

Dialectical ministry: Christian life and mission in the multi-faith situation

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1. Jesus' dialectical ministry

At the age of twelve Jesus was found by his anxious parents 'sitting in the temple surrounded by the teachers, listening to them and putting questions' (Lk. 2:46). I long to know what those questions were. Perhaps some day a scholar will give his mind to it, for as the next verse says 'all who heard him were amazed at his intelligence and the answers he gave'. We can be sure that the

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adolescent Jesus genuinely wanted to know what the intellectual leaders of his people thought, and that he gained much from them. Luke's summary of the whole episode is that 'as Jesus grew up he advanced in wisdom and in favour with God and men' (2:52). It was a landmark in his spiritual and intellectual development.

It was also a sign of his openness to people, and his willingness to engage with them in deep thought – as much as a twelve-year-old can manage. This was the promise of a *dialectical ministry*, a ministry of question, answer and counter-question, which marked all Jesus' meeting with religious and political leaders.

Commentators have noted that the Greek word for 'asking them questions' in Luke 2:46 is *eperōtōnta*, which is also the standard word for the investigative questions put to Jesus by the Pharisees and Sadducees in order to trap him into some indiscretion which could be used against him. One scholar wonders 'whether Luke 2:46 denotes, not so much the questioning curiosity of the

boy, but rather His successful disputing'.² I think not. The questions of Jesus are more probably to be seen as in direct descent from the long line of prophetic questions in the Old Testament. God's questioning of his people in the Old Testament starts at the beginning of Genesis – 'Where are you?' (Gn. 3:9). After the sin which separated the man and the woman from God, his first words are a question. And then another question: 'Who told you that you were naked?' (v. 11). And then a third and a fourth, before the sentence of exclusion from the garden of God is passed.

The link between these Old Testament questions and Jesus' dialectical ministry may at first sight seem remote. But I want to suggest that throughout the Bible God deals with the sinful, poor, blind and naked human race at least as much by means of the question as by the command. The command, though a good gift of God, has failed to maintain the unity of God and humanity and brings condemnation – 'Through that commandment sin found its opportunity . . .' (Rom. 7:8). But God does not leave us condemned by our sin; his purpose is to redeem. And he keeps his relationship with us open through the question. Think of the poignancy of the question 'Where are you?' Is God asking for information? Is he establishing his case against humanity? I think he is looking for a response. The friendship up to now natural and unbroken has known a rift, a silence – something has come between them, a dark shadow chilled the atmosphere and stilled the human tongue. Does not 'Where are you?' mean 'Think where you are – in the garden of God, created by his hand and fashioned by his loveliness into his image'? For the first time man is afraid of God, because he has been beguiled by a question, the question of the serpent: 'Is it true that God has forbidden you . . .' Tricked, floored, deceived by a question, he must now be redeemed by a question – question after question, like a rock climber inching his way up the cliff down which he has fallen. So the questioning goes on all through the Scriptures, as God continually takes the initiative to bridge the gulf between himself and humanity, to secure a glad response which drives out doubt and unbelief.

God says, for example, to Cain: 'Where is your brother Abel? What have you done?' (Gn. 4:9,10); to Abraham: 'Why did Sarah laugh and say, "Shall I indeed bear a child when I am old?" Is anything impossible for the Lord?' (Gn. 18:13,14); to Moses: 'Who is it that gives man speech?' (Ex. 4:11); to David: 'Are you the man to build me a house to dwell in?' (2 Sa. 7:5); to Samuel: 'What shall I give you? tell me' (1 Ki. 3:5); to Elijah (twice): 'Why are you here, Elijah?' (1 Ki. 19:9,13); to Job: 'Who is this whose ignorant words cloud my design in darkness?' (Jb. 38:2).

In Job and the prophets the questions of God become a torrent: 'Where were you when I laid the earth's foundations?' (Jb. 38:4); 'What more could have been done for my vineyard that I did not do in it? Why, when I looked for it to yield grapes, did it yield wild grapes?' (Is.

