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The date is right and I have not made a mistake! No, I am not referring to 1992 and the Single European Act of July 1987 which provides that by 31 December, 1992 goods will circulate freely between EEC member countries and custom formalities will disappear. However, I am referring to something quite different yet equally relevant.

The significance of 1993

Four major international inter-faith organisations are combining to observe 1993 as a *Year of Inter-religious Understanding and Co-operation*. Why 1993? Well, it marks the centenary of the World Parliament of Religions held in Chicago in 1893 which is generally regarded as the commencement of the inter-faith movement. The four organisations involved in the planning for 1993 are the International Association of Religious Freedom, The Temple of Understanding, The World Congress of Faiths and the World Conference on Religion and Peace.

Since the 1893 Chicago meetings, many local inter-faith groups and some national bodies for inter-religious co-operation have emerged. The four main organisations involved are now seeking to link inter-faith co-operation worldwide. They are planning a common celebration in India in August 1993 and other events are scheduled for major cities worldwide, including Chicago and Vancouver. Their expectation is that 'all places of worship will arrange special celebrations and that schools and youth organisations will plan educational programmes so that 1993 becomes a real Year of Inter-religious Understanding and Co-operation'.¹

The Inter-Faith Movement

Let us see how the inter-faith movement has developed, particularly in relation to the World Council of Churches in recent decades, and grasp the implications and challenge of these developments for the 1990's. Evangelicals cannot afford to ignore the theological, pastoral and missiological implications of inter-faith dialogue and co-operation.

Interaction between Christianity and other religions or philosophies is not new as the Early Church grappled with those of the Graeco-Roman world. More recently, there was the famous Edinburgh Missionary Conference of 1910 where the concern for mission was accompanied by an awareness, at least, of both a divided Christendom and world. Later missionary conferences at Jerusalem (1928) and Tamboram (1938) discussed in more detail the relationship of Jesus Christ to other major world religions. Due to the theological influence of men like Karl Barth and Hendrik Kraemer, the 1938 Conference underlined the significance of the gospel for other religions and cultures. The debate was interrupted by the Second World War but in the wake of a revived nationalism in many countries, various post-colonial developments, the resurgence of world religions and the secularisation of

theological reflection within large sections of Christendom, a renewed interest in inter-religious relationships emerged in the late 1950's onwards. Influential names in this period included P D Devanandan, M M Thomas and D T Wiles.

It was in this context that in 1955 the influential Protestant body the International Missionary Council launched a project-study entitled, *The Word of God and the Living Faiths of Men*. From 1961, the IMC was incorporated within the World Council of Churches as the Commission on World Mission and Evangelism (CWME) which met in Mexico City in 1963 to discuss 'The Witness of Christians to Men of Other Faiths'. Here it was affirmed that:

True dialogue with a man of another faith requires a concern both for the gospel and for the other man. Without the first, dialogue becomes a pleasant conversation. Without the second, it becomes irrelevant, unconvincing or arrogant... Dialogue requires a transparent willingness to listen to what the other is saying and to recognise whatever truth be in it... Sincerity is basic.²

Significant developments were also taking place at this time in Roman Catholic reflection particularly in relation to Vatican II and its 'Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions'. Samuel Ryan, for example, mentions 'certain new insights and emphases' which are discernible in the mission-theology implied or expressed in the documents of the Council and subsequent writings:

4...God makes his salvation possible and available in some way to all men everywhere throughout history. 5. Within all nations, cultures and religions there is a secret and saving presence of God... 6. A new respect therefore has sprung up in the heart of the Church for other religions which are accorded recognition before the God who saves...³

A Changed Attitude

The change in attitude has been profound and disturbing. Prior to Vatican II, the New Delhi Assembly of the World Council of Churches in 1961 referred to 'dialogue as a form of evangelism which is often effective today'. The Uppsala Assembly in 1968 went further in claiming that:

The meeting with men of other faiths or of no faith must lead to dialogue...a genuinely Christian approach to others must be human, personal and humble.⁴

In the meantime, in June 1962 a small number of Hindus and Christians (Roman Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant) met near Kottayam in South India to explore the nature of truth. Another bi-lateral meeting was held at Birmingham in January 1968 between Roman Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant representatives and Muslims. Their report declared:

There was a great need for continuing discussion and increasing society's awareness of the relevance of our common assumptions as Muslims and Christians. The supremacy of God, the availability of his revealed guidance, the expectation of an afterlife, the definition of right and wrong, of truth and falsehood, the sanctity of family life and all life — such are the issues we must maintain in an increasingly agnostic world. We look forward to further contacts and to working for and praying for a deeper reconciliation of Muslims and Christians in our service to men and to God, in our dialogue with each other and with God.

Several discussions have also taken place between Christians and Jews. Possibly the most famous one was that convened by the International Jewish Committee on Inter-religious Consultations and the WCC in Lugano, Switzerland in October 1970.

