

Mission as Reconciliation

2. Religious Pluralism and Social Conflict

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In this talk, I want to advance ten theses, the first five are general and the second set of five are specifically Christian and theological.

1. All the major world faiths make universal truth-claims that cannot be confined to a private 'religious' realm without serious distortion. Any secularist demand that social harmony requires the surrender of these claims, or their demotion to the status of mere 'opinions', has to be rejected.

As I have written elsewhere, '[A] religious tradition addresses the fundamental questions of human existence, not only linking individuals with each other in an inter-subjective, moral community but also to a cosmic, transcendent order. The reason why the major world religions have been so effective for so long is because they incarnate otherworldly concerns and values with everyday, practical living. The boundaries of text-centred faith-communities transcend those of nations as well as ethnic groups and endure across generations. Such a plurality of allegiances has to be accepted in the modern world, and any attempt to eliminate them will only lead to bloody violence.'¹ While loyalty to the nation-state is important, no Christian, Muslim, Jew, Buddhist or *advaita Vedantist* can put his/her nation before a humanity oriented towards a sacred, transcendental realm.

2. Religious differences are real and ultimate. Attempts to reconcile such differences in a theoretical scheme (which is what is often called 'religious pluralism' in theological discourse) violates the 'otherness' of the other, and risks sacrificing the distinctiveness of each particular faith tradition for the sake of a new global religion.

3. Religious differences, as well as shared understandings, can only be discovered through attentive, empathetic listening to the 'best' exponents of another tradition, collaborating with others in social and political projects of common concern, and honest, vigorous argument. It is a fallacy to believe that argument has no place in inter-religious dialogue. Argument, so long as it does not descend to the level of misrepresentation and invective, is a form of respect towards the other. The other's views are considered important enough to be taken seriously, neither ignored or 'downplayed' in the interests of a superficial harmony.

4. Religious differences *by themselves* do not entail social conflict and violence. The latter ensues when differences are used in a political context to justify depriving others of civil liberties, equal educational opportunities or access to economic resources. This is normally the case when a particular religious tradition and community is *identified* with a given territorial space. That political space is then treated as a sacred space whose custodianship lies with the majority religious community. Other religious communities are treated as socially inferior and politically marginal. Conversion from the majority community to a minority community is feared as a potential loss of social-political power. It is regarded as an act of treason and punished severely. Violence against the other in the name of 'religion' betrays a fear and insecurity that makes the claim to truth of that religion implausible.

¹ Vinoth Ramachandra, *Subverting Global Myths: Theology and the Public Issues Shaping Our World* (Downers Grove, Ill: IVP Academic and London, UK: SPCK, 2008)

5. While religious traditions are always embedded in historical cultures, we must not identify them. Religions invoke transcendental truths and values in a way that cultures do not. It follows that religions and cultures can overlap and intertwine in a variety of ways, so that there is no monolithic 'Islam', 'Buddhism' or 'Christianity'. Communities embodying the major world faiths have not lived in isolation from each other but have interacted and borrowed from each other over long stretches of time, and have defined themselves in relation to these other faiths. So, we need to acknowledge diversity in their local expressions while, at the same time, recognizing the family resemblances, the 'core' beliefs and practices that constitute a particular world faith.

6. Does not Gospel integrity demand a world mission? The truth that the early Christians believed had been disclosed in Jesus was *for* the world because it was *about* the world and its future. This remains central and distinctive to the Good News. Thus, missionary outreach, both to Jews and to pagans, was not an activity tagged on later to a faith that was basically *about* something else (e.g a superior metaphysical or ethical system); rather, it flowed from the very logic of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

Therefore, in the words of David Bosch, 'Christian faith cannot surrender the conviction that God, in sending Jesus Christ into our midst, has taken a definitive and eschatological course of action and is extending to human beings forgiveness, justification, and a new life of joy and servanthood, which, in turn, calls for a human response in the form of conversion.'²

7. Does not Gospel integrity demand that we hold together a high Christology and an open soteriology? We are called to be witnesses, and not judges. To argue that all who do not make an explicit confession of faith in Jesus as Lord are 'eternally lost' is not only to go beyond the biblical evidence, it is to deny salvation to the Old Testament People of God, the mentally handicapped and little children. Similarly, to argue that all men and women are saved, irrespective of Christ, is to contradict the entire biblical testimony. All we can say, humbly yet boldly, is that if anyone *is* saved it will not be through any religion or human attainment, but solely through the objective, atoning death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, whether consciously appropriated or not.