5:4); 'Whom shall I send? Who will go for me?' (Is. 6:8); 'Will the pot contend with the potter, or the earthenware with the hand that shapes it?' (Is. 45:9); 'Did you think my arm too short to redeem, did you think I had no power to save?' (Is. 50:2); 'What is it that you see, Jeremiah?' (Je. 1:11,13); 'How can I give you up, Ephraim, how surrender you, Israel?' (Ho. 11:8); 'Should I not be sorry for the great city of Nineveh?' (Jon. 4:11).

In the last book of the Hebrew Scriptures the questions fly back and forth in a continuous dialogue: 'You have wearied the Lord with your talk. You ask, "How have we wearied him?" By saying that all evildoers are good in the eyes of the Lord, that he is pleased with them, or by asking, "Where is the God of justice?" Look, I am sending my messenger who will clear a path before me. Suddenly the Lord whom you seek will come to his temple. . . . Who can endure the day of his coming? Who can stand firm when he appears?' (Mal. 2:17-3:2).

This last passage brings us back to our starting-point – *i.e.* to Jesus and the New Testament, since Jesus fulfils the prophecy of Malachi, not, I suggest, just by coming physically to the temple and cleansing it – interestingly, none of the New Testament writers suggests directly that the cleansing of the temple is the fulfilment of the Malachi prophecy – but by himself superceding the temple and bringing into being in himself and in his followers God's new temple (*cf.* Jn. 2:21).

In any case the sudden presence of the Lord's anointed in the physical temple dedicated to the Lord produces a crop of questions, put both to Jesus and by him (Mt. 21:14-22:46). God's long questioning of his people comes to its climax with the critical question: 'What is your opinion about the Messiah? Whose son is he?' (Mt. 22:42). Or in the familiar version; 'What think ye of Christ?' This is of course the pivotal question for conversion. It is *the* evangelical question, and I find it most significant that it is asked in the temple, the very heart and focus of institutional Jewish faith, and asked of the leading representatives of the most enlightened and forward-looking and dedicated religious movement of its time. If anyone knew the right answer these men should. From them came the rabbinic fathers of Talmudic times and virtually all the inspiration which recreated Jewry and Jewish scholarship after the cataclysm which befell the temple in AD 70. When the Sadducees, the priestly class, went down with their temple, the Zealots were eliminated and the Herodians assimilated into Roman society; when the Essenes disappeared into the desert, it was the Pharisees who took charge of the Jewish future. Jesus knew what he was doing when he asked *them* 'What think ye of Christ?'

The question itself was an invitation to consider whether there was not a greater mystery in the expected Messiah than the traditional teaching had so far allowed. Traditional teaching identified the Messiah as the descendant of David, the one who would restore the age of greatness to God's people (*cf.* Acts 1:6). Like so many religious visions, it was essentially backward-looking.

²G. Kittel (ed.), *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans), p. 687.

The golden age, the source of salvation, lay in the past. What was needed was so to purify the common life of the nation that God would bring back again those great days. Even now there is wide currency for a Talmudic view that if the Jews would only keep the sabbath properly for two consecutive weeks, they would bring about the Messianic redemption.³ It seems to me that Jesus was suggesting that this was too narrow a vision. 'It is too slight a task for you, as my servant, to restore the tribes of Jacob, to bring back the descendants of Israel; I will make you a light to the nations, to be my salvation to earth's farthest bounds' (Is. 49:6). God's plan was much further-reaching than they had yet realized, and explored far more deeply than they had bargained for the inner recesses of the human soul. God not only reaches with his salvation to earth's farthest bounds, but also 'searches our inmost being' (Rom. 8:27). What Jesus was really asking the Pharisees was whether they had grasped the scale of God's redemption, whether the image of David and the short-lived temporal glory of Israel was an adequate evocation of what God was about to do.

