

Editorial

The question of inter-faith dialogue has taken a new turn recently, with the increasing incidence of acts of inter-faith worship, and the progress of the Decade of Evangelism, which some representatives of other religions claim is a threat to them and their followers. Within the Church of England, concern about this has been expressed most visibly in an Open Letter to the Leadership of the Church of England, which was published in December 1991. The signatories of the Open Letter committed themselves to a view of Christianity, and of evangelism which would exclude participation in acts of inter-faith worship and encourage the preaching of the Gospel to all men, irrespective of their religious background.

The Open Letter has made a very firm and proper affirmation of the uniqueness of Christ's Person and Work, which must always be at the heart of our preaching and of our claims. Jesus said: 'I am the way, the truth and the life, *no-one comes to the Father except by me*' (John 14:6). When speaking to the woman at the well (John 4) he acknowledged her theological awareness and built on it, without compromising the basic fact that salvation was of the Jews, not of the Samaritans, who had mixed the pure revelation with practices derived from the surrounding paganism. Here, if anywhere, is an example of sensitive yet clear evangelism, which the Open Letter is calling for.

The Decade of Evangelism is clearly an exercise in Christian renewal, and will have its greatest effect in those places where it manages to encourage ordinary people to share their faith more effectively. But evangelism has no time limit. It did not begin in 1990, nor will it end in 2000. Evangelism, that is preaching the Gospel to those who have not yet heard, in the earnest expectation that they will turn to Christ, is part of the very foundation of the Church, and cannot be neglected by any true believer. There is no justification for limiting it to those with a vaguely 'Christian' background: Jews, Muslims and others need Christ as much as anyone else. Indeed, it is possible to argue from the New Testament that we should preach to the Jews first of all, though clearly such positive discrimination would not go down well in the Jewish community!

Jews are particularly sensitive, partly because of the way they have suffered persecution from so-called 'Christians' in the past, and partly because they are a small and vulnerable minority in most Western countries. Among Jews in Britain there is a very high level of nominalism, and Jewish leaders are understandably concerned at the prospect of watching their flocks assimilate into the surrounding secular culture. Since the concept of 'religion' in this culture carries a Christian tinge, it is not unreasonable for such men to assume that a secularized Jew who turns to God will be inclined to seek enlightenment in a Christian context, though it would be hard to prove that any substantial number of Jewish Christians have come to faith in that way.

A more serious reason for Jewish vulnerability to Christian evangelism is theological. Christianity cannot help but be a message of salvation to the Jews, since that is precisely what Jesus and the New Testament proclaim. Christians cannot afford to ignore their Jewish roots, and will always be inclined to see themselves as belonging to a fulfilled Israel. That in itself will be offensive to Jews who take their religion seriously, since no-one likes to be thought of as inadequate, and particularly not in a matter as fundamental as religion. But however sensitively the matter is stated, there can be no escaping the fact that the New Testament does present itself as the fulfilment of the Old, and Christians cannot escape the consequences of that claim.

This is one reason why the Archbishop of Canterbury's recently announced decision not to become the patron of the Church's Mission among the Jews is unfortunate. Most people would probably agree that he should not appear to be involved in an aggressive campaign to convert people of another religion, but that has never been the nature of that Society. On the contrary, it has always sought to perform the Church's missionary task in the most sensitive way possible. Were it to disappear, evangelism among Jews would not cease, but would be likely to take on a more offensive tone, as the recent activities of Jews for Jesus make clear. Part of the function of an organization like C.M.J. is to channel the missionary impulse, which is basic to the Church's life, in a direction which respects other commands of the Gospel. In distancing himself from them, the Archbishop may be doing no more than giving encouragement to extreme groups who will not hesitate to do all the things he is most trying to prevent.

In this connexion it is especially salutary for Christians to turn to the question of Islam, a religion which claims to have supplanted Christianity in much the same sort of way that Christianity claims to have supplanted Judaism. Islam is a highly aggressive religion, which makes no bones about its desire to convert others, by force if necessary (or possible). Muslims who object to Christian evangelistic activities cannot claim, as Jews can, that they leave others alone, or that they respect their beliefs. In Muslim countries, other religions are discriminated against and even outlawed. Even in a liberal or secularized Islamic state, like Turkey or Egypt, conversion out of Islam to Christianity (or to anything else) is virtually impossible. It is very hard to see why Christians should feel so sensitive about Muslim feelings that they are not prepared to present the claims of Christ to them, particularly when the *Qur'an* makes its own claims about Jesus, which Christians believe are inadequate.

In many cases, religious affiliation is so closely bound up with ethnic identity, that charges of racism or cultural insensitivity are liable to be made with some degree of plausibility. This is largely true of Islam, and even more of oriental religions like Hinduism or Sikhism. Buddhism is a special case, because it has considerable appeal among Anglo-Saxon intellectuals (or pseudo-intellectuals) as well as deep roots in various

ethnic minority communities. These links must obviously be respected, but there is no justification for failing to evangelize among peoples of a different culture. Christian missionaries have long done so around the world, and there are churches formed by converts from these religions in their home countries, as well as in the United Kingdom and elsewhere. We must beware of an inverted form of racism, which would regard ethnic minorities as a kind of protected species, not to be touched by our ways or beliefs. That way lies the way of apartheid—not an ideology which the Church would normally recommend. The only valid conclusion is that the Gospel must be preached freely to all, and everyone must be free to receive or to reject it as God wills. Only in that way can we really claim to be faithful to our calling as Christians, which is to go into all the world, and preach the message of salvation to everyone who will hear it.

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