

WHY DO CHRISTIANS ENGAGE IN DIALOGUE WITH OTHER FAITHS?

BY REV PETER LOCKHART

The primacy of Jesus Christ

The Christian faith is grounded in the claims surrounding the person and work of Jesus Christ who is “the way, the truth and the life.”¹ The Uniting Church acknowledges this central doctrine of the church in the third paragraph of the Basis of Union as well as indicating the universal nature of God’s call to all people in and through him. “To God in Christ all people are called to respond in faith. To this end God has sent forth the Spirit that people may trust God as their Father, and acknowledge Jesus as Lord. The whole work of salvation is effected by the sovereign grace of God alone.”²

This Christocentric faith affirmed by the Uniting Church echoes the revelation contained within the New Testament concerning Jesus identity as God’s Son, who is the beginning and end of all things, that is to say the alpha and the omega (Rev 21:6).³ These assertions concerning Jesus identity as the first truth⁴ and as the end of all things are of fundamental importance in considering the relationship that Christianity has with other religions. George Sumner in his consideration of the relationship between Christianity and other faiths rightly asserts: “The revelation of Christ serves as the norm by which reflection on alien claims and communities casts its backward gaze.”⁵

Yet not only does Jesus remain central as the truth in whom and through whom we engage with others of different religious or spiritual understandings, as Christians we also understand that the future of all people is tied to the person of Jesus Christ. For example, in John’s gospel when some Greeks, presumably gentiles, came seeking Jesus he taught the disciples that all people will be lifted into his death (20:12-32). In this sense whatever life story a person may find their life embedded in the scriptures teach that ultimately each person and each story will find its culmination in Jesus. Moreover, any truths found within the competing claims of other religions and the society at large therefore derive from Jesus who is the truth of all things.⁶

Our knowledge of Jesus and our knowing of Jesus in this way thus sets the context for the engagement of Christians with people not simply of other recognised religious or spiritual traditions but any of those whose truth claims compete with those of Jesus who is the first and the last.⁷ This context of Jesus as the first and the last raises a number of important issues. Firstly, it recognises that those who are not of the Christian faith mean more to God and by implication the church than simply becoming objects of our mission. That is to say people that are to be either converted or served for the fulfilment of the demands of our faith. Secondly, it resists a collapse into a pluralism

¹ In stating this I wish to affirm the orthodox Christian position held by the Uniting Church in Australia concerning the person and work of Jesus Christ and note that in beginning any engagement with those who are clearly not of the Christian faith identifying with the faith of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church as defended by the Nicene and Apostles Creeds is paramount.

² *Basis of Union* Paragraph 3

³ “The great and definitive battles in the history of Christian theology have shared the defense of... [the] assertion... that he [Jesus] is ‘the First and the Last.’” George R. Sumner *The First and the Last: The claim of Jesus Christ and the claim of Other Religious Traditions* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004) p.17.

⁴ For Christianity “Christ, the *prima veritas* or “first truth,” though born ‘late in time,’ orders all that follows and precedes.” Sumner *The First and the Last* p. 14.

⁵ Sumner *The First and the Last* p.15.

⁶ “Christ is the One toward whom the [alien] narratives run and from whom their truth (to the extent that they are true) derives.” Sumner *The First and the Last* p.16-17.

⁷ Whilst other doctrine may be the locus of a particular engagement “no matter what locus may serve as a better point of comparison for another claim, that locus stands in immediate relationship to the claim about Jesus Christ.” Sumner *The First and the Last* p. 18.

which undermine the very truth claims of Jesus identity as the first and last by suggesting that there is some kind of higher order.

The Scriptures and other world views

The Bible does not present a simple and coherent vision of the relationship between Israel and other religions nor the early church and the surrounding cultures. There are passages which speak of the separation and isolation of God's people in both the New and Old Testament. (Exodus 33:16, Leviticus 20:24, 2 Corinthians 6:14). These have been used by Christian communities to justify segregation and separation from people of other religious traditions and beliefs.

