

The New Relationship: The Way We Behave in Inter-Religious Dialogue

If Christians are able to look forward to a future in which they will be able to contemplate a plurality of religious traditions as within the gracious purposes of God, and more than that, to affirm God's gracious presence within people of other faith they will need some kind of theology like that outlined in the last chapters. But with such an understanding, they will be able to approach men and women of other religious paths without undue anxieties lest, not having been converted to belief in Jesus Christ in this life, the latter should be lost eternally. Our whole intention then in setting out the visions of a pluralist religious eschatology and especially an inclusivist christology is to make it possible for Christians to behave with a new freedom in the light of their understanding of Jesus Christ. We have argued that such an openness towards others is part of the obedience of faith in one whom we confess to be the Way, the Truth and the Life in the ways we have tried to outline in the last chapter. Our participation as Christians in inter-faith encounter will depend upon an understanding of God's purposes which allows us to be both open and honest, vulnerable and yet committed, and, in the words of the Fourth Gospel, 'to do the truth' in our time.

We turn now to the practical implications of this doing of the truth in the light of these understandings, first of all in the ethics of our inter-faith relationships, and then in the new forms of spirituality towards which we are called to move. Insights into both the ethical and spiritual issues that are raised will come from both within and from outside the Christian tradition, and from the rapidly increasing stores of experience that we and people of other traditions are gaining as we meet one another in new and profounder ways. In this chapter

we begin to reflect on the ethical questions – the practical ground rules for our behaviour towards one another – and then we shall try to set, however tentatively and precariously, these ethical matters within a framework of prayer and spirituality, of faith and love.

'Begin to reflect' are words chosen advisedly, for though an enormous literature already exists on the theory of interfaith dialogue, and on the theology of religions, surprisingly little attention has been given to ethical questions in this encounter. The material we do have falls under one of four heads. There is a vast amount of writing on the rightness or wrongness of entering into the 'dialogue relationship' (whatever that is conceived to be) from confessional standpoints.¹ Such injunctions, either to embrace or to refrain from embracing the way of dialogue, are based, for Christians as for others (although they would not use the terminology), on considerations of systematic theology, the theology of mission and the theology of religion. That is why we have spent so much time on these in this book.

Under the second head, we may put such writing and reflection that deals with ethical questions which themselves form part of the content and subject matter of interfaith dialogue. To be sure, such literature very often contains both implicitly and explicitly profound insight into the ethical considerations which must govern right relationships between the religious communities, and we shall refer to such insight in this kind of writing several times in the course of this chapter. But in general ethicists and moral theologians have not themselves turned their full attention to inter-religious ethics as such.²

In the third category is the kind of writing which portrays actual inter-faith encounter.³ This descriptive writing may so to speak come from 'within' and be personal stories of deepening relationships and enrichments. It may be story-telling about the situations and experiences of other people and groups. There is much sensitive material of both these kinds. Of its nature the ethical content is very considerable but as yet remains the raw material of the ethicists' reflection.

The fourth category is that of the burgeoning *genre* called 'Guidelines'.⁴ These are attempts by responsible groups within the faith-communities to set the rules of the game for those who wish to take part in this new activity. Very often such documents are in the nature of efforts to set down the parameters within which the new dialogue is permissible, with the strong suggestion that there are boundaries over which participants in such relationships may not go, thresholds

which may not be crossed.⁵ So they shade over into the first category, and should then be considered by those concerned with confessional theologies. Nevertheless, for our purposes this last category will provide us with basic material which may be discussed from the points of view of both descriptive and prescriptive ethics. At the same time we will be constantly reflecting upon how this 'Guideline' material is consonant with the ethical considerations in the other types of writing.

1 'Guidelines on Dialogue'

Guidelines on Dialogue between people of different faiths now come from all around the world and often reflect quite different situations. Very often they are what is called 'bilateral' in their scope, referring to what should happen between Christians and Jews or Christians and Muslims, or Muslims and Jews. We must hope that somewhere some scholar is monitoring all this material.⁶ Other sets of Guidelines are 'multi-lateral' and refer rather more to the general principles involved in inter-religious encounter. For our purposes there are three sets of guidelines of the multi-lateral type: the *Guidelines on Dialogue with People of Living Faiths and Ideologies*, of the World Council of Churches (1979); the British Council of Churches' *Relations with People of Other Faiths: Guidelines on Dialogue in Britain* (1981); and, from the hands of one individual, 'The Rules of the Game' in Raimundo Panikkar's *The Intrareligious Dialogue* (1978).