2. The church's ministry today

I have spend some time in the preceding section discussing the dialectical ministry of Jesus, begun and ended in the temple with the religious leaders of Jewry, because here we find both authority and instruction for our own ministry to people of other faiths. We could, of course, have looked at other parts of Jesus' ministry and found the same pattern of dialectical ministry, and we could have gone on to look at the missionary methods of Paul and the early church (e.g. Acts 18:4). But sufficient has been said to enable us to draw certain conclusions for ourselves. The first lesson to be learned is one of *engagement*. Jesus did not fire off evangelistic salvoes at other people of religion from a distance; he did not write pamphlets and instruct his disciples in the techniques of church growth. These things may have become necessary subsequently, but the first thing was and is actually to meet and engage with people of other faiths. Far too many people are content to secure their evangelical orthodoxy by *talking* about ministry and witness to people of other faiths without being in any way involved in it. In Britain at least, very few Christians are actually in touch with those of other faiths, and many Asians, especially those who live in the inner city areas, have never met a practising Christian believer. Naturally they are very critical of the faith which has produced a society they have been taught to think of as 'Christian', yet which seems to them callous, unjust and careless of the things of God and the kind of behaviour – especially between the sexes – which he requires. Muslims especially are inclined to want to withdraw from such a society, and to bring up their children in the purity and moral and spiritual coherence of traditional Islamic values. Hence in Britain the desire for Muslim schools. There is a real parallel between such people and the *Pharisees*, those who 'separated' themselves from the

'people of the land' in the first century, the better to obey God. Jesus of course had devastating criticisms to make of the Pharisees, but here we have to remember two things. First, Jesus bothered to attack the Pharisaic movement precisely because it was widely respected and, as I have already suggested, deeply significant for the future of Judaism. The Pharisees were people of obvious integrity, and it is because they represented the best in contemporary religion that they merited Jesus' attention, and he theirs. Secondly, however, there was no ethnic or cultural barrier between them. Both sides were members of the Jewish race and people, and in a very important sense Jesus criticized them as one of them, as a devout and deeply committed layman concerned for the spiritual health of the nation.

Our contemporary situation is different, at least in the west, where the great majority of people of other faiths are also ethnically and culturally distinct from the great majority of Christians. They are not only distinct: they are frequently the object of discrimination in education, employment and immigration policies. The immediate need in many contemporary situations is for a Christian *ministry of welcome*, which makes it clear that people of other faiths are regarded by Christians as human beings with the same feelings and needs as everyone else, and as people who have every right to be where they are. Such a Christian ministry of personal welcome, consistent reassurance in the face of racial harassment, and practical help in linguistic and bureaucratic difficulties, is I believe actually pre-supposed by the way that Jesus treated disadvantaged people of all kinds, and by the particular dialectical ministry which I have outlined in his relations with religious leaders. It is sometimes alarming to listen to Christian views about mission and evangelism to those of other faiths and to realize that the speakers have little or no interest in Muslims or Hindus or Sikhs as people, or indeed as religious believers, except in so far as their beliefs can be made to yield angles of approach for Christian propaganda. I use the derogatory word 'propaganda' because of the essentially inhuman attitude which such views betray. There is indeed much unacknowledged racism in western Christian utterances about Islam, Hinduism and other faiths, especially when, as with Islam, a political threat can also be perceived. It sometimes appears the western European Christians have learnt nothing from the long and tragic story of their relations with the Jewish people. With terrible speed the Jew came to be regarded by a Gentile-dominated church not as a person but as a theological stereotype, then an enemy of the gospel, then a figure of sinister intent. Finally the church realized too late that it had helped to create the psychological conditions for Hitler's Final Solution. Christians in West Germany are acutely aware of the legacy of the past as they note the pressures on Turkish people now resident in that country.

However there is no need to allow the tragic past or the sometimes ominous present to paralyse us when it comes to sharing our faith with those of other confessional backgrounds. Nor should there be any contradiction between the ministry of welcome and the

³ Alan Unterman, *Jews. Their Religious Beliefs and Practices* (London: RKP, 1981), p. 170.

ministry of witness. If Jesus came that people might have life, and have it in all its fullness (Jn. 10:10), it is surely a Christian vocation to help people in their struggle against adverse and dehumanizing conditions. If we regard people of every faith and culture as our neighbours, those of us in the dominant community who are Christians have surely a responsibility to see that everyone has a neighbourhood in which they can be themselves. How will this work out in practice? The following 'Do's and don'ts' were designed primarily for Christian ministers and leaders of congregations in British cities where there are substantial communities of Jews, Muslims, Hindus or Sikhs, and they have found wide acceptance. But many of them will have relevance to other situations and places.

