Paul's language of sacrificial atonement and propitiation until I realised that Paul chose these metaphors because they were understood by Jewish Christians. They have dominated Catholic and Evangelical theology but perhaps we do not have to absolutise nor perpetuate them. Nor does the Johanne language that 'God sent his son into the world' bind us to images of God coming from somewhere else to intervene in this world. Jesus offered us the metaphor of the wind to convey that the intervention of God is subtle and mysterious: we know not whence it comes or whither it goes but in mystery, and through human agency, God influences the creation.

The third element of the MFE I want to acknowledge is my experience of a sense of call in the task of interfaith cooperation. This has some elements of the call of a missionary to evangelise but it might be described as an Obama version – because I pursue it within a sense of mutual respect and a mutual desire to learn from each other. In the process of speaking to Year 10 students I discovered that while Jews, Christians and Muslims have irreconcilable differences in theology, we do not need to get a divorce! That is because of our mutual concern for the 'children' (to extend the metaphor), meaning the urgency to bear witness to God, in whatever way, to young people growing up in a near pagan life style. This is because I share with my interfaith partners:

- i) an understanding that life is the gift of a gracious God;
- ii) the values of spiritual devotion and forgiveness; and
- iii) a whole of life commitment to peace and justice for all.

I believe God has given me a vocation to work with others in JCMA. This endeavour has become my one ministry commitment outside of congregational ministry. All this means that I count the MFE to be of huge significance for the Christian confession of faith and mission. In the case of high school students, if we did not approach schools with a shared vision to witness, none of our three faiths would get a hearing individually. In fact our presentation elicits a very enthusiastic response from teachers and students who are surprised by the mutual respect and common perspectives we present to them.

I would enjoy opportunities to speak and discuss more fully the issues above, perhaps in the context of study discussion workshops in Uniting Churches. You are welcome to email me: paultonson@optusnet.com.au .