Nineveh Revisited: Theory and Practice in Interfaith Relations

Christopher Lamb

A Christian woman I am in touch with has just discovered that her Pakistani Muslim husband already has a wife and children in Pakistan. How do I counsel her?

A group of Muslims want to use our church hall for their coming festival. What should we say?

The regional television network wants to make a program about a leader of one of the other faith communities in Britain. Whom do you suggest?

The school governors are anxious to maintain the Christian character of the school although it has over 50 percent Muslim, Sikh, and Hindu pupils. What do you advise?

The operational end of interfaith relations is sharp and highly controversial in Britain today. The questions above are only a tiny sample of those I have been asked over five years’ work as an adviser/resource person in interfaith relations working for two Anglican missionary societies. The chapter entitled “Theology at 120° Fahrenheit” in Klaus Klostermaier’s Hindu and Christian in Vrindaban often haunts me.1 Half-humorously Klostermaier contrasts the tortured life of the theologian in the heat of an Indian summer with the measured existence of his North Atlantic counterpart, producing his work from the library with a steady 70° maintained at all seasons. Any temperature over 80° is regarded as a prostrating heat wave in Britain, yet Klostermaier’s insistence on the difference between the two theologies is apt. For it is one thing to study in detachment the faiths of the world and observe their common ground and their sharp disagreement, but it is quite another to be faced by day-to-day relationships with actual Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, Sikh, and Buddhist people and communities, and to take practical decisions that continually lay you open to accusations of either racism—if you seem opposed to some aspects of other faiths—or syncretism, if you seem too accommodating. This arena of practical interfaith politics is theology at 120° Fahrenheit, with the heat of the moment and the necessity for (sometimes urgent) decisions contrasting strangely with the 70° existence of theorists like myself.

The gulf between the pew and the pulpit and the professor of theology are already well documented in Britain,2 and nowhere are they more evident than in the attempts of ordinary local Christian churches to come to terms with what is involved in having people of other faiths as neighbors, fellow citizens, sharers in their community. With small time to read, with little leisure to reflect and consider the issues he or she is faced with, the minister is thrown from one necessity for decision to the next, sometimes managing to fling over the shoulder a query to people like myself. All the many people who have consulted me about marriages between people of different faiths3 have been requested to keep me in touch with further developments in the case concerned, so that a wider monitoring can take place. None has done so unprompted. Time is too short, the next issue already too pressing.

This is not of course the universal situation, but it is very common, especially in the hard-pressed, woefully understaffed downtown (or in British parlance “inner-city”) churches where most people of the non-Christian faiths live in Britain.

This does not mean that a coherent and consistent theology is not in operation in such conditions. It will rarely, if ever, achieve the sophistication and intellectual rigor of the academic product. It is likely to be implicit rather than articulate, marked by anecdote and story rather than neatly framed propositions. Above all it will be marked by experience, and argued from experience. Perhaps I am laboring the point, but it seems to me that the actual experience of meeting and knowing people of other faiths is an exceptionally disturbing event in the lives of many Christians. The devout “other” believer shakes my stereotyped version of his or her faith, and therefore of the person, provokes me to question my own practice, my particular Christian tradition, and sometimes the very basis of my faith. The uniqueness of the Christian religion is suddenly radically relativized, and I am left with an alarming sense of insecurity. Wilfred Cantwell Smith has well described “the leader of one of the other faith communities in Britain. Whom do you advise?

When an observer comes back from Asia, or from a study of Asian religious traditions, and reports that, contrary to accepted theory, some Hindus and Buddhists and some Muslims lead a pious and moral life and seem very near to God by any possible standards . . . then presumably a Christian should be overjoyed. . . . Instead, I have sometimes witnessed just the opposite: an emotional resistance to the news, men hoping firmly that it is not so, though perhaps with a covert fear that it might be.4

Perhaps a more characteristic reaction is seen in the British theologian John Hick, who notes that it was his move to Birmingham “with its large Muslim, Sikh and Hindu communities, as well as its older Jewish community” that finally brought him to “think of the religious life of mankind as a continuum within which the faith-life of individuals is conditioned by one or other of the different streams of cumulative tradition.”5

What should be the impact of experience, or history, on the Christian thinker? Is it right that theology should be determined by Auschwitz, that theology after Auschwitz must be different from theology before it? The point, of course, lies in the word “determined.” A faith whose basis is in history cannot ignore the things that happen, or assume that God is unconcerned with them because of some prior event. Yet when we speak of “determining” we know that for us life is “determined”—or better, life is only truly understood—by the things that happened to Jesus of Nazareth. This is a critical issue, for the whole understanding of interfaith relations in Britain, and in Europe generally, is profoundly affected by a certain view of history, by a particular understanding of what has happened in recent centuries and decades.