I choose Panikkar's 'The Rules of the Game' for two reasons. Panikkar himself is a figure of extraordinary stature in contemporary inter-religious encounter. For him much of this encounter is within his own being, for he was born into two of the major traditions, the Roman Catholic and the Hindu. He described himself once, when someone said he was half Spanish, half Indian as 'fully Spanish, fully Indian'. He is reputed to be a difficult writer and indeed he does think in a most condensed way. But the major cause of the difficulty often seems his ability to think in no less than (and probably more than) four languages, and therefore through language to live at home in the religious traditions and cultures of which these languages are the vehicles. Out of this range of experience he has written some thirty books on inter-faith relations, or as he would prefer 'intrareligious dialogue', most of which are not translated into English.⁷ The first reason is therefore his personal authority. Alongside this we set his being Roman Catholic. We have not yet so far a document from the Vatican which is exactly equivalent to the WCC *Guidelines*, but it

would be grossly misleading to treat the ethics of inter-religious relationships as though the Roman Catholic church had not made some decisive contributions in inter-faith activity. The great Vatican II statements *Nostra Aetate* and *Lumen Gentium* are not in themselves formal guidelines for inter-faith relationships, but Panikkar's 'Rules' serve to make explicit what is often implicit. Panikkar's statement (despite his alleged 'difficulty') offers powerful descriptive and proscriptive ethical rules which deserve close attention.

The WCC *Guidelines* on the other hand bear all the marks of corporate thinking, the 'camel a horse designed by a committee' syndrome. A word about their provenance is therefore necessary. The WCC has had a Sub Unit on Dialogue with People of Living Faiths and Ideologies since 1971. In its earliest years this Sub Unit, (now known as the Dialogue Sub Unit but previously called the DFI) was much extended in the organization of high-level international encounters between leaders of world faith communities. No doubt these early ventures were open to the charge of élitism, and in fact they aroused a good deal of suspicion about the purposes of such dialogue. Was it to shape a new world religion? To eliminate religious differences? To engage in conscious or unconscious syncretism? To offer a substitute for mission and evangelism? The Nairobi 1975 Assembly of the WCC had an unsatisfactory and inconclusive debate on these matters and at this point the DFI programme nearly foundered altogether. It was therefore with a renewed sense of purpose that member churches sent their representatives to the DFI Consultation at Chiang Mai, Thailand, in 1977. This gathering produced a new statement entitled *Dialogue in Community*, and much of this material is incorporated into the WCC *Guidelines*. While one can take *Dialogue in Community* as representing an advance in ecumenical understanding of inter-faith dialogue across several fronts, for our purpose it is sufficient to note the new emphasis in the title: dialogue is 'in community', that is, where there are existing inter-religious or pluralist communities, and that these specific encounters take place in a world which is made up of communities, 'a community of communities'. This focus is ethical rather than theological, or, to be more precise, the concerns expressed are those of theological ethics rather than of systematic theology. It is this strand in the WCC *Guidelines* that we concentrate on, rather than such matters as 'syncretism' which also gets treated in Section E.⁸

The BCC *Guidelines*, *Relations with People of Other Faiths*, are dependent upon the WCC *Guidelines* in the sense that they are a deliberate working out for a national context of the WCC themes,⁹

and in fact the BCC Committee for Relations with People of Other Faiths distilled from the disparate WCC material what are now called the Four Principles of dialogue:

Dialogue begins when people meet each other
 Dialogue depends upon mutual understanding and mutual trust
 Dialogue makes it possible to share in service to the community
 Dialogue becomes the medium of authentic witness

In the pages which followed the BCC Committee showed itself concerned with prescriptive ethics for the Christian churches in Britain, treating such areas as community relations, pastoral care, religious education, denominational schools, and such issues as inter-faith worship and the sale of and the use of Christian premises to and by people of other faiths.

Since these Four Principles of Dialogue were first published in June 1981, they have been widely studied and in many cases wholeheartedly accepted by church decision-making bodies.¹⁰ At the same time they have been expounded to people of other faiths in Britain who have affirmed that they too can accept them in the light of their own convictions or theologies. This unexpected development is felt to be extraordinarily encouraging, indicating that the 'Four Principles' have a general validity.

It is not therefore a matter of mere convenience if we use the Four Principles to give structure to the following exposition of the ethics of inter-religious dialogue.

