

Evangelical Christians at the Inter-faith Dialogue Table? How? **by Bob Robinson**

Abstract

Evangelicals deserve attention because of their numbers, global influence, and missional, activist inclinations, but they typically believe the practice of inter-faith dialogue would compromise their self-understanding. This article deploys six sets of reasons to persuade them otherwise: biblical precedents for dialogue; a neglected biblical stream concerning the religions; Jesus as exemplar of dialogue given his openness to Gentiles and other “outsiders”; pragmatic and further theological reasons for dialogue (such as understanding and the reduction of tension; common social concern; shared humanity and the ideal of community—etc); dialogue as appropriate in a post-colonial world; and reassuring examples of fruitful dialogue. Evidence is offered of some changing attitudes among evangelicals, and the article concludes with examples of what they might bring to the dialogue table.

For more than thirty years, this writer has been trying to gauge what his fellow evangelicals around the world think about the challenges of religious plurality. He finds them spread along the following continuum of attitudes: indifference—anxiety—engagement (occasional or intentional)—triumphalism (principled or unreflective)—suspicion (principled or unreflective)—prohibition—fear and denigration—hostility and confrontation. Apart from the response labeled “engagement,” the prevalence of the other attitudes is a major disincentive to an intentional, principled, sustained and mutually beneficial meeting with people of other faiths.

*Why single out evangelicals?*¹ They deserve attention both because of their typical absence from dialogue and because the consequences of the negative attitudes outlined above can be considerable: ignorance, misrepresentation and even intentional confrontation with people of other faiths. Nonetheless, because of their numbers, global influence, and missional, activist inclinations, they are likely to encounter Muslims (for example) in the global south, or to meet and comment on them from the relative isolation of their enclaves in the global north. Evangelical Christians usually do not believe that there are persuasive reasons for intentional dialogue. However, in this writer’s experience, persuasive reasons *can* be advanced to help them at least understand or consider forms of dialogue that need not compromise the biblically-based and christocentric faith that is vital to their self-understanding. Six sets of reasons might be offered.

1. *Biblical precedents for dialogue.* Evangelicals generally read the Bible as speaking unequivocally of God and the gods and the folly of idolatry. Proclamation—not the advocacy and practice of dialogue—is the obviously required response. But there are a number of clear biblical precedents for at least *some* kinds of dialogue: the prophets, Jesus, Paul and even God communicate in ways that might appropriately be called dialogue. Jesus is seen as employing dialogue with his contemporaries, not least in his encounters with the non-Jewish people he meets in the Gospels. In fact, a study of the “dialogue” groups of words in the Septuagint and New Testament (*dialegomai* [to converse, confer], *dialogizomai* [to reflect on, discuss], *dialogismos* [consideration, discussion]) makes clear that such dialogue does have a place in the biblical repertoire. Care must be taken not to exaggerate the place of dialogue as a means of communicating the Gospel in the New Testament, but proclamation—in the sense of monologue—is certainly not the only biblically-approved means of communication.

2. *A neglected biblical stream.* Conservative Christians are well aware of biblical teaching about the realities of sin and idolatry and about the particularities of the unique revelation and final salvation said to be found in Christ. These starting points provide little incentive for dialogue. But evangelicals are often unaware that alongside this stream runs another in which the biblical narrative offers a rather more positive assessment of the religions. There is a cosmic, universal, inclusive current derived from the assertions that all humanity is made in the divine image and that all human beings are the beneficiaries of God’s providential faithfulness, immense love and ubiquitous wisdom. The divine covenant through Noah is with the entire human family. There is a “general revelation” available to all (God not having left himself without a witness anywhere: Acts 14:17) and some non-Israelite believers in the living God clearly acknowledge and are known by God (Melchizedek, Jethro, Ruth, Naaman, the Ninevites, Job and others). Within the New Testament there are some positive implications of *logos* theology, including the statement in John 1:9a that describes Christ as the true light that enlightens / shines upon *everyone*. Acts 17:26f explicitly states that God made the nations so that they would search for God and perhaps find him—but evangelicals are rarely heard asserting that people of other faiths might be on some kind of God-inspired search, and that dialogue (rather than proclamation or monologue) is the obvious means by which they might make contact with this search.