Jewish people came to Britain in the last century, as they did to the United States, as refugees from eastern Europe and Russia. Muslims, Sikhs, and Hindus came in the sixties and seventies of this century as migrants rather than refugees, in the wake of a slightly earlier Caribbean migration to Britain. To those for whom the newcomers were unwelcome the distinction between “refugee” and “migrant” was no doubt immaterial, but to the arrivals themselves the “migrant” concept reflected a temporary and purely economic existence. The attitude of many Pakistanis, in

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particular, is summed up in the title of the sociologist Muhammad Anwar’s book *The Myth of Return*, a myth that both sustained and misled them. The new Muslim, Sikh, and Hindu settlers only gradually accepted that Britain would be their children’s home, even if it would never feel like home for themselves. Harassed by discrimination, increasing unemployment, and an alien culture, they became fearful lest the last should destroy their children’s integrity and their wanderings should end in futility and shame. Religion, however neglected in the homeland, suddenly assumed importance as a bulwark against the persistent strangeness of British life. The familiar rituals, the evocative language, and the security of a communal meeting-place all gave the faith a new and perilous significance. Perilous because the indigenous British showed little sign of appreciating what had become more precious than ever to the newcomers. Perilous because the use of the turban or ritually slaughtered meat, having to be fought for, gained distorting prominence as badges of ethnic identity, and threatened to obliterate all understanding that these were ordinary, decent people. Most perilous of all because the second, British generation of Muslims, Sikhs, and Hindus was clearly developing a different set of values and a lifestyle radically other than that of their parents. Can a British Islam, Sikhism, Hinduism develop?

Meanwhile the white community reacted according to its perception of, and its distance from, the threat the newcomers posed. White Christians, of course, were not immune from the reactionary prejudices, liberal principles, or radical idealism of their socioeconomic class, but whatever their ideological outlook or professional responsibilities, not many shared the immediate neighborhood of the ethnic minorities whether Asian or black. Some of those who did made it clear to black Christians, and the neighborhood of the ethnic minorities whether Asian or black. Some of those who did made it clear to black Christians, and the much smaller number of South Asian Christians, that they were not really welcome in white churches.

This highly compressed and selective account may give some idea of the relevant history against which a theology of interfaith relationships has to be worked out in Britain. The middle-class clergyman, serving his disadvantaged inner-city congregation, is aware of much of this, and almost certainly shares too the growing liberal awareness of the evils of the British imperial past, of the exploitation of colonies for their raw materials, the policies of Divide and Rule, and the cultural and racial pride that underpinned the whole enterprise of Empire, whatever its redeeming virtues. He is conscious of ethnic communities feeling vulnerable to inner dissension and attack from outside, just as he knows the white people of the area to be subject in many cases to multiple deprivation. At the same time he knows the accusation from radical political activists that he is a patronizing do-gooder, patching up a system which should be swept away, and at best diverting attention from institutional racism (as exemplified in the 1981 Nationality Act) to the irrelevance of religion.

Here at least, however, this middle-class clergyman is on surer ground with the Asian community and with many blacks. For they at least agree that religion matters. But sometimes it must seem as if that is all they do agree on. The list of practical issues that arise is a long one, and local Christian groups need brief, clear, and unfudged advice and guidelines on them all. What are the legal, cultural, emotional, and spiritual problems that arise when two people of different faiths plan to marry? What are the opportunities and pitfalls of pastoral care to people of other faiths in hospital, family crisis, or bereavement? How does a Christian minister respond when invited to conduct the funeral of a Hindu, or to pray with a Sikh family in the home they are convinced is controlled by evil spirits? These are not hypothetical questions but real issues, which have arisen directly from the caring involvement of a minister with his neighbors and parishioners of other faiths. Very often Sikh and Hindu families regard the resident minister as the Christian “holy man,” to whom it is quite appropriate to turn for help if none is available from Sikh or Hindu sources. If “interfaith prayer” can take place on this informal level, are there possibilities of a wider and more formal sharing in prayer between two or more communities, perhaps in response to some particular crisis?

At least one synagogue I know invited people of all faiths to join in mourning the Israeli athletes murdered at the Munich Olympics. Such “interfaith prayer” is already practiced in some
tian minister will share responsibility for developing policies concerning admission (in a church-controlled school), assembly for worship, religious education (also compulsory in British schools), dress, diet, and the teaching of subjects like history and literature where a cultural bias may be very evident.

Christian teachers, especially head teachers, may be drawn into conflicts between the different Asian generations, for they know it is partly the school experience that divides the children from their parents. How does a teacher react when an Asian girl pupil asks him or her for help because her family wants to marry her to a man she does not know? How does the local Christian church help to fight racial harassment and abuse? How can it use its influence with police and local authority to alleviate the harsher problems of living as a minority in the inner city? Should Christians be instrumental in securing access for those of other faiths to the local media, radio, press, and television? All these questions arise because the church, as a long-established British institution, has a multitude of contacts with almost every aspect of British life and is in a position to use that influence for the benefit of religious minorities, if it so chooses. Often people of other faiths expect such help from Christians as also people of religion.