3. Do's and don'ts

To be positive first:

1. Do take every opportunity to get to know people of other faiths in your own locality, on the assumption that the church's ministry is there for everyone, whether or not they acknowledge God in Christ. Getting to know people of other faiths can be easy or difficult depending on local history and atmosphere, but people often live in water-tight compartments and it may take a special effort from those who are called the 'host community' to break down the barriers, and make others feel at home too. So if you are the minister of a local church

2. Do make contact with whatever 'opposite number' you can discover, whether rabbi, imam or priest. In this way there can be community to community relationships which may profoundly affect all the subsequent relationships between Christians and people of other faiths in the neighbourhood. Very often those of other faiths are extremely glad to welcome a Christian leader because they know that he represents the traditional faith of the country and his recognition of them is important. Consequently you as leader may well be received with particular courtesy and interest, and here is an opportunity to

3. Create a positive relationship based on what you have in common, allowing the real differences to take second place for the moment. This is a natural, human thing to do, and there is nothing dishonest or hypocritical in it. Moreover it is a western habit to get down to basics straight away. Asian custom cherishes a certain formality in which it is impolite to be direct early in the acquaintance. You may be very concerned for evangelism, but you will be wise to lay the foundations of common ground and a common language. Differences will inevitably emerge, but they can be handled much more creatively after the right preliminaries.

4. Be open and straightforward about your hopes in meeting, which may be very limited because of time and other priorities. Sometimes great difficulties arise when expectations are raised and not fulfilled, and some future Christian group may be the loser if you establish a poor reputation for us. Don't suggest you have more support from your congregation in this venture than you have.

Not all Christians are eager to meet those of other faiths – some feel very threatened. If those of other faiths do not find you completely open they will begin to suspect they are pawns in some strategy and then will be nervous and resentful of your approaches.

5. Do take every opportunity to discover the needs of people of other faiths in your community, and whether there is any way in which local Christian people can contribute to them. Any request for the use of one of your church buildings should be very seriously considered, especially if they are able to assure you that the use of it would be social rather than religious. There may be conscientious reasons for refusing the request and if so these should be sympathetically and carefully explained. Other needs may include the learning of English language skills (to which British churches contribute many volunteer teachers), help with form-filling and the mysteries of British bureaucracy, and other details of the law and customs of this country. Again do not promise more than you can fulfil but make it clear that the church is there to be the servant of the wider community, of which people of other faiths are unmistakably a part.

6. During any incident of racial attack or blatant discrimination make it instantly clear that the church and you as a minister of it totally oppose such things. Be quick to offer reassurance that the British churches have constantly spoken out against racism and that you yourself are committed to fighting it. It is difficult for us to imagine what it is like to be victims of racist attacks and we should never underestimate how vulnerable black and Asian people feel. Equally do not underestimate the extent to which white people in Britain (often without realizing it) contribute in subtle ways to making the ethnic minority groups feel devalued and unwanted.

7. This means that you will need to preach and teach consistently on race relations and on other faiths, aiming at the elimination of fear – fear of alien faces and alien ways – and at the growth of authentic knowledge, knowledge both of the other faith(s) represented in your area, and of the gospel as they might be prepared to hear it. Be prepared for opposition from your congregation on this one, but gently insist there is nothing to fear and much to learn. It may be that you can encourage some members of the congregation to make a special study of another faith, meeting regularly with members of that community.

8. Pray for the opportunity of giving your Christian witness in a sensitive and appropriate way, and try to be as clear and straightforward as possible when that moment comes. Among Sikhs and Hindus in particular you may be asked to speak publicly on the spur of the moment, and it is wise to have some appropriate thoughts ready which are free from Christian jargon and which fit the occasion. Personal testimony is often much more effective than the proclamation of Christian doctrine, since few people will take offence at an account of your own experience sincerely presented. The simple reading of a passage of Scripture may sometimes be the right thing. Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims have little

experience of British people as people of prayer and devotion, and it is good to let them see that some of us are.