3. *Jesus as exemplar of dialogue* given the considerable openness in his reported encounters with Gentiles and other “outsiders.” It is true that the encounters as recorded in the Gospels are few in number: a Syrophenician mother, a centurion whose servant is healed, a Samaritan woman at a well, and teaching passages such as the example of a compassionate Samaritan. But each of them is significant because of the way in which they do involve dialogue and display Jesus stretching the received understanding of the entry of outsiders into the community of faith. There are also

occasions on which Jesus even praises the faith of pagan Gentiles and urges his Jewish hearers to learn from them. Such Gentile faith seems commendatory to Jesus—which is why one contemporary evangelical Christian can write about such examples that “the Gospel writers imply that we Christians can also learn from these pagans.”² It is not unreasonable to apply the example of Jesus to our present situation: if Jesus enters into genuine dialogue, then so should his followers today.³ Jesus never met a Hindu or Muslim, but an exemplary Christology offers an answer to the question, “What would Jesus do?”

4. *Pragmatic and further theological reasons for dialogue.* Among such reasons for dialogue are the following:

Understanding and the reduction of tension: the need to understand clearly why others believe and act as they do, and to offer explanations in turn. This enables misunderstandings to be removed or reduced, and positive understanding to be deepened. Inter-religious understanding is especially important in situations of inter-communal tension where ignorance, social isolation and prejudice can and do breed misunderstanding, isolation, fear, alienation, self-contented passivity, insecure suspicion or aggressive chauvinism.

Commitment to common social concern can also serve as both a reason for and a basis of dialogue so that urgent human needs can be tackled together rather than separately. Those who meet for this reason do so as concerned citizens and not simply as members of different religious groups. Pressing social concerns offer an urgent incentive to a dialogue which may otherwise become both empty and unrewarding if it is confined to discussion of religious matters alone.

Shared humanity and the ideal of community also offer reasons for dialogue. These are derived theologically from the biblical statements about humanity made in the image of God (Genesis 1) and the unity of humankind (Acts 17). They point to the distinctly personal basis of dialogue: meetings are not meetings between, say, Christianity and Islam, or even between their representatives so much as an encounter of human beings—of individual Christians and individual Muslims. Dialogue is the movement from thinking and talking about “them” to thinking and talking in some way about “us.” It helps discern and multiply the social capital that exists within and between diverse faith communities.

The dynamics of modernity and postmodernity directly or indirectly challenge traditional religious loyalties of every kind. Both Christians and others might well be found, perhaps even together, raising the possibility of a transcendent reference point for the concerns of secularized or uncertain neighbors. Postmodern emphases on experiential and epistemological de-centeredness and pluralism are hardly congenial to conservative Christian opinion, but the general spirit of postmodern openness to the

self-authenticating power of personal narrative *is* highly attractive to them and could be seen as an incentive for dialogue and even some forms of co-operation.

A shared quest for truth can also function as a reason for dialogue. One example is the quest to acknowledge and clarify the differences in belief and practice between the religions: to find out why it is that Christians and Muslims, Hindus and Buddhists see the world so differently. Dialogue does not offer some privileged mode of access to the truth. But there is no compelling reason why a joint search for truth might not be commended as a worthy basis for dialogue—including to evangelicals, at least some of whom acknowledge the demise of foundationalism and absolutist claims to knowledge and their replacement with more modest epistemological starting-points.

Towards a contextual theology and inculturated church. The missional activism of evangelicals raises the question for them of what might be the most appropriate contextual forms to be taken by Christian belief and practice. Some form of dialogue with the surrounding culture is a necessary means of assisting these processes of contextualization and inculturation. For example, before Paul spoke to Athens, Athens had spoken to Paul—and he had listened by means of what we could call an attentive prior “interior dialogue” that clearly shaped the framing of his message in Acts 17.

Dialogue as a fruit of the Gospel. The call to love one’s neighbors, as an expression of the universal love of God, is a love that requires at least talking with one’s neighbor! And, alongside love, there might be an appeal to freedom: God does not compel belief but respects human freedom. Respectful dialogue models these and other Gospel virtues such as patience, trust and hope.

A number of reasons can, then, be given to justify a principled commitment to dialogue and all of them can, with care, be offered to evangelicals and other theologically conservative Christians.⁴

5. *Dialogue as one consequence of a post-Christendom context.* Some evangelicals (especially younger ones) are acutely aware of the cultural changes required by a changing global context as Christians no longer speak from the privileged position of power that they once supposedly had. Dialogue recognizes that Christian mission in most parts of the world (including the once-Christian global north) is now undertaken from, at best, a position of equality and often as a powerless and vulnerable minority. Christians are rarely able to set and control an agenda or dictate the dynamics of inter-religious meeting; there is no possibility of compelling passive listening to their monologues. Evangelicals aware of this cultural shift increasingly see that dialogue is not opposed to proclamation—it is in fact the normal context for Christian witness within multicultural and multireligious contexts. In recent decades, a number of evangelicals have decided to focus on the biblical notion of “witness” rather than “proclamation” (with its implications of one-way communication from a position of

privilege), even as they increasingly prefer an adjective such as “particularist” over the term “exclusivist” to describe their theology of religions.

