TABLE TALK

THE RIGHT TO SPEAK:
EVANGELICAL DIALOGUE IN AN INTOLERANT WORLD

Introduction

I have read and reflected with interest upon Dan Strange's 'Table Talk,' *Defending the Indefensible: The exclusivity of Jesus Christ in an intolerant world*.[1] In large measure I would concur with his position on "exclusivism," though his threefold categorisation (Exclusivism, inclusivism, pluralism) is now considered inadequate. Most pertinently I accept his observation that "Evangelicals have a lot more thinking to do in this area." and his endorsement of a '*bold humility*.'

However, where I suggest our constituency fails most in its contribution to the interfaith debate is in providing a practical model for just how Evangelicals should relate to those of other religions, and the cultures formed by those religions, in the social life of the public square. Such a contribution to any dictionary of theology article would seem to me to be vital in today's world. In other words, our emphasis is persistently upon *missiology*, which is consumed with evangelism and the saving of lost souls. In many respects this is an understandable, and laudable, emphasis, endeavouring to concur with Jesus' mandate to disciple the nations (Matt. 28:19), and in keeping with the Evangelical history of social engagement,[2] but this pre-occupation is myopic. Furthermore, prevalent models for interfaith relations have been genuinely difficult for Evangelicals to engage with without considerable compromise to fundamental convictions, because they have centred on finding theological common ground for worship.

On a theological, and a pastoral, level, therefore, Evangelicals have gained a deserved, *but not always* deserved, reputation for indifference, isolation, and hostility, rather than for enthusiastic toleration, understanding, and friendship in this vexing area of life. This is deeply unfortunate and is a major impediment to serious theological (and therefore, ultimately, missiological) engagement. Liberal and postmodern models of ecumenical and interfaith relations have proved inadequate for including the more particularist theological and pastoral contributions of Evangelicals. This is because those models have encouraged, consciously or otherwise, polarisation and not convergence. Either one had to be

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[1] Daniel Strange, "Defending the Indefensible: The exclusivity of Jesus Christ in an intolerable world." *Table Talk*, Issue 25, Summer 2009.

[2] See Frank Prochaska, *Christianity and Social Service in Modern Britain: The Distinguishing Spirit*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

persuaded to find a consensus based on a kind of lowest common denominator, thereby sacrificing essential theological convictions, or one had to be effectively 'converted' to a particular Confession, and thereby avoid relating.

Surprisingly, for a constituency that majors on history (e.g. Reformed historical theology, church history), we seem strangely morally oblivious to aspects of our history which do not sit comfortably with our missiological, compassionate gospel of grace. We tend to a rather selective memory when it comes to history! The resurgence of religious fundamentalist militancy within Western society is a stark, and dangerous, reminder to Christians of their historical blind-spots, which those militants of other religions see only too vividly, and exploit with lethal force. The fact, in brief, is Christians have acted as offenders as much as being offended through history – or at least that is how it is perceived in the public square.[3]
As Grace Davie has alerted us,

> The cataclysmic shock of September 11, 2001, and the subsequent bombings in Bali (twice), Madrid, and London have altered our lives forever, and with them our understandings of the concepts in question. The war in Iraq has had a similar effect. Sadly, it is not only the Muslim communities in Europe that have suffered as a result; anyone "not white" or "not Christian" has been at the receiving end of prejudice and at times of physical violence. Post-9/11, it has become harder rather than easier to assume goodwill in our attempts to build an accepting and mutually considerate society. [4]

Dan Strange rightly observes that one of the most serious threats to civil well-being today comes from violent religious extremism, particularly in the form of militant Islam.[5] There is a body of literature suggestive of such extremism influencing young British Muslims who are disillusioned by the current low moral state of the West, and wars against Islamic enemies.[6] In the history of religious militants there are no innocents, Christian or otherwise.

From a very practical point of view this socio-historical factor raises a significant issue for the Affinity constituency, not least because of a fast changing British society where the collapse of hegemonic colonial Christianity means today it has to "... compete for allegiance on the open market of religions and ideologies." Geographical separation of the nations has been superseded by diversity in the locale, so that, "In Western countries Christians, Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs, and Buddhists rub shoulders on every street. Also, serious Christians have discovered that those "other" religions are, incongruously, both more different from, and more similar to Christianity than they had thought."[7]

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[3] Perception is as strong as reality in real life. So, the perception of Christianity's role in the Middle-east / Arab/Israeli conflict and its association with Bush's USA's and Blair's Britain's 'War on Terror' in Iraq and Afghanistan, is potent.