Apart from these and other bilateral conversations between RC/Protestant leaders and those of one other faith, there have been numerous meetings in which representatives of different faiths come together. For example, in October 1965 thirty representatives from six major religions in Korea (including Buddhism, Confucianism and Chondoism) met for two days to consider their common tasks and individual contributions to the solving of national problems. A World Conference on Religion and Peace also met in Kyoto, Japan in October 1970 attended by 285 representatives of ten major religions and thirty-six countries. This had been preceded by the WCC Ajaltoun Consultation on 'Dialogue between Men of Living Faiths' in March 1970 when Hindus, Buddhists, Christians and Muslims talked about recent experiences and future possibilities of dialogue.

WCC Sub-unit on Dialogue

Throughout the 1970's the WCC actively encouraged dialogue between people of different religions. The Ajaltoun Consultation encouraged the WCC Central Committee in January 1971 to establish its own 'sub-unit' on dialogue; its full title is 'Sub-Unit on Dialogue with People of Living Faiths and Ideologies', often referred to as the DFI. Dr Stanley Samartha was the first Director of this unit. Justifiably, charges of 'syncretism', 'compromise' and 'undermining evangelism' were directed against the WCC and its Sub-Unit on Dialogue in Nairobi in 1975. However, the Nairobi Assembly re-inforced its commitment to dialogue but drew attention to urgent theological questions which needed to be answered. What kind of 'community' are Christians committed to seek? What is the theological basis for dialogue with other religions? How do dialogue and mission relate, if at all? It is these and other questions which ecumenists have been answering — unbiblically, I am sad to say — during the past fifteen years. But the 1975 Assembly also made practical recommendations urging churches to promote inter-religious understanding both at national and local levels.

The DFI organised a world-wide Consultation on the theme 'Dialogue in Community' in Chiang Mai, Thailand in 1977. Despite basic differences in theology and methodology, the Consultation published an influential report entitled Dialogue in Community. One major emphasis in this report was the idea of **unity of mankind** as the context in which dialogue was to be pursued. In 1977 and 1979, the WCC adopted its own 'Guidelines on Dialogue', a brief but influential document.

In the 1980's the WCC extended their dialogue with those belonging to traditional religions and focused on three regions: North America, Africa and the Pacific. For example, a consultation was convened in Mondolo, Zambia in September 1986 to discuss the issues involved. Other major concerns in the 1980's were helping churches to live in pluralistic societies and also working ecumenically on what Wesley Ariarajah calls 'the rethinking of Christian theology in the light of religious pluralism'.

Meanwhile, meetings between leaders of major world religions increased both in number and significance between 1986 and 1990. A small Jewish-Christian dialogue was held in Nairobi in 1986 while the third Muslim-Christian dialogue in Crete in September 1988 brought together Christians and Muslims from Europe and the Middle East. WCC staff meet regularly with representatives of various international Muslim organisations and also with church-related groups concerned about Muslim-Christian relations. A multilateral dialogue was held in India in November 1988 as well as a pan-Asian Buddhist-Christian dialogue. More elaborate and ambitious plans are scheduled for the early 1990's in order to develop inter-faith dialogue throughout the world and 1993 will be a focal point and stimulus for the whole process of dialogue, co-operation and unity.

Types of Dialogue

At this point, however, we need to understand the different ways in which the term 'dialogue' is used. Diana L Esk has provided a helpful and competent survey of types of inter-religious dialogue. In **Parliamentary Dialogue** large inter-religious Parliaments or Assemblies are created for a short period of time as a forum for inter-religious discussion. Such meetings are being held more frequently and help to 'make visible and public the work of dialogue'. The first such Parliament was held in Chicago's World Fair in 1893 and is a milestone in the history of inter-religious dialogue. The representatives were mostly Christian and Jewish; the Christians tended to assume the superiority of Christianity over other religions. However, three observations need to be made on this first Parliament.

Firstly, there were a small number of Hindus, Buddhists and Muslims present and their contributions were influential and uncompromising. Secondly, Christian self-criticism emerged during this Parliament. One writer expresses his feelings in this way:

It was felt by many that to claim everything for Christianity and deny any good in other religions is not Christian, and is an impeachment of that divine goodness... Christians...perceived that religion...is after all, the best there is in man, and that God is not confined in his mercy and benefactions...⁵

Thirdly, the 1893 Parliament has more recently influenced others to develop the same work. In 1985 in Bath, Somerset, leaders of several organisations met to discuss closer co-operation and plan the 1993 centennial of the Parliament. The World Congress of Faiths is mainly British-based and was founded by Sir Francis Younghusband but is now led by Marcus Braybrooke. An American, Judith Hollister, founded the Temple of Understanding and it has held six Spiritual Summit Conferences since its foundation in 1960. The International Association for Religious Freedom has focused its work primarily on issues of conscience and religious liberty. The most active and best organised of all the inter-religious networks is the World Conference on Religion and Peace (WRCP) which held its first assembly in Kyoto in 1970. The WRCP is a Non-Governmental Organisation of the United Nations with offices in both New York and Geneva and regional chapters in Asia, Africa and Europe.