2 Dialogue Begins when People Meet Each Other

This principle was derived from the statement in the WCC *Guidelines*: 'Dialogue should proceed in terms of people of other faiths rather than of theoretical impersonal systems' (Para. 20). Such a formulation reflects the consensus of people everywhere involved in constructive inter-religious relationships. This widespread agreement has, however, come to be expressed with varying emphases and we consider these now.

First, there is often a strongly proscriptive element: 'Dialogue', i.e., creative inter-religious encounter is not to be conducted in terms of religious or ideological systems, and this for two reasons.

On the one hand the practice of dialogue has led again and again to the discovery that no one person anywhere is the embodiment or personification of ideas and beliefs that are set out systematically in text books for the convenience of students and other interested

'outsiders'. We are learning not to say to one another: 'as a Marxist you must believe in x', or 'you Hindus believe in the doctrine of y, Zaehner says so'. Or even 'The Holy Qur'an says you Muslims believe in z'. As we meet any given Marxist, or Muslim, or Hindu, we discover that he or she may or may not, for whatever reason, believe x or y or z. Deep learning in the history and comparative study of religions is as much a hindrance as a help in meeting and listening to actual men and women. The label of the faith or ideology in which they have been brought up or which they profess is only a first clue to discerning their rich individuality. It is sound ethical practice to approach another person with as few presuppositions as possible; and not to label or stereotype him or her.¹¹

Alongside this we must put the experience of practitioners of inter-religious understanding that to proceed in terms of systems rather than of individuals is inevitably to enter a *cul-de-sac*. The propositions of, say, Christian faith and the Islamic revelation are mutually exclusive. Jesus Christ may not be confessed as Risen Lord if he was taken up from the cross before he died.¹² Ultimate Reality cannot be at one and the same time the impersonal Brahman and the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Dialectical Materialism is incompatible with theistic belief and so on. World views and religious systems exclude each other but human beings with their common, everyday concerns do not. In the words of the BCC *Guidelines*: 'What makes dialogue between us possible is our common humanity, created in the image of God. We all experience the joys and sorrows of human life, we are citizens of one country, we face the same problems, we all live in God's presence.' The right order of going, therefore, is to enable ordinary people (including ordinary theologians) to meet each other. It is almost instantaneously disastrous for future inter-religious activity to invite the local bishop, the rabbi, the imam and the Hindu pundit to share the same platform and to discuss religious questions. This will almost certainly be a debate, not a dialogue. It will close doors rather than open them.

These two practical considerations are given positive theological and philosophical grounding in the positions advanced by writers such as Raimundo Panikkar and Wilfred Cantwell Smith.

Panikkar's 'Rules of the Game' make clear general theoretical positions discussed in his longer works, notably *Myth, Faith and Hermeneutics*.¹³ Summarizing himself, Panikkar insists: '*The Religious encounter must be a truly religious one*. Anything short of this simply will not do' (the italics are his). He sets out some of the consequences of this prescription of a genuinely religious encounter: 'It must be free

from Particular Apologetics', for 'if the Christian or Buddhist approaches another religious person with the *a priori* idea of defending his own religion by all (obviously honest) means, we shall have a valuable defence of that religion and undoubtedly exciting discussion, but no religious dialogue, no encounter, much less a mutual enrichment and fecundation.' Apologetics has, he says, its proper place but 'we must eliminate any apologetics if we want to meet a person from another religious tradition'. As a corollary to this Panikkar goes on: 'It must be free from General Apologetics', when this would imply some kind of intention to enlist the other person into a religious league against 'un-religion' or irreligion. 'If to forget the first corollary would be to indicate a lack of confidence in our partner . . . to neglect the second point would betray a lack of confidence in the truth of religion itself, and present an indiscriminate accusation against "modern" Man.' This, he says, may be understandable but it is not in his terms 'a religious attitude', or in our terms ethically good practice.

Myth, Faith and Hermeneutics contains, as has been indicated, the theoretical hermeneutical basis for such encounter of free persons. He argues there that we must be freed from what he sees as the enslaving Western Myth, the myth of history, into a Myth of tolerance and communion, in which faith is understood as the constitutive human dimension.¹⁴ In this we are taken beyond mere awareness of plurality into an acceptance of *pluralism*. This cannot belong within what he calls the 'order of the *logos*': 'pluralism cannot be accepted within an ideology. On the ideological level you cannot compromise with error. Just so, two contradictory conceptual statements cannot be both true at the same level, or according to a single perspective'.¹⁵ Panikkar is here directing our attention to the realities of discourse in a world in which there is not a single system of logic and philosophy. Modes of analysis which appear to make sense in discussions taking place within the Western philosophical framework are rendered inoperable in encounters between cultures which have arisen from fundamentally different propositions. 'To assume *a priori* that a given conceptual form can serve as a framework for an encounter of cultures represents, from a philosophical point of view, an unacceptable, uncritical extrapolation. Sociologically speaking, it represents yet another vestige of a cultural colonialism that supposes that a single culture can formulate the rules of the game for an authentic encounter between cultures.'¹⁶ So we have this formulation: 'Pluralism is grounded in the belief that no single group embraces the totality of human experience. It is based on trust in the other, even though I do