[4] Grace Davie, "Pluralism, Tolerance, and Democracy: Theory and Practice in Europe." in Thomas Banchoff. *Democracy and the New Religious Pluralism*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 224-241.

[5] Though we still must not overlook the threat of a resurgence of militancy from the Northern Ireland theatre, nor from right wing Christian groups.

[6] For example see Nafeez Mosaddeq Ahmed, *The London Bombings: An Independent Inquiry*, (London: Duckworth, 2006); Milan Rai, *7/7: The London Bombings, Islam, and the Iraq War*, (London: Pluto, 2006); Nigel Biggar, "Saving the Secular: The Public Vocation of Moral Theology." An Inaugural Lecture delivered before the University of Oxford. (22 April 2008).

[7] David J Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*, (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2003), 475. In the 2001 Census 76·8% of people in the UK identified themselves as having a religious faith, including 46 million Christian, 1·6 million Muslims, 0·56 million Hindus, 0·37 million Sikhs, 0·27

My concern is that unless Evangelicals relate with other religions in the interest of social cohesion, unless we are prepared to demonstrate our gospel through action and social living, we can too easily assume a right to disciple the nations we just do not have. We have just pushed our dirty linen into the back room on the assumption no-one will notice.

I have had to wrestle with this in my own research project over the past three years, where I have been exploring an Evangelical theology of Major Incident response in the UK. In this context, interfaith relationships are both demanded, and vitally necessary in my view. Therefore, controversial though it may be, I would like to place into the Affinity constituency a contribution to a debate on interfaith relations. It is a model for pursuing such relations in the interests of a socially cohesive *friendship*, which, in turn, could provide us with the right to speak in terms of our Christian evangelistic mission, but does not have that end necessarily in view. It is important (all the more so for this constituency) to emphasise this is not a model for direct acts of interfaith *worship*, but for an engaged living together. Yet, having emphasised this, it also assumes a *'bold humility'* of recognising that we do not know all there is to know of even our own Christian faith, and God can bring understanding to our constituency from surprising quarters!

My model combines a synergetic relationship between a Christian socio-political theory called Principled Pluralism with two embryonic practices in ecumenical and interfaith relations: Scriptural Reasoning and Civic Networking. I can introduce each one only with almost insulting brevity here.

Principled Pluralism (PP)

My dream is, ultimately, that this could form the civic, or political (with a small 'p') basis for social cohesion in multifaith institutions, such as Local Government, Emergency Planning departments and the NHS, but, meanwhile, it could be the basis upon which the Evangelical community insists its own civic discourse and action takes place. Principled pluralism has been explored as a "... stance towards the plural religious affiliations" of the state. Thus, "Its central aim is that the role of the state in a religiously diverse society is to maintain a public square equally open to contributions from many faiths rather than overtly prefer or privilege any one of them, even Christianity."[8] As an alternative to the Christian nation model, with its validation of Christianity as the preferred particular in the national public square, PP attempts to provide a theological justification for endorsing the square as neither naked (secular) nor sacred (Christian nation/theocracy), but civil.[9] This means that there are theological reasons for the public square giving equal rights

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million Jews, 0·15 million Buddhists, and 0·18 million who describe their faith as "other". ("Religion in the UK," Office of National Statistics. [cited September 2008] Online: http://tinyurl.com/a6b2m).

[8] Jonathan Chaplin, "The Bible, the State and Religious Diversity: Theological Foundations for 'Principled Pluralism.'" A paper delivered at a meeting of the Religion, Culture & Communication group of the Tyndale Fellowship, in Cambridge, July 2008, n.p. Chaplin has developed his ideas of PP (or Procedural Secularism) in his *Talking God*. He acknowledges Rowan Williams' term, "procedural secularism" (in contrast to "programmatic secularism") as a secular equivalent for what he prefers as "Principled Pluralism."

[9] The Christian Nation model is that espoused by Prof. Oliver O'Dovan in his *Desire of the Nations*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

to all religions and none; where every right one faith might assert is at once a right for the others too.