However in contrast to these passages there are numerous passages and examples of the recognition of people outside the boundaries of God's people, even ones which elevate them as examples to God's people. Remembering the covenant we also remember the Israel was called to be a light among the nations (Isaiah 42:6) and that God's future involved a vision which drew the nations together (Isaiah 25:6-9). To this extent we see that "other communities are tangentially related to the metanarrative [the story of God, Israel and Jesus Christ], to the extent that Israel emerges out of 'the nations,' is attacked or aided by them, witnesses to them, etc."⁸

Other stories from the Old Testament challenge the notion of segregation as we see people like Ruth, a forbidden Moabite, upheld as an example to the Israelites to the point she is given a whole book. Similarly Job, a man from the land of Uz, is presented as upright and blameless in God's eyes. We also find that the Israelites were commanded to include resident aliens in their festivals (Deuteronomy 14:29) and to leave the edge of their field for the poor and the alien (Leviticus 19:10) Whilst there can be no doubt of the particular covenantal relationship God formed with Israel neither can we doubt that God continued to relate to and have concern for all the nations.

In the New Testament God opens the good news and the possibility of inclusion in the people of God to all the nations in and through Jesus.⁹ The deconstruction of these barriers is reflected in very language of the gospel writers. For example, "Hellenistic speculation about the *Logos* finds a new use to describe the incarnation of Christ in John 1, and the Stoic idea of 'conscience' in Romans 8 to illustrate the dynamics of grace. In each case a concept or term was borrowed from the surrounding environment and adapted creatively for the purpose of saying something" about God and God's people.¹⁰ More than this, the New Testament also contains the indication of God's activity in those outside the recognised believers.¹¹ In John's gospel it is recorded that Jesus himself enigmatically speaks of other sheep not of this pen who will be gathered eventually into the one fold (14: 16).

Whilst there does appear to a range of views expressed within the scriptures what appears evident is that whilst the Christian knowing of God is particular the object of our knowledge is universal and that the God who made all things continues to relate to all peoples. This is not to validate a view that says all religions worship the same God and we are simply on different pathways but rather to indicate that whilst Jesus is the first truth there is a level of mystery in terms of how God relates to those who do not know him to be as such.

⁸ Sumner *The First and the Last* p.16.

⁹ Cf. Colossians 3.

¹⁰ Sumner *The First and the Last* p.13.

¹¹ In Acts 17 "a period of worshipping 'an unknown God' precedes the moment of hearing the gospel proclaimed. In John 1 the Word is at work before becoming flesh. In Romans 1-2, the pagans have some knowledge of 'the law written in their hearts,' but still they are under God's wrath, awaiting redemption in Christ." Sumner *The First and the Last* p.16.

The Challenge of our Context

The Australian context is a changing landscape in terms of religious and spiritual belief and it would be naïve to say that Australia has ever simply been a Christian Nation.¹² Contributing to this shift include the continued post enlightenment rejection of God, the development of pluralist understandings, influxes of refugees and a growing interest in spirituality particular among Gen Y.

In identifying dialogue partners it must be acknowledged that some of the emerging people and groups who identify themselves as spiritual do not gather institutionally and are not formed by a cohesive set of beliefs even though some networks appear to exist. It would be difficult to establish any official dialogue with such a multifarious group yet the importance of this growing group and how we engage with them is yet to be seen. Whilst there are issues with this group what is more accessible is the possibility of official dialogue with other religions that do have institutional lives. For the Uniting Church at a National Level there are already some Inter Faith Dialogues in motion.

Approaching the dialogue table in the current Australian context involves becoming more clearly aware of what we believe and what agenda we have in approaching the table. The importance of being clear about who we are and what we believe is paramount in our Western culture because as Alasdair MacIntyre identifies there is an epistemological crisis in Western Christianity, he asserts “pluralism is the presenting symptom for a wider epistemological illness in Western Christianity.”¹³ Pluralism presents a number of problems including the failure of those who profess such views to understand “that theirs is one more particular position emerging from assumptions embedded in Western Enlightenment thought.”¹⁴ Moreover, that “Pluralism is complicit in the commodification of religion.”¹⁵ The notion of Jesus as the first truth describe above should set the agenda of our engagement, not some idea that there is some other bigger truth as certain pluralist approaches would want us to believe.