not understand him and from my point of view I will have to say that he is quite wrong. Pluralism does not absolutize error because it does not absolutize truth either.¹⁷

We have already looked at Wilfred Cantwell Smith's understanding of faith 'as a characteristic quality or potentiality of human life: that propensity of man that across the centuries and across the world has given rise to and has been nurtured by a prodigious variety of religious forms, and yet has remained elusive and personal, prior to and beyond the forms'.¹⁸ Because faith is this primary constitutive human reality, we meet other persons as people of faith and not primarily as Hindus and Buddhists. Indeed, as we have seen,¹⁹ it was Smith himself who taught us in *The Meaning and End of Religion* to set fundamental question marks against the unthinking use of the concept 'a religion' or 'a faith' and against the usage of the terms 'religions' and 'faiths' to indicate contraposed socio-theological communities.²⁰

In his latest book, *Towards a World Theology*, he returns to these issues as they confront the academic community, and especially those professionally involved in humane sciences. In a chapter entitled 'Objectivity and the Humane Sciences', he writes: 'my contention is that objective knowledge in the humane realm is an inherently immoral concept. Many practitioners of this brand of knowledge are, of course, better than their theories; many are better men and women personally than individual scholars with more humane ideas. The goal of an objective scientific knowledge of man, however, is wrong. One element in this inadequacy, shall we say, is its moral wrongness'.²¹ Writing primarily as a comparative religionist, his further remarks chime in with Panikkar's as he reflects on cultural superiority: 'Such learning requires, of course, a certain humility . . . and respect *vis-à-vis* men and women of other cultures, a humility that . . . neither Christians nor Western secularists regularly had. Sceptic and believer, at loggerheads at home, joined company to feel superior when they looked abroad: the one presuming that the religious faith of all humankind was superstitious error, the other that that of non-Christian was. At very least, both for a time lacked that humility that recognizes that one can learn about oneself and about one's own world from other civilizations'.²²

He continues, a few sentences later, and now perhaps more overtly as a Christian theologian: 'Man cannot know man except in mutuality; in respect, trust and equality, if not ultimately love . . . One must be ready not only to receive the other but to give oneself. In humane knowledge, at stake is one's own humanity, as well as

another person's or another community's. At issue is humanity itself.²³

In all this Smith is concerned about how we know another person, and about our not being caught up in 'objective ideology'. As in Panikkar, and both WCC and BCC *Guidelines*, the ethic is 'personalist' through and through. How strikingly this all reflects what we learnt in a previous generation from a Jewish theologian who taught us to distinguish between I-it and I-thou relationships. I refer, of course, to Martin Buber, who also wrote on 'Dialogue' (*Zwiesprache*) as 'speech from certainty to certainty . . . from one open-hearted person to another open-hearted person. Only then will common life appear, not of an identical content of faith which is alleged to be found in all religions, but that of the situation, of anguish and expectation'.²⁴

3 Dialogue Depends upon Mutual Understanding and Mutual Trust

Put in ethically prescriptive terms engagement in dialogue is in order to remove misunderstanding and to build up friendship. The BCC *Guidelines* see this happening, in so far as Christians are concerned, by the deliberate avoidance of misleading and hurtful terminology about other people, in the refusal to dismiss other religions as human attempts to reach God with nothing of his grace in them, by allowing other people to define themselves in their own terms, and lastly by accepting responsibility to help other people to clear away misconceptions about what Christians themselves believe and teach. About such a programme, the WCC *Guidelines* say: 'Dialogue can be recognized as a welcome way of obedience to the commandment of the Decalogue: "You shall not bear false witness against your neighbour". Dialogue helps us not to disfigure the image of our neighbours of other faiths and ideologies' (para 17).

Such propositions clearly belong to the realm of axioms in theological ethics, because both truth and love are involved here. They are to be tested by applications in particular contexts, and we content ourselves in this section by indicating some of the considerations that affect each context in which the search for mutual trust and mutual understanding takes place.