6. *Some reassuring examples of fruitful dialogue.* It can also be helpful and reassuring to offer some actual lived-out examples of dialogical praxis. Of many possible global examples, two accounts from the meeting of Christians and Hindus in India illustrate the point. Sadhu Sundar Singh (1889-1929), said to be “perhaps the most famous Indian Christian who has yet lived, and whose influence has been widespread and prolonged,”⁵ might be mentioned. He combined a deeply christocentric faith with a creative but not uncritical adaptation and use of Hindu terminology in order to “offer the water of life in an Indian cup.” The American missionary, Stanley Jones (1884-1973) spoke and wrote widely on “The Indian Christ,” and his “Round Table” conferences enabled an unprecedented series of meetings of people of different faiths.⁶ Singh and Jones are examples of how commitment to one’s own faith does not require the denigrating of another’s. Their Christian orthodoxy did not impede a journey along the path of dialogue. In a postmodern context a narrative retelling of such lived examples of fruitful and intentional encounters across religious boundaries (and there are many others) may be helpfully reassuring—and even inspiring—to those evangelicals who wonder about *how* they might live inter-religiously in a faithful way.

Evidence of some changing attitudes. It might once have been said, especially by those not among their number, that evangelicals rarely display the very features we have been arguing for: well-informed understanding and a willingness for dialogue. However, over the last few decades, that has begun to change. Evidence of changing attitudes is found in the quantity and quality of resources that are increasingly available. For example, an online journal, *Evangelical Interfaith Dialogue*, was launched in 2010; its mission statement describes the intention “to create space for Evangelical scholars and practitioners to dialogue about the dynamics, challenges, practices, and theology surrounding interfaith work, while remaining faithful to the gospel of Jesus and his mission for his Church.”⁷ Mention should also be made of a number of volumes written over the past twenty or so years by well-informed evangelical authors, across the spectrum of theologically conservative Christian views. They display a mix of factually accurate and fair-minded assessment of the views of others, and neither ignore nor fixate negatively upon undoubted differences.⁸ Among a multitude of journal articles, an interesting sample of these virtues is provided by two authors: the Methodist missiologist, Terry Muck (former editor of *Buddhist Christian Studies*) and the Malaysian-American Pentecostal academic Amos Yong.⁹ Even though Islam is the religious tradition most likely to trigger negative reactions in evangelicals, even here signs of change are found in a growing number of well-informed and balanced appraisals.¹⁰

Such changes must not overlook or underestimate the suspicion and even hostility that remain in evangelical circles. For example, Pastor Rick Warren of the large Saddleback Church has recently become the focus of controversy due to aspects of his interfaith work with the southern California Muslim community. He and his church have been involved in various collaborative projects with local mosques and produced a document that describes the common theological aspects of Christianity and Islam. Some fundamentalist and evangelical leaders have attacked this, accusing Warren of creating a “Chrislam” hybrid. Such negative reactions further serve to underscore the considerable need to provide evangelicals, and other conservative Christians, with a model for intentional interfaith encounter that (a) understands and respects the particularity and self-understanding of their (and other) faith communities; (b) does not relegate religious faith to the background during a search for any commonalities or any engagement in cooperative ventures; (c) draws intentionally and deeply upon biblical, theological and pragmatic reasons for dialogue, including the example of Jesus himself.

What might evangelicals bring to the dialogue table? They might bring a degree of clarification and even critique in a number of areas. For example, there is, typically, a populist dimension to evangelicalism that might help correct (or at least complement) the way in which much inter-faith discussion is confined to the meeting of what might be called the elite, educated and articulate traditions of faiths. This can overlook the important casual encounters of everyday life and the importance of preparing individuals to make sensitive use of them in fostering understanding and co-operation. Populist inclinations within evangelicalism might remind progressive opinion that the vast majority of religious believers are not well-educated and articulate.

