

# INTER FAITH CONTACT



## **Our World Today**

The last hundred years have seen an unprecedented migration of peoples around the globe, leading to the multicultural, multiethnic and multi-faith societies found in our country and others today. Many Christians have felt called to look beyond their own circle and build up friendly relations with believers of other religions.

## **Wars, violence and terrorism**

We must not be blind to the facts of history in which 'wars of religion' have been fought. Although in our day religion is rarely a direct cause of conflict, there are many conflicts in the world where religion is used or abused to further violence. Nonetheless, religions are also authentic sources of peace and reconciliation. Many church leaders, and leaders of other religions, have affirmed and declared that violence in the name of religion is an offence to God and that anyone who uses religion to stir up violence contradicts its most authentic and profound inspiration. In the wake of civil disturbances in the north of England in 2001, and following terrorist atrocities, an increasing number of Christians have become involved in inter faith activity and in efforts made by civic authorities at every level to foster dialogue and understanding for the benefit of society. Nonetheless, peace is inseparably linked to justice - a fairer sharing of the world's resources and, also, to forgiveness.

## **God's love for all humanity - the call to dialogue**

The Bible offers profound insights into God's love for humanity. The opening chapters of the Book of Genesis (1-11) are universal in scope and show that God's initial design embraced all of humanity. The book of Jonah has long been recognised as having a universal note, where even the Ninevites were precious in God's eyes and showed a greater responsiveness to God's

call than Jonah did. The Servant Song in Isaiah 49:6, taken up by Paul in Acts 13:47, speaks of 'God's servant being a light not only to Israel, but to all nations'.

Building good relations with people of other faiths is one way of making explicit our trust in God in whom 'we live and move and have our being' (Acts 17:28), the God who even 'counts the hairs on our head' (cf. Matt. 10:30). For Christians, genuine love of God necessarily involves love for our brothers and sisters in the human family, for we are all God's children. 'Those who say, "I love God", and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen' (1 John 4:20).

The call to dialogue comes directly from our faith in God who is both One and Three. In God there is a Trinitarian life of exchange, mutual indwelling and communion; and since humanity is made in God's image, for human life and interaction to be true to itself it should be modelled on the pattern of the Trinity.

Dialogue can be seen to be part of our spiritual DNA, so to speak, which calls us always beyond ourselves to build a relationship of interaction and fellowship with the 'other' and with 'others', whoever they may be. We naturally rejoice when there is growth and harmony in relationships; we suffer when relationships are threatened, distorted or broken.

## **The presence of God in other religions**

Christians in Britain hold a spectrum of theological views on the status of other faiths. There are those who consider that, through the work of the Holy Spirit, or the Logos - the Word of God as expressed in the prologue to St John's Gospel - other religions can mediate God's salvation in Christ, even though they may not have an explicit or full knowledge of Christ.

Many insist that only an explicit acceptance of Jesus as Saviour allows full access to the salvation God brought about in Christ. Others affirm that God has laid down many paths which in themselves mediate salvation without an explicit or implicit link to the person of Christ.

While there is much contemporary debate on these questions, they were also considered by leading figures in the first centuries of the Church's life, such as Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria and Athanasius. Reflecting on the words of John's prologue that 'all things came into being through the Word', Athanasius speaks of the Word being 'stamped' or 'imprinted' on the whole of creation. Justin wrote: 'Since it is God who works all things in all, he is, by his nature and his greatness, invisible and ineffable to all his creatures, but not therefore unknown, for through his Word, all learn there is one sole God and Father, who contains all things, who gives being to all things....' This gave rise to the concept of 'seeds of the Word' being found in other religions.

Among the significant principles Christians share with other religions is the so-called 'Golden Rule'. The Christian text Luke 6:31 reads 'Do to others as you would have them do to you.' The Golden Rule is found in the teachings of almost all religions and we can consider it 'an invitation to put into practice a precept, or word of life' (cf Phil: 2:15-16), we share. We can move on from there to discover how to love our neighbours according to their real or particular needs.