It will be noticed that I have not so far used the word “dialogue.” It is hardly necessary, for in the situation I have been describing people are living unselfconsciously in a continual dialogue with their neighbors of other faiths. They are also witnessing—often, again, unselfconsciously—to their own scale of values and to their care for people around them as part of their Christian vocation. But where does evangelism fit in? Here, of course, there will be differences of approach, from those who will say that to attempt the conversion of someone of another faith is neither necessary nor desirable, to those who feel that no one must be denied the opportunity to hear the gospel message. Both positions are less rigid in practice than in theory. The liberal Christian who is deeply involved with his or her Muslim neighbors will be asked insistently, “Why do you not become a Muslim?” and be required to give an answer. The evangelist has to take into account the vulnerability of the people he preaches to, and the fact that for them “good news” must mean first of all acceptance of what they are, with all the cultural and religious baggage they bring with them.

This “baggage” has itself to be properly understood, and the underlying Asian attitudes to such things as education, health, mental illness, handicap, gender roles, sexuality, family, morality, law, and a host of other matters to be unravelled in all its complexity. When this is done it will be found that Westerners have much to learn, unlearn, and relearn. On these issues, as on the practical questions noted above, there is the beginning of an extensive literature, though much of it is not in a form readily digestible by busy ministers. Scholars of religion (as distinct from anthropologists) have turned their attention, rather, to the great issues between the faiths: the relationships between piety and faith (How are we saved?), religion and society (No truth can be private), the divine and the demonic (How does evil enter religion?), the nature of God (Doctrine of the Spirit and Christology) and of humankind (What is the church?). It must be said that much of the immense written material in this area is of only limited help to the busy practitioner in interfaith relationships who wants to know not only what we can believe, but how we should hold our faith. Privately or aggressively, implicitly or explicitly, arrogantly or neurotically?

I would like to suggest a “missionary mode,” based on two texts from 1 Peter: “The time has come for the judgment to begin; it is beginning with God’s own household” (4:17); “Be always ready with your defence whenever you are called to account for the hope that is in you, but make that defence with modesty and respect (3:15; both NEB). In British inner cities, trying to work with theology at 120° Fahrenheit, one senses that the church is under judgment. It is under judgment from Muslims and others who ask why it has failed to prevent the emergence of callous, racist, and sexually anarchic society. It is under judgment for its own past, and for the British imperial past. As Jonah was put to shame by the faith of the pagan sailors and the people of Nineveh, so the church, which “knows” the love of God in Christ, finds itself rebuked by the devotion and integrity of those who do not “know.” As so often in the Scriptures, God is provoking us as he provoked Jonah: “Should not I be sorry for the great city of Nineveh?” Jonah can quote Exodus: “I knew that thou art ‘a God gracious and compassionate . . . ,’ “ but makes it abundantly clear that he does not know the meaning of the words he is saying. He has to be taught through his own preaching, and his teachers are his listeners.

So the church must take its critics for its friends, and listen to what God is saying through them. At the same time it must be ready whenever it is called to account for its hope. In spite of Jonah’s disobedience and spiritual and emotional immaturity, his missionary commission was not revoked. God did not recall him from the task he had been given. He still had to preach repentance and faith even though he seemed to have disqualified himself by his own “evil” (the literal meaning of 4:1 is “And it evilled to Jonah a great evil . . .”). We have a hope that Jonah did not have, that from the greatest of evils God has brought redemption for all, so that we can face the evils of every Nineveh, and the evil still within ourselves, because of our hope in Christ. Jonah “knew” and yet did not know the grace and compassion of God. We also know only in part, and are far from perceiving the full significance of our own gospel, but we have been shown the cultural and religious defensiveness that crippled Jonah and brought Christ to the cross. We know that evil stalks the noblest motives, and we do not put our trust in piety itself, or believe that the human race is saved by its worship, however purified. We walk, that is to say, in the shadow of the cross and in the knowledge of the resurrection, which we allow to be the determining history and the decisive act of God. And when our friends have come to trust us enough to be ready to hear it, we tell them the story, in the confidence that they can add to its meaning for us.

Notes

3. This has been partly as a result of a small booklet I wrote for the British Council of Churches’ Committee for Relations with People of Other Faiths: *Mixed-Faith Marriage: A Case for Care* (London: BCC, 1982).
8. This theme is pursued with engaging clarity by Rabbi Jonathan Magonet in his Form and Meaning: Studies in Literary Techniques in the Book of Jonah (Sheffield: Almond Press, 1983).
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