God may graciously give saving faith to men and women while they live in the context of a non-Christian religion, and even be at work in the transformations of religious traditions to reflect his purposes for the world. But this is not the same as claiming that the religions are vehicles of divine salvation and have been raised up with that intent. If men and women find God, it may be *despite* their religious practices and not *through* them.

The message of the cross is scandalous, for it tells us that it is not the 'good Christian' or the 'sincere Hindu' or the 'devout Muslim' or the 'men and women of good will' who are recipients of the vision of God. But, rather, that it is the bad Christian, the bad Hindu, the bad Buddhist—those who know themselves to be moral failures, it is these who may well be closer to the kingdom of God. This can be so simply because salvation is through grace, mediated in the cross of Christ, received in faith. I know of no statement more subversive of the 'world of religions' than Paul's description in Romans 4:4 of the Father of the Lord Jesus Christ as 'the God who justifies the ungodly'.

² David Bosch, *Transforming Mission; Paradigm shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1991) p.488

8. Does not Gospel integrity demands a dialogical approach to mission? Dialogue proceeds from the belief that, in the missionary encounter with other peoples and their cultures (whether explicitly religious or not), we are not moving into a void, but that we go expecting to meet the God who has preceded us and has been preparing people within the context of their own cultures and communities.

This is why the *other* is essential to our own pilgrimage. We do not know what we really believe, let alone how far our lives conform with what we profess to believe, until we engage in dialogue with others, especially those who are profoundly different from us. It is humility that enables me to see the ways in which I may be prone to use my Christianity—to conceal inconvenient truths about God and myself or to bolster my own ego in self-justification. Evangelism, if authentic, changes the bearers as well as the recipients of the Gospel.

9. If the incarnation of the Word of God in Jesus of Nazareth is central to Christian faith and identity, following Jesus in his solidarity with the socially marginalized and his ruthless exposure of religious hypocrisy and sanctioning of an oppressive *status quo* is indispensable to Christian witness in every age and every culture. Criticism of ‘religion’—insofar as religion perpetuates privilege, superstitious fear, oppressive hierarchies, and idolatrous practices— is implied by the message of the cross.

This criticism of religion includes Christianity insofar as it perpetuates forms of power that contradict the content of the Gospel. Until that day when all hostile powers are subject to Christ and we share in the resurrection of the dead (1 Cor 15:24-28), we see in a mirror, dimly (1 Cor 13:12). I am *simul justus et peccator*. I have been grasped by the truth as it is in Christ Jesus, yet am ever growing into the fullness of that truth. In this pilgrimage, even as I share the story of Jesus with others I find myself drawn deeper into the story and given fresh insights into it.

10. We should welcome and rejoice in every sign of God’s grace at work in the lives of all people of whatever background. Also, there are struggles for justice, peace and human dignity in which we can (and must) cooperate with those of other worldviews in order to achieve specific goals which conform to our vision of God’s kingdom. Obviously we shall differ on our respective visions of the ultimate meaning and goal of history, as well as in our motivations for the struggle. There will be points in our common journey with others where we shall discover that a parting of the ways is necessary. But such points of divergence are real opportunities for genuine dialogue and faithful witness.

‘The biblical story’ as Richard Bauckham reminds us, is not only critical of other stories but also hospitable to other stories. On its way to the kingdom of God it does not abolish all other stories, but brings them all into relationship to itself and its way to the kingdom. It becomes the story of all stories, taking with it into the kingdom all that can be positively related to the God of Israel and Jesus. The presence of so many little stories within the biblical metanarrative, so many fragments and glimpses of other stories, within Scripture itself, is surely a sign and an earnest of that. The universal that is the kingdom of God is no dreary uniformity or oppressive denial of difference, but the milieu in which every particular reaches its true destiny in relation to the God who is the God of all because he is the God of Jesus.’³

³ Richard Bauckham, *Bible and Mission: Christian Witness in a Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids, Mi: Baker Academic, 2003) p.110