First, from Panikkar's 'Rules of the Game', concerning the avoidance of false witness: ' . . . the golden rule of any hermeneutic is that the interpreted thing can recognize itself in the interpretation. In other words, any interpretation from outside has to coincide, at least

phenomenologically, with an interpretation from within, i.e. with the believer's viewpoint. To label a *murtipujaka* an idol worshipper, using idol as it is commonly understood in the Judaeo-Christian-Muslim context rather than beginning with what the worshipper affirms of himself is to transgress this rule. An entire philosophical and religious context underpins the notion of *murti*; we cannot impose alien categories upon it'.

And sometimes it is even less forgivable because the misinterpretation, the false witness, happens within the Judaeo-Christian-Muslim tradition. Since in a moment I shall go on to speak of other people's failures let me record a characteristic Christian error, but one of my own. I had for several months been telling the story of the conversion of a well-known black entertainer to Judaism. He is reputed to have replied to the question, 'Why Judaism rather than Christianity?' by saying, 'Because Christians talk about love, but the Jews about justice'. This I had been doing in good faith, to illustrate the individualism and privatization of Christian ethics, compared with Jewish concern for how people live together, *Torah*, *Talmud*, *Halakhah* and so on. I mentioned this story to a Rabbi friend of mine. 'But', he said, 'we Jews also believe in love'. I could tell that he felt I had simply been reinforcing the stereotype of legalism that Christians lay upon the Jews. I apologized then, and I apologize now, for that is indeed what I had been doing, however unintentionally.

Secondly, there is the need to avoid language which is dismissive of other religious traditions. Stanley Samartha, the first Director of the WCC Sub Unit on Dialogue, has reported on the reactions of the guests of other faiths at the Nairobi WCC Assembly in 1975: 'they were', he writes, 'not sure why dialogue should be suspect to some Christians and attacked by others. They were disappointed that the question of seeking community in the contemporary world was not taken up with a greater sense of urgency. They felt uneasy to discover that they were part of the statistics that made up the 2.7 billion who were the objects of the proclamation of the gospel.' Dr Samartha reflects accurately on the unhappy paradox here: 'The missiologist who described all non-Christian religions as demonic missed the chance of personally meeting these "non-Christian" guests to discover and perhaps to do battle with "demonic" elements in them. At least one of these guests expressed disappointment that no one among those who talked loudest about proclamation actually came to him or others personally to proclaim the love of God in Jesus Christ.'²⁵

The question raised in this last paragraph is not, I think, so much about theological ethics as the ethics of theologians, and you may like

to be reminded of a story concerning one of the greatest of Protestant theologians with one of the greatest of Protestant evangelists of our century. D. T. Niles of Sri Lanka met Karl Barth for the first time in 1935. In the course of conversation Barth said, 'Other religions are just unbelief'. Niles asked, 'How many Hindus, Dr Barth, have you met?' Barth answered, 'None'. Niles said, 'How then do you know that Hinduism is unbelief?' Barth replied, '*A priori*'. Niles concluded, 'I simply shook my head and smiled'.²⁶

Part of the problem for the Christian theologians, and especially for those who see their first task as the articulation and explication of the faith of the church, the formulation of 'Church Dogmatics',²⁷ is that they are driven by circumstances to use the third person plural as an exclusive: there is 'us' and there is 'them'! The 'we' form articulates subjective, firsthand knowledge, and the 'they' form necessarily suggests objective knowledge. Here is Wilfred Cantwell Smith again: '(Objective knowledge) . . . does not yield personal understanding, or the kind of knowledge on which to found friendship. One may remark that last century's missionaries, who were objective in another fashion (individually very friendly, but in their group's theoretical relation to the "other" religion, and in their writings, objectivist, alienist) were victims essentially of the same we-they fallacy . . . mutual understanding between groups is part of the truth, in this realm; it provides a criterion, a verification principle.'²⁸

It would go far beyond the limits of this chapter, and way beyond my own competence, to discuss the philosophical and theological issues involved here, but I may be permitted to refer to John Macmurray's first volume of his Gifford Lectures, *The Self as Agent*, whose declared intention was to construct and illustrate in application the 'form of the personal', that 'personal existence is *constituted* by the relation of persons'. You may recall the words of his introductory preface 'The simplest expression I can find for the thesis I have tried to maintain is this: All meaningful knowledge is for the sake of action, and all meaningful action is for the sake of friendship'.²⁹