9. Be sure to inform the other faith communities of any major Christian events in the locality – for example the induction of a new minister – where it may be right to invite representatives of local other faith communities just as other representatives of the wider local community are invited. Any programme of visitation by the church should also be notified if it includes, as it should, the visiting of people of other faiths. Prior warning of this sort may prevent misunderstanding and opposition, e.g. from the local mosque.

10. Do take advice from the many people with experience and expertise in these fields. All the main denominations now have their committees examining these issues, and some their publications. The British Council of Churches has produced documents, e.g. about the use of church buildings, and has a full-time secretary available for consultation. At local level RE teachers are in many cases now engaged in teaching world faiths and can offer both detailed knowledge and some relevant experience. At the same time they, and others particularly involved in this kind of ministry, need the support and encouragement of the clergy and the backing of prayer in what can be a lonely and sometimes puzzling vocation. For up to now British theologians have not given the whole subject the attention and personal involvement it needs.

The 'don'ts' are of course mainly the converse of the 'do's', but some of these may not be so obvious:

1. Don't make prior judgments about the faith of those you go to meet. When you really get to know them you may be very surprised that what they actually believe is not what the textbooks say they are supposed to believe. Resist the temptation to correct them about their own faith, even if you appear to know (for example) the Qur'an better than they do! Among many Jews and Hindus you will find that belief is much less important than observing the right custom or law. That doesn't mean they are legalistic: simply that they attach more importance to doing than to thinking.

2. Don't go in with all evangelical guns blazing on the conviction that unless you make a statement for Christ in the first few minutes you are in some way letting him down. That kind of aggressive evangelism is often offensive or simply bewildering. True evangelism is usually a long and costly process. At the same time Asians are far readier to talk about spiritual things than most white British. Don't give them the wrong impression by being reluctant to do so too. And don't be trapped into fruitless arguments, especially with Muslims.

3. Don't imagine that the words you use will necessarily be understood in the sense you intend. The people you go to may speak English only as a second or third language and therefore miss many of the nuances of your speech. They are likely to find it difficult to translate what they want to say adequately into English. Even

with Asians brought up and educated entirely in this country we need always to be alert to the possibility that what we are saying has not been so much rejected as incorrectly understood, or conversely that we appear to be in agreement when we are really saying quite different things. 'Son of God' to a Muslim implies physical paternity: 'everlasting life' to a Hindu means rebirth into endless lives: 'mission' to a Jew means the attempt to destroy his community.

4. Don't expect the same patterns of social engagement. Many Asians never use a diary and are genuinely delighted when people simply drop in. They are devoutly disinclined to mortgage an uncertain future to meetings arranged weeks ahead. Muslims invariably use the safeguarding term *insh'Allah* (if God will) when making any future engagements. This freer attitude to time means that we should

5. Never attempt to rush through a visit to a mosque or temple in a few odd minutes. If you don't have time to drink a cup of tea with them it may be better not to go, or to keep in touch for the time being by telephone. Hospitality is of enormous importance in eastern traditions and people may feel really let down if you refuse it. Far from creating problems for the host, hospitality is seen as a religious duty in which the guest is honoured and the host acquires a sense of nobility through his ability to confer that honour.

6. Don't expect the same sense of humour. This can be important where religious issues are concerned. Jews characteristically make jokes about themselves and God and all sorts of religious matters. If you try the same kind of jokes with Muslims they will be scandalized. Other people's humour is perhaps the most difficult thing of all to appreciate – usually it seems crude, childish or bewildering. Since the English often pride themselves on their sense of humour this can be an area of great misunderstanding, requiring not a little humility.