Evangelicals will also underline the central place of religious commitment. They understand and appreciate the call to suspend those evaluative processes that might impede a profound hearing of the other—at least in the prior or initial stages of the encounter (the so-called “interior” dialogue). But they reject any suggestion of a permanent bracketing out of conviction and evaluation. In fact, evangelicals will usually argue that authenticity in dialogue *requires* honesty of conviction and acknowledgement of the differences between discrete religious particularities. Terry Muck, for example, discusses the not uncommon view of dialogue found in ecumenical Protestant circles that fruitful dialogue requires the following: lack of any ulterior motives; openness to change; religious expertise; and truth to be understood as relational and seen as the goal of dialogue. Muck responds by pointing out that “very few religious people, Christian or otherwise, can satisfy these four conditions, so the pool of possible participants in interreligious dialogue following these guidelines becomes small indeed” and goes on to discuss the weaknesses of such a prescriptive regime.¹¹ The quest for an empathetic but non-evaluative dialogue seems futile.

Moreover, in the Christian-Muslim encounter, it might even be argued that conservatives, with their firm sense of religious belief and commitment, will more likely be recognized by Muslims as “serious” and suitable dialogue partners than more liberal Christians would be. So, for example, to help enable Muslims understand the ideals of the cultural and justice traditions of the global north, religious conservatives might have some advantages. As Ross McCullough argues, “the Muslim and I can talk together: of truth, and God, and good and evil; of the sanctity of life and the perfecting of people; of the errors in his culture and the errors in mine precisely as errors and not mere differences... I do not mean to deny all the differences between my creed and the Muslim’s. I mean only that we—traditional Catholics, Protestants, and Jews—are the natural interlocutors for Muslims in the West. We have the most to teach them, and we are best placed to learn from them in turn.”¹² That religious commitment does not necessarily impede dialogue is a point made by a number of participants; religious people *are* located in specific traditions.¹³ Writing after years of inter-religious encounter in India, Bishop Stephen Neill maintained that “real dialogue is possible only if all the interlocutors are committed, resolute and uncompromising; only so are we able to uncover to one another the riches of the religious inheritance into which we have ourselves entered.”¹⁴

Conclusion

There are substantial reasons why all Christians—evangelicals included—should enter into the constructive interfaith dialogue that is clearly needed in a painfully divided world. A number of biblical, theological and pragmatic reasons can be given, not to mention the perhaps unexpectedly positive example of Jesus towards the religious “outsiders” he met and spoke about. In this writer’s experience, hesitant or reluctant evangelicals are willing to re-consider dialogue on the basis of these sorts of reasons for a principled engagement with people of other faiths—reasons that do not compromise their beliefs about the centrality of Christ. There is, potentially, much to be gained if evangelicals can be brought to the dialogue table. There is, sadly, much to be lost if they continue to stay away. So, dear reader of this *Journal*, you know that sustained friendship can, in fact, become a hermeneutical key for inter-religious understanding; befriend an evangelical or two and offer them good reasons for dialogue!

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Notes

- ¹ The taxonomy of the word “evangelical” is debated, but this writer means that growing species of pietistic Protestantism that is conservative in theology (because christocentric and biblicist). In many places in this article the word is used interchangeably with the phrase “theologically conservative” to denote a wider set of Christians that includes many Pentecostals and charismatics (and even some Catholics and fundamentalists) who might or might not also self-define as “evangelical.”
- ² See Gerald McDermott, *Can Evangelicals Learn from World Religions? Jesus, Revelation and Religious Traditions* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), p. 87.
- ³ For a lengthy treatment of the material in the Gospels see Bob Robinson, *Jesus and the Religions: Retrieving a Neglected Example for a Multicultural World* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2012)—a volume that offers a detailed elaboration of the theological and contemporary inter-faith implications of the encounters.
- ⁴ However, notice what is missing here: several of the key reasons for dialogue as typically argued by many Catholic and Protestant advocates of dialogue. For example: the promotion of mutual religious growth; supposedly common or complementary religious experience; the activity of God as the initiator and sustainer of dialogue, often as the Spirit. Also omitted from discussion is one evangelical motivation: dialogue seen as a means of evangelization. Considerations of space preclude discussion of these decidedly more contested reasons.
- ⁵ Robin H.S. Boyd, *An Introduction to Indian Christian Theology* (Madras: Christian Literature Society, 1965), p. 92; see the extended discussion, pp. 92-109. For a recent study (a doctoral dissertation by an astute and ecumenically-minded Indian Pentecostal theologian that discusses Singh) see the relevant portions of Ivan M. Satyavrata, *God Has Not Left Himself Without Witness*. Regnum Studies in Global Christianity (Oxford and Eugene, OR: Regnum and Wipf & Stock, 2011).
- ⁶ For an example of the continuing influence of Jones, see the article by a contemporary Indian Bishop: Samuel Mathew, “Stanley Jones and His Interfaith Exercise,” *Evangelical Interfaith Dialogue*, 2.2 (Summer 2011): 18-19, 17.
- ⁷ See <http://www.evangelicalinterfaith.com/>. Another site, offering a constructive and dialogical evangelical approach to the ‘new spirituality’ is: <http://www.sacredtribesjournal.org/>.
- ⁸ Ada Glaser, *The Bible and Other Faiths: Christian Responsibility in a World of Religions* (2005); McDermott, *Can Evangelicals Learn from the World's Religions?*, and *God's Rivals: Why has God Allowed Different Religions?* (2007); Clark Pinnock, *A Wideness in God's Mercy: the Finality of Jesus Christ in a World of Religions* (1992); Vinoth Ramachandra, *The Recovery of Mission: Beyond the Pluralist Paradigm* (1996); Don Richardson, *Eternity in Their Hearts*. Revised edition (1984). Bob Robinson, *Christians Meeting Hindus. An Analysis and Theological Critique of the Hindu-Christian Encounter in India*. Regnum Studies in Mission (2004), and *Jesus and the Religions*; George Sumner, *The Claim of Jesus Christ and the Claim of Other Religious Traditions* (2004); Timothy C. Tennent, *Christianity at the Religious Roundtable. Evangelicals in Conversation with Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam* (2002); Amos Yong, *Beyond the Impasse: Toward a Pneumatological Theology of Religions* (2003).
- ⁹ See, for example, Muck's “Instrumentality, Complexity, Reason: A Christian Approach to Religions,” *Buddhist Christian Studies*, 22 (2002): 115-21; “Theology of Religions after Knitter and Hick: Beyond