4 *Dialogue Makes It Possible to Share in Service to the Community*

The guests from other faiths at the Nairobi Assembly of the WCC in 1975 were, we learnt from Dr Samartha, disappointed that the question of seeking community in the contemporary world was not taken up with a greater sense of urgency. A number of hypotheses might be advanced as to why this may have been so, and some of them need extended consideration and indeed condemnation from within

the Christian ethical tradition. David Jenkins, now Bishop of Durham, writing out of his experience in the *Humanum* programme of the WCC, discusses some of the factors involved in the first chapter of *The Contradiction of Christianity* in which he refers to the tribalism of Christian traditions. He quotes Niebuhr's remark in *Man's Nature and his Communities*, 'The chief source of man's inhumanity to man seems to be the tribal limits of his sense of obligation to other men'.³⁰

This is painfully true, and yet there may also be for some Christians deeply held theological beliefs which are not necessarily epiphenomenological to the preservation of cultural identity. For it may be, for example, that the church, 'the people of God in world-occurrence', is qualitatively different from all other communities. So Karl Barth, in the very act of arguing eloquently and persuasively that the church is 'the community for the world', seeing and finding its own cause in that of the world, and that of other men in its own, remarks, 'Now there can be no doubt that in the discharge of its mission to them the community has in a sense to keep its distance, and even to contradict and oppose them. Without saying No it cannot really say Yes to them'.³¹ He speaks of this withdrawal as 'well-founded and solemn', this contradiction and opposition as 'well-meaning and justifiable' even at the same time as it proceeds from the 'profoundest commitment to the whole of humanity and each individual man'.³²

Here is another instance. The Nairobi 1975 Assembly took place within the context of the whole 'humanization' debate begun in the late sixties, and still reflected in internal Christian discussion in various ways even now. Peter Beyerhaus, professor of missions and ecumenics at Tübingen, was one of the architects of the 1970 'Frankfurt Declaration on the Fundamental Crisis in Christian Mission'. About such propositions as 'we have lifted up humanization as the goal of mission' Beyerhaus says: 'Here, it seems to me we are encountering nothing less than the bankruptcy of responsible mission theology . . . In former ages people were religious and asked for the true God, and Christian missions directed them to Him. Today people do not care for gods any more, but for better human relations. Thus mission does not speak of God but directs them to the humanity in Christ as the goal of history.' 'True all this is done in the concern of missionary accommodation. By confining ourselves to the concept of humanization we hope to find a field of common concern with Hindus, Muslims, Marxists and Humanists. For according to the concept of the anonymous Christ *extra muros Ecclesiae* we are already sharing in Christ if we work together with them for the humanization of mankind. Perhaps by means of dialogue if the others ask us for the

motives of our actions, they might even become disposed to accept Christ and integrate him into their present faith.³³

I have given these rather extended quotations for fear lest I caricature or misrepresent either Barth or Beyerhaus and those of Christian traditions who responsibly feel the force of these or similar arguments. There are also, of course, many other Christians who would not even be concerned to enter this discussion, for it is foreclosed by the very nature of the views of salvation which they hold.³⁴ But we have sufficiently established the point that the BCC's third Principle: 'dialogue makes it possible to share in service to the community' is affected by prior theological understandings.

We take notice, therefore, that Paragraph 18 of the WCC *Guidelines* is deliberately and consciously 'ethical' when it states: 'Dialogue is a fundamental part of service within community. In dialogue Christians actively respond to the command to "love God and your neighbour as yourself". As an expression of love, engagement in dialogue testifies to the love experienced in Christ. It is a joyful affirmation of life against chaos, and a participation with all who are allies of life in seeking the provisional goal of a better human community. Thus "dialogue in community" is not a secret weapon in the armoury of aggressive Christian militancy. Rather it is the means of living our faith in Christ in service of our neighbours.'

