

# Dialogue or Evangelism?

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Religious education in our schools is under debate. The framers of the 1944 Butler Act did not envisage a pluralistic society in which there would be other options. Religious education to them meant Christian education. The presence in our country of considerable numbers of people of other faiths, the increase of humanism and other systems of thought naturally brings reconsideration. UK citizens include many Muslims, for example. We must accept facts. The plurality of faiths is a fact in our society. We need to rethink our attitudes, approaches and theology. It is here that we run into confusion. I will try to identify areas for thought.

- (i) The Uniqueness of Christ
- (ii) The relation of dialogue and evangelism
- (iii) Differing positions held by evangelicals.

Anyone acknowledging the Bible as the Word of God in all matters of faith and practice accepts **the uniqueness of Jesus Christ**. Bruce Nicholls, who recently attended the Fifth General Assembly of the World Council of Churches as an observer, reports on this theme. He writes *“The emergence of a theology of a ‘Cosmic Christ’ at the New Delhi Assembly and the popularising of anonymous Christianity by Karl Rahner and others, are factors that have prepared the way for a wider acceptance of relativistic theology. In this climate there is little sympathy for a unique and final revelation in Christ made known through the written Word of God as the only basis for the salvation of man. The assumption that special revelation is only a particular case of general revelation has always been the hallmark of religious, syncretistic thinking.”* Tolerance is not necessarily a virtue – love must have its basis in truth – in this case in the truth of Scripture. So we must reject syncretistic thinking, and what logically leads to universalism. Christ is, as He claimed – whether we think it polite or not, tactful or not – “the Way, the Truth and the Life”; no-one comes to the Father but by Him. (John 14 v6)

Now let us consider **the relation of dialogue and evangelism**. They are not mutually exclusive. They are not necessarily alternatives. In today’s confusion we have to define our words. Christ shows us the meaning of dialogue: it is conversation in a chosen direction. It involves listening, questioning and answering. It is two-way, but it points to the One Way, even Christ.

We see this when Christ talks with Nicodemus, a master of Israel, or when he requests a drink from a Samaritan prostitute. Some will agree that Christ is our Example, but we are but frail followers. We do, however, have authority to point to Him “and I, if I be lifted up, will draw all men unto Me”. Some say that we cannot have real dialogue without complete openness: we answer that we are open to God, to the Spirit of Truth, to the person we are meeting; but not to refusal to introducing him to Christ. The lines between dialogue and evangelism cannot be fully drawn – in dialogue there is the idea of conversation, in evangelism there is the content of good news. The two come together when our friend is introduced to Jesus Christ and we step back and let that new relationship develop, and then share in it. The introduction to Jesus Christ may never take place, but the intention is always there. This is New Testament evangelism,

and it depends on our personal relationship with Christ as well as our acceptance of the authority of Scripture. As John Stott said at the conclusion of his brief address at Nairobi: *“I sometimes wonder if the greatest of all hindrances to evangelism today is not the poverty of our own spiritual experience. True evangelism is the spontaneous overflow of a heart full of Christ.”*

Some Christians engage in dialogue but have no evangelistic intent. They reject any sort of evangelism. Other Christians engage in dialogue and claim to be engaged in evangelism, but their definition of evangelism is not a New Testament concept. For example, at Nairobi Bishop Mortimer Arias of the Methodist Church in Bolivia, and here I quote Bruce Nicholls again, described his experience of an integrated evangelistic programme of proclamation and action among atheistic Bolivian tin miners struggling to rise above their oppressive working conditions *“All that was missing was the naming of the Name, and we had to recognise that perhaps these people had more of Christ in them than we who spoke His name.”* He echoed the idea of anonymous Christianity when he said *“To evangelise is to help men discover the Christ hidden in them and revealed in the Gospel. All men and all human values are destined to be recapitulated in Christ.”* This is universalism.

Christians committed to God and His word engage in dialogue and evangelism in their New Testament definitions. However, evangelicals at least take different positions in their attitude to Islam.

(a) There are those who are militant in their approach, insensitive in their judgements, restating perhaps the ideas on the hold of Islam, the bondage of Islam, reinforced by the still-used hymn:

*Let the song go round the earth,  
Lands where Islam's sway  
Darkly broods o'er home and hearth,  
Cast their bonds away.*

Granted there is the bondage of sin into which all men are born, Islam is not just a faith, it is a culture, it is a way of life. *“Jesus Christ both affirms and judges cultures.”* We must beware of condemning a whole civilisation, of attributing to the devil much that is part of the development of civilisation.

- (b) There are those who reject using the Qur'an as a bridge in talking with Muslims. Granted, not many Christians (to our shame) are qualified to do this, but some argue that to do so is to accept the authority of the Qur'an. We can quote from a play, but that does not mean that we accept all the beliefs of the playwright. We can quote from the Greek poets like Paul, but that does not make us upholders of Stoic philosophy.
- (c) There are those who rightly realise that there should be a fresh expression of Christian theology in our changing, pluralistic society. In their creative effort to theologise they concede some of the “deposit of truth” in some areas at least. One feels that it is out of the anguish of longing to embrace the Muslim that they tend to syncretism despite their declared obedience to Christ the Lord and the written Word.
- (d) There are those who find the middle way of speaking the truth in love. It is only by prayer, in humility, and by grace that anyone can walk this way – and we all fail from time to time.