Ultimately, my model is birthed in Christian theology, which maintains fairness and equity for all. I emphasise that it is not intended to constitute some surreptitious path to a theocracy, though it acknowledges its Christian foundation, since foundational neutrality is not an option. In so far as it is a form of socio-political discourse it is peculiarly suited to an area of social life that has become highly politicised, namely interfaith relations. PP has been notably mirrored in the *Evangelical Manifesto: A Declaration of Evangelical Identity and Public Commitment* (the US context is not overlooked!).[10]

Thus, PP endorses a hospitable, civil public square, where all can come and make their contribution, irrespective of how fervently religious or irreligious they are. Working with the common civic virtues of compassion and love, PP also values upholding strong "truth" claims (by all parties) while abandoning Constantinian programmes of institutional coercion or enforcement. It ensures it is possible to endorse pluralism without relativism. The right to believe anything does not mean that anything believed is right. In fact PP avers the right to propound *and* the right to be critiqued and judged. PP is about the provision of a civil public square and the rights of all, even those with whom we may fervently disagree. That the concept of pluralism is Christian in nature is openly avowed, but this does not require a Christian nationhood to be operative.[11] Its application of the Golden Rule (Matt. 7:12) extends an open invitation to all faiths and none to co-operate in the public sphere to make religious liberty practical and religious persecution rare. A Christian principled pluralism will endorse a commitment to both truth and justice – "a gracious yet firm insistence upon Jesus Christ as the one Lord for all and a concern for justice that actively protects the rights of religious others to believe and practice as they do."[12] Applied in the context of major incident response for Christians, PP actually *encourages* a multifaith public response. That is to say, if Christian responders are acting as civically, on behalf of their particular faith community, they should be comfortable with a multifaith response in principle, and be distinctly uncomfortable if they are not!

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[10] Evangelical Manifesto Steering Group. *An Evangelical Manifesto: A Declaration of Evangelical Identity and Public Commitment*. Washington D.C. May 7, 2008.Timothy Jackson argues for the same out of his concept of "prophetic liberalism", in Timothy Jackson, *The Priority of Love,* 62-67. His arguments fit those of PP, when he quotes William Galston, "Civic tolerance of deep differences is perfectly compatible with unswerving belief in the correctness of one's own way of life." (William A. Galston, Liberal Purposes: Goods, Virtues, and Diversity in the Liberal State, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 253, in Jackson, *The Priority of Love*, 66). See also John G. Stackhouse, Jr., *Making the Best of it: Following Christ in the Real World*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 2008.

[11] *An Evangelical Manifesto* is explicitly Christian, and broadly Evangelical, as its Steering Group membership exhibits. The Steering Group (US) comprises: Timothy George (Beeson Divinity School); Os Guiness (author/social critic); John Huffman (Christianity Today International); Richard Mouw (Fuller Seminary); Jesse Miranda (Vanguard University); David Neff (Christianity Today); Richard Ohman (Businessman); Larry Ross (Larry Ross Communications); Dallas Willard (University of Southern California). Evangelical Manifesto website. Cited September 2008. Online: http://tinyurl.com/58ysux. In Os Guinness, "Making the World Safe for Diversity", Guinness reflects exclusively upon the American context (choosing the term "chartered pluralism"). The Williamsburg Charter sets out a formal agreement for PP, and reflects on it as the peculiar genius of the historic US contribution to the democratic world.

[12] Netland, *Encountering Religious Pluralism*, 347.

However, PP alone is not sufficient for the close working relationships required within a context like major incident response. On the realistic basis that society, and Government, will require a great degree of inter-dependence in major incident response, it is necessary for PP to be outworked through some methodology that brings religions and ideologies together in a form of co-operative understanding that is not disembowelled by mythical neutrality, consensus, or veiled syncretism, but reflects particularist *transparency* and *integrity* (both of which are Christian virtues). Similarly, society and Government need to acknowledge the moral and theological dilemmas that much current modernist multifaith ideology forces upon the faith communities, so that only those who have sold out to the secular terms are accepted.

Scriptural Reasoning (SR)

SR is a post-liberal embryonic practice, founded in the Judeo-Christian contexts of scholars such as George Lindbeck and Hans Frei, of the Yale Divinity School, and David Ford, leading the Cambridge Inter-faith Programme: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam in Partnership.[13] SR is a practice of inter-, and intra- faith relating that is text-based, seriously orthodox, deeply reasoning, open-ended, provisional and realistic; and which is fundamentally engaged in friendship and community formation through the medium of scripture/ideological text dialogue.