Yet, because of the issues we have raised by citing Barth and Beyerhaus, i.e., that for many within the Christian community theological presuppositions still govern the way in which they may behave towards people of other faiths, these statements are still likely to be seriously questioned: what is meant by 'provisional goal'? what is meant by 'a better human community'? what is this 'life' which is to be affirmed over against chaos? How does all this fit in with traditional understandings of e.g. 'the Church', 'the World' and 'the End'?³⁵

If we have spent so much time on the Christian theological considerations anteceding the ethics of co-operating with people of other faiths, this is only because such considerations are the nearest home for most of us. With the necessary changes in terminology or patterns of thinking, similar issues affect other communities of faith. For example, many Muslims might have the gravest reservations about working with non-Muslims for 'the provisional goals of a better human community'. For non-Muslims traditionally belong to the *dar ul harb*, literally the 'house of war': a better human community could only come into being as the house of war becomes the *dar ul islam*, the house of peace wherein Muslim *mores* are normative. For such

Muslims their concept of *jihad*, striving for God, would be seriously jeopardized by co-operation with those who do not believe. The same could be said about many other religious groupings, bearing in mind that the force of Niebuhr's comment about 'tribal limits' applies across the board. Questions of cultural identity and absolute religious truth are inextricably intertwined for them as for Christians.

In this context the WCC *Guidelines* are right to locate their ethical imperative not so much in romanticized (or even realistic) ideas of 'community' or 'humanization' as in the love of God and the love of neighbour, two axioms of theological ethics neither of which is peculiar to Christianity.

So it is no surprise that my own experience of expounding these 'four principles of dialogue' at inter-faith gatherings has often found the greatest response at this point. One could, if space permitted, first indicate the ways in which the several traditions echo the command to love thy neighbour; secondly the ways in which the old exclusiveness is being re-interpreted; and thirdly, some of the areas which are already being tackled in this kind of inter-religious co-operation.³⁶

5 *Dialogue Becomes the Medium of Authentic Witness*

We have seen how insistent Raimundo Panikkar is in his 'Rules of the Game' that '*the Religious encounter must be a truly religious one*', or in his other words, it is more than 'just a congress of philosophy', more than 'merely an ecclesiastical endeavour'. In his discussion Panikkar touches on many of the themes covered in the first three of our 'Four Principles' and here we highlight those that belong specifically to the areas of 'authentic witness'. Panikkar is clear, as are the WCC and BCC *Guidelines*, that one must face the challenge of conversion: 'to enter the new field of religious encounter is a challenge and a risk. The religious person enters this arena without prejudices and preconceived solutions, knowing full well that he may have to lose his life – he may also be born again'.³⁷

Here is one of the clearest statements of the openness and vulnerability that can be expected of participants in the deepest forms of 'dialogue'. This should not, however, be set out as the *sine qua non* or absolute condition for earlier stages in inter-religious encounter represented in some part by the first three Principles. It is certainly possible, for example, to work in a dialogical relationship with people of other religious commitments for a better human community without this form of openness and vulnerability.³⁸ It is equally

possible for people utterly committed to their own faith-understandings to explain themselves to each other without expecting that they should be, in Panikkar's expression, 'without prejudices and preconceived solutions'. If this were the necessary condition, almost every possibility of discourse in this area would be foreclosed, and few members, if any, of the world religious traditions could ever set out on this path.³⁹

And yet vital ethical issues here are at stake. The WCC *Guidelines* wrestle with the problem of 'integrity' in commending the way of inter-faith dialogue to Christians, recognizing that Christians (no more or less than Hindus, Buddhists, Muslims and everyone else) enter into such dialogue with prior commitment, in the Christian case commitment to Jesus Christ. As an attempt to deal with this, the WCC formulation runs like this:

In dialogue Christians seek to 'speak the truth in a spirit of love', not naively 'to be tossed to and fro, and carried about by every wind of doctrine' (Eph. 4.14-15). In giving their witness they recognize that in most circumstances today the spirit of dialogue is necessary. For this reason we do not see dialogue and the giving of witness as standing in any contradiction to one another. Indeed, as Christians enter into dialogue with their commitment to Jesus Christ, time and again the relation of dialogue gives opportunity for authentic witness. Thus to member churches of the WCC we feel able with integrity to commend the way of dialogue as one in which Jesus Christ can be confessed in the world today; at the same time we feel able to assure our partners in dialogue that we come not as manipulators, but as genuine fellow-pilgrims, to speak with them of what we believe God to have done in Jesus Christ who has gone before us, but whom we seek to meet anew in dialogue (para. 19).

We may note, but refrain from commenting on at this moment, the christological proposition embedded in the last fourteen words of this passage. Let us concentrate on the phrase 'not as manipulators but as genuine fellow-pilgrims', as pointing to the major ethical issue here.