This is important to hold on to given that those approaching the dialogue table from the other side in many cases will not have been shaped by Western philosophical thought and will hold their truths as absolute, as absolutely as we should hold on to that Jesus is the first and the last.

Why should The Synod Ecumenical Relationships Committee be the group to take this on?

Matters of doctrine are normal handled by the Assembly so the question might be raised why should the Synod engage in this task? The answer is to build more local relationships and to assist congregations in their engagement with the different faith groups around them. In an increasingly religiously diverse culture it is important that Christians sharpen their own faith stance and are empowered to live with people who hold diverging views in peace. By acting as a point of dialogue and think tank for inter-religious and spiritual matters the SERC hopes to resource congregations in the local settings as well as provide a point of contact for other faiths when opportunities arise.

The Synod could opt for a separate committee in order that the imperative of Christian unity is not reduced in any way however the current SERC has already begun engaging in processes of dialogue and reflection in this area, in particular with the Islamic community, and believes it is equipped to delineate the two priorities and accord but the attention needed.

¹² Ian Breward explores the history of Christianity in *Australia: The Most Godless Place under Heaven?* (Adelaide: Lutheran Publishing House, 1988).

¹³ Sumner *The First and the Last* p.5.

¹⁴ Sumner *The First and the Last* p.2.

¹⁵ Sumner *The First and the Last* p.3.

Conclusion: Giving witness to what we believe, seeking peace and justice

As Christians a fundamental call in our relationship with God is to be a light among the nations. In seeking to engage with other faiths we go seeking to witness to what we believe about Jesus Christ. In this the goal is not necessarily conversion nor is it to serve some common higher good based on humanitarian grounds, we go because Jesus calls us to witness and so we engage seeking to witness to the love of God, the peace and reconciliation that is offered in and through Christ with the knowledge that Jesus is end for all peoples.¹⁶

Through engaging we can learn about each other and listen for God speaking to us through sometimes surprising means, just as God communicated to the Israelites through the Moabite Ruth. We can also prepare ourselves to better understand the language and stories of those around us which does provide tools for engaging in the mission of sharing the good news in word and in deed.¹⁷ In addition, we can understand ourselves and our own doctrines and beliefs more clearly.¹⁸

Whilst the agenda of our engagement with our religions is yet to be fully formed our dialogue should not be reduced to an overemphasis on process which is unprepared to deal with real issues and prefers to remain in the comfortable space of listening and talking to on another but to seek more than this.¹⁹

¹⁶ “The Church’s call is to serve that end: to be a fellowship of reconciliation, a body within which the diverse gifts of its members are used for the building up of the whole, an instrument through which Christ may work and bear witness to himself.” *Basis of Union* Paragraph 3.

¹⁷ “The best practice of missionaries after the Reformation will constantly keep account of this, trying to adapt the Gospel to the culture and traditions of the people it is being preached to. One might make this general point, that the preaching of the Gospel, it is to be other than an expression of the felt superiority of the preacher, demands this close and respectful attention to the life of the addressees as it is prior to the grace which the gospel will bring.” Charles Taylor *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007) p.94-95.

¹⁸ “Each community must generate its own ‘doctrines about alien claims’ of other communities in a manner consistent with its own beliefs.” Sumner *The First and the Last* p.9. “The church witnesses to the goal, but must not be confused with it. In other words, the church must, in any such theological construction, retain some sort of kinship with its non-Christian neighbours, since it too is under judgement. It fallibly and imperfectly reflects God’s revealed truth, while at the same time it has an ambassadorial role on behalf of Christ the goal.” Sumner *The First and the Last* p.19.

¹⁹ In terms of ‘dialogue’ Sumner suggests that “Too often the term connotes an emphasis on process over content; too often it soft-pedals conflicts between traditions in the face of a universal or future horizon of mystery.” A minimal definition is also inadequate, dialogue needs to be more than “the willingness to listen and talk with adherents of other traditions.” Sumner *The First and the Last* p.211.