the Paradigm,” *Interpretation*, 61 (2007): 7-22; “Interreligious Dialogue: Conversations That Enable Christian Witness,” *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, 35 (2011): 187-93. See, for example, Yong’s “The Spirit Bears Witness: Pneumatology, Truth and the Religions,” *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 57 (2004): 14-38; “A P(new)matological Paradigm for Christian Mission in a Religiously Plural World,” *Missiology: An International Review*, 33 (2005): 175-91; “Can We Get ‘Beyond the Paradigm’?—A Response to Terry Muck’s Proposal in Theology of Religions,” *Interpretation*, 61 (2007): 28-32; and Amos Yong, Frank D. Macchia, Ralph Del Colle, and Dale T. Irvin, “Christ and Spirit: Dogma, Discernment and Dialogical Theology in a Religiously Plural World,” *Journal of Pentecostal Theology*, 12 (2003): 15-83.

- ¹⁰ There is space only to list some examples. Two works by British evangelicals are: Colin Chapman, *Cross and Crescent: Responding to the Challenges of Islam* (second edition; 2007) and Martin Goldsmith’s *Beyond Beards and Burqas: Connecting with Muslims* (2009). Two chapters in Robinson, *Jesus and the Religions*, point to close parallels between Samaritanism and Islam as an argument that Jesus’ attitudes to Samaritans offers a constructive model for the Christian-Muslim encounter today. Within the United States there is Peter Kreeft, *Between Allah and Jesus: What Christians Can Learn from Muslims* (2010); Miroslav Volf, *Allah: A Christian Response* (2011); Abu-Nimer and Augsburg (eds), *Peace-Building by, between and beyond Muslims and Evangelical Christians* (2009); Michael Lodahl, *Claiming Abraham: Reading the Bible and the Qur’an Side by Side* (2010). There is a discussion of Christian-Muslim interaction and dialogue in two of the three issues of *Evangelical Interfaith Dialogue* in 2011.
- ¹¹ Muck, “Interreligious Dialogue”: 187-88; for a further detailed and constructively critical appraisal of a number of features of the usual Protestant and Catholic justifications of dialogue (with the Christian-Hindu encounter in mind), see Robinson, *Christians Meeting Hindus*, pp. 137-208.
- ¹² “Westernizing Islam and the American Right,” *First Things*, no. 214 (June/July 2011): 18.
- ¹³ Terry Muck: “Meaningful dialogue takes place among people who are crystal clear about their strongly held convictions, whatever they are, not among people who claim some sort of preternatural openness to everything. It is not the case that this sort of openness inhibits conversation, offends sensibilities, or stifles interaction. On the contrary, when done among people of good will, committed to a love ethic, personal candor creates an honest atmosphere, refreshed by winds of confidence” (“Interreligious Dialogue,” p. 192).
- ¹⁴ *Christian Faith and Other Faiths*, second edition (London: Oxford University Press, 1970), p. v.