SR has been criticised as restrictive to the three "Abrahamic" faiths (a hotly disputed term in itself), very Western, and idealistic in its aims. However, I see no reason why it must remain thus necessarily, given a willingness to work with its core principles. Nor need it be confined even to religious participants. It can involve also secular parties, provided they show "... understanding and respect for how the others take their scriptures, willingness to be as vulnerable as the others in exposing their basic convictions to argument, and unwillingness to claim either an overview or a neutral vantage point." Certainly, its post-liberal focus upon studying the religious text(s) in an intra-textual manner, with a view to understanding each other's faith in a realistic and honest fashion, has synergy with PP and Evangelical passion for plain text Bible study. It comes as a post-liberal challenge to contemporary Evangelical biblical illiteracy.[14] It retains a traditional focus upon reason, but rejects the liberal false bid for a neutral consensus. Jeff Bailey captures this when he states,

> The assumption behind each study is not that some underlying consensus exists beneath or behind the faiths represented – some kind of broad, "fourth way" that transcends the particularities of each faith with a kind of lowest-common denominator, all-roads-lead-to-the-same-place-consensus. The prevailing assumption is that each faith must go deeper into its own tradition, and not ignore the deep differences that exist – while, at the *same* time, believing that one must engage in increasing depth with those of other faiths. These commitments are mutually exclusive.[15]

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[13] Also William Taylor, of the Grubb Institute of behavioural studies Ltd., London

[14] Ben Witherington, "Ignorance is Bliss? Biblical Illiteracy in the West," n.p. On Witherington's web blog. Posted Saturday, August 25, 2007. Cited September 2008. Online: http://tinyurl.com/2mt5qq.

[15] Jeff Bailey, "Engaged Particularity: Interfaith Scriptural Reasoning and the Politics of Small Achievements." A paper delivered at a meeting of the Religion, Culture & Communication group of the Tyndale Fellowship, in Cambridge (July 2008): n.p. See also Daniel W. Hardy, "The Rules of Scriptural Reasoning." (A Response to Peter Ochs). *The Journal of Scriptural Reasoning* 2 (May 2002): n.p.likens modernity's obsession for "a monolithic 'centralized' culture" to that of the European Economic Community.

Thus, *resolution* of differences is not important, *understanding* is. Focussing upon particular crises of suffering, high quality argument is preferred to tolerance, and there is no need for apology for arguing from a particular place. Rather than avoiding points of textual, hermeneutical, theological and philosophical confrontation, SR seeks a scriptural path directly to those points in dialogue with scripture, and one often comes away more deeply conscious of the degree of difference than agreement. SR has been described as both midrashic and radically democratic, implying disagreement and argument can in fact be productive.[16]

Potentially, SR holds out a practice for the social cohesion PP endorses, modelling a meeting place for honest openness, the right to disagree amid mutual hospitality and friendship. Because SR operates dialogically, not kerygmatically, the purpose of SR is not primarily evangelistic. It is more a way of relating together in an often hostile, divided world, of forming friendships amid diversity upon principles of common grace.[17] It is a forum for serious intertextual, and intratextual, dialogue in the pursuit of spiritual wisdom for living in a multi-faith world that is not assuming the public dominance of any faith. It addresses the dilemma facing Christians in major incident response systems today, namely, "How to remain faithfully rooted in my own Christian vision of a time-honoured truth and yet become open to and respectful of those committed to sometimes very different beliefs and values", but to the same traumatic event.[18] It is concerned with ethical cohabitation and friendship in the twenty-first century.

However, valid critiques of SR may make it still too embryonic, idealistic, and restrictive to academia to be a form of outreach into the diverse publics of the UK. It holds hope for the future, and should be encouraged by its current experiments within the academy and in pioneering forms in HM Prison Service chaplaincy, and a few local inter-faith forums.

Civic Networking

Since the need for ecumenical and interfaith relations in social cohesion is more urgent than SR can currently deliver, is there a practice that embraces PP, and foregrounds SR? I think there is, in the form of a concept that has been pioneered in the UK in the metropolitan City of Bradford by Dr Peter Lewis, called Civic Networking.[19] It seems to me that CN would find that PP provides a beneficial political and social framework for bringing together community leaders, local authorities, and law enforcement agencies, which constitutes CN, to identify and

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[16] Bailey, "Engaged Particularity," n.p.

[17] As Abraham seemed so good at doing during his journey of faith (Gen. 17-20; and the Exiles in Babylon were commanded to do, albeit in their context of judgment. Also Richard J. Mouw, *Uncommon Decency: Christian Charity in an Uncivil World*, (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1992), 104, where he warns, "We mustn't set these relationships up in such a way that our efforts will be a failure if the relationships don't develop into evangelistic opportunities."

[18] Michael S.J. Barnes, *Theology and the Dialogue of Religions*. Cambridge Studies in Christian Thought, (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2002), 3.

