

The significance of the multifaith environment (MFE) for the Christian confession of faith and mission

A Response to Paul Tonson by Sandy Yule

There is much to commend and support in Paul Tonson's paper, 'The significance of the multifaith environment (MFE) for the Christian confession of faith and mission'. We should unreservedly commend his practice in providing seminars for schools through the Jews, Christians and Muslims Association (JCMA), as he describes it. We should also agree with his general rationale for this practice, as I read him, which is that we live in a multi-faith environment and that this should be seen as a good gift from God rather than as evidence of human faithlessness and sin. His appeal to the Old Testament¹ I find thoroughly persuasive (and refreshingly orthodox). I would even support his apologetic stance of not leading with our most obnoxiously distinctive doctrines in interfaith engagement, though our conversation partners will usually call us to give account of these traditional matters if they really care about dialogue (and more on this later). He presents a fine account of his sense of calling into interfaith co-operation.

Where I find room for further discussion is in relation to the large questions introduced by the title of the paper. Paul Tonson makes a good case for a positive acceptance of the MFE as a 'given' for our Christian self-understanding and practice. But is this no more than a sociological fact that we should deplore but accept as a given? Is it, as some would argue, a sign that not every knee acknowledges Christ, requiring us to redouble our efforts for mass conversion? Or is it, as Paul suggests, a positive gift from God for the restoration of the brokenness of the world? This is worth asking explicitly because this latter suggestion opens the way to further important questions. How should Christians recognize value in faiths other than Christianity? Indeed, how should Christians recognize value in the various forms of Christian faith other than that in which we were personally formed? It seems to me that the general form of an acceptable answer would be the discernment that religions have value in assisting communities and individuals to turn to God, with consequent beneficial changes to their lives.

For us in the UCA, the prime question to which the Basis of Union was offered as an answer was, 'What is the faith of the church?' It was assumed that even if we humans could not expect a definitive answer to this question before Christ's second coming in glory, the question itself made sense. I suggest that we need to recover a sense that our theological thinking should be ecumenical, meaning that it is conducted in the company of the whole church and – at least implicitly – the whole world. I believe that we should affirm that faithfulness to Christ requires of us an openness to co-operation and dialogue with all people and all traditions, much as Paul Tonson suggests,

In Christian understanding, God is One, and God is living. Christian mission does not make sense if it is not based upon an attempt to join in with the pre-existing mission of God. God calls us before we call upon God. Similarly, God is One, but our human ideas of God are many. The reality of God is served by faithful human witness, but it cannot be said to be dependent upon human witness. Our ideas of God become more

¹ I prefer to continue our traditional designation rather than use one of the modern alternatives, on the understanding that it is unacceptably ageist to regard 'old' as a pejorative term and that supercessionism is not necessarily implied by the term 'New Testament'.

faithful as we attend to the truth in the witness of other human traditions and other individual voices.

Does the mission of God aim at a situation in which every person in the world is a Christian?² Many Christians think that the answer to this question has to be 'Yes', as 'being saved' is equated with 'being Christian'. I believe that it is proper to think that the answer is 'No'. Christian faith should be seen as a special calling from God for explicit partnership in God's redemptive work rather than as a secure destination, an achieved heavenly reward. This understanding leaves room for a positive role for religions other than Christian in God's universal mission.

The identification of salvation with being a Christian goes back to the old belief that there was no hope of salvation outside the Christian Church.

Is there any formula more well known than 'Outside the Church there is no salvation'? It would not be difficult to find equivalents in the New Testament; but it is found for the first time in its present form, two examples of it at the same moment, about the year 250, on the pen of two confessors of the faith whom one cannot know without loving, Origen at Alexandria and St. Cyprian at Carthage. Applying the words to people who live after Christ's coming, they mean them in an absolute, exclusive sense.³

Congar points out that this belief depends upon the understanding that there is no salvation except through Jesus Christ. 'There is salvation in no-one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved' (Acts 4:12). Rather than accept that an affirmation of pluralism requires the denial of the teaching of texts such as this, Congar seeks another resolution. 'The whole question turns on this point: is there or is there not another way of honouring the principle of the oneness of the mediator of salvation?'⁴ His answer is that, not only is there another way, but that this traditional exclusivist understanding is itself excluded by official Roman Catholic teaching.

Catholic theology has kept the formula 'Outside the Church...', but it must be recognized that it is now given a sense very different from that of its originators, Origen and St. Cyprian. ... Briefly, it is no longer a question of applying the formula to any concrete person whatever, but of stating objectively that the Church of Christ is commissioned and qualified to carry salvation, brought by Jesus Christ, to *all* men (sic); and that she alone, as Christ's Church, is so commissioned and qualified. So the formula is no longer to be regarded as answering the question 'Who will be saved?' but as answering the question 'What is it that is commissioned to discharge the ministry of salvation?'⁵

There is much room for further discussion of what this teaching means and implies. It seems to me to be important and helpful teaching in confirming that salvation is of God and that we humans are not given to know its mysteries before the appointed time. It is also helpful in affirming the pivotal role of the church in the salvation of the world without premature glorification of the church. Our present Christian knowledge

² This question was asked by Fr. Tom Michel at a workshop on interfaith dialogue at the Christian Conference of Asia Assembly in 2005. His answer was 'No', along the lines that I am setting out here.