There is also **Institutional Dialogue** where there are liaisons and relationships

between different religious traditions. The WCC for example has its own dialogue sub-unit and, in addition, there are many inter-religious commissions belonging to individual church denominations as well as national/regional councils of churches.

In addition, **Theological Dialogue** can be distinguished in which systematic theologians/thinkers of all religious traditions write in terms of their deep awareness of a religiously plural world. Such writers include Radhakrishnan (Hinduism), Masao Abe (Buddhism), Sayyed Hossein Nasr (Islam), Pinchas Lapid (Judaism) and John Hick (Christendom). Hitherto, the most active bilateral theological dialogue has been the Christian dialogue with Buddhism. One significant date in the history of theological dialogue is March 1986 when John Hick, now at Claremont Graduate School in California, sponsored a theological conference on pluralism now popularly called the 'Rubicon Conference' since its aim was to explore what it means for Christian theologians to cross the 'Rubicon' from Christian exclusivism to genuine pluralism. Speakers included Rosemary Reuther, Stanley Samartha, Raymond Panikkar, Paul Knitter, Langdon Gilkey, Wilfred Cantwell Smith, Alan Race and Gordon Kaufman.

The most popular form of dialogue, however, is **Dialogue in Community or Life**, on the streets, in projects or festivals and among ordinary people. Subjects include mixed-faith marriages, ancestor worship or reverence and social problems.

Spiritual Dialogue is where people are concerned primarily with the deepening of spiritual life and it relates somewhat to mysticism. Roman Catholics have taken the lead in this type of dialogue. For example, there is a well-organised Christian-Buddhist monastic exchange programme, while Jesuits and Benedictines have also participated in more personal ways. For example, the Jesuit, Ignatius Hirudayam has generated an Inter-faith Research and Dialogue Centre at his ashram in Madras.

Finally, it is customary to distinguish also the **Inner Dialogue** which takes place with other people and also within ourselves.

Pastoral and Theological Challenges

There is surely a **pastoral** challenge for us. Are we sufficiently aware of developments in this area of dialogue? Do we alert our congregations to these new trends which undermine and deny the unique claims of Christianity? This teaching has permeated our schools and colleges for several years but is our preaching contemporary in its application as well as biblical in its content?

Make no mistake about it, Ecumenism has taken a major new initiative in the past decade or so. No longer is it a mere union of Protestant/RC churches which is now envisaged but *an eventual union of all world religions*. This presents a major pastoral challenge to us especially as plans for inter-religious co-operation at local level are developed and encouraged in the 1990's.

What about the **theological** challenge for ourselves? The choice today is not between experience/social action and theology but between a bad and a good theology or, in other words, between an unbiblical and a biblical theology. One competent theological response to dialogue and pluralism is included in this issue under the title, **NO OTHER NAME**. It needs to be pondered carefully and

understood by readers. We also need to ask questions of ourselves. How well do we know the Bible? Do we really believe the Bible? Are we clear concerning the unique claims of Christ?

Furthermore, there is need for evangelicals to develop and apply a biblical theology of pluralism. Christopher Lamb, for example, recently claimed 'we are in urgent need of a theology of pluralism' yet some of his own tentative conclusions are questionable.⁶

The challenge is for us to understand (Luke 24:45) continue in (2 Timothy 3:14), contend for (Jude 3) and preach (2 Timothy 4:2) the Word of the Living God in our contemporary situation.

References

- 1 CURRENT DIALOGUE 17, WCC, p 4
- 2 WITNESS IN SIX CONTINENTS, R K Orchard, 1964, pp 144-147
- 3 CHRISTIANS IN DIALOGUE WITH OTHER FAITHS, International Review of Missions, Vol 59, 1970, p 415
- 4 THE UPPSALA REPORT, WCC 1968, p 29
- 5 CURRENT DIALOGUE 11, WCC December 1986
- 6 EVANGELICAL REVIEW OF THEOLOGY, Vol 14, No 1, Jan 1990, p 78

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The Holy Spirit is intimately involved with the ministry and work of Christ. It could hardly be otherwise. Matthew, Mark and Luke all speak of the Holy Spirit in connection with the birth, baptism and temptation of our Lord. Even so, it is all too easy to miss the wider implications of this involvement and its significance lies in the unquestionable truth that there was a ministry of the Holy Spirit with, in and through the Lord Jesus Christ all through his life and in every aspect of his saving work.

Long before the incarnation, Scripture speaks of a mission of the Spirit which has the closest affinity with the saving work of Christ in the world. So closely identified are they that in Isaiah 48:16 the two-fold commission from the Lord God to the Son and the Spirit inaugurates on single, joint engagement. The sending of the Spirit which is in view is to be linked with, and locked into, the mission of the Son when it occurs. There are definitely two persons spoken of here but only one sending; the two are being sent out with the same aim and to accomplish the one great, divine purpose.

J Douglas MacMillan, page 6, JESUS — POWER WITHOUT MEASURE; The work of the Spirit in the life of our Lord; Sermons preached at St Vincent Street Free Church, Glasgow, 153 pp, NEW PAPERBACK, Evangelical Press of Wales, £2.95.
