

RELATIONS WITH PEOPLE OF OTHER FAITHS (1983)

'Dialogue' is a relative newcomer to the Christian vocabulary. It was first popularised as a reaction to the kind of missionary engagement in which the Christian preacher assumed that he possessed the whole truth and his hearers none. Unfortunately, therefore, the word 'dialogue' has often been taken to mean the very denial of preaching or evangelism, whereas it can become full of creative possibilities for Christians in their relations with people of other faiths. This is the theme of the British Council of Churches' booklet: *Relations with People of Other Faiths: Guidelines on Dialogue in Britain* (1981).

The Faith and Order Committee has set itself the task over the next five years of trying to help Methodists make a positive Christian response to the presence of other faiths in Britain today. To prepare the ground we here commend to the study of the Methodist people the B.C.C. booklet and make our own first brief response to it.

We understand dialogue to be a proper part of the total mission we are called to – a mission which is rooted in the belief that God, as Jesus Christ has revealed him, is not simply the God of Christians but the God of the whole universe. This belief John Wesley reinforces in Sermon XCI, 'On Charity': '... He "is rich in mercy" to all who call upon Him according to the light they have, and "in every nation, he that feareth God and worketh righteousness is accepted of Him."' God's purpose embraces creation and redemption. He is the Lord of nature, of history and of people of every nation, race and language; and he calls us to share his active love towards our fellow human creatures whoever they be.

This will involve our entering into conversation with our neighbours of other faiths: and loving our neighbour as we love ourselves means that we do not monopolise the conversation but allow him to express himself, his hopes, his fears, his heritage (p. 5:3, p. 7). Conversation or dialogue is an integral part of loving another person. It is not a technique to break down the other's defences and win his allegiance to Christ more easily. In dialogue both partners have much to learn; the Christian must want to know what the God of the universe has been doing in the life and heritage of his partner as well as to share his own experience of God-in-Christ. There must be respect for the integrity and contribution of the other partner as well as freedom to witness to what rings true for oneself.

At the same time, Christians will recognise that truth for them is essentially a person, Jesus Christ, and that he is the norm by which they try to discover what is creative and what is destructive in their own and others' faiths. But we can speak of a shared search for truth, in that the truth is greater than the members of any faith have grasped. Indeed, Christians may well find that they are shaken to the foundations by dialogue.

Dialogue with people of other faiths certainly has its own intrinsic value quite apart from whether it wins people to allegiance to Christ or not. The Christian partner will usually emerge from dialogue a more sensitive and discerning Christian. Also, insofar as dialogue is often part and parcel of community building in a multi-faith neighbourhood, it finds its place in the total mission of the Church which derives from the activity of God. Of course we shall want to co-operate with people of all faiths and of none who are working for a more just and peaceful world.

None of these considerations inhibits the Christian from witnessing to his experience of the universal Lordship of Christ in the presence of people of other faiths, though it will affect the *manner* in which this is done (p. 12). It detracts neither from the urgency of evangelism nor from the centrality of commitment to Christ. While recognising the Holy Spirit's sovereign freedom in the work of conversion. Christians involved in formal interfaith meetings will refrain from using these as opportunities for soliciting converts. The Church's ministry of preaching for decision will be exercised on other more appropriate occasions. Nevertheless such preaching and evangelism ought always to be sensitive to the principles of dialogue.

As the B.C.C. booklet makes clear, dialogue covers many different forms of meeting from the formal to the personal, but however or wherever the Christian engages in evangelism, people of other faiths must be left 'utterly free to respond as free persons to God's act in Christ, whether that response is that they be confirmed in their original faith or that they take the step of acknowledging Christ as Lord' (p. 12). We believe that the principles of dialogue as set out in the B.C.C. booklet always apply, namely, I. Dialogue begins when people meet each other (p. 4), II. Dialogue depends upon mutual understanding and mutual trust (p. 5), III. Dialogue makes it possible to share in service to the community (p. 6) and IV. Dialogue becomes the medium of authentic witness (p. 6).

Many of the observations we make above are reiterated and vividly illustrated in the B.C.C. booklet. Very practical guidance is given to Christians who already share friendships with people of other faiths, and Christians who do not yet enjoy this privilege are helped to appreciate that the subject still applies to them. There are statements on the subject from world Christian bodies like the World Council of Churches (pp. 8-10), the Second Vatican Council (p. 11), the International Congress on World Evangelism etc. (p. 13); and the subject is applied to issues such as community relations, hospital chaplaincy work, interfaith marriages, religious education in local authority and denominational schools, the use by others of church premises and interfaith services (pp. 14-19).

The booklet also includes three Bible studies (pp. 20f) as well as two pages of resource material (pp. 22f), and is divided into short manageable sections which make it appropriate for study by church groups.

The B.C.C. Committee for Relations with People of Other Faiths responsible for the booklet includes a wide range of theological opinion as well as several Methodists. Observers from the Evangelical Alliance and Roman Catholic Church also participated in the booklet's preparation.

Copies are obtainable from the British Council of Churches, 2 Eaton Gate, London SW1W 9BL, at 35p plus postage and packing.

(Agenda 1983, pp. 57f)