³ Yves Congar. The Wide World My Parish: Salvation and its Problems. London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1961, p.95.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Congar, p.98.

and experience is not worthless and does play a part in our salvation and that of others. We believe ourselves to be part of Christ's church and therefore part of the divinely created means for the realization of salvation for us and for all. Can we then go on to think that we are of use to God through our loving openness to all the 'others' whom we encounter and that positive relationships are central to the inclusion of finite human beings in the very life of the Trinitarian God whom we know through Christ?

If we can think this, it would seem to open up the possibility that God is even now at work in many other traditions and experiences which Christian faith can now recognize as valuable realizations of community in which the Holy Spirit of God is not absent. This is not a matter upon which we are called to judge in any abstract and general way, but we are called to judge who and what we welcome into our own circle. Friendship leads to sharing, which would seem to be of God. There is a blessing in finding new friends, even as we know that there can be testing times when friends seem to go astray or turn away from us in our hour of need. I believe that, as Christians, we should have sharing and friendship as our default position, which we maintain until there is reason to do otherwise.

On this understanding, Christian faith is seen as a special calling, similar to the calling of individual prophets. The focus of God's redemptive purpose can be seen as the formation of loving persons living in loving community. This should be what people see when they encounter the life of the Christian Church. The goal of this loving communion has been ultimately revealed to be an incorporation into the very life of the Triune God. In the gracious providence of God, all communities and persons have some share, however partial, in this spiritual fullness. The special calling of Christians is to follow the way of Jesus, for which this is the main game. Christians are called to conscious and intentional discipleship in this way.

The consequences of this discussion for our attitude towards our present multi-faith environment seem reasonably clear. We are free to leave the judgements and the reality of final salvation to God, an attitude compatible with the clear teachings that we have inherited, that there is a salvation for which to hope and that there is God as the agent and judge of this salvation. We are free to approach all whom we meet in the hope of achieving an open and ultimately loving communication, despite the immense barriers of culture, race, class and psychological damage. We are free to hope for the revelation of good will even from our enemies when we do approach them in this open way. The potential for rejection and suffering is obviously great when we go out into our damaged world in this open spirit. Yet it seems clear to me that this is nothing other than the way of the cross.

If we are proselytising, it is for the practice of the gospel values of love, forgiveness, truth, peace and justice, not for others to become like us and join our organization. It is not easy to maintain this open stance when others operate less openly, so that we cannot avoid facing difficult and at times murky choices about what to do. Yet it seems clear that we should be affirming the general right of others to define their own religious and social identities with the assistance of our respect and that of the wider society, which implies that we have some responsibility also to support and influence this wider acceptance.

Yet it is insufficient to pretend that we can maintain this open attitude without extraordinary help. How can we avoid seeing how naked and vulnerable we become when we let our defences down? This is where I believe that we need to maintain a strong version of Christian faith in the God who strengthens the fainthearted and

brings the dead to newness of life. It is precisely because God is that we find the possibility of radical openness to 'the other'. We bear witness to the truth and grace of God most fully by living in the power of truth and love, as forgiven sinners. This is a matter which goes beyond the possibilities inherent in verbal witness, important as this can be. We can note the relative silence of Jesus on his way to death. Love does not remove us from vulnerability and potential suffering. Indeed, it often seems to pitch us into the middle of both. Yet Christian experience, time and again, tells of the surprising strength that can come in support as we follow this path. Perhaps the real giftedness to be found in the reality of our multi-faith environment is the pressure that it brings on us to depend upon God for guidance and discernment in living within the radical openness that it provides.

This brings me to the one point of potential tension that I have found with what Paul Tonson has written. I see no need to disown traditional theological doctrines such as the two natures of Christ because I believe that a proper understanding of them confirms and supports the open and loving stance that Paul and I are promoting. Believing that God was in Christ, reconciling the world to Godself, is indeed the key broad belief here. The doctrine of the two natures of Christ is an ancient attempt to make sense of this core belief (or should we say experience here?). Finding acceptably modern language to present this core belief is indeed highly desirable for apologetic purposes, but I see no need to regard this as a forced choice, 'either the modern explanation or the ancient one', as Paul seems to suggest. We should be looking for the empowerment of faith in which we can enter into open dialogue, not only with sympathetic Jews and Muslims, but also with conservative Christians, thus becoming more competent as bridge builders between communities that suffer from centuries-old separations and misunderstandings. We need each other in this communal bridge building and I conclude by reiterating my appreciation for Paul Tonson's significant contribution to this through the JCMA and through his reflections on our multi-faith environment.