Stanley Samartha's invaluable collection of essays *Courage for Dialogue* contains more than one reference to the reactions of people of other faiths to new-found Christian enthusiasm for dialogue. Here is one such:

Do not think I am against dialogue . . . on the contrary, I am fully convinced that dialogue is an essential part of human life, and

therefore of religious life itself . . . Yet to be frank with you, there is something that makes me uneasy in the way in which you Christians are now trying so easily to enter into official and formal dialogue with us. Have you already forgotten that what you call 'inter-faith dialogue' is quite a new feature in your understanding and practice of Christianity? Until a few years ago, and often still today, your relations with us were confined, either merely to the social plane, or preaching in order to convert us to your *dharma* . . . For all matters concerning *dharma* you were deadly against us, violently or stealthily according to cases . . .⁴⁰

This Hindu from North India was politely declining to take part in a dialogue instigated by Christians: the memory of past attacks and derogatory remarks was too fresh in his mind. What also perhaps he was too polite actually to express in words was the fear that others have made explicit, that in this context dialogue remains a disguised form of mission: 'you have failed to convert us by direct methods, now you will try to manipulate us by dialogue'.

Many on the Christian side hear this charge with too great an arousal of guilt feelings, for it often goes along with other indictments like 'cultural imperialism', 'Western feelings of superiority' and so on. At this point certain strategies are adopted, sometimes consciously but more often in an unreflecting and unaware manner. We must spend a little time on such moves, for they are quite simply *unethical* or, in Panikkar's terminology, *irreligious*.

One such move is to relativize the concept of truth itself, and to describe it in cultural terms. Christopher Lamb describes it thus: ' . . . one strong defensive tendency among British Christians is to adopt a "cultural-bound" interpretation of faiths, saying in effect "Jesus is the way for me because other religious traditions are culturally inaccessible to me. My western upbringing makes them opaque to me, and I presume that Christian tradition is equally opaque to their followers".'⁴¹ Paradoxically there are many who are willing with this understanding to engage in a dialogue of a kind, though such a position would at first sight suggest that inter-religious understanding is impossible from the start. My own work takes me constantly to local groups in Britain who desire to have closer relationships with, say, the local mosque, and who are startled when I suggest that they should want to talk to Muslims as it were 'from faith to faith'. To meet, yes; to build up trust and friendship, yes; to work together on city and neighbourhood issues, yes . . . but to witness to Christ . . . ? That is a much more doubtful proposition.

And so it often comes about that 'truth-claims' are excluded from the agenda of inter-faith dialogue. Let another Hindu hold the mirror up for us here. Lesslie Newbigin tells us of the comments of Dr R. Sundarara Rajan of Madras. Dr Rajan suggests the emphasis on a self-critical attitude, the demand that each party should try to see things from within the mind of the other, and the disavowal of any attempt by either side to question the faith of others, can easily mean that dialogue is simply an exercise in the mutual confirmation of different beliefs with all the really critical questions excluded. 'If it is impossible to lose one's faith as a result of an encounter with another faith, then I feel that the dialogue has been made safe from all possible risks.'⁴² Newbigin adds 'A dialogue which is safe from all possible risks is no true dialogue'.⁴³

It is on grounds such as these that Panikkar and both WCC and BCC *Guidelines* reject explicitly or implicitly the 'congress of philosophy' or 'parliament of religions' approach to dialogue. It is vitally necessary in serious dialogue that the partners come with open commitments, not 'hidden agendas' or worse 'concealed ideologies'. So the WCC *Guidelines* believe that we must come as 'partners, genuine fellow-pilgrims, to speak of what we believe God to have done in Jesus Christ . . .'. The BCC *Guidelines* affirm, 'If we are concerned with religion we cannot avoid being concerned with truth – otherwise we are playing games, and dangerous games at that', and 'Christians will wish to be sensitive to their partners' religious integrity and also to witness to Christ as Lord of all'.⁴⁴ And Panikkar writes 'If the encounter is to be authentically religious, it must be totally loyal to truth and open to reality'. The last word comes from Dr Samartha: 'The freedom to be committed and to be open is the pre-requisite of genuine dialogue'.⁴⁵

Once again we have approached the ethical and religious issues from a viewpoint within the Christian tradition. Strictures against less worthy forms of behaviour in dialogue have been charged to the account of Christians: positive precepts and prescriptions have been couched in Christian terms and Christian language. But it is reassuring that the fundamental positions and commitments are susceptible to interpretation in the terms of the other religious traditions of humankind, and indeed that from time to time it is possible to hear people within those traditions expounding them for their communities. Just as we Christians have to hear, mark and inwardly digest comments like those of the two Hindu scholars quoted in this section, so there are comments made by Christians to, say, Muslims or Hindus that have to be heard on their side, for we,