7. Don't, of course, by the way you talk or behave imply disrespect for the customs, furnishings or beliefs of the people you have gone to. This means being prepared to remove your shoes in temple and mosque, and cover your head in the synagogue and Sikh gurdwara (where you must also remove your shoes). Women in the mosque should dress in what Muslims consider a modest fashion, which usually means no short skirts or bare arms. The key guideline seems to be respect for the reverence or discipline of others. So we don't serve a Jew or Muslim pork, or a Sikh or Hindu beef because we respect them. Similarly we stand in respectful silence before the Sikh scriptures or a Hindu image because we respect our hosts. It would be wrong to pay a reverence to the image itself which as Christians we in no way feel.

8. Don't expect the same attitudes to relations between the sexes, especially where Muslims are concerned. Muslim women do not generally shake hands with men. Usually they keep in the background (though they can be extremely powerful in the family), and this may create difficulties for a woman Christian minister going to the mosque. The attitudes of Muslim men should not be understood as conveying male superiority

so much as an unease and unfamiliarity in meeting women outside the family circle. A Christian woman who is both self-assured and sensitive can break through this barrier. A man should never visit an Asian woman in her home when her menfolk are absent.

9. Don't pretend to have more knowledge than you do, or expect those of other faiths to be expert theologians in their own field. Either way people may become defensive and the spontaneity and humanity of meeting is lost. The issues of religion involve profound convictions and people very easily feel threatened especially if they are a small minority in an alien land trying to converse in an alien tongue.

10. Don't too quickly class people who appear to have drifted from their family faith as 'nominal' or 'only cultural' Muslims/Hindus/Sikhs, *etc.*, even if that is their self-description. The bonds of community life, though weakening in the west, are much more powerful than in the rest of British society, and revival movements often bring about a return to the ancestral faith, particularly when people feel rejected by the rest of society. Great care needs to be taken when a marriage is planned between a committed Christian and someone of an Asian background.

4. Dialogue and commitment

Readers will notice that the word 'dialogue' has not yet been used in its technical sense in this paper. What I have been commending, however, is called 'dialogue' by some Christians, or at least a 'dialogical' style of relating to people of other faiths. An open, natural approach which does not pretend there are no disagreements but refuses to put disagreement in the forefront of the relationship – an approach which is person-centred not just doctrine-centred, an approach which is eager to learn *how* as well as *what* the other thinks, so that the 'language' of the other may be learned and Christ shared through it – this is the kind of dialogue which Christian missionaries have practised for generations, and which now much wider circles in the church must learn to practise too. There are of course other misunderstandings of dialogue which emphasize the risk of being convinced by the other's point of view, or which require from the outset that any attempt at persuasion of the other must be abandoned. Neither interpretation seems to me very realistic. One position places too much importance on the intellectual expression of the faith, the other too little. If you enter dialogue with someone of another faith consciously determined to follow wherever the argument seems to lead, so that you are willing to become, *e.g.*, a Muslim at the end of it, the implication is surely that faith is all in your head, that no sense of belonging or identity is involved, but that the question can be settled entirely by argument. I trust my faith goes deeper than that. If Christ is all in all to me, and I have been incorporated into him by baptism, I am simply not free to hand over my life to anyone else, however powerful his argument.

In practice not many people adopt this line. Far more common is the resolute refusal to engage in persuasion at all. This is justified by some version of the idea that there

are many truths, and some have grasped one and some another. In a common refinement of this thesis I hear people say that there are many aspects of the one truth, but the underlying reality is the same. It is of course true that God is far greater than the sum of all our apprehensions of him, but that is a truth better acknowledged in prayer than in discussion. When we speak we use words, and if words are to have any meaning at all they must carry roughly the same value for all those who use them. It is simply meaningless to talk about things being 'true for me' but not 'true for you'. What is true for me must be at least potentially true for you, or else it is not even true for me. It is an illusion, a solipsist dream. No religious faith can admit that much subjectivity, least of all one which has incarnation at its heart.