On this basis we can enter into a real dialogue where, not only are there already things in common but where, albeit among practices and doctrines in contrast to our own, we may find Christ already waiting for us. Generally, adherents of other religions are pleased to build on these elements of faith we share, whilst hoping that Christians will seek to understand and respect the differences that exist among religions.

**So who is acceptable to God? Who is saved?**  
Our Christian faith makes strong affirmations about salvation through Christ alone and in

John 14:6 Jesus states clearly 'I am the way, the truth and the life; no one comes to the Father, but by me'. However, Christians believe that Christ died for all and it is not for us to judge whether people are close to Christ or not since the ways of God are inscrutable and we cannot read people's hearts. John Wesley said, for example 'I have no authority under God to judge those who are without' and Scripture gives important insights that encourage humility and trust in God; 'God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him' (Acts 10:34-35). 'Then people will come from east and west, from north and south, and will eat in the kingdom of God. Indeed, some are last who will be first, and some are first who will be last' (Luke 13: 28-29).

This apparent paradox that exists within Christianity is a positive challenge to us. The World Council of Churches affirmed: 'We cannot point to any other way of salvation than Jesus; at the same time, we cannot set limits to the saving power of God'. A commentator said 'We appreciate this tension and do not attempt to resolve it'. So while there is no need for Christians to renounce their belief that Christ alone is the path to salvation, we are also invited to understand that the infinite love of God knows no boundaries.

### **Witnessing to Christ**

We are called to witness to Jesus by the constant re-evangelisation of our lives and our service to others. Nonetheless, we are also invited to speak when appropriate: 'Always be ready to make your defence to anyone who demands from you an account of the hope that is in you' (1 Pet 3:15). Christians must think carefully about how to speak about their faith in a multi-faith society, hence the importance of prayer and study. We trust too that the Spirit may guide us in the present moment, as to what to say and when. Respect is key to every dialogue, involving a willingness to listen and to learn. Our dialogue partners can be very sensitive to poorly hidden agendas regarding hoped for conversion to Christ. They welcome however, Christian sharing on what we believe,

when views are given 'with gentleness and reverence' (1 Pet 3:16) whilst being ready 'to make disciples of all nations' (cf Matt 28:19) we must remember that Christian faith is a gift from God, the work of the Holy Spirit, and that mission is not measured by visible results. Nonetheless, perhaps the most important feature of witness today, is mutual love among Christians of different traditions 'By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another' (John 13:35).

### **Principles of Dialogue**

These grew out of a World Council of Churches document published in 1979 and are endorsed by Churches Together in England.

### **Dialogue begins when people meet each other**

Dialogue is first of all about people: meeting, building friendships, conversation, laughter, tears, sharing. Once we meet, we may realise that Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs, Jews, Zoroastrians, Baha'is, Jains or Buddhists are not what we thought. We realise too that no one is the perfect embodiment of faith. Dialogue has been defined as 'all positive and constructive interreligious relations with individuals and with communities of other faiths that are directed at mutual understanding and enrichment in obedience to truth and respect for freedom'. While Christians have a special relationship with the Jews, and share the 'Abrahamic tradition' with Islam too, much can be learned from and exchanged with the faithful of all religions.

### **Dialogue depends on mutual understanding and trust**

It is essential to abolish notions of superiority with regard to any neighbour, because we can truly learn from everyone we meet. Trust also requires that each dialogue partner is intent on listening to and receiving the best of the other (it is not right to compare our 'best' and their 'worst'); and that everyone listens with an open heart and mind. It has been said that 'to know the other's religion implies seeking to walk in the other's shoes, seeing the world as he or she sees it, grasping what it means for the other person to be Buddhist, Muslim, Hindu...'

Genuine dialogue nonetheless, requires that each partner work from a position of strength, knowledge and confidence in their faith. To dilute our faith is a disservice to others. Hence, mutual understanding leaves room for the view that Christ is the only mediator through whom salvation is possible, just as it does for other perspectives. Where there is both giving and receiving there is the possibility of challenge, change and growth on both sides.

### **Dialogue makes it possible to share in service to the community**

The opportunities are endless. Increasingly too at the level of local and regional governance, faith communities acting together are being invited to take part in planning and resourcing. The Christian community can play a key role here.