[19] In a US terrorist context see the work of Doug Johnston's "faith-based diplomacy" in its application to the interrogation techniques of prisoners in Iraq and Afghanistan as an alternative to other more infamous, and aggressive (illegal?) methods. (Richard Moll, "The Father of Faith-Based Diplomacy, *Christianity Today*. September 2008.

discuss issues of social concern, and to encourage *religious literacy* among policy makers and the building of *trust* through civic networking.[20]

CN could also be helpful in creating the mutual social trust, at the inter-agency and community leader levels, which would create a social and intellectual foreground from which SR could evolve outside of academia into the public square more readily. In particular, since CN has had positive socially cohesive results in Bradford and Leicester, in regard to situations where religion has been part of the problem, it would be worth exploring if it can also work beneficially in major incident response contexts where spiritual and religious issues again can be part of the problem in that they can provide the causal stimuli for certain incidents – particularly those resulting from persons/groups feeling provoked to take extreme terrorist action, and, also contexts where casualties require a controversial cross-cultural response. Thus, CN could provide a practical model for local interfaith forums in addressing the impacts of major incidents upon religiously and ethnically diverse communities and foreground a vision for greater mutual understanding.

But who, among the Evangelical/Affinity constituency, is remotely close to engaging within a local interfaith forum? The most reputable and representative of interfaith workings is the Interfaith Network for the United Kingdom (IFNUK). This was formed in 1987 to promote good relations between people of different faiths, and is a network connecting many diverse faith-based traditions and organisations. It is often used in an advisory and facilitating capacity by national and local Government emergency planning.[21] IFNUK methodology is based on the principle that *"dialogue and cooperation can only prosper if they are rooted in respectful relationships which do not blur or undermine the distinctiveness of different religious traditions."*[22] This network promotes interfaith relations for the benefit of social cohesion, not theology *per se*, within the UK. This is an important point for Evangelicals in particular, because it interrogates our theology of citizenship. Christian response to major incidents should be an expression of such a civic theology. I suggest, therefore, that there is nothing in the IFNUK guidance document for building good relations with different faiths and beliefs that does not harmonise with Christian civic and common grace theologies also, which in turn resonate with PP. Its guidance addresses the need for (Christian) respect and courtesy, for honesty, sensitivity and straightforwardness. It also gives endorsement for persuasion and evangelism .[23]

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[20] It would challenge the negatives impacts of 'turf wars', which bedevil major incident response so often.

[21] Philip Lewis, 'For the Peace of the City: Bradford a case-study' in Stephen B. Goodwin, ed. 'World Christianity in Muslim encounter,' n.p. (emphasis mine). I am grateful to Dr Lewis for sending me a copy of his chapter, and permitting me to quote and cite. Strictly speaking the organisation that national and local Government bodies will consult with most generally will be the Faith Communities Consultative Council (FCCC). This was set up in 2006 as a replacement for the "Inner Cities Religious Council and the Working Together Steering Group". Among its objectives are: strengthening the links between Government and faith communities; and facilitating the faith communities' voice(s) being heard by Government. ("Faith Communities Consultative Council (FCCC)." Dept. of Communities and Local Government. [cited September 2008] Online: http://tinyurl.com/44favw). The FCCC is mainly for the interests of social cohesion.

[22] From the Interfaith Network website: [cited September 2008] Online: http://tinyurl.com/3z87s9.

[23] See "Building Good Relations with People of Different Faiths and Beliefs," The Interfaith Network for the United Kingdom (1993, 2000, 2005), n.p. Cited September 2008: Online: http://tinyurl.com/3z87s9. Evangelism is acknowledged within the requirements of self-restraint and concern for the other's liberty and dignity reflected by: respecting an expressed wish to be left alone; avoiding imposing oneself and one's views on any who are vulnerable to exploitation; avoidance of violent actions, language threats, manipulation, improper inducements, or the mis-use of power; recognising the right of others to disagree.

I conclude neither PP, SR, or CN need be unacceptable concepts for Evangelical citizens. Indeed, given the development of a closer, more humble relationship between theologians and practitioners in the Post-liberal and Evangelical constituencies, then Evangelicals can give a lead in the development of this new model. Whoever does it, they could be providing an exceedingly valuable, life-saving, engagement for responding to future civil incidents in our pluralist society, and affecting those UK citizens who become victims of incidents in foreign cultures abroad. These incidents are bound to happen in the future. Secularism has no effective equivalents to operate with.

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