This is not to deny much common ground between the religions of the world, only to insist that there are irreconcilable differences between them, and that anyone who is convinced that he has hold of the truth is bound to want to share that truth with others. I hope I have said enough to show how important is the manner and the timing of that attempt to share. But even in the contemporary world there are many Christians who do not have the opportunity yet to meet with those of other faiths. Their encounter with the issue is principally through their general education at school and through the media. Such exposure will raise theological issues implicitly but not solve them. Children at school will be given perhaps a more or less accurate account of what Muslims believe and how they practise their faith, and the world-wide significance of Islam, but it is likely that no-one will set that faith side-by-side with Christian faith to ask how Christians should view it, what spiritual truth may be credited to it, and how it may be thought to feature in God's design for the world. The pupil is usually left to answer such questions for himself, and in the absence of any more careful guidance he is likely to conclude that faith is principally a matter of taste or conditioning. Since it is only a minority in the western world who appear to take such things seriously he may be forgiven for assuming that it is anyway a matter of indifference.

This is unquestionably an omission in his personal life, but it can have more public consequences. The Iranian revolution caught most western governments by surprise, for few people in the west supposed that religious motivation could achieve so much. The positive aspects of that movement have been overlaid by the tragic developments common to so many revolutionary events. 'The Revolution eats its own children.' But it should not be forgotten that in 1978-79 an extremely repressive government with strong western backing was overturned by people fighting literally with their bare hands against tanks and well-trained soldiers. The people were primarily sustained by the belief that God would honour the justice of their cause. Few in the west supposed that religion could be so significant in people's lives, for their own experience and understanding locates religious belief firmly in the private sector. It is a personal, domestic matter of little public consequence. It can therefore be viewed with the detachment thought

proper to scholarly inquiry, or ignored altogether, according to taste.

It would take many more pages to explain how this peculiarly western, and oddly unrealistic attitude to religion came about. An explanation may lie in the moral exhaustion of western Europe after the religious wars of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Whatever the reason the characteristic attitude of western governments towards religious issues is now one of studied neutrality, and this is of course reflected in educational circles wherever religious issues are dealt with in publicly-financed schools and colleges. In Britain the teacher of the religious education class in a government school cannot afford to appear to be 'proselytising' for his or her faith. He must present Christianity and other world religions 'in neutrality', as though he had made no prior judgments of his own about them. This is difficult enough to do in teaching literature (to take a parallel case), but surely it is infinitely more difficult to do when one's whole orientation of life is at stake. The only honest procedure (at least in secondary schools and beyond) seems to be for the teacher to make clear his or her own commitment, or lack of commitment, at the outset, and allow his pupils to make their own judgments about any bias in the material he presents to them. What seems quite wrong is to assume that objectivity precludes personal commitment. To act as though personal commitment in religion were somehow detrimental to objective teaching about religion is to sanctify indifference (usually disguised as 'toleration'), and make religious studies ultimately meaningless. The attempt to study religion as a merely human activity (the 'phenomenological' approach), while it has produced a wealth of interesting material, is ultimately untrue to the nature

of religion, for it fails to deal with the conviction at the heart of it. As Kenneth Cragg once wrote: 'A living religion calls for study on the part of those whose religion is alive.' He warned western scholars of Islam against taking refuge 'in the illusion, or the comfort, of a study that calls for no action, incurs no debts and involves no responsibilities other than logic and verification'.⁴ The warning might be pinned up on the door of all university departments of theology, together with the famous verse of the Urdu poet Ghālib:

The secret that is hidden in the breast is not a sermon;
You cannot utter it in the pulpit, but on the gallows.⁵

5. Conclusion

I began with Jesus in the temple, listening to the learned men of faith and asking them questions. The task of the student of theology is still to listen and to ask questions, while sitting in the temples of human conviction and commitment. If the questions we ask are deep enough, and relevant enough, they will eventually focus on the fundamental question: 'What think ye of Christ?' Because of the unsurpassed loveliness of Jesus, and even because of the often unlovely lives of his people, many of other faiths throughout the world are beginning to answer that question. The answers are not yet all that we would hope for,⁶ any more than our own discipleship properly matches our profession of Christ, but our vocation in a multi-faith world is to go on trying to focus the question.

⁴*The Muslim World*, vol. 42 (1952), p. 217.

⁵Annemarie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* (Chapel Hill, N. Carolina, 1975), p. 76.

⁶See my *Jesus Through Other Eyes. Christology in Multi-Faith Context* (Oxford: Latimer House, 1982).