### **Dialogue becomes a medium for authentic witness**

The faithful of other religions are willing to hear what Christians believe. While Christian communities or individuals on their faith journey may not adhere to all of the articles in the Apostles Creed, it remains an essential summary of Christian belief: 'I believe in God, the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth. I believe in Jesus Christ, God's only Son, our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried; he descended to the dead. On the third day he rose again; he ascended into heaven, he is seated at the right hand of the Father, and he will come to judge the living and the dead. I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy Catholic Church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. Amen.'

### **Identifying with others - imitating Christ**

Interreligious dialogue and collaboration requires openness to others and a readiness to learn from them; that can seem to be in contrast to the immense treasure of our faith in Christ and the truth he revealed. Here Christ's own example is key. Christ 'though he was in the form of God', did not regard equality with God as

something to be exploited, 'but emptied himself... And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death - even death on a cross' (Phil. 2:5-11). In Christ and with him we can 'empty ourselves' which means to put aside our own point of view in order to identify with the other person. It is a matter of momentarily setting aside what we have and what is most precious to us, our own faith, our own convictions, in order to be, as it were, 'nothing' in front of the other person, a 'nothingness of love'. '...unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit' (John 12:24).

This, 'dying to ourselves' enables us to learn from others and also give authentic witness to Christ. Our complete openness and acceptance then predisposes the other person to listen to us. Then we can pass on to proclaiming with respect. Being true to God, and being sincere with our neighbour, we can share what our faith affirms on the subject we are discussing, without imposing anything, without any trace of proselytism<sup>1</sup>, but only out of love.

### **Multicultural society becoming an intercultural society**

If this is our attitude, our partners in dialogue will be able to express themselves because they find people who seek to listen deeply and speak respectfully. In this way, we can become acquainted with their faith and with their culture. We can in some way enter into their lives, even to some extent becoming in a sense inculturated in them, and so be enriched. This attitude enables us to contribute to making our multicultural societies become intercultural, that is, made up of cultures that are open to one another and in a profound dialogue of respect and love with one another.

### **Difficult questions**

Nevertheless, dialogue and collaboration with our neighbours of other faiths does not mean agreeing with beliefs or practices contrary to our faith or remaining silent about things we might disagree with in other faiths. However,

great care and delicacy is required in order to seek to understand fully, the beliefs and practices of others and the culture(s) they are associated with. Ways of thinking and acting may seem different from our own but they are not necessarily wrong. We too should be prepared to answer difficult questions. Where there is a context of trust and a willingness to be part of the solution rather than part of the problem, difficult questions can be raised.

### **The fruits of dialogue**

Dialogue frees hearts to love each neighbour in a disinterested way. It helps Christians re-discover and deepen their faith and appreciate the faith and practices of others. It allows Christians to discover truths held in common with the faithful of other religions and to put them into practice together. Dialogue forges genuine friendships, builds the local community and brings joy, peace, understanding and light. Dialogue and effective action together also give credibility to religion in the eyes of those who question its usefulness.

"The enrichment that can come through encountering difference is one of the most exciting things for me in interfaith relations"  
A Christian inter faith specialist

Mary's Muslim friend did not get her second child into the same school as her first child and was distraught. Mary knew she could not "do" anything to help. She said 'I will pray that a place becomes available'. Her friend's face lit up at her explicit reference to their common bond of faith in God. Some weeks later the news came through that a place had become available.

*This leaflet has been written by Celia Blackden, Inter Faith Officer for Churches Together in England, in consultation with colleagues. This text is offered to Christians, not as a policy document, but as an opportunity for reflection and an encouragement to further study and prayer. It is accompanied by the Inter Faith Contact Resources leaflet. Many further resources and discussion documents are available from the Churches, including 'Evangelism in Multi Faith England'.*

*This leaflet is obtainable from Churches Together in England, 10 copies for £3 incl. p&p. You may photocopy it, download it from the website [www.churches-together.net](http://www.churches-together.net) or obtain it as an rtf file by email from [lorraine.shannon@cte.org.uk](mailto:lorraine.shannon@cte.org.uk)*

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<sup>1</sup> Pressurising people to convert